



Alone

Lisa Gardner

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Chapter 1

He'd put in a fifteen-hour shift the night the call came in. Too many impatient drivers on 93 leading to too much crash, bang, boom. City was like that this time of year. The trees were bare, night coming on quick and the holidays looming. It felt raw outside. After the easy camaraderie of summer barbecues, you now walked alone through city streets hearing nothing but the skeletal rattle of dry leaves skittering across cold pavement.

Lots of cops complained about the short, gray days of February, but personally, Bobby Dodge had never cared for November. Today did nothing to change his mind.

His shift started with a minor fender bender, followed by two more rear-enders from northbound gawkers. Four hours of paperwork later, he thought he'd gotten through the worst of it. Then, in early afternoon, when traffic should've been a breeze even on the notoriously jam-packed 93, came a five-car pile-up as a speeding taxi driver tried to change four lanes at once and a stressed-out ad exec in a Hummer forcefully cut him off. The Hummer took the hit like a heavyweight champ; the rusted-out cab went down for the count and took out three other cars with it. Bobby got to call four wreckers, then diagram the accident, and then arrest the ad exec when it became clear the man had mixed in a few martinis with his power lunch.

Pinching a man for driving under the influence meant more paperwork, a trip to the South Boston barracks (now in the middle of rush-hour traffic, when no one respected anyone's right-of-way, not even a trooper's), and another altercation with the rich ad exec when he balked at entering the holding cell.

The ad exec had a good fifty pounds on Bobby. Like a lot of guys confronted by a smaller opponent, he confused superior weight with superior strength and ignored the warning sign telling him otherwise. The man grabbed the doorjamb with his right hand. He swung his lumbering body backwards, expecting to bowl over his smaller escort and what? Make a run for it through a police barracks swarming with armed troopers? Bobby ducked left, stuck out his foot, and watched the overweight executive slam to the floor. The man landed with an impressive crash and a few troopers paused long enough to clap their hands at the free show.

"I'm going to fucking sue!" the drunken exec screamed. "I'm going to sue you, you commanding officer, and the whole fucking state of Massachusetts. I'll own this joint. You hear me? *I'll fucking own your ass!*"

Bobby jerked the big guy to his feet. Ad Exec screamed a fresh round of obscenities, possibly because of the way Bobby was pinching the man's thumb. Bobby shoved the man into the holding cell and slammed the door.

"If you're gonna puke, please use the toilet," Bobby informed him, because by now the man had turned a little green. Ad Exec flipped him off. Then he doubled over and vomited out

the floor.

Bobby shook his head. "Rich prick," he muttered.

Some days were like that, particularly in November.

Now it was shortly after ten p.m. Ad Exec had been bailed out by his overpriced lawyer, the holding cell was washed down, and Bobby's shift, which had started at seven a.m., was finally done. He should go home. Give Susan a buzz. Catch some sleep before his alarm went off at five and the whole joyous process started once more.

Instead, he was jittery in a way that surprised him. Too much adrenaline buzzing in his veins, when he was a man best known for being cool, calm, and collected.

Bobby didn't go home. Instead, he traded in his blues for jeans and a flannel shirt, then headed for the local bar.

At the Boston Beer Garden, fourteen other guys were sitting around the rectangular-shaped bar, smoking cigarettes and nursing draft beer while zoning out in front of plasma-screen TVs. Bobby nodded to a few familiar faces, waved his hand at the bartender, Carl, then took an empty seat a bit down from the rest. Carrie brought him his usual order of nachos. Carl handed him his Coke.

"Long day, Bobby?"

"Same old, same old."

"Susan coming in?"

"Practice night."

"Aye, the concert. Two weeks, right?" Carl shook his head. "Beautiful and talented. I'll tell you again, Bobby—she's a keeper."

"Don't let Martha hear you," Bobby told him. "After watching your wife haul a keg, I don't want to think of what she could do with a rolling pin."

"My Martha's also a keeper," Carl assured him. "Mostly 'cause I fear for my life."

Carl left Bobby alone with his Coke and nachos. Overhead, a live news bulletin was reporting on some kind of situation in Revere. A heavily armed suspect had barricaded himself in his home after taking potshots at his neighbors. Now, Boston PD had deployed their SWAT team, and "nobody was taking any chances."

Yeah, November was a funny kind of month. Wired people up, left them with no defenses against the oncoming gloom of winter. Left even guys like Bobby doing all they could do just to hold course.

He finished his nachos. He drank his Coke. He settled his bill, and just as he convinced himself it really was a good idea to go home, the beeper suddenly activated on his belt. He read the screen one moment and was bolting out the door the next.

It had been that kind of day. Now it would be that kind of night.

Catherine Rose Gagnon didn't like November much either, though for her, the real problem had started in October. October 22, 1980, to be exact. The air had been warm, the sun a hot kiss on her face as she walked home from school. She'd been carrying her books in her arms and wearing her favorite back-to-school outfit: knee-high brown socks, a dark brown

corduroy skirt, and a long-sleeved gold top.

A car came up behind her. At first, she didn't notice, but dimly she became aware of the blue Chevy slowing to a crawl beside her. A guy's voice. *Hey, honey. Can you help me for sec? I'm looking for a lost dog.*

Later, there was pain and blood and muffled cries of protest. Her tears streaking down her cheeks. Her teeth biting her lower lip.

Then there was darkness and her tiny, hollow cry, "Is anyone out there?"

