

DARK MEN

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PEGASUS CRIME
NEW YORK

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Pegasus Crime is an Imprint of
Pegasus Books LLC
80 Broad Street, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10004

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First Pegasus Books cloth edition December 2011

Interior design by Maria Fernandez

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-60598-271-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

CHAPTER ONE

Would you listen to a story told by a dying man? Would you listen to me tell it in the present, like it is happening now? It seems I've been telling my story and living my story for so long, the two have mixed, and I'm no longer sure which is accurate, which informs the other: the story or the life. I try to tell it the way it happened, as it is happening, but how close am I to the truth?

I'll do my best to finish, to give you closure. You've been with me this long; I owe you that. But at some point, forgive me if my story suddenly ends.

In Fresno, California, in 2007, a tiger mauled a woman. The tiger was six years old and had arrived in the United States as a pet purchased by Lori Nagel through dubious channels in the Far East. Her friends told investigators the tiger was quite docile toward Lori, even affectionate, right up to the moment its five-inch dew claw severed an artery in Lori's left leg. She survived, but her leg didn't. She insisted the unfortunate incident was her fault; it was her carelessness, her inattentiveness

that was the cause. Nevertheless, at the behest of animal control, a veterinarian euthanized the beast a few weeks after the incident.

The tiger's only crime was being a goddamn tiger.

A little over two years has passed since Risina Lorenzana and I moved to the little village on the sea. I am still here. It is the longest I have lived in one place, and I have almost stopped looking over my shoulder. Instincts die hard, however, and for most of my life, I've survived by keeping my guard up, my defenses engaged. I spent my youth incarcerated in a juvenile detention center named Waxham outside of Boston, Massachusetts; my adult life I spent as a contract killer, and a damned good one at that. I was what the Russians call a Silver Bear, a hit man who never defaults on a job, who takes any assignment no matter how difficult, and who commands top fees for his work. As such, I survived this professional life by honing my peripheral vision. I killed, I escaped, and when hunters came for me, I put them down.

Risina changed everything. She gave me a glimpse of what my life could be without a Glock in my hand, and when the opportunity arose to break free, I leapt at it.

She's the only one who knows my complete story, the only one alive who knows my true name.

I crack an egg, and the yolk spills out whole into a white bowl. A little salt, a little milk, a quick stir with a fork, and I pour the contents on to a pan set on low heat. Risina walks out of the bedroom, yawning, tying her black hair up so I can see all of her neck. When she puts her hands up, her pajama top pulls away from the bottoms, exposing her stomach, and something in me stirs. It's been over two years, and something in me always stirs.

"You've finally given up on my cooking." Her Italian accent has softened, but only a bit, like the hint of spice in a pot of

strong coffee. She pours herself some juice and plops down in a mismatched sofa chair we bought off a yard in a neighboring town.

"I'm just giving you a breather."

"Ha. You can tell me the truth."

"I'd rather not."

She laughs. "I'm terrible, I know. But I'm getting better."

Risina has forged a relationship with a fisherman's wife, Kaimi, one of the few village natives to venture to our house after we settled. Kaimi's a plump woman, with a broad forehead and a broad smile. She's been teaching Risina the basics of cooking—how to season the meat before grilling it, how to add spices to the pot before boiling the water—but it's a bit like teaching music to a deaf man. Risina can get the mechanics right, but for some reason, the end result is as flavorless as cardboard.

Still, she continues to try, undaunted. Her inability to get frustrated fascinates me. Maybe it's an indigenous side effect to this place, where the rhythm of the day is always a few beats slower, a few notes softer. Or maybe it's just Risina, whose beauty has grown even more pronounced since we arrived. Something unnamed has relaxed inside her, and her inner calm now wafts off her in waves. She always had an underlying sadness just below the surface on her face, in her eyes, but it seems to have diminished like her accent. The sun has brought out the gold in her skin, and the simple dresses and the longer way she wears her hair combine to make her look even more radiant and alive.

I look decent. I've kept in shape by running on the beach and swimming in the water. My body's not as hard as it was, but I'm far from sluggish.

Kaimi's husband Ariki heads to his boat six days a week. He leaves his home before the sun rises, and walks into the town

center before descending the cobblestone path to the bamboo huts that dot the dock. Here he cuts bait until 5:45, and then he pilots his long boat out to deeper water, alone, waiting for the sun to arrive and the fish to start biting.

I followed him from the shadows for five days once. I tracked him carefully, noting points that held the highest probability of success. I could kill him shortly after he leaves his house, drag his body to the jungle and have him buried before anyone else awakens. I could lie in wait at one of his favorite fishing spots, have him come to me, then shoot him and weigh his body down so it never floats to the surface. I could wait until Kaimi leaves to do her laundry and waylay him in his own shower after a long day on the water, when the man is at his most vulnerable.

