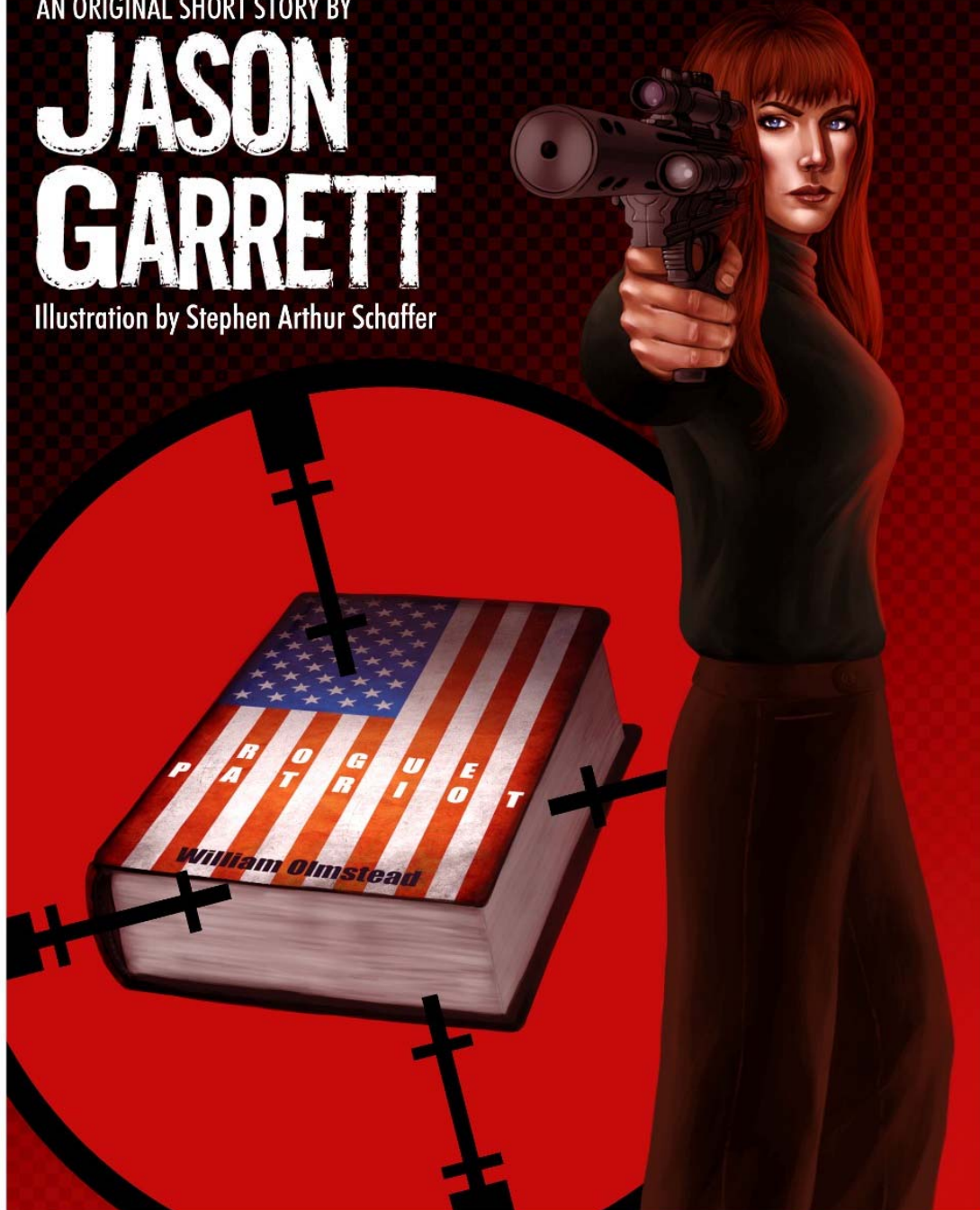


# OPERATOR

AN ORIGINAL SHORT STORY BY

**JASON  
GARRETT**

Illustration by Stephen Arthur Schaffer



# **O P E R A T O R**

An original short story  
written by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the creator's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Operator

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## I.

KELLY OLMSTEAD HAD NEVER BEEN ACCUSTOMED TO wealth or the privileges it afforded. Growing up in a barely-blue collar home, she often went days without seeing her father, who worked two jobs to keep food on the table. Her mother always hoped her daughter would do well, but neither of them could have imagined a night or a life like this.

Wearing a gown which cost more than her first car, Kelly stood surrounded by some of New York's most elite movers and shakers. She felt a cool droplet of sweat race down the small of her back and she frowned as she worried that it might seep through the fabric. For one night, these powerful people seemed to hang on her every word.

An auburn haired beauty with long, slender facial features, she hid a slight overbite behind curled fingers as the soft glow of light sparkled in almost transparent blue eyes. Her smile, despite her own reservations, was one of her best features and one that made people warm up to her. Eyeing the smiling faces encircling her, she responded to the question on all of their minds.

“It was an accident,” she claimed. “I hit my head, didn't have a clue where I was. Traffic was stopped all around me...I couldn't even think of my name.

“I got out of my car, hardly able to stand on my own two feet, and then the whole world went,” she hesitated and raised her drink, “well, it looked a lot like the lights through this glass of champagne.”

The group laughed as Kelly smelled jasmine and noticed a blonde with striking facial features and sculpted shoulders eavesdropping in passing.