And then, for the longest time, there was nothing.

They told her it lasted twenty-eight days. Catherine had no way of knowing. There was no time in the dark, just a loneliness that went on without end. There was cold and there was silence, and there were the times when he returned. But at least that was something. It was the sheer nothingness, endless streams of nothingness, that could drive a person insane.

Hunters found her. November 18. They noticed the plywood cover, poked it with their rifles, and were startled to hear her faint cry. They rescued her triumphantly, uncovering her four-by-six earthen prison and releasing her into the crisp fall air. Later she saw newspaper photos. Her dark blue eyes enormous, her head skull-like, her body thin and curled up on itself, like a small brown bat that had been yanked harshly into the sun.

The papers dubbed Catherine the Thanksgiving Miracle. Her parents took her home. Neighbors and family paraded through the front door with exclamations of "Oh, thank heavens!" and "Just in time for the holidays" and "Oh, can you really believe ...?"

Catherine sat and let people talk around her. She slipped food from the overflowing tray and stored it in her pockets. Her head was down, her shoulders hunched around her ears. She was still the little bat and for reasons she couldn't explain, she was overwhelmed by the light.

More police came. She told them of the man, of the car. They showed her pictures. She pointed at one. Later, days, weeks—did it really matter?—she came to the police station, stared at a lineup, and solemnly pointed her finger once again.

Richard Umbrio went on trial six months later. And three weeks into that, Catherine took the stand with her plain blue dress and polished Mary Janes. She pointed her finger one last time. Richard Umbrio went away for life.

And Catherine Rose returned home with her family.

She didn't eat much. She liked to take the food and slip it in her pocket, or simply hold it in the palm of her hand. She didn't sleep much. She lay in the dark, her blind bat eyes seeking something she couldn't name. Often, she held quite still to see if she could breathe without making a sound.

Sometimes her mother stood in the doorway, her pale white hands fluttering anxiously against her collarbone. Eventually, Catherine would hear her father down the hall. *Come to bed, Louise. She'll call if she needs you.*

But Catherine never called.

Years passed. Catherine grew up, straightening her shoulders, growing out her hair, and discovering that she possessed the kind of dark, potent beauty that stopped men in their tracks. She was all pale white skin, glossy black hair, and oversized navy eyes. Men wanted her desperately. So she used them indiscriminately. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't their fault. She simply never felt a thing.

Her mother died. 1994. Cancer. Catherine stood at the funeral and tried to cry. Her body

had no moisture, and her sobs sounded papery and insincere.

She went home to her barren apartment and tried not to think of it again, though sometimes, out of the blue, she would picture her mother standing in the doorway of her room. *"Come to bed, Louise. She'll call if she needs you."*

"Hey, honey ... I'm looking for a lost dog..."

November 1998. The Thanksgiving Miracle curled up naked in her white porcelain tub, her thin, bony body trembling from the cold as she clutched a single razor in her fist. Something bad was going to happen. A darkness beyond darkness. A buried box from which there would be no coming back.

"Come to bed, Louise. She'll call if she needs you."

"Hey, honey ... I'm looking for a lost dog?"

The blade, so slender and light in her hands. The feel of its edge, kissing her wrist. The abstract sensation of warm, red blood, lining her skin.

The phone rang. Catherine roused herself from her lethargy long enough to answer it. And that single call saved her life. The Thanksgiving Miracle rose again.

She thought about it now. As the TV blared in the background: *An armed suspect has barricaded himself in his home after taking numerous shots at his neighbors. Boston SWAT officials consider the situation highly volatile and extremely dangerous.*

As her son sobbed in her arms. "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy."

And as her husband bellowed from below: "I know what you're doing, Cat! How stupid do you think I am? Well, it's not going to work. There's no way in hell you're going to get away with it! Not this time!"

Jimmy stormed up the stairs, heading for their bedroom.

The phone had saved Catherine before. Now she prayed it would save her once again. "Hello, hello, nine-one-one? Can you hear me? It's my husband. I think he's got a gun."

Chapter 2

Bobby had been a member of the Massachusetts State Police Special Tactics and Operations (STOP) Team for the past six years. Called out at least three times a month—and generally every damn holiday—he thought very little could surprise him anymore. Tonight, he was wrong.

Roaring through the streets of Boston, he squealed his tires taking a hard right up Park Street, heading for the golden-domed State House, then threw his cruiser left onto Beacon Street, flying past the Common and the Public Garden. At the last minute, he almost blew it—tried to head up Arlington straight for Marlborough, then realized that Marlborough was one way the wrong way. Like any good Masshole driver, he slammed on his brakes, cranked the wheel hard, and laid on his horn as he sliced across three lanes of traffic to stay on Beacon. Now his life was tougher, trying to pick up the right cross street to head up to Marlborough. In the end, he simply drove toward the white glow of floodlights and the flashing red lights of the Advanced Life Support ambulance.

Arriving at the corner of Marlborough and Gloucester, Bobby processed many details at once. Blue sawhorses and Boston PD cruisers already isolated one tiny block in the heart of Back Bay. Yellow crime-scene tape festooned several brownstone houses, and uniformed officers were taking up position on the corners. The ALS ambulance was now on-scene; so were several vans from the local media.

Things were definitely starting to rock and roll.

