

The first thing the hunter saw was the shadow, a long silhouette stamped on milk-blue snow, rising near a copse of maples half-way across the field.

It was deep twilight, mid-March, and the ground had not yet given up its game, nor the night its quarry. Certainly nothing of this size.

The hunter walked cautiously forward, his boots crunching the crust of frozen earth beneath him. The sound echoed across the valley, and was soon met by the cry of a nesting barn owl, a mournful plea that reminded him of the girl, of the night everything changed.

The mountain fell silent.

As the hunter closed the distance to the trees, the shadow reappeared, became a man – a big man – now standing no more than ten yards away.

The hunter tried to raise his crossbow, but could not lift his arms. He'd had this paralysis once before, a thousand sleepless nights ago, back when he wore a gold shield on his chest, back when he was a hunter of men. On that night he'd all but paid for this failing with his life.

The big man stepped into a pond of moonlight, and the hunter saw his face for the first time in three years.

'My God,' the hunter said. '*You.*'

'I found it.'

At first the hunter thought the man was speaking another language. It had been that long since he'd heard a voice not his own.

The three words soon reached his memory. He tried to purge them, to rid himself of their power, but the words had already begun to tunnel into his past, his soul.

The hunter dropped his weapon, fell to his knees, and began to scream.

Before long the moon was once again clothed in shadow, and his screams became the wind.

ONE

In the city beneath the city, through these hollow black halls where dead souls murmur and the seasons do not change, he moves, silent as dust.

By day he walks the city above. He is the man in the shabby overcoat on the bus, the man in the gray workman's coveralls, the man who holds the door for you, touching a finger to the brim of his cap if you are a woman, offering a tactful dip of the chin if you are a man.

There is something in his manner that remembers another time, something formal and reserved. It is not politeness or courtesy, nor could it be described as politesse – although most people who met him would, if asked, comment on his courtly fashion.

It is by night he has seen the very heart of human vice, and knows that it is his own. It is by night he moves through his warren of stone corridors and shabby rooms, bearing witness to assignations in quiet basement chambers. It is by night he wanders the dream arcade.

His name is Luther.

He first killed a man when he was twelve years old.

He has never stopped.

*

On this late winter morning, five days before the ground will tremble beneath the bulk of the giant machines, he waits third in line at the City Fresh Market on West Oxford Street.

The old woman stands in front of him. He considers her purchases: five boxes of Jell-O, various flavors; a quart of Half and Half; angel-hair pasta; a jar of smooth peanut butter.

Cancer food, he thinks.

There is a small hole at the back of her cardigan, a starfish of threads peeking out. Through it he can see a tear in the fabric of her blouse. It is where she cut out the label, perhaps because it irritated her skin. Her shoes are sturdy, round at heel, tightly laced. Her fingernails are scrubbed and clipped short. She wears no jewelry.

He watches as she scrutinizes each entry on the cashier's LCD screen, oblivious – or, more likely indifferent – to the fact that she is holding up the line. He remembers this about her, this obstinacy. Transaction completed, she takes her bagged groceries, walks a few steps toward the exit, scanning the register receipt, making sure she has not been cheated.

He has watched her over the years, watched as lines furrowed her face, watched as spots blossomed on her hands, watched as her gait slowed to an arthritic shuffle. What had once passed for regal comportment, an imperious manner that shunned intimacy or acquaintance at any level, has become a scowling, ill-mannered dotage.

As the woman nears the exit she puts down her bags, buttons her coat. She is being observed, but not just by the tall man behind her.

There is a boy of seventeen standing near the Red Box video rental machine – loitering, witnessing, looking for some sort of opportunity.

When the woman picks up her bags she drops her credit card onto the floor. She does not notice.

The boy does.

Träumen Sie?

Yes.

Where are you?

Tallinn. In the Old City.

What is the year?

It is 1958, nineteen years adrift from the end of the first independence. It is five days before Christmas. Food is scarce, but there is still joy in the lights.

Where will you go?

To Läänemaa. I am to meet a man.