I have no intention of killing Ariki, ever. But I'm keeping in shape in other ways, too.

Once every three months, I head to the only city of any size on this side of the country. I amass several things we're lacking: clothes, batteries, light bulbs and other assorted knick-knacks. But the true purpose of these trips is to stock up on the one necessity Risina can't do without: books. She's given up so much of her life to escape with me. Literature is like a lifeline for her, a connection with everything she left behind. When I met her, she was acquiring rare books for a small shop named Zodelli on the Via Poli in Rome, and the job was more than an occupation to her; it was a passion, a necessity, a fix. Something I understand well. Her dark eyes dance whenever I return with a few dozen hard covers, half written in her native Italian, half written in English. She makes a list of ten authors she wants me to find before I set out—Goethe and Poe and Dickens and Twain and Moravia—and leaves the rest of the

purchases to my discretion. It takes me hours to make my selections, ranging from contemporary authors like Wolfe and Mailer and King, to my favorite writer, Steinbeck. I get no greater pleasure than opening the boxes for Risina when I return and then watch the color rise in her cheeks. In minutes, she is curled in a chair, her feet tucked under her, absorbed in the fresh pages.

I am near the front of the bookstore, a half-dozen classics in my hand, when I first notice a man marking me. He's a black guy with a wide face and a freshly purchased linen shirt. I can still make out the starched fold lines, since the shirt hasn't been washed.

The city attracts its share of tourists, but this man is no vacationer. I can see it in his hard eyes and the stiff way he holds his shoulders. He's watching me, only me, in the glass across the street, I'm sure of it. If he's trying to be stealthy, he's not very practiced at it.

My heartbeat slowly rises, and I have to admit, it's a welcome feeling, like finding an old jacket in the closet and discovering it still fits. Fuck, this is not right . . . I should be angry, worried, embarrassed I've been discovered, that my hard-fought-for independence has suddenly been compromised without warning. So why am I feeling the complete opposite? Why do I feel elated?

Over a year ago, Risina and I lit out for a remote sanctuary following an assignment in which I killed an innocent bystander along with my target. The unfortunate man had a brother who hired a host of assassins to track me down—to hunt the hunter—and when I killed the brother too and disposed of the final assassin, I thought I was free. I fled that world, persuading the girl I loved to escape with me.

But did I convince myself? Did I really want to escape?

The tiger is still a tiger.

I move out of the cashier's line and head back over to the classics shelf in the rear of the store to see if my movements elicit a response.

Like I thought, he's an amateur; he jerks his head to track my position, as conspicuous as if he'd rung a bell. I pull out my cell phone, pretend to check who is phoning me, then put the phone to my ear and pantomime a conversation while I really snap photos of the man through the window. They may not be perfect shots, but they should be enough.

A clerk stands near the back, sorting new arrivals.

"Bathroom?" I ask in her language and she points me to a short hallway. I quickly pass it and duck out the delivery entrance, slipping into an alley. I hurry to the nearest intersection where the alley meets the driveway and wait.

I don't have a weapon, so I'm going to have to use his.

I hear his hurried footsteps approaching, and I am right, he's an amateur, no doubt about that. If he's been in this line of work, he hasn't been doing it long. He's making as much noise as a fireworks display. In another minute, he won't be making any noise at all.

He swings around the corner in a dead sprint, and it only takes a solid kick to his trailing leg to send him sprawling, limbs akimbo, like a skier tumbling down a mountain. Before he can right himself, I am on him, pinning him to the cement with my knee in the small of his back. A quick sweep of his waist and I have his gun, a cheap chrome pistol I'm sure he bought in the last day or two, after arriving in the country. A second later, it is out and up and pointed at the back of his head.

Before I can pull the trigger, he shouts "Columbus!"

I roll him over and have the gun under his chin. His eyes in that wide face are wild, feral, like a cornered wolf. No, whatever he is, he's no professional.

"What do you want?" I spit through clenched teeth. I like him scared and I mean to keep him that way.

"I came to find you . . ."

"No shit," and I thumb the hammer back, cocking the pistol. I hope the gun isn't so cheap as to spring before I'm ready to pull the trigger. I want to find out who the hell this guy is who knows my name and how on earth he found me before I plant him.

He winces, his face screwing up like he tasted a lemon, and then he bellows, "For Archie. For Archibald Grant . . . your old fence!"

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't that.

"Archie?"

"Yeah man, that's what I'm trying to tell you. Archie's been taken."

We sit in the back of a chicken-and-pork restaurant, drinking San Miguels.

"What's your name?"

"I go by Smoke."

And as if the mention of his name turns his thoughts, he pulls out a pack of Fortunes, pops free a cigarette, and lights it with a shaky hand. I guess he hasn't quite calmed his nerves after having his own gun cocked beneath his chin.

