

WARF

THE RELUCTANT ASSASSIN

BOOK 1

1 » *THE KILLING CHAMBER*

BEDFORD SQUARE, BLOOMSBURY, LONDON, 1898

THERE WERE TWO SMUDGES IN THE SHADOWS between the grandfather clock and the velvet drapes. One high and one low. Two pale thumbprints in a black night made darker still by blackout sheets behind the thick curtains and burlap tacked across the skylights.

The lower smudge was the face of a boy, soot-blackened and slightly shivering inside the basement chamber. This was young Riley, brought this very night on his first killing as a test.

The upper smudge was the face of a man known to his employers as Albert Garrick, though the public had once known him by a different name. His stage name had been the Great Lombardi, and many years ago he had been the most celebrated

illusionist in the West End, until during one performance he actually sawed his beautiful assistant in half. Garrick discovered on that night that he relished taking a life almost as much as he enjoyed the delighted applause from the stalls, and so the magician made a new career of assassination.

Garrick fixed his flat murderer's eyes on Riley and gripped his shoulder, long bony fingers pressing through the fabric of the boy's coat, pinching the nerves. He didn't say a word but nodded once, a gesture heavy with reminder and implication.

Think back, said the inclined chin, to your lesson of this afternoon. Move silently as the Whitechapel fog and slide the blade in until your fingers sink into the wound.

Garrick had instructed Riley to haul a dog carcass from the Strand to their Holborn rooms and then practice his knife work on the suspended remains so he would be accustomed to the resistance of bone.

Novices have the mistaken impression that a sharp blade will slip in like a hot poker through wax, but it ain't so. Sometimes even a master like myself can come up against bone and muscle, so be ready to lever down and force up. Remember that, boy. Lever down and force up. Use the bone itself as your fulcrum.

Garrick performed the move now with his long stiletto blade, tilting his wide, blackened forehead at Riley to make certain the boy took heed.

Riley nodded, then took the knife, palming the blade across to the other hand as he had been taught.

Garrick nudged Riley from the shadows toward the large four-poster bed, on which lay the nearly departed.

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Nearly departed. This was one of Garrick's witticisms.

Riley knew that he was being tested. This was a real killing, a fat purse paid in advance. Either he snuffed out his first candle or Albert Garrick would leave an extra corpse in this terrible, gloomy chamber and swipe himself a new apprentice from the gutters of London. It would pain him to do it, but Garrick would not see any other option. Riley must learn to do more than fry sausages and polish boots.

Riley swept his feet forward, one at a time, tracing a wide circle with his toes as he had been taught, searching for debris. It slowed his progress, but one crackle of discarded paper could be enough to awaken his intended victim. Riley saw in front of him the blade in his own hand, and he could hardly believe that he was here, about to commit the act that would damn him to hell.

When you have felt the power, you can take your place as my junior in the family business, Garrick would often say. *P'raps we should have cards of business made up, eh, boy? Garrick and Son. Assassins for hire. We may be low, but we're not cheap.*

Then Garrick would laugh, and it was a dark, faraway noise that caused Riley's nerves to throb and his stomach to heave.

Riley moved forward another pace; he could see no way out of it. The room seemed to close in around him.

I must kill this man or be killed myself. Riley's head started to pound till his hand shook and the blade almost slipped from his fingers.

Garrick was instantly at his side like a ghost, touching

Riley's elbow with one crooked icicle of a finger.

"From dust thou art . . ." He whispered so softly that the words might have been formed from the gusts of a draft.

"And unto dust thou shalt return," mouthed Riley, completing the biblical quote. Garrick's favorite.

My own last rites, he'd told Riley one winter's night as they looked out on Leicester Square from their booth in an Italian restaurant. The magician had polished off his second jug of bitter red wine and his gentleman's accent had started to slide off his words like fish from a wet slab.