“And that’s when you met William?”

“William,” she smiled pensively, her lips concealing her teeth, uncertain who had asked the question. “I had wandered too far from my car and fell down. That’s when I felt his arms around me. He picked me up and carried me to the curb, sat down and never let me go until the ambulance arrived.”

“Amazing,” one of the elitists guffawed.

“Yes, yes, he is,” Kelly agreed wholeheartedly.

The night, after all, was not about the ginger beauty, but rather her husband, Will. In these circles, he was referred to by his pen name: William Olmstead. His crime novels had won more awards than she could name and his latest novel was already rumored to be on the Hollywood fast-track. Tonight’s event was in celebration of the release of that novel, which had debuted at number one based solely on pre-orders.

Across the room, Kelly gazed to find him, her eyes catching the back of the eavesdropping blonde once and then a second time before she spotted her spouse. To no surprise, she found him uncomfortably surrounded by a bevy of admirers and Cheryl Woods.

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Finishing off her champagne, Kelly looked back to the women around her and forced herself to smile politely albeit coolly.

TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, CHERYL WOODS WAS THE sort of woman that men did their best to avoid. Some women were brazen, a trait necessary for their livelihoods. Some women were intrusive, as a means of being recognized. Cheryl Woods was, perhaps, the most caustic and callous woman on the eastern seaboard. There was a rumor floating about the industry that she ate babies and bathed in blood. Those were possibly the finest compliments ever spoken of her.

For three years and seven months, Woods acted as Will's publicist. She was not the sort who coddled her clients; rather, she tended to be the one who never let them forget how much more important she was and that she was something back when they were nothing. Why anyone put up with her was the subject of much speculation and, likely, therapy sessions. It was no secret that the spouses and children of all her clients abhorred her. In fact, she bragged about it.

"How long have the two of you been married?" an unsuspecting male asked curiously.

"Married?!" Woods spat. "To William? Please! I may have made him what he is as a novelist but I can't be expected to hold his hand in everyday life, now can I? What terrible taste you have. No, his little

wife is around here somewhere, likely sweating through her off-the-rack gown and guffawing like a doe in the headlights.”

Taken aback, the man recoiled away from her and dissolved into the crowd, allowing an opening for the eavesdropping blonde. A square-jawed woman with beautiful skin and amplified curves, she was not the sort to be intimidated by the publicist she could only describe as a sour woman prone to shopping beneath her age bracket. When Cheryl stared down her nose at the woman, the unnamed blonde arched her brow and smirked back unimpressed.

“Come on, William, tell us the truth. Where do you get the inspiration for your stories?”

The blonde perked up her ears and tilted her head with doe-eyed fascination as she eyed the inquisitive man and got her first real glimpse of the author. Reaching to adjust an absent pair of eyeglasses, Will Olmstead grinned nervously and slid idle hands into the pockets of his suit.

“If I told you that, Charlie, I’d be out of a job,” he grinned.

“I’ll bet I can guess who inspired your leading lady in the book,” a woman in red-rimmed glasses teased, empowered by the laughter of the crowd. “Where is that darling wife of yours, William?”

“If I know her, she’s found the only quiet corner in the room,” he grinned again. He also wondered where she was and wished she were on his arm instead of his publicist.

“How much more of this Q&A do you intend to do tonight?” Cheryl whispered through a Botox smile.

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“How would you characterize the people of Santiago?”

Eyeing the blonde who fluttered her eyes slowly and spread her chest, Will forgot the question from the publicist and redirected as the smell of jasmine wafted from the stranger’s skin.

“I’ve never visited Chile, Miss?”

“Suzanne Miller,” the toothy blonde said. “The details in your writing were so realistic. I thought for sure you must have visited at least once in your life.”

“As you have, I take it?”

“I’ve gotten around in my time, sure,” she smiled and garnered the warm chuckles of adoring men, but not Will.

“Well, Miss Miller, thank you for verifying my ability to pen authentic fiction.”

Again the men laughed and the inquisitive blonde joined them.

“You better put this one on the payroll fast, Will,” one of his cohorts teased and nudged Suzanne’s arm.

“Careful, Bob,” his crony said, “you’ll make Ty woozy if he thinks he’s going to have to part with another sliver of his empire.”

Will’s mouth rolled into an awkward grin, as though he were uncomfortable with what was said but was attempting to rise above it. Suzanne spotted the gesture, even if none of the others could.

“I didn’t notice your press pass. Who did you say you were affiliated with,” Cheryl questioned.

“I’m too well-informed for the press,” Suzanne said, eyeing the publicist coldly. “But, Mister Olmstead, I’d certainly jump at the chance to play twenty questions with you sometime.”

“All interviews go through me,” Cheryl announced with steely arrogance.

“Cheryl, could you get Miss Miller and me something to drink?” Will asked.

“I’m not some sort of—”

Eyeing Cheryl directly, Will said, “And see if you can’t find my wife while you’re at it. Thank you.”

Cheryl saw the way everyone in the group, including Suzanne Miller, eyed her, and as she stormed off, she mimicked a stone skipping across the water and sending the wave of people scurrying into smaller clusters.

“And thank you,” Will said. “I’ve been looking for a reason to make her find K—my wife for the better part of twenty minutes.”

“She’s loyal, that one,” Suzanne noted. “I hope she has all her shots, it could cost a fortune if you ever have to put her down.”