"Then tell me something straight, Smoke . . . you're no bagman."

He blows a thin stream out of the side of his mouth. "No . . . shit no. I just handled things for Archie . . . a 'my-man-Friday' type setup. Whatever he needed me to track down, that was my job."

"A fence in training."

He nods. "I thought about trying my hand at the killing business, but I wasn't sure I had the chops for it."

"Now you know."

"You're right about that."

"How'd you find me?"

"Archie liked to tell stories about you, said you were the best he'd ever seen. Said if he ever got in a tight spot, I's to open an envelope he kept in a safety deposit box at Harris Bank on Wabash. That'd tell me where to find you. He told me this pretty soon after I started there . . ."

"How long . . . ?"

"Over a year. After his sister died, he came back to Chicago a bit lost. I knew him from his prison days."

Ruby. His sister's name was Ruby, and she was one of the good ones. I had a real fondness for her; I like to think we were cut from the same cloth. Then Ruby had caught a bullet in that mess in Italy two years ago that made me want to leave the game forever. And here it was, all coming back.

"I meant, how long has Archie been missing?"

"Not missing. Taken. There's a note."

He shifts to reach into his pants pocket and withdraws a single sheet of paper, folded into quarters, then hands it over without the slightest hesitation. As I unfold it, he takes another drag, squinting his left eye as the smoke blows past it, toward the ceiling.

"Goddamn, it's nice to smoke indoors. They don't let us do that shit in Chicago no more."

The sheet is standard white typing paper, the kind found jamming copy machines throughout the world. Block letters, written in a masculine hand with a black Sharpie:

BRING COLUMBUS HOME. OR YOU'LL GET GRANT BACK IN
A WAY YOU WON'T LIKE.

I look up, and Smoke is studying my face.

"Why didn't you tell me this was about me?"

Smoke shrugs. "I'm telling you now."

When I level my eyes, he puts his palms up like a victim in a robbery. "I didn't mean nothing by it. Just didn't know how you'd react. They ask for you and I immediately come find you. I wasn't looking to do an investigation . . . wouldn't know where to begin. But your name was on there clear as crystal and this seemed like a straight-up emergency, so here I am. Didn't want you to have the wrong idea."

"When was the last time you saw Archie?"

"I was at his place the night before . . . wasn't unusual for us to be up 'til eleven-thirty, twelve, goin' over all the goin's on, but mostly talking shit, you know? I think I left around midnight, but I don't remember looking at a clock. It was late, though.

"Next day I was supposed to meet him for eggs and bacon at Sam & George's on North Lincoln, but Archie never showed."

"That unusual?"

"First time ever. I knew something was up before the waitress set down the menus. He always beat me there. Always. Say what you want about Archibald Grant, but he's a punctual son-of-a-cuss."

I couldn't argue with that. "So what'd you do?"

"I got up, left a buck on the table for coffee, and headed to Archie's place. Banged on the door, but no answer. The lock wasn't forced or nothing, so I opened it and poked my head in."

"You have a key?"

"Yeah. Archie gave me one." He says it defensively, but I shake him off like a pitcher shaking off a sign from the plate.

"Keep going."

"Not a sound in the joint. Air as still as a morgue."

"No sign of a struggle?"

"Not in the front room, no." He leans forward, lowers his voice. "But in the bedroom, he must've put up a hell of a fight. Blood everywhere, lamps knocked over, mirror broke, bed knocked to shit. I knew it was bad, bad, bad. My first thought was he was dead, truth be told. All that blood. Someone must've stuck him and dragged the body away. But then I saw the note."

"Where?"

"Living room table." He tamps out another cigarette from his pack and lights it off the end of the first, dropping the original into a plastic ashtray when he's done.

"You think the note was put there for you to find it?"

"Don't know who else it'd be for. I'm the only one he lets into his house."

"And you have absolutely no idea who did this or why they want me?"

"Swear on every single family member's name, living and dead."

As a professional killer, I have to read faces the way a surgeon examines x-rays. A purse of the lips, a downward glance of the eyes, a nervous tap of the knee, there are dozens of tells that give away when a man is playing fast and loose with the truth. Smoke is skittish, no mistake, but his voice is steady and his eyes are focused. He's afraid of me, but he's telling the truth.

The air is dry and stale and the cigarette smoke hangs under the ceiling like a gas cloud, thick and poisoned.

I tap the note with my index finger. "And you have no idea why they want me?"

"I hung around that place for two days, hoping someone would show up and explain things further, but not a creature was stirring, you know what I'm saying? On the third day, I went looking in that safety deposit box."

"No one followed you to the bank?"

A look sweeps over his face like the thought never crossed his mind. His adam's apple dips like a yo-yo.

"No. I mean . . . no . . . I don't think so." Like he's trying to convince himself.

"Doesn't matter," I say so he'll get back on track.