Who is this man?

A blind man, a Baltic German. He is a thief. He preys upon the elderly who have little to begin with. He stole something from a friend, and I will have it back this night.

How is this possible? How would a blind man be able to do this?

He does not yet know of his blindness.

Luther shadows the thief at a discrete distance, down West Oxford Street to Marston Street, then south. Many of the buildings on this bleak and desolate block are boarded, abandoned.

Before they reach Jefferson Street the thief ducks into an alley, shoulders a door.

Luther follows. When his shadow darkens the wall opposite the splintered doorway the thief notices. He spins around, startled.

They are alone.

'You have something that does not belong to you,' Luther says.

The thief looks him up and down, assessing his size and strength, searching for the telltale bulge that signals a handgun. Seeing none, he is emboldened. 'D'fuck are you?'

'Just a ragged stranger.'

The thief glances at the doorway, back. Recognition alights. 'I remember you. You was at the store.'

Luther does not correct the thief's deplorable grammar. He remains silent. The thief takes a step back. Not a defensive move, but rather a gauging of range.

'What you want, man?' the thief asks. 'I got business.'

'What business would that be?'

'Not your business, motherfucker.' The thief slowly moves his right hand toward his back pocket. *'Maybe I take what you got. Maybe I fuck you up, pendejo.'*

'Perhaps so.'

Another few inches toward the pocket. Nervous now. 'You talk fucked up, man. Where you from?'

'I am from everywhere and nowhere. I am from right beneath your feet.'

The thief looks at the floor, as if the answer might be there, as if there might suddenly appear a dog-eared Baedeker.

When he looks up, the man standing before him removes his overcoat, takes the felt cap from his back pocket, slips it onto his head. What had only moments ago been curiosity becomes something else, something of nightmares. The thief's eyes roam the man – the tattered brown suit, the frayed sleeves, the patch pockets crudely sewn, the missing button. The bloodstains.

In one fluid motion the thief reaches into his back pocket, retrieves a semi-automatic pistol, a black 9mm Hi-Point. Before he can clear it, the weapon is slapped from his hand, and he is brought roughly to the floor.

With the thief subdued, Luther takes a few moments, steps away, picks up the weapon. He checks the magazine, chambers a round. 'What were you going to do with this?' he asks.

The thief has yet to catch his breath. When he does, he says, 'Nothing.'

Luther places the handgun on a wooden pallet near his feet.

'My name is Luther,' he says. 'I think it is important for you to know this.'

The thief says nothing.

'I say this because I know, from experience, that what happens in this room will be a turning point in your life, a story you will repeat many times over, and that people will ask you: "What was this man's name?"'

'I don't need to know who you are.'

'Well, this is merely what I am called,' Luther says. 'It is not who I am.'

'Just take my shit, man. I didn't mean what I said before. I wasn't going to shoot you.'

Luther nods. 'Let me ask you a question. When you sleep at night, or when you nap in the afternoon after a particularly good meal, do you dream?'

'What?'

'It is a simple question. Do you dream?'

'I don't . . . yeah. I dream.'

'Some people say they do not, but the truth is we all dream. What these people mean to say is that they do not often remember their dreams.'

Luther crosses the room, leans against the far wall. The thief glances at the handgun on the pallet. His eyes say he will never make it.

'Let me give you an example,' Luther says. 'Do you know how sometimes, when you are dreaming, it begins as one thing, and then magically – for dreaming truly is in the realm of magic – it becomes something else? Something other?'

The thief remains silent.

'In the dream you are, let us say, a famous matador. You are in the ring with the beast, being cheered by thousands. You wave the muleta, you ready your espada for the kill.

'Then, suddenly, you have the ability to fly, to soar above the crowd, to cast your shadow on the countryside, to taste the salt of the sea. Such dreams, I suggest to you, are difficult to leave behind. For most of us it is such a disappointment to awaken, to relinquish such godlike powers, only to discover that we are still, simply, ourselves. Still bound by this mortal coil.'

Luther takes a few steps toward the door, glances into the alley, continues.