“Have you been talking to my wife?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t had the pleasure,” Suzanne assured him. “Kelly is her name, right? I did pass her on the way in, though. She’s wearing a lovely gown.”

“Everything looks lovely on her,” Will thought aloud.

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Staring at his eyes, Suzanne said, “You really mean that, don’t you? I know a little something about the truth, Mr. Olmstead. I can always tell when people are telling it.”

“Best thing that ever happened to me,” he grinned.

“On a night like this, that’s saying something. Did I hear correctly?” Suzanne touched his forearm and cozied up to him, “Did you really save her life?”

Scoffing, Will said, “To hear her tell it. I just, uh, couldn’t leave her side, you know? It didn’t feel right.”

“I’ve lived here for half of my life and, I have to tell you, most men would have never felt that way.”

“Where did you spend the other half?”

With a smile, Suzanne tucked long strands of blonde hair behind her ear.

“You aren’t on the press circuit and,” he added, “I don’t remember seeing you on any of the other tours. Who *do* you represent, Miss Miller?”

“I *represent* an interested party. There’s talk of a bidding war for the screen rights to *Rogue Patriot*.”

“Ah, you’re with one of the studios,” he smirked. “I’m always amazed how people talk about bidding wars but I’m usually the last one to hear any of their offers.”

“You must have good people around you, Mister Olmstead,” Suzanne told. “They know when to protect ‘the talent.’ May I call you William?”

He nodded and looked around the room again for his wife.

“Thank you,” she said with genuine courtesy. “Forgive my saying so, William, but none of this seems like your element, or your wife’s, for that matter.”

“We’re used to simpler surroundings,” he agreed.

“As am I,” she told him. “In another life, I think I could have been a nomad. I hope I wasn’t out of line for implying you had visited Chile.”

“No, not at all. I’ve often wished I was more adventurous but, sadly, all of my exploits exist only in my imagination.”

“Were my employers to make a bid on the rights,” she mentioned, “it would be crucial that they know more about the heart of your book. How you came up with the idea, what the message really means, things like that.”

“My books are complex, I’m not.”

Smiling, she said, “That’s hardly true, I’d imagine. I read your last book, *Odd Man Out*, and I loved the intricacy that you wove into the story. Just like *Rogue Patriot*, I felt so drawn in because I could imagine it happening. It’s almost like something I’ve read about in the newspaper or watched on the news.”

“I’ve always felt like the best stories happen in real life,” the novelist told. “I just try to give them a little more flair.”

“‘The best stories happen in real life’...that is *so* true. Just the same, I’m going to have to quote you on that,” Suzanne laughed and waggled her finger. “You know, my boss is enamored by you. All I’ve

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heard about for weeks and weeks are conversations about you and your books.”

“Yet he sent you here in his place?”

The author did not miss much and Suzanne admired that.

“A last minute hiccup,” she claimed. “He’s actually found himself caught up in another matter that he just could not tear himself away from. All work, no play, as they say.”

“I thought maybe he didn’t want to show his hand just yet, in case that bidding war does happen.”

With a playful bat of her eye, Suzanne said, “I suppose that could have something to do with it too. Are you staying here in the hotel by any chance?”

“We are,” Will stated.

“So am I,” she smiled. “Maybe, if you have the time that is, we could get together for breakfast or lunch tomorrow? I don’t want to monopolize all of your time this evening. I just wanted to introduce myself so you know that we are very committed to getting to know you. By all means, your wife will have to join us.”

“I’m sure she would like that,” he grinned. “If Cheryl were here I’d have her set something up, but, I don’t see where that would be a problem, Ms. Miller.”

“Please, Suzanne,” she said.

Judging from the way he looked around the room, she could tell she was losing his interest and decided to shrink away into the crowd for now.

AT THE BAR, CHERYL STARED INTO THE TWO GLASSES and lowered her head towards the glass in her right hand. Discreetly and sadistically, she spat saliva into the drink and swished it around with her index finger. Confident that none of the guests had seen her, she glowered at the hired hand behind the bar and pivoted to face the crowd. Looking chunky in his suit, her client approached in typical hand-wringing fashion.

“That woman, Suzanne Miller, turned out to be a rep for one of the studios considering the options for the new book,” he told.

“She had that Hollywood look,” Cheryl said and not in a complimentary way.

“I suppose. She wants to set something up tomorrow to discuss the details.”

Upon the prospect of a greater commission, Cheryl offered the drink in her left hand to Will and poured the other into a potted tree.

“That’s wonderful news. I’ll see if I can pin her down to a date.”

“Find out which studio she’s representing, if you can,” he asked. “Have you seen—”

“—No. But I’m sure she’s here somewhere.”

II.

LOOKING DOWN ON A CITY FORTY-ODD STORIES beneath her, Kelly stood alone on the balcony and kept a phone pressed to her ear. Without a doubt it was one of the least opportune times for a phone call, yet she had no choice but to answer. *Of all the nights, why this one?* She repeated the question over and over in her mind as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

“You’re in the city?” She asked in surprise. “Yes. Yes, Sir. Ten o’clock, I understand.”

Ending the call and returning the phone to her otherwise empty handbag, she exhaled slowly and felt a startle in her breast as her husband snaked his arms around her and pulled her against him. Kissing her neck and shoulder softly, he held her securely and she opened her neck to allow him to keep kissing.

“I’ve missed you,” he said.