Every man Jack of us crawled forth from the filth and dust, and unto that stuff we shall return, mark you. I just send 'em back quicker. A few heartbeats early so that we may enjoy life's comforts. That is the way of our situation and if you have no steel in you for it, Riley, then . . .

Garrick never completed his threat, but it was clear that the time had come for Riley to earn his place at the table.

Riley felt the crack between each board through the thin soles of his shoes, which had been painstakingly shaved down on the lathe in Garrick's workshop. He could now see the mark in the bed. An old man with a thatch of gray hair jutting out from under a puffy quilt.

I can't see his face. He was grateful for that much.

Riley approached the bed, feeling Garrick behind him, knowing his time was running out.

Unto dust. Dispatched to dust.

Riley saw the old man's hand resting on the pillow, the index finger a mere nub due to some old injury, and he knew that he could not do it. He was no murderer.

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Riley cast his eyes about while keeping his head still. He had been taught to use his surroundings in times of emergency, but his mentor was behind him, observing Riley's every move with his eerie, non-blinking intensity. There would be no help from the old man in the bed. What could a gray-hair possibly do against Garrick? What could anyone do?

Four times Riley had run away, and four times Garrick had found him.

Death is the only way out for me, Riley had thought. Mine or Garrick's.

But Garrick could not be killed, for he was death.

Unto dust.

Riley felt suddenly faint and thought he would sink to the cold floor. Perhaps that would be for the best? Lie senseless and let Garrick do his bloody work; but then the old man would die too, and that knowledge would weigh on Riley's soul in the afterlife.

I will fight, decided the boy. He had little hope of survival, but he had to do something.

Plan after plan flitted through his fevered brain, each one more hopeless than the last. All the time, he moved onward, feeling the frost of Garrick on his neck like a bad omen. The man on the four-poster grew clearer. He could see an ear now, with holes a row of rings must have once pierced.

A foreigner perhaps? A sailor?

He saw a ruddy jaw with tallowy runs of flesh tucked underneath and a lanyard that ran to a strange pendant lying on the quilt.

Look for every detail was one of Garrick's lessons. Drink it all in with yer eyes, and maybe it will save yer life.

No chance of saving my life, not tonight.

Riley took another sweeping step and felt his forward foot grow curiously warm. He glanced down and to his surprise and confusion saw that the toe of his shoe glowed green. In fact, a cocoon of light had blossomed around the frame of the sleeping man, its heart an emerald blaze emanating from the strange pendant.

Garrick's words gusted past his ear. "Hell's bells. Trickery! Dirk him now, boy."

Riley could not move, petrified as he was by the spectral light.

Garrick pushed him farther into the strange warm glow, which immediately changed hue, becoming a scarlet hemisphere. An unnatural keening erupted from somewhere in the bed, piercing and horrible, rattling Riley's brain in the gourd of his skull.

The old man in the bed was instantly awake, popping up like a windup Jack from his box.

"Stupid sensor malfunction," he muttered, his accent Scottish, his eyes rheumy and blinking. "I have a pain in my . . ."

The man noticed Riley and the blade emerging from his fist like an icicle. He allowed his hand to trail slowly down toward the glowing teardrop pendant resting on his scrawny chest, then tapped the center twice, silencing the dreadful wail. The pendant's heart displayed a glowing series of numbers now,

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seemingly written in phosphorus. Flickering backward from twenty.

“Now there, lad,” said the old man. “Hold on to those horses. We can talk about this. I have funds.”

Riley was transfixed by the pendant. It was magical certainly, but, more than that, it was familiar somehow.

Garrick interrupted Riley’s thoughts with a sharp prod in the ribs.

“No more delay,” he said briskly. “Make your bones, boy. Unto dust.”

Riley could not. He would not become like Garrick and damn himself to an eternity in the pit.

“I-I . . .” he stuttered, wishing his mind would supply the words to extricate both himself and this strange old man from these dire straits. The man raised his palms to show they were empty, as though fair play was on offer in this dark room.