Bobby double-parked his Crown Vic just outside a blue sawhorse, jumped out the door, and jogged around to his trunk. Inside, he had everything a well-trained police sniper might need for a party. Rifle, scope, ammo, black BDUs, urban camo BDUs, ghillie hood, body armor, changes of clothing, snacks, water, a bean bag, night-vision goggles, binoculars, range finder, face paint, Swiss Army knife, and flashlight. Local police probably kept spare tires in the trunks; a state trooper could live out of his cruiser for a month.

Bobby hefted up his rucksack and immediately started assessing the situation.

In contrast to other SWAT teams, Bobby's tactical team never arrived en masse. Instead, his unit consisted of thirty-two guys located all over the state of Massachusetts, from the fingertip of Cape Cod to the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. Headquarters was Adamant, Mass., in the western half of the state, where Bobby's lieutenant had taken the call from Framingham Communications and made the decision to deploy.

In this case, a domestic barricade with hostages, all thirty-two guys had been activated and all thirty-two would arrive. Some would take three to four hours to get here. Others, like Bobby, made it in less than fifteen minutes. Either way, Bobby's LT prided himself on being able to get at least five officers anywhere in the state in under an hour.

Looking around now, Bobby figured he was one of those first five officers. Which meant he needed to hustle.

Most SWAT units were comprised of three teams: an entry team, a perimeter team, and snipers. The perimeter team had the primary job of securing and controlling the inner perimeter. Then came the snipers, who took up position outside the inner perimeter and served as reconnaissance—appraising the situation through their scope or binoculars, and radioing in details on the building as well as all people and movement inside. Finally, the entry team would prepare for last-resort action—if the hostage negotiator couldn't convince the suspects to come out, the entry team would storm in. Entries were messy; you prayed they didn't come to that, but sometimes it did.

Bobby's STOP team brought all those bells and whistles to the table, but they didn't specialize. Instead, given that they arrived piecemeal, they were cross-trained on all positions so they could get up and running the second boots hit the ground. In other words, while Bobby was one of the team's eight designated snipers, he wasn't looking at taking up sniping position just yet.

First goal—establish the inner perimeter. The inner perimeter was the area looking in on the scene. Establishing a good inner perimeter solved ninety percent of any tactical unit's headaches. You controlled and contained. It took at least two guys to form a perimeter, each standing on opposing corners, monitoring the diagonals.

Bobby was one guy. Now he was looking for a second. He spotted three other state police cruisers parked across the way, so he had teammates around here somewhere. Then he noticed the white van set up as command center. He jogged toward the van.

"Trooper Bobby Dodge," he announced five seconds later, climbing into the command center, setting down his gear, and thrusting out a hand.

"Lieutenant Jachrimo." The CO took his hand, handshake tight but quick. The thin-faced lieutenant wasn't from the state police, but from BPD. That didn't surprise Bobby; the scene was technically Boston jurisdiction, plus the state police commander was probably still two hours away. While Bobby would've preferred his own LT, he was trained to play nice with others—up to a point, of course.

Jachrimo had a white board up in front of him and was making a Gantt chart in the upper left-hand corner. "Position?" the CO asked Bobby.

"Sniper."

"Can you hold a perimeter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great, great, great." Lieutenant Jachrimo broke away from the white board long enough to stick his head out of the van and yell at a Boston uniform, "Hey. Hey, you. I need the phone company. Understand? Use your radio, call in to dispatch and get the goddamn phone company, 'cause nothing in this van is working, and you can't really have a command post if it doesn't command. Got it?"

The uniform went flying, and Jachrimo returned his harried attention to Bobby. "Okay, so what do you know?"

"Domestic barricade, male subject believed armed with a gun, wife and child also on the premises." Bobby repeated the message he'd received on his pager.

"Suspect's name is Jimmy Gagnon. Mean anything to you?"

Bobby shook his head.

“Just as well.” Jachrimo finished his Gantt chart, then started an overhead sketch of the neighborhood on the lower part of the white board. “So here’s where we’re at. Woman called nine-one-one shortly after eleven-thirty. Claimed to be Catherine Gagnon, Jimmy’s wife. Said her husband was drunk and threatening her and their son with a handgun. The nine-one-one operator tried to hold her on the line, but there was some kind of disturbance and the call was disconnected. About sixty seconds later, nine-one-one received a call from a neighbor reporting sounds of gunfire.

“The call came into headquarters, but our guys are already out on a situation in Revere, so I kicked it to Framingham Communications, who contacted your lieutenant. Your unit is serving as the primary, maybe for the whole show, maybe until our guys wrap up the party in Revere. Don’t know. As of this moment, we have uniforms securing the external perimeter. There are men posted, here, here, and here, and cars positioned here and here to block off the connecting streets.” Jachrimo made a series of Xs on his sketch, and that quickly, one block of brownstones was cordoned off from the surrounding neighborhood.

“The Gagnons occupy the top four levels of unit number four-fifteen. Uniforms have already evacuated the residents below their unit, as well as the residents of the brownstones on either side. We haven’t had contact with anyone inside the residence yet, which, frankly, doesn’t make me happy. As far as I’m concerned, we should’ve had the inner perimeter secured ten minutes ago and the hostage negotiators here eight minutes ago. But hey, that’s just me.”

“Manpower?”

“Troopers Fusilli, Adams, and Maroni are already on-scene. They’re scoping the building now, looking to form a very tight perimeter, probably inside the building. I got one officer tracking down blueprints and another—hopefully—getting me the goddamn phone company

“Intel from the neighbors?”