'When I left the house today, the situation in which we find ourselves was not my dream. I suspect, however, that it was yours.'

*'No, man,' the thief says. 'It wasn't. Just let me—'
'And yet you brought with you this fearsome weapon.'
'It's for protection.'
'From whom? Old women with credit cards?'
The thief looks at his hands. 'I wasn't going to use it.'
'I understand,' Luther says. 'In the broadest sense, I believe this to be true. And that is why this may end well for you after all.'
A light returns to the thief's eyes. 'What I gotta do?'
Luther approaches him, crouches down. 'There is a dream about a blind man. Do you know it?'
The thief shakes his head.
'They say to dream about blindness means that there is a truth about yourself you refuse to accept, or that you have lost your way in life. I believe this applies to you.'
The thief begins to tremble.
'I am here to help you find your way, Jaak Männik.'
'Who?'
Luther does not answer. He picks up the thief's handgun, then reaches beneath his jacket, and pulls out a long, bone-handled knife.
'No,' the thief says. 'You can't do this.'
'You are right. That is why you will do it to yourself. You will take your eyes, as the matador wields his espada, and by this you will finally see.'
'You're fucking crazy, man!'
'That is not for you or I to determine,' Luther says. He finds an oily rag on the floor, hands it to the thief. 'For the blood.'
'No, man. You can't—'
'Now, this is a delicate undertaking. Extreme care must be taken. If you push the knife in too deeply, you will sever the optic nerve, yes, but you may run it into your frontal lobe. If you do it, there is the possibility – quite a good possibility, as I understand it – that you will live. If I do it, I fear you will not. I cannot make the choice for you.'*

Luther stands.

'Do you see that old calendar on the wall behind me?' Luther asks. The thief looks over. There is a yellowed calendar hanging on a nail. January 2008. 'Yeab.'

'Do you see the date for January fifteen?'

The thief just nods.

Without another word Luther spins quickly around and fires the weapon, hitting the small square for 15 January dead center. He turns back to the thief, hands him the knife, handle first. He steps away.

'So, tell me. Which dream do you choose?' Luther asks. 'To live many more years as a blind man, or to die in this terrible place?'

Luther smells the sharp tang of urine as the young man fouls himself. In the chill of this unheated room, vapor rises from the thief's lap.

'If . . . if I do this, you won't kill me?'

'I will not,' Luther says. 'You have my word.' He glances at his watch. 'But you must do it in the next thirty seconds. Beyond that, I cannot make any promises.'

The thief takes a deep breath, releases it in four or five small gusts. He slowly turns the knife toward himself.

'I can't do it!'

'Twenty-five seconds.'

The thief begins to sob. The knife shakes in his hand as he brings it closer to his face. He raises his other hand to steady himself, and stares at the blade as one might consider a burning rosary, an abacus of sins.

'Twenty seconds.'

The thief begins to pray.

'Dios te salve, Maria.'

'Fifteen seconds.'

'Lena eres de gracia.'

'Ten seconds.'

'El Señor es contigo.'

'Five seconds.'

At the moment the tip of the blade pierces his left eye, the 11:05 SEPTA carrying twenty-one passengers roars to a stop outside. The

thief's screams are swallowed by the whet of steel on steel, plumed inside the release of exhaust.

When the knife falls from the thief's hand, there is only silence.

The thief—whose name was Ezequiel Rivera 'Cheque' Marquez—had always thought that when death came it would be accompanied by a bright white light, or the sound of angels singing. When his mother died at the age of thirty-one in an osteopathic hospital in Camden, New Jersey, it was what he wanted to believe. It was possible that all eight-year-olds want to believe this.

For Cheque Marquez the moment wasn't anything like that. Death wasn't an angel in a long flowing gown.

Death was a man in a tattered brown suit.

One hour later Luther stands across the street from the old woman's house. He watches as she sweeps the dead leaves from her porch, marveling at how small she is, how big she had at one time seemed to him.