"Anyway, that's where I found the file on you."

"What's your plan from here?"

Smoke shrugs as he starts on his third cigarette. "Man, I wish I knew. Like I said, Archie told me if he's ever in a tight spot, to set out to find you. And then your name's on this here note. I don't know what to tell you, but you gotta admit, this qualifies as a pretty goddamned tight spot, so I did what Archie asked. Beyond that . . ."

He lets his voice spool out, joining the smoke near the ceiling like he never intended to finish the sentence.

An image pops into my head, a highway in Nevada I drove a lifetime ago. The sky was clear, the desert calm, and the blacktop was an infinite line across the landscape, a shapeless, endless mirage. Each time I'd crest a bit of a slope or round a slight bend, the line would reemerge before me, stretching out to the horizon, teasing me, sentient, like it knew I could never reach its end.

I am about to drive that road again. I knew it the moment Smoke called me by name. The real question, the one I'm not sure I want to answer: did I ever truly leave it in the first place?

Risina is folding clothes in the back room when I enter, and her face lights up when she sees me coming through the door.

"What'd you bring me?"

Then she spots it in my face, and I guess she's believed this day would come since we first arrived.

"Someone found you."

I nod.

"How much time do we have?"

I swallow, my mouth chalky. "We leave tonight."

"Where?"

"I have to go to the U.S. for a while."

"What's a while?"

"I don't know."

"And me?"

"I don't know."

She folds her arms across her chest and raises her chin. She's never been one to lower her eyes, and she's not going to start now. "Tell me what happened."

I paint the picture of Smoke, about the way he found me and what he had to say about Archibald Grant and the note left behind that called me out by name.

"You told me you were out . . . that Archie wanted you out, was covering for you, he said. I don't understand this. His problems are not your problems."

"I was out. I am. But he stitched me up when I needed stitching and I can't turn my back on him."

Risina collapses into a chair, but still she doesn't lower her eyes.

"I want you to know . . ." I start but she cuts me off.

"Give me a moment to think, dammit." This might be the first time she's ever snapped at me, and I can't say I blame her.

"Can you bring me some water?"

I move to the kitchen and pour some filtered water out of a jug we keep in the refrigerator. This might be the last time I'm in this kitchen, the last time I open this fridge, and even though this place isn't much, it has been good to us. Better not to think this way. This is no time for sentiment. Better to rip the bandage off quickly.

I return with the water. She takes it absently and drinks the entire glass without taking it from her lips. I'm not sure she even knows I'm in the room. I can see her eyes darting as her mind catches up to what I told her.

After a moment, she finally raises her eyes and focuses on me, maybe to keep the room from spinning. She blushes, blood rising in her cheeks.

"I'm sorry . . . this is new to me. I thought I was prepared, had prepared myself for something like this, but . . ."

She swallows and bites her lip. I know she is sorting her thoughts the way a contract bridge player organizes playing cards, bringing all the suits together before laying down the next play.

"Are you going to have to kill someone?"

"I don't know."

"What if once you enter this life, you don't want to stop again?"

She's trying to read my face, less interested in what I say than how I look when I say it. It's a skill she's picked up from me. I answer with the truth.

"I don't know."

She absorbs this like a physical blow. Just when I don't think she's going to say anything, she finds her voice. There is a strength there that shouldn't surprise me, though it does.

"I'm coming with you."

"I don't—"

"It's not a question. I'm not asking for permission. I'm coming with you. You offered me a life with you and I won't run away just because the past caught up with us. *Us*. Not you. *Us*."

"Risina—"

"You can't send me away. You can't kick me in the stomach like you did the first girl you loved." Her eyes are hot now. "I'm coming."

I turn my voice to gravel. She hasn't heard this voice from me, but I want the weight behind my words to be clear. "It's one thing to hear these stories about me and another to live them, to see them with your own eyes. I can't get back into this and have to worry about—"

She interrupts, fearlessly, her voice matching mine. If I thought I could outgravel her, I misjudged the woman I love. "Yes, you will. You'll learn to do it *and* worry about me at the same time. I'm not giving you the choice."

"You'll see a side of me you won't recognize."

"Don't you understand a damn thing I'm saying? I want to know *every* side of you. I must know! I've wanted *all* of you since I first met you. Not just one side or the other. Not just the mask you choose to show me."

"And what if you hate what you see?"

"I won't."

"And what if you die standing next to me?"

"Then I'll die. People do it every day."

I start to ask another question and stop myself. There's a reason I fell in love with Risina the first time I saw her; it's here before me now. Defiance, ambition, determination, passion . . . the qualities of confidence. The qualities of a professional assassin. A tiger is a goddamned tiger. The beasts are born that way, and no matter how they are *nurtured*, their *nature* always emerges eventually.

"So when do we leave?" she asks.

"Now," I whisper.