“And I’ve missed you,” she smiled and wrapped her arms around his, not wanting him to stop holding her.

“You look gorgeous tonight,” he said. “And you smell amazing.”

“Meaning I don’t smell like smoke,” she teased.

“That too,” he agreed.

“A deal’s a deal,” she reminded him.

When she told him she would stop smoking if he sold a million copies of his new book before their anniversary, she thought it would have given her more time. Still four months and a week away, she had gone cold turkey for two weeks, five days, twenty hours and eleven minutes. *Not that she was keeping track.*

“Look at it like this,” he said, kissing along her throat, “that’s five more hours a day,” he kissed further, “that I’ll be able to do this when we’re old and gray.”

“Mm, you should have put it that way when we met,” she teased.

“Speaking of, people keep asking me if I really met you in a car accident.”

“I tell them that you were a Good Samaritan not a bad driver.”

“Thank you,” he chuckled.

“Do you ever regret stopping?”

“Not ever,” he said automatically and turned Kelly around to look into her eyes as he stroked the length of her chin. “Your worst day was my best.”

Forcing a smile to keep from tears, she shook off the emotion and straightened his collar. She liked seeing him in a half-Windsor and tugged at the necktie as though claiming him all to herself.

“Are you making a lot of new friends, *William?*”

“I hate that name,” he sneered. “I really should have chosen a cool pen name.”

“Paging W. Vaughn Olmstead,” she teased. “I could tell everyone I’m married to a Baron who writes books.”

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“And maybe movies,” he smiled with a playful roll of his eyes. “Some studio sent a woman here to talk to me about movie rights.”

“You’re kidding me!” Kelly swooned and cackled. “Will! That’s so amazing, baby! Congratulations!”

Hugging him tightly, they dwindled in an obtuse circle along the balcony. It was too close to dancing for Will and he stopped after a few rotations to continue the conversation.

“She—Suzanne—wants to meet with us tomorrow, breakfast or lunch, if we’re available.”

Laughing again, Kelly smiled.

“If you weren’t so opposed to PDA, I’d have to mess up your makeup, lady.”

Giggling, Kelly hooked her arms around Will’s neck and pulled him down to plant a kiss on his lips. It was true, public displays of affection always made her uneasy but she loved this man and wanted all the prying eyes in the city to know it.

“Surprised?” she smiled and thumbed her shade of lipstick from his bottom lip. He nodded incoherently and laughed as she took hold of his hand and raised his arm overhead. “I love Will Olmstead, my amazing husband!!!”

Her voice carried as far as it could before street traffic captured her words in its net and absorbed them. Surprised by her sentiment, Will held on to her hand and leaned against the balcony. Smiling lovingly at him, she put her hand on the ledge of the balcony and looked up at the moonlight.

“It was all so perfect,” she said whimsically. “They were wrong about it raining. Not even a cloud up there tonight, baby.”

He was too fascinated by his wife to look up, afraid she might stop smiling if he did. Chewing at his lip, he leaned on the balcony that was all theirs for now and spoke his mind to her.

“What do you say when we get back to our room, we go out on our balcony and you let me see if I can name all the colors of your butterflies in the moonlight.”

A laugh on her lips turned to the sweetest moan and she stared into her husband’s eyes. Along her ribs and into the small of her back, Kelly had a collection of butterfly tattoos. Each of them was a memory, a time when she was truly happy in the life she shared with Will. Shaking her head, she looked upon him with such fondness and joy that she hated to have to tell him about the phone call.

“I like the sound of that,” she agreed. The air was warm on her skin and his kisses soft, still she felt her smile vanishing.

“But?”

Breathing deeply and shallowly at the same time, she felt it catch in her chest as she tried to shake off the emotion.

“David McAvoy called me.”

It was as odd for her to say the name as it was for Will to hear it. He knew the name but not the man; still, he knew what it meant.

“When?”

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“Right before you found me out here,” she grinned in sincere apology. “He’s in the city. He wants me to meet with him tonight...at ten.”

“I thought...”

Will paused and turned to face the city. The action was so slight, still it made Kelly’s heart hurt. She wanted to reach for him or to console him somehow but she stood as still as the stone ledge surrounding them.

“Then you have to go,” he said.

“I hate that it’s tonight...any other night, but not tonight.”

“You can’t tell him that, though, can you.”

They both knew the answer and it meant something to Kelly that he was not asking such things of her.

“You know there’s no place else I want to be then right here with you. You know that, Will, don’t you?”

The novelist nodded and let his head slump as he exhaled.

“Look at me, please,” she asked and waited for him to honor her request. “No one in this whole world is prouder of you than I am.”

He offered her one of his trademark rumped grins, the kind that seemed confused by his feelings when he wanted to make her think everything was going to be okay. She started to walk away from him, maybe because she had nothing else to offer, but one thing stuck in her mind and she could not refuse herself the chance to say it again.

“I love you, Will.”

Sighing, he replied, “Love you too, baby.”

Walking away, she nearly made it to the doors when she heard his voice again.

“Hey, don’t think I’m letting you off the hook for leaving me here to face Ty alone, though.”

He always tried to be funny when he knew she was sad and she loved him a little more for that.