He knows that the next time he sees her it will be in her bedroom, her rucked and cloying boudoir with its peeling wallpaper and brown mice and generic powders, a visit during which he will return the credit card to her wallet.

Nothing can be out of place over the course of the coming days. Everything must be as it has always been. Luther had not planned on dealing with the thief, but if the old woman's card was missing, it might change everything. It might mean they would begin to scrutinize this, her penultimate day.

He's already visited her home, three times sitting at the foot of her bed as she fitfully slept, chased by what demons he could only imagine. Perhaps he was one of those demons. Perhaps the woman knows that, when her time comes, it will be him.

In the end, someone always comes.

Detective Jessica Balzano found herself in a brightly lit room, sitting upright, her left hand high in the air, the clatter of street noise drifting in from a window behind her. At first she thought she was alone, but soon realized there were people all around her. She didn't see them, but she knew they were there in the way you know anything when you're dreaming, the way you know that, while danger may lurk in every shadow, it is only dream-danger, and you will not be harmed. All you have to do is wake up, and it will be gone.

But this wasn't a dream. Somehow, she was in a classroom. With her hand raised. And there were at least a dozen people staring at her.

Real people.

'Ms Balzano?' someone said.

The man at the front of the classroom, the man who seemed to know her name, was thin and pale, about sixty. He wore a pillared blue cardigan with epaulets, beige corduroy slacks, cupped at the knees. There was a half-smile on his face, as if he had done

this before, as if this were an inside joke he was sharing with everyone.

Everyone except Jessica Balzano.

Before Jessica could respond it all came rushing toward her in a hot, mortifying wave. She was not in bed in her small, comfortable South Philly row house, her husband Vincent next to her, her two children safely asleep in their rooms on the third floor. She was, instead, in school – specifically, her second year of law school.

Jessica had known it was going to be like this, but she had no idea it would be like *this*. She'd had the feeling this might happen one day, and it finally had. She'd fallen asleep in class.

She put down her hand, her mind a kaleidoscope of questions. What class was this, again? *Contracts? Torts? Civil procedure?*

Not a clue.

She glanced at the chalkboard, saw a quote from Louis Nizer: *In cross-examination, as in fishing, nothing is more ungainly than a fisherman pulled into the water by his catch.*

No help there.

'Ms Balzano?' the professor said. 'False imprisonment?'

God bless him, she thought. He'd repeated the question for her benefit.

Jessica said, 'The three elements of false imprisonment are: wilful detention, detention without consent, and unlawful detention.'

'Very good,' her teacher said with a wink. He'd been a law professor for more than twenty-five years. Jessica was not the first student ever to nod off in class. She would not be the last.

Jessica reached under the table and pinched the web of flesh between the thumb and forefinger on her right hand, almost to the point of drawing blood. It was an old trick she'd been taught by her Field Training Officer her first year out of the academy, a trick to keep her awake when she worked last-out, the eleven p.m. to seven a.m. shift.

For the next forty minutes Jessica tried every trick she'd ever learned to regain wakefulness. Thankfully, the professor didn't call on her again, and somehow she made it to the end of class.

On the way to her car, Jessica noticed a small group of students from her class walking across the parking lot at Cecil B. Moore and Broad Street. They all looked about twenty – wide awake, happy, fully caffeinated by life. Jessica wanted to shoot them.

'Hey, Jessica,' one of them said. His name was Jason Cole, and he held the unofficial title of cutest boy in class, a class in which there was a lot of competition for that honor. 'Nice save back there.'

'Thanks.'

'For a minute there I thought you were going to wash.'

You have no idea, Jessica thought. 'Not a chance,' she said. She unlocked her car. 'I've had tougher cases.'

Jason smiled. He had braces, which somehow made him cuter. 'We're going to Starbucks for a study jam,' he added. 'Want to come with?'