“I’m not armed,” he said. “All I have is unlimited currency. I can run you up whatever you need. Easiest thing in the world to print a few thousand pounds. But, if you harm me, men will come to make sure you didn’t take my secrets—men with weapons like you have never seen.”

The old man spoke no more, as there was a knife suddenly embedded in his chest. Riley saw his own hand on the hilt and for a sickening moment thought that his muscles had betrayed his heart and done the deed; but then he felt the tingle of Garrick’s cold fingers releasing his forearm, and he knew that his hand had been forced.

“There it is,” said Garrick as the warm blood coated Riley’s sleeve. “Hold on tight, and you will feel the life leave him.”

“It wasn’t me that did it,” Riley said to the man, the words trickling from his lips. “It was never me.”

The old man sat stiff as a board, the pendant’s cord fraying against the dagger’s blade.

“I do not believe this,” he grunted. “All the people on my tail, and you two clowns get me.”

Garrick’s words crawled into Riley’s ears like slugs. “This is not credited to your account, boy. Mine was the hand that found the gap between this pigeon’s ribs, but there are circumstances here, I’ll give you that. So, I may allow you another chance.”

“I do not believe this,” said the old man once more; then his pendant beeped and he was gone. Literally gone. Fizzling into a cloud of orange sparks that were sucked into the pendant’s heart.

“Magic,” breathed Garrick, his tone approaching reverence. “Magic is real.”

The assassin stepped sharply back, protecting himself from whatever the consequences of the vaporization might be; but Riley did not have the presence of mind to follow. Still holding the dagger, all he could do was watch as the cloud spread along his arm, dematerializing him quicker than a beggar could spit.

“I am going,” he said, and it was true, though he could not know where.

He saw his torso turn transparent, and his organs were

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visible for a moment, packed in tight behind translucent ribs; then all the workings were gone too, replaced by sparks.

The gas that Riley had become was sucked into the pendant's heart. He felt himself go in a vortex that reminded him of being tumbled by a wave on Brighton beach and of a boy watching him from the shore.

Ginger. I remember you.

Then Riley was reduced to a single glowing dot of purest energy. The dot winked once at Garrick, then disappeared. The old man and the boy, both gone.

Garrick reached for the pendant, which had fallen to the sheets, thinking, I have seen this device before, or one like it. Many years ago . . . But his fingers touched only a smear of soot left behind where the strange talisman had been.

"All my life," he said. "All my life . . ."

He mouthed the rest but did not say it aloud, as he was alone in this room of wonders.

All my life I have searched for real magic. And now I know it does exist.

Garrick was a man of turbulent emotions that he usually kept tucked inside his heart; but now warm tears of happiness trickled down his face, spilling onto his lapels.

Not simply conjuring. Real magic.

The assassin sank to the ground, his long spindly legs folding so that his knees were level with his ears. Blood soaked through the seat of his expensive breeches, but he cared not one jot, for nothing would ever be the same again. His only fear was

that the magic had gone from this place forever. To have been so close and to have missed out by a whisker would indeed be devastation.

I will wait here, Riley, he thought. The Chinese believe that magic often resides in a place, so waiting is my only card to play. And, when the men come with their fabulous weapons, I will avenge you. Then I will take the magic and bend it to my will, and there will be none who can stop me.

2 » GYM GIRL

BEDFORD SQUARE, BLOOMSBURY, LONDON, NOW

CHEVRON SAVANO HAD NEVER PARTICULARLY cared for the parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact it could be said that she hated that particular story and had to grit her teeth whenever some lecturing type brought it up.

There is great rejoicing in heaven when a prodigal son returns to the fold.

Really? Was that so? And what about the son, or daughter, who has stayed in the fold and worked through holidays and weekends to keep the fold safe from organized crime and corruption? What about the daughter who has sacrificed just about everything to make sure that *the fold* didn't come under threat?