“According to the first-floor unit owner, the Gagnons did significant work on the place in the past five years. The top level of the brownstone was converted into cathedral ceilings for the fourth floor, where they apparently have one helluva master bedroom, with a walk-out balcony. Level one contains a small, one-bedroom unit, in addition to the lobby, which features an elevator that goes up to the second floor and the entrance to the Gagnon residence, as well as a staircase which reaches every level of the townhouse. The basement has been finished into a two-bedroom unit. We evacuated the couple that lives there and they told us exactly nothing; they have no idea about crawl spaces in the building, fire escape, nada. It’s an old building, though, so there’s bound to be a few surprises.

“It would seem that the Gagnons keep to themselves, and whatever parties they’ve had they haven’t invited their neighbors. Couple has a reputation for its fights and we’ve been called out before for domestic disputes. First time there’s been mention of a gun, though, so that’s a fresh kick in the pants. Is it her? Is it him? Hell if I know. Mostly, it just sucks for the kid. So that’s where we are and that’s what we got.”

The lieutenant’s spiel ground to a halt just in time. Phone company had arrived. Another one of Bobby’s teammates as well.

“Perfect,” the lieutenant declared. He stabbed one finger at the new trooper. “You, inner perimeter. And you,” the finger moved to Bobby. “Find a position. I want intel on that house

Where's the husband, where's the wife, where's the kid? And better yet, is anyone still alive? Because it's been over thirty minutes now, and we haven't heard a thing."

Stepping out of the command center, Bobby picked up his pace. Now charged with a task, he had choices to make. He ran through them quickly.

First off, proper gear. He went with city camo, a battle dress uniform blended with shades of gray. Solid black provided too much of a silhouette. Camo blends, on the other hand, gave the eye a sense of depth, allowing the wearer to sink into the surrounding environment.

Over the top of his BDUs came soft body armor. The rest of his team would be wearing Kevlar with boron plates, but that kind of heavy body armor was too cumbersome for sniping. Bobby needed to be able to move quickly, while also maintaining an often uncomfortable pose for hours on end. For him, a flak vest and helmet would do.

Next up, rifle, scope, and ammo. Bobby slung his Sig Sauer 3000 over his shoulder, then went with a Leupold 3-9X 50mm variable scope. His scope was already zeroed to one hundred yards, standard setup for a law enforcement sniper, versus military snipers, who zeroed their scopes to five hundred yards. The military guys, however, were running around in ghillie suits and crawling through swamps. Bobby's job rarely got that interesting.

Briefly, Bobby debated night-vision goggles, but given that the area was lit up like the Fourth of July, he passed.

That left ammo. He selected two: Federal Match Grade .308 Remington 168-grain slugs and Federal Match Grade .308 Remington 165-grain bullets with bonded tips. The 168-grain slugs were standard issue; the 165-grain bullets were better for shooting through glass. Given that it was a cold night and the residence in question seemed buttoned up tight, he'd start with a bonded tip in the chamber. When you only got one shot, you had to play the odds.

Next Bobby pared down his rucksack to three bottles of water, two PowerBars, a bean burrito, his binoculars, and a range finder. He closed his trunk and turned immediately to the street.

He had his gear, now he needed a position.

Back Bay was an old, wealthy area of Boston. The tall, narrow brownstones boasted granite arches, elaborate wrought-iron balconies, and expansive bay windows. Broad shade trees were beautiful in the summer but now mere silhouettes, cast their skeletal canopies over BMWs, SAABs, and Mercedes, while in the glow of the police floodlights, gray veins of leafless ivy climbed up redbrick walls and caressed intricate window casings. It was a beautiful city block, grand, self-contained, slightly arrogant.

Bobby could work his entire life and still not be able to afford to *park* on a street like this, let alone live here. Funny how some people could seemingly have every advantage in life and still be so royally fucked up.

Distance would not be a problem, he determined. The brownstones sat shoulder to shoulder, with only fifty yards between one side of the street and the other. Angle was more of a consideration. Anything greater than forty-five degrees and the ballistics grew problematic. The brownstone in question appeared to be five stories, plus a daylight basement. The CO had commented, however, that the fifth floor had essentially become

vaulted ceiling for a fourth-story master bedroom.

That would fit what Bobby saw now—lights blazing on the fourth story, where the appeared to be a balcony with an elaborate wrought-iron railing.

He crossed the street, where he could get a better view. Space between the wrought-iron rails of the balcony appeared to be approximately three inches. No problem, given he trained monthly to nail a one-inch kill zone. Angle, however, became tricky; shooting straight through the three-inch gap would be a piece of cake. Trying to shoot up or shoot down more than thirty degrees, however ...

Bobby definitely had to get off the ground.

Bobby eyed the four-story brownstone directly across from the Gagnons' and moments later was banging on the front door. While Lieutenant Jachrimo had told him uniforms had already evacuated area residents, Bobby wasn't surprised when a bright-eyed older man in a dark green robe immediately threw open the old wooden door; it was amazing how many people wouldn't leave their houses, even when surrounded by heavily armed men.

"Hey," the man said. "Are you a cop? Because I already told the other one I wasn't leaving."

"I need access to the top floor," Bobby said.

"Is that a rifle?"

"Sir, this is official police business. I need access to the top floor."

"Right. Top floor's the master bedroom. Oooh." The man's eyes went wide. "I get it. Master balcony's across from the Gagnons'. You must be a police sniper. Ooooh, can I get you anything?"