They all knew she was a police officer, of course, a homicide detective at that. They also knew she was juggling three lives – cop, mother, student – living days haphazardly constructed around a curriculum of early-morning, late-evening and weekend classes. Jessica desperately wanted to feel sorry for herself about this, but she knew it was nothing special for many people her age who were attending college. The truth was, she just wanted to go home and finish the nap she'd begun in the classroom. She couldn't do that. In addition to the thousand other things she needed to accomplish, she was staring down the barrel of a full twelve-hour shift.

It was her first day back after a two-week sabbatical.

'Gotta go to work,' Jessica said. 'Maybe next time.'

Jason gave her a thumbs-up. 'We'll save you a seat.'

Jessica slipped into her car, the fatigue a living thing within her. She glanced at her law books on the seat, and not for the first time in the past eighteen months wondered how she got here.

She was currently working in the SIU division of the homicide unit four days a week – a generous offer allowed by her captain, cleared with the inspector and, most importantly, with her husband, Vincent – and getting about five hours of sleep per night. It was one thing when you were a twenty-two-year-old grad student; quite another when you were on the osteoporosis side of thirty-five.

Of the three divisions in the PPD Homicide Unit – the Line Squad, the Special Investigations Unit, and the Fugitive Squad – SIU was the least demanding, at least in terms of immediacy and the need for overtime. Although the physical and emotional rigors of working cold cases could be just as demanding as working fresh homicides, the days tended to be a little more structured, and the need to get the ball rolling – and hopefully make an arrest – in the first forty-eight hours were not there.

Still, this was the path she had chosen. She recalled the moment she'd chosen it, as well. She had been thirteen, and had visited City Hall with her brother, Michael. They went to watch their father – then Sergeant Peter Giovanni – testify in Judge Liam McManus's courtroom.

On that day Jessica sat in the back row, watching the proceedings, observing as the two lawyers went head to head. Having grown up in a police family, she knew that there were many jobs upon which the carriage of justice depended – cops, judges, forensic specialists, medical examiners. But for some reason she was instantly drawn to this stage, this rarefied arena where, if everyone else did their job, it would all come down to the clear, clinical thinking of two people to build a case for either guilt or innocence.

Young Jessica Giovanni was hooked, her future fully mapped

by the time she and her brother and their father sat down to lunch at Frank Clements Tavern, which was then located across the street from the original Bookbinder's. As Jessica ate her cheesesteak she watched in something close to awe as defense lawyers, prosecutors and judges – even a future Pennsylvania supreme court justice – all mingled in the smoky, storied bar, many of them stopping by the table to chat with her father.

On that day the scheme was set in motion: Michael would be the police officer; Jessica would be the ADA. That was the plan. Theirs would be the South Philly version of *Law & Order*. Peter Giovanni – one of the most decorated officers in the history of the PPD, who eventually retired with the rank of lieutenant – would play the crusty former cop who tended his San Marzano tomatoes in the garden, supplying moral support and pithy wise-cracks.

Everything went according to blueprint, until that horrible day in 1991 when Michael was killed in Kuwait, a Marine fighting in Desert Storm.

In that instant Michael Giovanni, Jessica's beautiful brother – her protector, confidante and greatest hero – was gone.

Jessica recalled sitting with her father the night they learned of Michael's death, how mightily her father tried not to cry in front of her. A week later, as she knelt next to Michael's casket, she knew that her dreams of being a lawyer would be put on hold, perhaps for ever, that *she* would be the one to follow in her father's footsteps. Over the ensuing years she had never regretted her decision to enter the academy, not once, but she knew that if she was ever going to get her law degree, now was the time.

She wasn't certain she would even take the bar exam upon completion of her studies, but she knew that, at the very least, she owed it to her brother to try.

Jessica started her car, glanced at her watch. It was five minutes

to noon. She had five minutes to get to the Roundhouse. In Philly traffic. She opened the glove compartment, found a Twix. High calorie, nutrient-free sugar.

Yes.

Candy bar in hand, Detective Jessica Balzano pulled out into the traffic on Broad Street thinking: if God was smiling down on her this day – and she was blessed in so many ways that she couldn't expect anything else from God, not anytime soon – she would be home and in bed around midnight.

God wasn't listening.