What about *that* daughter? Well, apparently that daughter got shipped off to London to babysit an overseas witness-protection safe house, which seemed to be pretty much a career-killing assignment, as far as she could tell.

Special Agent Lawrence Witmeyer, her FBI boss in the L.A. office, had assured her that she was not being unofficially punished for her recent, very public embarrassment of the Bureau.

“This is an important assignment, Chevie. Vital, in fact. WARP has a thirty-year history in the Bureau.”

“What does WARP even stand for?” Savano had asked.

Witmeyer checked the e-mail on his screen. “Er . . . WARP: Witness Anonymous Relocation Program.”

“That sounds like they threw in *Anonymous* to fit the name WARP. Otherwise they’d have WRP, and what kind of acronym would that be?”

“I guess they wanted to make it sound cool. You know these name guys.”

Chevie fumed. It was obvious that the Bureau was tucking her out of the way in London where the press might not find her.

“I did my job, you know? I saved lives.”

“I know you did,” said Witmeyer, softening for a moment. “Chevron, you have a choice here. The rest of the group accepted the decommissioning package. You’re sixteen years old; you can do whatever you want.”

“Except be a Fed.”

“You were never a real agent, Chevie. You were an official source of intelligence. That’s a very different thing.”

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“But it said *Agent* on my badge. My handler called me Agent Savano.”

Witmeyer smiled at Chevie as though she were five years old. “We thought you kids would like a badge. You know, to make you feel important. But it takes more than a badge, Chevie.”

“I was on the fast track to becoming a real agent. I was told that all I had to do was complete my assignment and a place at Quantico would be mine.”

“You were *told*,” said Witmeyer. “But there was nothing in writing. Take the deal, Miss Savano. It’s a good one. And maybe, if you keep your head down, we can talk about Quantico in a few years.”

Chevie was not interested in the deal but, if she wanted to be a real Special Agent, England was her only option.

“So I report to the London office?”

Witmeyer looked shiftier than usual. “Nope. You report directly to WARP. The London office works mostly on hate crimes, that kind of thing. What you’ll be doing is not connected to their day-to-day operations. They won’t even know you’re in the country unless you call in.” Witmeyer looked around excitedly, as though about to deliver *amazing* news. “In effect, you’ll have nothing to do but study distance-learning modules for your high school diploma.”

Chevie sighed. “So it’s back to school for the little kid.”

“I hate to tell you this, Chevie, but you *are* a kid,” said Witmeyer, glancing over Chevie’s shoulder, anxious to shut this meeting down and join the other agents *clack-clacking* their

weapons in the bustling office space beyond. "I'm giving you double years for your pension, Chevie. That's the best I can do. You can take the pension offer or not. Either way, if you want any chance of staying on at the Bureau, you're going to London."

So Chevie had been in England for nine months, babysitting a metal capsule that looked an awful lot like an Apollo landing module that had been stuffed into the basement of a four-story Georgian house on Bedford Square in Bloomsbury.

"What do we actually do here?" she had asked her boss on the first morning. His name, believe it or not, was Agent Orange, which she thought must be some kind of alias, and he was gray from head to toe, from his floppy coif to his sunglasses and his skinny suit, right down to his custom-made tasseled loafers.

"We attend the pod," said the fifty-year-old agent, his Scottish accent making the word *attend* about three seconds longer than it needed to be.

"What are we, podites?" said Chevie, still jet-lagged and feeling a little belligerent.

Orange took the question seriously. "In a way. Yes, Agent Savano. That pod downstairs is your church."

He led Chevie through the lobby area, which was decked out like a three-star English hotel, complete with andirons and a ship in a bottle, down into a basement with a reinforced steel door. Once they got past that door, things got real FBI real quick. Chevie spotted over a dozen cameras in the concrete walls; there were motion-sensor bugs all over the corridor; and

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every type of information cable known to man was threaded through a gray conduit.