"Just the top floor, sir. Immediately."

The man was dying to please. George Harlow was a consultant, he informed Bobby as he hastily led the way up a sweeping central staircase. He was almost always on the road, but dumb luck he'd been home tonight at all to let Bobby in. His brownstone was smaller, not quite as nice as the others, but he owned the whole damn thing. Drove his condominium neighbors nuts speculating what the single-family dwelling must be worth. Why, just last month, a single-family townhouse in Back Bay sold for nearly ten million dollars. Ten million dollars. Yep, George's lush of a father hadn't left him such a bad inheritance after all. Of course, the property taxes were killing him.

Could George please touch the police rifle?

Bobby said no.

They arrived at the bedroom. The vast space bore hardly any furniture, let alone art on the walls. The man must travel a lot, because Bobby had seen hotel rooms with more personality. The front wall was all glass, however, with sliders right in the middle. Perfect.

"Kill the lights," he requested.

Mr. Harlow nearly giggled as he complied.

"Do you have a table I could use? Nothing fancy. And a chair."

Mr. Harlow had a card table. Bobby set it up while his host rounded up a metal folding chair. Bobby's breathing had accelerated. The climb up four flights? Or the adrenaline of the night that was about to officially begin?

He had now been on-scene for sixteen minutes, not bad time, but not great. More guys had probably already arrived. The perimeter was getting fine-tuned. Soon another officer would

show up to serve as spotter, providing two pairs of eyes. Then would come the crisis negotiation team, finally making contact.

Bobby set up his Sig Sauer on the table. He cracked the sliders one inch, just enough for the tip of his rifle. Then he sat down in Mr. Harlow's metal chair, turned on the radio mounted in his flak vest, and started to talk into the microphone/receiver that was tucked inside his ear and worked off the vibrations of his jawbone.

"This is Sniper One, reporting in."

"Go ahead, Sniper One," Lieutenant Jachrimo answered back.

Bobby put his eye to the scope, and finally met the Gagnons.

Chapter 3

“I see the back of a white male subject, approximately six feet tall, short brown hair, dark blue shirt, standing approximately four feet inside a pair of French doors on the front side of the building, which I’m going to call side A of level four. The French doors are approximately forty inches across, opening outward, and are the third opening across. Opening one of level four is a double-hung window, approximately thirty inches across and seven feet tall. Opening two is another double-hung window, approximately twenty-five inches across, seven feet tall. Opening four, side A, level four, is a final double-hung window, twenty-five inches across, seven feet tall.”

Bobby reported in the details of the Gagnons’ fourth floor while keeping his eye on the lone male subject. The man didn’t move. Watching someone, looking for something? Both of the man’s hands were in front of him, so Bobby couldn’t tell if he was armed.

Using binoculars now, Bobby scanned for a woman and child, but came up empty.

The room appeared to be a bedroom with a king-sized bed planted squarely in the middle of the space, lined up parallel to the French doors. The bed was one of those elaborate wrought-iron affairs with gauzy white fabric draped every which way. Behind the bed he could see a row of white-painted folding doors. Probably a closet. Then, over to the left, he could make out an alcove where there appeared to be another doorway. Master bath? Sitting area?

The room was large, with many hiding spaces. That made life interesting for everyone.

Bobby tried to adjust his binoculars to penetrate the shadows of the left-hand alcove without any luck. Briefly, he scanned the other lit windows of the brownstone, but didn’t encounter any signs of other occupants.

So where were the wife and child? Hidden in the drapes of fabric swathing the bed? Tucked inside a closet? Already dead on the floor?

Bobby could feel his stomach starting to tighten with tension. He forced himself to slowly breathe in, then out. Focus. Be part of the moment, but outside of the moment. Detach.

Do you know the difference between a shooter and a sniper? A shooter has a pulse. A sniper doesn’t.

Bobby prepared for the long haul: He fine-tuned his rifle stand, working the stock of his rifle into the bean bag until it achieved perfect height. He moved the chair until he could lean into the table, wedging the butt of his rifle squarely into the curve of his shoulder. When the rifle felt good, tight but comfortable against his body, like another appendage, a third arm, he leaned forward and found the spot weld—the place where his cheek met the stock and his eye met the scope in such perfect alignment that the entire world suddenly seemed to fill the crosshairs. He could see anything, he could shoot anything.

He studied once again the lone male subject, now peering over the edge of the wrought iron bed.

Bobby chambered a bonded-tip slug and slowly placed the crosshairs of his scope on the back of the man's head. His breathing was shallow, his pulse steady. He lined up his shot without a single tremor in his hand.

Police snipers practiced one thing only—to immediately incapacitate a subject who may have his finger on a trigger. Basically, month in, month out, Bobby trained to sever a man's brain stem.

He was satisfied with his position. Angle was easy, distance manageable. He would incur a minor deflection from the glass of the French doors, but nothing that couldn't be handled by the 165-grain ammo. With the target stationary, he did not need to worry about inducing lead, and at a distance this short, weather and wind were not relevant factors.

He pulled away from the scope, careful not to disturb the rifle, and with his right hand made notes in his logbook. He detailed his ammo, his scope setting, and his setup. Then he picked up his binoculars, which provided a wider field of view, and again, careful not to disturb his rifle, continued monitoring the scene.

The man had moved slightly toward the foot of the bed. Bobby had a sense of growing tension, a force building to a crescendo. He couldn't place why, but then he got it.