IN THE CORRIDOR OUTSIDE THE BALLROOM, CHERYL Woods barreled forward in high heels, which struck the marble floor hard enough to turn coal into diamonds. Her scowl was tight and under her breath, she ranted how wandering to find anyone was, like the marble floor, beneath her. From the shoulders down, her arms seemed fused at every joint, as though hammers swaying from her torso. In an alcove, she spotted the blonde hair and ruby red dress of Suzanne Miller, who had her back to her.

“Finally! Someone! Do you make it a habit to disappear in the middle of attempting to do business? I’ll have you know, if I conducted myself with as little—”

Clamping a rag to the publicist’s mouth, Suzanne showed the instinctual poise that Cheryl only pretended to have. With her foot, the blonde struck the door and a man with handsome features and a foreboding stance granted her access.

“Thank you,” she said and dragged Cheryl past him.

“Who’s this?”

“Would you believe she spit in my drink?”

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In a huff, the man said, “Debutantes. Isn’t she the publicist?”

Holding up her hand, Suzanne said, “I know she isn’t on the list but, trust me, I’m doing you a favor.”

Dropping Cheryl in a thud on the floor, Suzanne unzipped the side of her red gown and reached for a black turtleneck. Her accomplice was unoffended by the view and she could not have cared less if he watched or not. Pulling the top over a beige, strapless bra, she lunged for a pair of dark gray cargo pants and checked the clock on the wall. Disinterested now that she was dressing, the man turned away from Suzanne and towards the door in exit.

“Urnst,” she called out.

The man stared back in silence.

“Get me a few of those shrimp rolls, for later?”

HER GOWN FELT BETTER THAN THE OUTFIT SHE HAD worn earlier that day, but it was the most professional attire at her disposal. In a dark blouse and matching slacks, her hair pulled back tightly, Kelly emerged through the arched entryway and found David McAvoy leaning against a town car in an abandoned service tunnel a mile from the rail yards. His hair had gone completely white and his full cheeks hung loosely about the jowl, enough to give him the look of a bulldog. It was a nickname that plagued him all his adult life but he had developed the tenacious, menacing demeanor to go along with it.

*Jason Garrett*

*“Lola was a striking woman with graceful features and eyes so blue a man could swear he was diving into the ocean every time he looked into them. Her gait was but a wisp, cool and secure but so soft that she could sneak up on even the most well-trained ear. A natural redhead with a lean, pert frame and strong legs, she was both predator and prey’...”* McAvoy read with a soothing voice and closed Will’s book.

Kelly stood still and attempted to relax as she forced a steady grin onto her face.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think your husband was describing you.”

“Not every woman gets to be someone’s muse,” she declared. “You didn’t ask me up here to get a signed copy, did you?”

“Oh, this is signed,” McAvoy smiled and placed the book on the hood of his car. “I waited in line a good forty minutes to get this. He’s a nice guy, your husband. He even gave my daughter some tips after I mentioned she wanted to be a novelist someday.”

Everyone knew McAvoy was no father.

He wondered, “How long has it been?”

“Eleven months, three weeks, two days and roughly nine hours,” Kelly answered almost immediately.

Pointing at her and smiling, McAvoy said, “One of these days you’re going to have to tell me how it is you do that.”

His laugh bellowed off the surroundings but implied no real sense of ease. Now a section chief, McAvoy was one of the steeliest agents ever produced by the farm, the CIA school where agents were

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made. He had been Kelly's handler, once upon a time, and her boss by the time she retired, nearly one year ago. When she was alone, every day since, she sometimes swore he was still watching her.

He sighed as he stood upright and approached. Those same cold eyes of his made it hard for her to look on his face and she wondered how much of her training had stuck with her. Behind her, she had the feeling someone else was watching. Likely because she had often been on the opposite end of a rifle, staring at a person of interest whose role she was now occupying. Before she wasted too much time thinking about it, she glanced at the towering, pale agent.

"I still remember the day you came into my office and told me you were going to be married," he sneered. "Lots of people thought you had gone soft, that you left your edge in that hospital bed in Pittsburgh. Not me. I could tell by the way you talked about him that it was true love. I must have spent three weeks convincing men whose names I don't even know that there was no security risk involved with one of our best operators marrying a crime novelist."

Kelly remained rigid in her stance as McAvoy circled behind her. *He would never shoot her in the back.*

"Then I saw a copy of his book, *Rogue Patriot*."

IF EVER A SAGE EXISTED IN WILLIAM OLMSTEAD'S LIFE, it would be Ty Mathers. The CEO of DB Press Publishing knew the industry inside out and never hesitated to offer his insight to any of the publishing house's authors. The first time that Will met Ty, he

was endeared by his elder, who sported a starched white shirt and a pinstripe tie with a splotch of mustard where one might have placed a tie tack.

Always dapper, always thinking, Ty was seldom ever bothered by appearances. A one-shot author who had found esteem as a lecturer, he was as much a celebrity as the best-selling novelist for whom the party was being thrown. Crowds gathered and masses parted when Ty entered a room. To the best of his recollection, Ty was the only one who ever got away with calling William...

“Billy, old boy!”

A smile as white as any cover girl’s lit up Ty’s face, wrinkled by the sun and age, and the head of DB Press Publishing shook Will’s hand firmly and casually.

“Hello, Ty,” Will smiled.

“Quite a shindig,” Ty beamed and hooked his arm around the author’s neck. “You know, when I first met this kid, I knew he was going to make me loads of money.”