“Nice conduit,” said Chevie drily. “Goes with your . . . everything.”

Orange coughed. “Agent Witmeyer did mention that I am your superior?”

“Negative on that,” lied Chevie. “He said we were partners.”

“I doubt that very much,” said Orange. “In fact, I am only referring to you as *Agent* as a courtesy. From what I hear, you’re being stashed in London after the ill-conceived *high school initiative* went south.”

They passed a holding cell and a well-stocked infirmary; then the corridor widened into a circular chamber, which housed a ten-foot-tall pyramid-shaped metal pod covered with refrigeration tubes and complicated groups of blinking lights.

“This is WARP central,” said Orange, patting the casing fondly.

“It looks like a sci-fi Christmas tree,” said Chevie, doing her best not to be impressed.

Orange checked a number of readouts; it really seemed like he knew what he was doing.

“I was expecting this attitude,” he said, without facing Chevie. “I read your file. Most informative. Graduated top of your special group. Record test scores in spite of your age. Problem with authority figures, *blah blah blah*, so movie stereotype.” Orange turned finally to Chevie. “We both know why you’re here, Agent Savano. Your group was an embarrassment to the Bureau and a potential legal minefield because of your age. You

messed up for the cameras in Los Angeles, so they sent you overseas on a quiet posting; but, in spite of what you may think, what we do here is important, Agent. There shall be no cutting of slack because of your youth.”

Chevie glared. “Don’t worry, Agent. I don’t expect slack, and I don’t cut any.”

Orange thrust a hand inside the pod, checking the temperature. “I’m glad to hear it. It is more than likely that your unslackened talents will never be called upon. On most days a man probably won’t come out of the WARP pod, so you don’t have to do anything except study for your diploma. But on the off chance that this very special man does emerge from that hatch when I am out, you need to keep him alive. Just keep him alive and call me. That’s it.”

“Is the man in there now?”

“No, Agent. The pod is empty at the moment, and has been for thirty years.”

“So it’s a magic pod?”

Orange smiled in a way that told Chevie that he knew quite a lot that she didn’t. “Not magic, exactly. Magical, maybe.”

“Yep, that makes a lot of sense.”

“That’s all the sense you’re going to get out of me today, Agent Savano. Maybe when you’ve proven yourself as a serious podite, I’ll share some details. Until then you live on-site, you never stray more than a mile from the house, and I watch the pod while you sleep.”

“Where do I sleep?”

“The flat upstairs. You’ll love it.”

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“Where do *you* sleep? In bonnie Scotland?”

Orange smiled again. “The top floor. I get the penthouse. One perk of being the boss.”

He handed Chevie a smartphone. “All the numbers are preprogrammed. And there are apps for the alarm and surveillance. You see this alarm-button icon? Don’t press that if you don’t want all hell breaking loose. Got it?”

Chevie took the phone. “I got it, Agent.”

“Good.” Orange turned back to the pod, his fingers tripping across multiple old-fashioned plastic keyboards bolted to its surface. “If you do well here, keep your head down for a couple of years, then let’s see if we can’t sneak you back into the U.S. without the press noticing. By that time you will be almost old enough to apply for Quantico.”

Chevie scowled at Orange’s gray back. In two years she would be ancient. Almost nineteen.

“Wow, that would be great. Two years of babysitting. I am so glad I did all those firearms courses.”

Orange left the pod chamber without looking back. “Keep trying, Agent,” he called over his shoulder. “Someday you will say something that is actually funny.”

I hate that guy already, thought Chevie Savano.

Now, several months later, Chevie had lost touch with most of her friends in California while she waited for some mystery guy to pop out of a space pod in the basement. She hadn’t fired her weapon once, even on a firing range, which made her extremely nervous; and she realized that she was not only

talking to herself on a regular basis but answering herself too.

“You need to stop that,” she said to herself. “People will think you’re crazy.”