The way the man was standing, his shoulders squared off, his elbows jutting out, his feet slightly apart. It was a dominating pose, a man puffing himself up to appear even bigger and stronger. Bobby bet if he could see the man's face now, it would be wearing an ugly snarl, a red-mottled look of rage.

Again, Bobby searched for signs of the wife and child, and again came up empty. Somewhere in that room, though, or the man would be moving. Bobby wished he could see the man's face.

With nothing immediately happening, Bobby returned to diagramming the building for his team. Following protocol, he labeled each side of the brownstone with a letter, A, B, C, or D. Given that the brownstone had adjoining units on both sides and the back, that left only the front, which he labeled A. Then he numbered each level of the townhouse, one through five plus basement. Finally, he recorded each opening of side A, describing whether it was a window or door, giving its approximate size and numbering it left to right starting with the number one.

This yielded a uniformed chart for everyone to follow. The man was standing in front of the French doors, side A, level four, opening three, or in quick shorthand when things got hopping, lone male A-four-three. No sorting through whose left or whose right. In three quick coordinates, boom, you got the job done.

The diagram completed, Bobby did his own personal check, things he'd learned from years on the job. Any sign of advanced preparation in the home? Doors barricaded, slats of wood nailed across windows? Any sign of someone trying to hide misdeeds? Blinds pulled, furniture blocking the view, etc.? Advanced preparation was a warning sign. So were shots fired out the window or open threats of violence.

So far, everything remained quiet. No one was visible in the entire building except a lone male subject, standing four feet inside French doors, A-four-three.

Bobby took the binoculars away from his eyes and returned to viewing the room through

the scope of his rifle.

With the sliders cracked he was getting a cold breeze, chilling his face and stiffening his fingers. When a spotter showed up, he'd have the guy close the sliders, but sit close enough to crack them again at a moment's notice. For now, he was okay, though. His breathing was steady, his muscles relaxed. He was finding that zone. Calm but prepared. Alert but relaxed. Aim small, miss small. He wasn't even really thinking about the card table anymore, or the cold November wind, or the fact that Mr. Harlow still lingered in the doorway behind him, eager for some kind of show.

Soon, the hostage negotiator would arrive, get the subject on the phone, and try to work out a peaceful resolution. If no one was hurt yet, the negotiator would probably convince the man to quit now, while the worst he would suffer was a little embarrassment. If the family was injured, or worse, dead, then things would get trickier. But the crisis management team was good. Just last year, Bobby had watched the lead negotiator, Al Hanson, convince three escaped felons to surrender peacefully, when all three criminals were facing life in prison and had nothing to lose by shooting it out.

Afterwards, Bobby's LT had gone up to each prisoner, clapped them on the shoulder, and thanked them sincerely for giving up.

These situations always started with so much adrenaline, testosterone, and generally nutty hype. Then Bobby's team showed up and worked on toning it all back down. No reason for rash action. No need for violence. Let's just go through the paces, my man, and it'll all work out fine.

Movement. Across the street, the suspect suddenly twisted, walking to the right in an agitated fashion. Bobby finally caught a glimpse of a handgun.

"White male subject, moving in front of French doors, A-four-three. I see what appears to be a nine-millimeter handgun in right hand. White female," Bobby declared suddenly, voice slightly triumphant. "Long black hair, dark red top, appears to be kneeling or sitting behind bed, fifteen feet inside French doors, A-four-three. White child, dark hair, pressed against the female. Small, maybe two or three years of age."

Lieutenant Jachrimo's voice came over the receiver. "Is the woman or child moving? Any sign of injuries?"

Bobby frowned. Harder to tell. The man cut in front of his view again, pacing rapidly now, right hand waving his gun. Bobby zeroed in on the man's weapon, seeking more detail. Tough, with the man moving. Bobby zoomed back out, trying to get a sense of the lone male subject instead, how he held the nine-millimeter, how he moved around the room. An experienced gun handler? An agitated amateur? Also hard to determine.

The man shifted right and now Bobby could tell that the woman was yelling something. She had the child—a boy, maybe?—held tight against her, his face turned into her chest, his hands covering his ears.

Things were happening. Sudden, fast. Bobby couldn't tell what had sparked the commotion, but now the man was screaming. Through the scope Bobby could see the spittle flying from the man's lips, muscles cording on his neck. It was surreal: to watch such explosive rage and never hear a sound.

The woman stood up, child still clutched against her chest. Now she'd stopped yelling, seeming to have reached some sort of conclusion. The man screamed violently; she simply

stared at him.

Abruptly, the man leveled his gun at the woman's head. He held out his left hand, as motioning for the child.

"Male subject drawing down on female," Bobby heard himself report. "Male subject pointing a handgun—"

The man still had his gun aimed at the woman's head, but was now rounding the bed, fast and furious. She didn't say a word, didn't budge a step. Then the man was *right there*, yelling ferociously and, with his left hand, tugging at the child.

The boy peeled away from his mother's chest. Bobby had a sudden, fleeting glimpse of a small, pale face with dark, wild eyes. The kid was scared out of his mind.

"Male subject has child. Male subject is shoving child across the room."

Away from his mother. Away from whatever was about to happen next.

Bobby was in the *now*, part of the moment, but outside the moment. He worked the scope's minor adjustments as natural to him as taking a breath. Shifting slightly left, inducing a fraction of lead as the male subject pushed his son to the end of the bed, then stepped back toward his wife.