A group of elbow-rubbers and back-patters laughed, as was often the case when they were trying to impress people in power. Will could feel his face go flush, still not used to the attention. As he recalled, he thought he had failed to impress Ty after their first meeting. He had nearly broken his checking account buying a six-hundred dollar suit, new shoes and a two-hundred and fifteen dollar airline ticket.

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“Yeah,” Ty sighed. “I knew that this kid was golden.” Flashing a high-watt smile, he added, “And all of you know it now, too, don’t you?”

Again the laughter rose and Will lowered his head humbly.

“This is all for you, kiddo,” Ty said. “Say, where’s your darling wife, Kylie?”

*Kelly.* “I’m afraid she wasn’t feeling well. She went upstairs to lie down.”

Ribbing him, Ty said, “Ah, my wife used to do the same thing at these events. Any excuse to get us all alone, am I right?”

Will scoffed and tried to clear his mind of Ty in seduction mode.

“It was probably the champagne,” he suggested, as it gave his head quite an ache.

“That’s what the good stuff’ll do,” Ty decided. “Say, you up for eighteen holes before you jet back?”

Smiling earnestly, Will admitted, “I’m still recovering from the last time you beat me.”

“Ty’s just trying to earn back some of that money he’s paying you,” an elder joked from the crowd. Will had no idea who the man was and Ty pretended not to hear.

“Listen, kiddo, there’s a guy I wanted to introduce you to,” Ty began. “He’s an authenticator, so to speak. He’s been all around the world and, well, I thought you might get a bang out of listening to some of his stories. Maybe the two of you could collaborate on

something in the future? Your golden pen, his bird's eye view...what do you think?"

"Sure, Ty, I'll meet with him. Say, did Cheryl mention the girl from Hollywood?"

"No, I haven't seen Cheryl tonight," the CEO replied dismissively. "Here's the guy now. Kyle Urnst is his name."

As Ty tapped him on the back, Kyle Urnst turned from admiring a foursome of ladies and eyed the two men in their pricey suits.

"Let me introduce you to—"

"—William Olmstead," the man spoke. "I'm a big fan. Everyone calls me Urnst."

"How do you do?" Will asked kindly and shook hands with the man.

With an overly firm grip, Urnst replied, "Not nearly as well as you."

"Oh, I'd be doing well to name five people in this room," Will confessed, though it sounded a bit like false humility and made Urnst twinge. "Ty tells me that you're a consultant?"

"I have certain expertise that has been profitable to many individuals."

Urnst was a cool customer, but there was something around the eyes that left Will feeling a bit unsettled. *Selling a million books for you gets me toe-to-toe with this guy, Ty?*

"Your knowledge of the Chiléan region was impressive, if not wholly accurate," Urnst let Will know. "Whoever your source was,

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their intel was outdated. Landmarks and structures are always changing in regions like that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Will said with a charming grin.

Folding his arms across his booming chest, Urnst told, “See, now this is where my services would prove useful to a guy like you. Say. Why don’t we go somewhere and talk?”

“Actually, you know,” Will said uneasily, “I do need to press the flesh a bit more. Why don’t you give me your card and I’ll have my agent set something up with you, okay?”

Urnst stared resolutely upon Will, who proved to be equally hard to budge. Whether he would admit it aloud or not, Will was smart enough to know that two strangers asking about Chil  coinciding on the night that his wife got an out of the blue phone call from her former handler added up to anything but a coincidence. As he plucked the card from Urnst’s hand, Will gave a quick, dismissive smirk, patted the man’s shoulder and excused himself.

“Olmstead,” Urnst called out, but the author ignored him.

### III.

“I’VE NEVER BEEN ONE FOR COINCIDENCES,” McAVOY announced as he folded his arms. “Most of the people I answer to believe in them even less than I do. In fact, unless they’re the ones orchestrating the coincidences, they don’t like them at all. So imagine when one of our own agents marries a man who writes a book about a black bag op that even she shouldn’t know about.

“Then it hit me, you *did* know about it. I had to dig deep into the annals of my memory, see? Deeper than I like to go, when you’ve been in this life as long as I have. Do you know what I remembered? I remembered a file coming across my desk two days before you took your retirement. So, now I’m wondering what my superiors are also wondering.”

Placing his mammoth hands on her narrow shoulders, McAvoy gave a squeeze and shook Kelly ever so gently. Her stance had escalated from rigid to ironclad and she moved as though she had been dipped in a plaster body cast.

“Did one of our most cunning operatives talk? Did she tell her husband about one of our missions? That shootout in the eighth chapter...to a tee of the actual accounts of that op. How did he do that? How could he know such things? We...we weren’t even

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supposed to be in that country officially. Now there's hard evidence that can be connected back to the Agency by any intelligence agent who can connect us to you and you to him."

Kelly remained so still that she doubted even her breath could flow. McAvoy stroked her face, cold like a butcher, not warm like Will. His massive paw felt the softness of her lean neck and she stared into his dead eyes with as fearless a gaze as she could manage. He had, after all, trained her to be ruthless. That felt like another life and it made McAvoy laugh.

"You have that look in your eyes like I'm going to choke you out," he sighed sadly and it was the truest emotion she had ever witnessed from him. "I was in New York on a deposition. I needed to see you face-to-face, to see your eyes when I asked you, is all. You always had the purest eyes, too honest for this line of work. It was good that he got you out when he did."

Kelly wanted to swallow but instead she prolonged her breaths and relaxed the muscles in her throat. This was nowhere near over. *Don't be lulled. Don't let your guard down now.*

"Have you ever spoken to your husband about the missions you had first or second-hand information of, Agent?"