Really? What people? It wasn’t as if she had talked to anybody other than Orange for over six weeks. She had even celebrated her seventeenth birthday on her own with a chocolate brownie and a single pathetic candle.

The house on Bedford Square had become like her second home, or maybe her prison. She knew every inch of the building better than she knew her own cottage on the Malibu bluffs, where she could legally live alone when she turned eighteen in less than a year.

There was one room in the Bedford Square house that she did love, and this was the studio. At some point in the house’s history a dancer had converted a large part of the second floor into a dance studio, complete with a mirror wall and barre. Not that Chevie Savano was a dancer, but she was a gym girl; and it had only taken three weeks of nagging to get Orange to sign off on a few thousand pounds for weights and machines.

On this evening, which was to prove eventful but had started out pretty same-old same-old, Chevie had spent her last stress-free moments for quite some time looking at herself in the mirror and thinking, *Girl, where is your life going?*

It was hardly a mystery.

You know where your life is going. Do your time watching the pod, and hopefully the powers that be back in the U.S. will forget all about Los Angeles and give you a shot at becoming a real agent. You still have friends in Quantico.

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Usually federal agents had to be twenty-three years of age minimum before they could wear the shield, but Chevie had been part of a trial program to combat the increasing problem of terrorist infiltration of high schools. A handpicked group of state wards had spent a semester in Quantico, and then had been placed undercover in various schools attended by suspected sympathizers, in a strictly observational capacity. No infiltration, no confrontation. Chevie had spent six months in L.A. keeping tabs on an Iranian family who the Feds believed were trying to start a cell in California. The assignment had ended with a public disaster outside a Los Angeles theater where Chevie had used her training to disarm a drunken teen who'd been threatening the Iranians. Unfortunately, the teen had been wounded in the process, and the entire fiasco was captured on a cell phone camera. The hothouse program was hurriedly shut down, and Chevie was whisked off to London for babysitting duty so a senate committee would not catch on to the fact that the agent involved in the Hollywood Center Affair was a minor.

Chevie did thirty minutes of cardio, thirty minutes of core, then shadowboxed in the mirror until her Lycra leggings and vest were dark with sweat. She was in good enough shape to whip the top ten percent of law-enforcement officers anywhere in the world. And she could shoot an apple off a tree at a hundred paces.

Do I look seventeen?

As far as Chevie could see, she looked pretty much the same as she had at sixteen. At five feet six she was a little short

for an FBI agent, but she was lithe and fast, with a delicate oval face and the glossy black hair typical of Native Americans.

I am going to get through this assignment, she thought. They don't get rid of Chevron Savano so easily. There are worse things than boredom.

Which was the last routine thought she was to have for a while.

Riley could not for the life of him have described his predicament. Had there been a Bible handy, he could not have testified on it as to whether he was alive or dead. His thoughts were a jumble of fear and confusion, and he found that the tough, stoical core of his spirit, which had kept him going through the terrifying years with Garrick, was totally absent.

His senses were spun together like the muddy streams flowing into the Thames, and he felt an urge to vomit that was somehow in his mind and not his gut.

Is this the pit? he wondered. Has the devil claimed me?

He ordered his hand to wave, but nothing happened; or perhaps it did and he could not see it.

It seemed somehow that there was a light up ahead, glowing like a streetlamp. Though Riley could neither see the light nor calculate in which direction "up ahead" lay, he somehow knew these things to be true.

I am about to arrive, he realized.

Chevie stood in front of the mirror and watched her image split in two. For the briefest moment she thought that she had finally

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gone stir-crazy; then she realized that the mirror had cracked from roof to ceiling.

That's bad luck for someone, probably me.

Then more cracks appeared, jagged black lightning rents that divided the room into sections.

Could it be an earthquake? Do they have those in London?