The child disappeared into the gauze of floating white fabric. Now it was just the man and woman, husband and wife. Jimmy Gagnon was no longer screaming, but his chest jerked up and down, breathing hard.

The woman finally spoke. Her lips were easy to follow in the magnified world of Bobby's Leupold scope.

"*What now, Jimmy? What's left?*"

Jimmy suddenly smiled, and in that smile, Bobby knew exactly what was going to happen next.

Jimmy Gagnon's finger tightened on the trigger. And from fifty yards away, in the darkened bedroom of a neighbor's townhouse, Bobby Dodge blew him away.

Panting. Breathing hard. Feeling an unbearable tightness suddenly burst, then deflate from his chest. Bobby pulled his finger away from the trigger, jerking back the way a man might release a live rattler. His eye remained on the scope, however. He saw the woman rush to the end of the bed and scoop up the child, saw her turn the boy's head away from the spray of his father's body.

For a moment, mother and son stood entwined, one unit of curving arms and legs, the side of her cheek pressed against the top of his head. Then the woman's head came up. She gazed across the street. She peered into her neighbor's home. She looked straight at Bobby Dodge and he felt a tingle he couldn't explain.

"*Thank you,*" the woman mouthed.

Bobby stood up from the table, realizing for the first time that he was breathing very hard and his face was covered in sweat.

"Holy crap," Mr. Harlow said from the doorway.

Then the rest of the world finally came into focus. Footsteps pounding. Sirens blaring. Me

coming. Some for her, some for him.

Bobby tucked his hands behind his back, planted his feet, and waited as he was trained. He had done his job. He had taken a life to save a life.

Now the shit would hit the fan.

Chapter 4

The entry team descended upon the house, confirming one male subject, now missing half of his head. Then the entry team beat a hasty retreat. The residence no longer belonged to Bobby. STOP. It had just become a crime scene.

The call went out to the DA's office, Suffolk County. An ADA got roused out of bed, assembled a task force of investigators, and arrived on the scene. Bobby's Sig Sauer was entered into evidence. His teammates were immediately sequestered and interviewed along with witnesses.

Bobby got to sit in the back of a patrol car, technically not in trouble, but feeling very much like a truant kid.

Media was already gathering outside the yellow crime-scene tape. Television lights were blazing, while reporters vied for the best position. So far, the DA's office had everything wrapped up tight. The body had already been transported from the scene; Bobby was sheltered inside the patrol car.

Name of the game was never to provide too many visuals. Denied on the ground, however, the media would soon take to the air.

His LT, John Bruni, arrived at the scene. He came over to the cruiser and clapped Bobby on the shoulder.

"How you feeling?"

"All right."

"These things are always lousy."

"Yeah."

"Employee Assistance Unit will be here shortly. They'll explain your rights, give you some support. You're not the first guy this has happened to, Bobby."

"I know."

"Just answer what you feel like answering. If you get uncomfortable, call it a day. The union provides a lawyer, so don't be afraid to ask for legal counsel."

"Okay."

"We're here for you, Bobby. Once part of the team, always part of the team."

Bruni had to go. Probably to check in with Public Affairs, which would soon be making a statement to the press: *Tonight an unidentified officer was involved in a fatal shooting. The DA has taken over investigation of the incident. No comment at this time.*

And so it would go. Bobby had seen it happen once before. A trooper was ambushed while making a routine patrol stop. Two Hispanic males in a beat-up Honda opened fire on the officer. He fired back, wounding one and killing the other. The officer had gone on immediate paid leave, disappearing from the barracks, disappearing from life, while the pre-

tried his case in the papers and the Hispanic community accused him of racism. A month later, the DA's office ruled that the case didn't merit criminal charges—maybe the fact that the officer had a bullet lodged in his upper arm helped. The press never seemed to notice though. A brother of the fatally shot man launched a civil suit against the officer, and like Bobby knew, the trooper was dealing with a million-dollar lawsuit.

He never returned to duty. And most people in Boston probably did think he was a racist.

Was it bad to have just killed a man, then sit here worrying about what that meant for your career? Was that totally self-absorbed? Inappropriate? Or was it just the way these things went?

Bobby was thinking of the woman again. Slender. Pale. Holding her child tight against her body. *Thank you*, her lips had said. He had shot her husband in front of her and her kid and she had thanked him for it.

Fresh knock on the window. Stupid, since the car door was open. Bobby looked up and saw one of his teammates, Patrick Loftus.

"Hell of a night," Loftus said.

"Yeah."

"Sorry I missed it. Just got here a few minutes ago. When all was said and done." Loftus lived on the Cape. Probably only an hour away. So the shooting had happened that fast. Bobby realized for the first time that he had no idea what the hour was. He'd gotten the call, jumped in his car, set up his rifle. The whole thing was already a blur in his mind, a series of actions and reactions. He came, he saw, he did. Holy shit, he had killed a man. Honestly, he'd blown off half a man's head.

Thank you, the woman said, *thank you*.

Bobby leaned out of the car.

"Cameras?" he asked.

"Got 'em covered."

"Good." Bobby vomited onto the street.

"I'm really sorry," Loftus said quietly.

Bobby leaned back against the seat. He closed his eyes. "Yeah," he said. "So am I."