"Never."

McAvoy winced and the hint of a smile formed along his upper lip.

“Okay. I’m going to get in my car now and I’m going to drive away and we’re both going to forget this conversation ever took place. How does that sound?”

“Like a fiddler’s tune,” she said softly.

Rounding his car, McAvoy kept a firmly pressed smile on his face and collected the copy of Will’s book. There was a glint in Kelly’s eye as she thought about how much she hated that he had a copy, a piece of her husband. She had the agility and she thought if she really tried she could take the hardback away from him. She watched as he tossed it into the passenger’s seat and she hated him, just a little, for making it seem like such a frivolous thing.

Then, from his own seat, he collected a small wooden box and raised it. Eyeing her, he placed the box on the ground and rose upright long enough to lean against the car door. A subway roared by overhead and she would have been lying to say it failed to startle her. He chuckled, tickled by her woe, and thumbed the tip of his nose.

“You’ll need what’s in that box to get out of here. It was good to see you again.”

With that, David McAvoy drove away, the taillights of his car and the purr of the engine lost on her curiosity. Her eyes were drawn to the wooden box as though it were calling out her name. She crossed over the tile floor and detritus to recover the case. Before touching it, she retracted her hand cautiously. McAvoy always favored contact poisons and she thoroughly wiped her sweaty fingertips on her trousers.

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*God, please protect Will. Never let him forget how much I love him.* And then she opened the box. Withdrawing her hand, she stared down at a velvet-lined case containing a gleaming, well-oiled two-shot pistol and no other bullets. Her eyes shut intensely and she shook her head, unprepared for what the device meant to her escape. Opening her eyes, she saw a focused beam of light—the laser sight of a weapon—aimed directly between her breasts.

Diving to her right, a single shot zipped through the air and shattered the tile on a column behind Kelly. Despite knowing better, she had walked directly into a trap. *Here lies Kelly Olmstead, who forgot every single thing she ever learned.* Grabbing the box, she wrapped her fingers around the gun and pressed her shoulders against the column. In four beats of her heart, all of her training came back to her. She had forgotten nothing after all.

From the sound of the shot, she knew that her suitor was using a sniper pistol. The shooter lacked the reverence to hunt her with a rifle. Given that disrespect, it was doubtful the mysterious shooter read her file to learn that every one of Kelly's confirmed kills had come from close-quarters battle. Shutting her eyes, she quieted herself and listened for her suitor to approach.

Footsteps like raindrops pelting the roof started distantly at first, but increased with speed and decibel. *Twenty yards out.* The slide of another round being chambered scraped and echoed through the tunnel. Breathing, like the drizzle of rain, fast and uneasy, wheezed off the cavernous ceiling. The shooter still felt the rush of the hunt,

as once Kelly had. The scent of nervous sweat and jasmine stung the air, sharp and unexpected. *Jasmine?*

The eavesdropping blonde at the party had spun a web too well, ensuring that she would get Will's attention and answer questions which she, no doubt, reported back to McAvoy. Kelly had disliked the vibe she got from the woman, but had forgotten it once the call from her predecessor interrupted the evening. If nothing else, it gave her an upper hand now and she thought she'd teach the agent a lesson.

"Is 'Suzanne' the alias you use all the time or only in New York?"

Three rapid bursts of gunfire thundered through the tunnel and blasted away the grungy tile, giving Kelly the opening she needed. Sprinting in the same direction as the gunfire, she reached the next column without being shot at. No sooner had she straightened her posture in the shadows of the sickly green overhead lights than two more rounds were fired in her general direction.

"Was it the jasmine?" Suzanne questioned.

Wincing, Kelly could not pick up a specific location for where Suzanne was nested thanks in part to the ringing in her ears.

"William mentioned it in *Odd Man Out* and then again in *Rogue Patriot*. I thought he must like it."

Scoffing, Kelly said, "He always uses that scent to describe treacherous women. How's that for irony?"

"Good to know," Suzanne mentioned.

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Leaning back, Kelly aimed and fired her first of two bullets in the direction of Suzanne's voice. Sparks flew and the smell of an electrical fire grew strong as the bullet severed an eight-inch galvanized pipe. Suzanne cursed but her rough language was deafened by the sound of more gunfire from her pistol. She had disengaged the laser sight and was operating on sheer experience now.

Rolling up her sleeves, Suzanne let her pistol rest against her legs and gave her quarry a moment of silence. The former agent was out of practice, soft around the edges and hardly worth killing. Suzanne had never been assigned to kill another agent before and she thought she might have felt differently about it. Arching her brow, she looked down for her weapon and was distracted by something in her peripheral vision. A bare foot with a butterfly tattoo caught her eye and Suzanne glanced upwards quickly.

“Oh f—”

The shot rang out with a hollow ping and lacked the recoil to jolt Kelly. Suzanne's body slumped and the retired agent ignored the sounds of spillage as she knelt to recover the pistol and a magazine from her victim's belt. Quickly, she returned her shoes to her feet and raced for the entry of the tunnel. As well as she knew McAvoy, she knew there was no deposition on his itinerary. He had come to the city to kill her and to kill Will.