The mirror cracked once, twice, a thousand times with a sound like automatic weapon fire. The cracks raced past the edges of the mirrors, streaking across the walls. Chevie finally moved when the lacquered floorboards beneath her sneakers began to splinter and fall in torn chunks through to the hallway below.

“What the hell . . . ?” she cried, picking a safe path to the door.

Overhead the lights flickered, then exploded, showering Chevie with glass and sparks. Through the window she could see streetlamps exploding all along Bayley Street and around the square itself. Beyond the square the blackout rippled down toward Covent Garden and Soho as though some giant night creature was swallowing chunks of light.

What is happening to the power? Orange will know.

But Orange was out. She was the on-duty agent.

A bulletproof front-facing window cracked, allowing noise in from the outside world. Metal shrieked as cars collided on Tottenham Court Road, and the cry of panicked people rose into the dark London clouds, which had lost their streetlight underglow.

Whatever is happening, it started here, Chevie realized.

She ran to the wall safe, punched in the code number, and pulled out her Glock 22 in the shoulder holster she wore with an extra strap to pull it tight to her left side for a smooth cross draw. She expertly donned the holster and drew her weapon.

Chevie held the gun straight-armed in a two-handed grip, staring fixedly through the green tritium contrast points of her night sight, hoping that nothing would pop up and force her to shoot.

I don't even know what the guy looks like who might come out of the pod. If I shoot the witness, they will never let me back into California.

Chevie ran down the upper landing, sticking close to the wall. Around her, bricks grated and plaster fell in chunks.

That chunk looks like Texas, thought Chevie, because you can't control what the mind throws up.

Emergency lighting blisters flickered on, bathing the interior in industrial yellow light.

Good, thought Chevie. I can see whatever happens, which will hopefully be nothing.

Something else occurred to her.

Agent Orange. He's probably going to blame me for this.

Chevie rattled her gun and told herself to focus, pulling a tight turn into the stairwell. She made her way carefully down the two flights of stairs. The basement steps before her were relatively intact, but the door had buckled and the central panel seemed to have melted.

What could melt a steel door? wondered Special Agent Savano, and this unspoken question was answered when a bolt

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of lightning sizzled through the glowing edges of the melt hole and took a good-sized lump out of the wall.

Lightning. Okay.

Chevie realized that she had squatted on her hunkers with her weapon aimed at the door.

That's right, Agent. You can shoot the lightning.

She gave it a few minutes, until it seemed as though the indoor lightning bolts were over and done with, then hurried down the remaining narrow steps.

There was nothing left of the basement door but its frame; the melted edges had already solidified.

In a move that would have made Cord Vallicose, her Quantico instructor, proud, Chevie dived through the frame, rolled, and came up with her gun pointed down the corridor. She would later realize that the sharp edges of the door had scraped her all down one side, but at that moment she didn't even feel the scratches.

There was no obvious threat beyond the ruined door, just dust and devastation. The WARP pod itself had broken free of its brackets and was pointing nose-first down the basement corridor. It looked for all the world like a small spacecraft had crashed into the house.

Which would make about as much sense as what is actually happening: a big machine is sucking the juice out of central London.

Chevie swore to herself that when Orange arrived, she was going to hold him at gunpoint until he told her exactly what this 1970s-style pod had to do with witness protection.

The pod usually reminded Chevie of a science museum

exhibit, with its retro design and faded metallic finish, but now the machine seemed alive and totally functional, whatever its function might be. The thick power cables at its base hummed and crackled like electric eels, and a dozen light clusters flashed complicated patterns in total unison.

This must be the day the important man comes out of the pod, which is impossible.

“You there, in the . . . er . . . pod,” she called, feeling more than a little silly. “Come out with your hands up.”

No one emerged from the metal pyramid, but a hatch vented gas, then dropped with a loud clang to the floor. Ghostly sheets of steam floated from the interior.

Well, that’s new, thought Chevie, checking with her thumb that the safety on her gun was off.