The EAU guys came next. Fellow officers, sort of like a peer support group. They walked him through the process. Investigators from the DA's office would be interviewing him shortly. He should answer the questions truthfully, but as briefly as possible. He had the right to a lawyer—the State Police Association of Massachusetts, SPAM, would pay for his lawyer. He had the right to end questioning whenever he felt uncomfortable. He had the right against self-incrimination.

He should be aware that the guidelines for use of deadly force stated that lethal force was appropriate if you felt your own life, or someone else's, was in immediate danger. Something to consider, you know, when the investigators asked their questions.

The ADA would probably need at least two weeks to study the events. Bobby's gun would be examined, tapes of the radio conversation between him and the command post analyzed.

They would do ballistic tests at the crime scene and take statements from everyone, including Bobby's teammates, the woman and child, and good old Mr. Harlow.

At the end of the investigation, it would be up to the DA's office to decide if the facts warranted criminal charges. If it was a righteous shoot, then Bobby was okay. Public Affairs would issue a statement, the DA would issue a statement, and Bobby would be back in action. If the DA did decide to press criminal charges ...

Well, let's not put the cart before the horse.

From here on out, Bobby was on paid administrative leave. It wouldn't be a bad idea to use that time to come to terms with tonight. Maybe talk to some other guys who'd been through it—the EAU could arrange it. Maybe even, if he wanted, sign up for some post-critical incident counseling. The EAU had a shrink they highly recommended and it would look good on Bobby's record.

Killing someone was a big deal, even for a cop. The sooner he faced it, the sooner he could get on with his life.

Then the EAU guys were gone, and the investigators took their place.

It was three-thirty in the morning now. Bobby had been up for nearly twenty-two hours. He followed the investigators to the DA's office, where they all had steaming cups of fresh coffee and sat around a scarred wood table, like old friends shooting the shit.

Bobby wasn't fooled. He was bottomed out and bone tired from buckets of adrenaline dumping suddenly into his bloodstream, but he was still a sniper, a man who could narrow the world down to a single set of crosshairs, and maintain that concentration for hours.

They all began the dance.

Where was Bobby when he got the call?

Boston Beer Garden, he answered, and immediately lost points. He added he'd been drinking Coke, the bartender would verify, and regained some ground.

He'd started work at what time today? He'd ended his shift at what hour? A fifteen-hour shift earned him a frown; the sidebar that he was trained to handle long hours didn't seem to rate him a second chance.

How had he gotten to the scene, how fast was his response time, what could he recall of his conversation with Lieutenant Jachrimo? They were searching here, looking for something, and Bobby's answers grew shorter. He felt the threat in the conversation, but couldn't identify the source. The investigators finally moved on, but the collegial atmosphere was fast eroding. Questions were sharper now, and answers harshly judged.

He had to explain how he'd determined to access Mr. Harlow's residence. He described his setup on the card table, why he chose to crack the window, why he went with bonded-tube ammo.

What did he see in the house, who did he see in the house?

Bobby did better here. White male subject, white female subject. Didn't give them names and didn't give them presumed identities such as husband, wife, or child. He was as neutral as possible. He'd shot a man, but it was nothing personal.

Finally, they got to the heart of the matter. Did he know the victim was James Gagnon?

And for the first time, Bobby paused.

Victim. Interesting choice of words. The man was no longer a suspect, someone who had pointed his gun at his own wife and tightened his finger on the trigger; he was a victim.

Bobby thought now might be a good time to ask for that lawyer. But he didn't.

He answered as truthfully as he could. Lieutenant Jachrimo had identified the family, possibly being the Gagnons, but at the time of the incident, Bobby had received no verification of those names.

The investigators sat back again. Mollified? Suspicious? Hard to tell. They wanted to know if he'd met the wife, personally, socially. Had he spoken to her during the incident?

No, Bobby said.

Now it was time for the nitty-gritty. What made him decide to fire his weapon? Had he been okayed for use of deadly force by the CO?

No.

Had the victim made any verbal threats toward Bobby or another officer?

No.

Had the victim made any verbal threats toward his wife?

Not that Bobby had heard.

But the victim had a gun.

Yes.

Did he fire it?

There were reports of gunfire.

Before Bobby arrived. But what about afterwards? Did Bobby actually see the victim fire his weapon?

His finger was pulling the trigger.

So he fired his weapon?

Yes. No. Not sure. He was firing, I was firing; it all happened so fast.

So the victim didn't fire his weapon?

Not sure.

So possibly, the victim was just pointing his gun? Hadn't he been pointing the weapon for a while?

The man's finger was on the trigger.

But did he squeeze it? Did he try to shoot his wife?

I believed there was an immediate threat.

Why, Trooper Dodge, why?

Because of the way the man smiled. Bobby couldn't say that. He said instead, "The subject stood two feet away from the woman with a nine-millimeter pointed at her head and his finger moving on the trigger. I perceived that to be an immediate and compelling threat."

Do you really think a man would kill his wife with his kid still in the room?

Yes, sir, I believed he would.

Why, Trooper Dodge, why?

Because sometimes, sir, shit like that happens.

The investigators finally nodded, then repeated the same questions all over again. Bobby knew how it worked. More times you made a man tell his story, the more he might trip up. Lies growing more embellished, truth more strained. They were giving Bobby rope and waiting to see if he'd hang himself with it.

At six-thirty they finally gave up. A new day was dawning outside the stifling conference room, and the collegial air returned. They were sorry they had to ask all these questions, yet

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