URNST LOITERED IN THE HALLWAY LONG ENOUGH TO pretend he was checking his phone as a drunken couple passed by. From the breast pocket of his coat, he withdrew a magnetic strip the breadth and width of a credit card and pressed it above the door to room 2808. One of the latest in jamming devices from the tech boys at Langley, Urnst all but guaranteed that Agent Olmstead would be unable to contact her husband so long as it took the hitter to carry out his task.

Inserting another device into the lock, Urnst manipulated the system and gained access to the room without a keycard or sound. Syrupy jazz hurt his ears and he cringed at the idea that anyone in the Agency would ever marry a man who found such music romantic. Killing William Olmstead would be a public service, enough that Urnst should receive a medal. Checking the suite room by room, he was impressed by the extravagance a second-rate hack like Olmstead could enjoy on his publisher's dime.

Few people in the world had what it took to be a real man of action, to live it and breathe it. Urnst lived in the shadows, where nobody had names or faces. He liked it there, away from the pathetic saps of society like Olmstead. Now this hack and his loose-lipped wife were encroaching upon his way of life. They had it coming and he was going to relish dishing it out, if only to one of them.

He lurked in the shadows from room to room, eager to find the mark. He had looked into the eyes of the man and knew there would be little fight. Finally, Urnst caught sight of Will again, sprawled out

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on the bed in loosened shirt and tie, his suit coat tossed to the floor and his shoes propped sporadically around the legs of a chair. Removing his blazer, the hardest decision left for Urnst to make was whether to use a knife or a gun.

PITTSBURGH IN THE NOVEMBER OF TWO YEARS PRIOR was the location where all hell broke loose in the life of Kelly Olmstead, then Kelly Pearce. The nephew of a Bosnian warlord tailed her from a data drop and put two rounds in her back before she took him out with the business end of the '78 Charger that once belonged to her father. She veered into traffic and drove as hard as she could, blood pumping out of her nearly as fast as the muscle car could guzzle gasoline.

When she finally crashed into a streetlamp after a utility van side-swiped her car from the passenger's side, she struck her head so hard that she might as well have collided with a herd of pink elephants. Leaving behind her gun and identification, she stumbled from the car, falling to the pavement and crawling until she was able to pull herself to her feet. Headlights made her think of her training at the farm, when she was interrogated past the point of breaking to prove she never would. The van driver shouted in his native tongue and cursed in blue streak, not that she had understood any of it.

About the time she swore the whole world had turned to bursts of light and sound, she collapsed into the arms of her hero. She had been saved by other spies before, others who had taken the same

oath and received the same training she had. Will Olmstead had no reason to care whether she lived or died. He gained nothing yet acted selflessly. Even though she swore amnesia, she remembered completely what he did for her.

She remembered the Bosnian goons who paraded past her hospital room and the CIA spooks who were waiting to shove a needle in her arm to keep one of their damaged operators from leaking their secrets. Will kept them all at bay and, without even knowing her name, saved her life. For two days he refused to leave her bedside and remained there until her release a few days later. Less than a week passed before she tracked him down to his townhouse and made sure he never left her side again.

Kelly had gone there to thank him for everything and the flowers but also to make sure she had not compromised him by saying something during her dizzied bouts of consciousness. She found him charming and asked him to dinner, genuinely, because it had been so long since anyone had done something so meaningful for her. Admittedly, she confided in him that she had never had anyone in her life like him. Though uncertain what to make of it, she knew she hated being apart from Will.

He had been understanding and less fearful than she fretted when she brought him in and told him about her true career. Remarkably, he never pried, never said or did anything that put her at risk. She feared losing him but instead found a husband, someone she could

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let down her guard with. It was always her idea to retire from the Agency and to make a new life being Mrs. Will Olmstead.

If anything happened to him now, if her life spilled over and wrecked the dreams he had finally seen to fruition, she would be the most dangerous enemy McAvoy had ever made. *He worried about her talking before?* Again she called Will, but neither the hotel nor their cellular provider could connect her to the sound of his voice. All she could do was approach the doorway of their suite with absolute stealth and not let go of Suzanne's pistol.

THE WORST SORT OF JAZZ IMAGINABLE SICKENED HER stomach and pulsed through Kelly's veins. She wanted to grow old listening to Will's lousy taste in music. *How lame was that?* Her eyes scanned the room with predatory precision, desperate to see a flash of light or a flicker of shadow. Her instinct was to get to the bedroom, because champagne always made her non-drinker husband sleepy. Stepping out of her shoes, she tiptoed barefoot and poised herself to react.

From the bedchamber of their suite, the oblong shadow of a man passed along the French doors, draped in marmalade silk and nearly drawn to. Her breath caught and drew the muscles of her abs tightly against the tip of her breast bone. She wanted to call out to him, but she had seen the jammer above the door and knew there was an unwelcomed guest in the room with them. The sound of gurgling and

the pitter-patter of liquid on carpet filled her ears and made her wince with pain.

Driven by emotion, she flung open the doors and aimed her stolen weapon. A man she did not know sat in the chair, his head pulled back to one side and his throat cut deeply. Behind him, his shirt sleeves rolled up and a bloody knife in hand, Will stared back at his wife with a direct sharpness in his gaze that she had never witnessed before. Reflexively, they both lowered their weapons and she stared at him for answers.

Talking quickly, he said, “I know how this looks and, yes, clearly, I have spent some time in Chil e.”

**END**



**Other titles from Jason Garrett:**

*Homecoming*

*Pursuit: A Tale of Bishop's Island*