Inside the pod, orange light flickered, casting weird, shifting shadows on the wall.

There’s something alive in there, Chevie realized.

Riley felt every molecule in his body coalesce, compacting until his senses returned.

I am alive, he rejoiced, until the bitter cold settled upon him, and his teeth chattered violently.

His hand still gripped the murder weapon, which was even now lodged in the chest of the murdered old geezer.

I cannot let go, he realized. My fingers are locked.

Riley tried to take stock of his surroundings, as Garrick had taught him.

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He was contained in a metal tank with numerous fairy lights a-flashing on the cold walls.

I have brought this magical gent back to his people with a blade in his body and my hand on the blade. They will see me swing for this.

Escape, his instincts told him. Escape before you are in the dock for murder or, worse, Garrick finds a way to find you.

But the cold held him like a boulder strapped to his back; and Riley knew that, like thousands of street urchins every winter, soon he would sleep and then he would die.

Chevie rose on her haunches, then moved stealthily toward the hatch, keeping her gaze pointed through the gun sights.

“Come out with your hands up,” she ordered once more, but again nothing emerged from the pod.

It may have taken three seconds to reach the hatch, but to Chevie it felt like an age. Everything slowed down as adrenaline coursed through her system, stimulating her heart rate, dilating her blood vessels and air passages. She saw sparks tumbling slowly from the conduits and steam clouds seemed to stand still in the air.

Keep your focus, Special Agent, she told herself. There is someone in that pod.

She could hear scrabblings inside.

Is it a dog? An animal?

How do I warn an animal?

Suddenly time sped up again, and Chevie found herself in front of the hatch. Cold radiated through the opening and

orange sparks moved unnaturally toward one another, coalescing into something solid.

Am I aiming my gun at a ghost?

But there was something else inside, huddled shivering in the cramped interior.

“Don’t move!” shouted Chevie, using her most serious FBI voice. “Freeze, or I will shoot.”

A weak voice came from somewhere inside the orange cloud. “I *am* freezing, miss. My word on it.”

Before Chevie could wonder why the strange accent had her brain singing “Consider Yourself,” the cloud dissipated, revealing the figure of a boy huddled over an old man.

The boy was alive but the man was not, probably because of the knife jutting from his chest. Being dead was not the only thing wrong with this guy: the blood congealing on his torso was yellow, and one of his arms seemed to be that of a gorilla.

Don’t think about it now. Do the job.

“Okay, kid. Move away from the dead . . . thing.”

The boy blinked, searching for the source of the orders. “I never done it, miss. We need to leave this place. He’ll be coming for me.”

Chevie made a split-second decision, reaching into the pod and yanking the kid out by his collar.

Chevie held him on the floor with the palm of her free hand.

“Who’s coming, kid? Who’s coming for you?”

The boy’s eyes were wide. “He’s coming. Garrick. The magician. Death itself.”

THE RELUCTANT ASSASSIN

Great, thought Chevie. First a monkey guy, and now Death itself, who is also a magician.

Chevie felt another presence in the room and looked up to see Agent Orange in all his gray glory moving down the corridor toward the pod.

“That’s a good way to get yourself shot, Orange. What are you doing here anyway? I never pressed the panic button.”

Orange pulled off his silver sunglasses and surveyed the devastation. “Well, Agent Savano, when half of London blacked out, I guessed the WARP pod might have been activated.” Orange hesitated six feet from the hatch. “Did you look inside, Chevie?”

“Yes. I looked. Am I gonna die from radiation poisoning now?”

“No, of course not. Is there . . . a man in there? Is my father in there?”

Orange’s father? This posting cannot get any weirder.

Chevie returned her gaze to the restrained boy. “There were two people inside. This boy and a man. I really hope the man is not your father.”

But the way this day has been going, I just bet that monkey guy is Orange’s dad.

Chevie realized that she had never really trusted Agent Orange, but at this moment she actually felt sorry for him.