

# ASTRA'S REVENGE



**Jim Keane**

Astra's Revenge

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Edited by Terry Wright

Cover Art by Terry Wright

ISBN: 978-1-944045-77-7

The old woman, as she did every Friday, lugged her bag of groceries to the security door of her apartment building. The big man waiting there surprised her, made her heart jump a beat. He looked the type, an enforcer for Yonkers Lending Company, stocky, whiskered, and ruddy. The lump under his sport coat wasn't a Bible, of that she was sure. Steeling her nerves, she pushed past him, key in hand, to unlock the door.

"Betsy Crowley?" His voice came out like he gargled with gravel every morning.

She turned to face him. "Who's askin'?"

"This is your final warning." He wagged an official-looking envelope in her face.

"I don't have the money. What are you going to do? Kill me? Then you boys get nothin'. Zilch. Nada. So stuff that envelope where the sun don't shine."

He stuffed the envelope into the maw of her grocery bag, right next to the celery stalk. "We're not playing with you, lady. You owe, you pay, or you die."

"I need more time. My investment hasn't paid off yet. But it will. She'll come through, you'll see. Until then, bug off."

"I'm sure you're a nice lady. And your daughter, she's a looker all right, but time's up. Don't let your pride get you killed. You'll leave us no choice but to go after her for the money. What's her name? Astra? You wouldn't want that, now would you?"

"Leave my daughter out of this."

"I don't get paid to give a damn. You have until Sunday night to pay up."

"Don't you guys have a heart?"

The man didn't answer, just stalked to his car, and peeled away from the curb.

Her legs felt like they would fail her. If only her dead husband Horace hadn't ruined their credit, she might have been able to swing a loan from the bank. She might have been able to borrow against her life insurance, if he hadn't tapped it dry. So what choice did she have? A loan shark or tell Astra the truth. There was no money to get her new business on the road, literally, with the HomeTown Traveling Circus. A truck and a trailer, they didn't give those things away, not to mention the tent, the tapestries, the furniture, and the candles. Oh god, the candles. She went through them like toilet paper.

Yes, Astra had a gift. They'd known this since she was a child, uncanny how she could see things, feel things, predict things. A circus. Her dream job. What better way to put her gift of sight to use: palm reading, tarot cards...she even had a crystal ball. Folks flocked to her for insight and advice. The money should have been rolling in, but expenses ate up profits: fuel, food, lodging, insurance, and all of it, but someday, Betsy knew, her fortunes would turn around, though lately, her daughter's dream seemed like a mother's folly.

She hurried inside her apartment and locked the door behind her then pressed her back to the wall, waiting for sledge hammer in her chest to slow down while she trembled like a drenched cat.

*What's your plan now? These people aren't going away until they get their money.*

She dropped the envelope on the table and lugged the groceries to the kitchen, where she leaned on the sink and rubbed her temples.

*Banging. Banging.*

What? She suddenly realized someone was banging on her door. Her eyes widened. Was it that goon from Yonkers Lending? Why? He'd given her until Sunday night. Had he changed his mind, come back to finish her off and get it over with?

*Banging. Banging.*

Those bastards were serious. What was she going to do?

"Mom, open up," Astra shouted behind the door. "Mom, are you all right?"

Thank God it was her daughter. Betsy rushed to open the door and let Astra in. However, just to be sure, she scanned the hallway left and right. Saw nobody. Closed the door and locked it again. Only then did she notice the tremble in her hand.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Why of course." She turned from the door to face Astra. "Why shouldn't I be okay?"

Astra's brow furrowed.

Betsy knew she couldn't keep anything from her daughter. She was too perceptive. There was nothing a mother could hide from this daughter, but it was worth a shot. "What brings you here all in a huff?"

"Who was that man?"

"What man?"

"Outside, mom."

Betsy's gaze darted to the windows, leery that someone could be watching. What if the loan sharks were listening to this conversation? They might have bugged the place; she wouldn't put it past them.

Astra stalked to the window and looked down on the street. "Something's got you spooked. What's going on?"

"You must be talking about that salesman, life insurance or some nonsense."

Astra folded her arms. "I saw him." She pointed to her head. "He looked like a gangster, and I felt his anger. He was no salesman. There's something you're not telling me, mom."

Betsy glanced at the table, the envelope, didn't want to but couldn't help it.

Ever-perceptive Astra caught the glance, spotted the envelope. "What's that?"

Betsy was unable to look at her but managed to mutter, "Nothing. It's nothing."

Astra snatched it up and opened it.

Betsy's heart rate jumped. "Don't look in there."

Astra pulled out the paper. "Yonkers Lending? Who's that? And what's this all about? Past due? Final notice." Her hand clapped over her mouth. Horror welled in her eyes. "Mom, what kind of trouble are you in?"

"You're so smart. You tell me."

"It doesn't work that way, mom, and you damn well know it. What did you need all this

money for?”

Betsy collapsed on the couch and exhaled. “I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

Astra sat next to her and held her hands. “Tell me everything.”

“All that seed money I gave you for your dream business with the HomeTown Circus, when you came back from Afghanistan, didn’t come from any inheritance from Horace. He left us flat broke.”

“You borrowed it?”

“Bank turned me down, so I went to—”

“Younkers Lending.” Astra gasped at her nightmarish insight. “That’s why the man was here, to collect.”

Betsy’s eyes burned with tears. “I was hoping you’d make a fortune, money would pour in, I’d be able to pay them back on time. It just didn’t work out that way.”

“Mom. Circus life is expensive. Why didn’t you tell me it was a loan. We could’ve at least paid them something.”

“I did. Gave them bits of my Social Security. Still got bills to pay around here, but what I gave them wasn’t enough. It’s never enough.” Her tears turned to sobs then all-out bawling.

Astra rubbed her back. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure this out, go to them, refinance the loan.”

“I tried that. Don’t you think I tried?”

“I’ll help with the payments this time. My income should give them confidence.”

Betsy clenched her fists. She wanted to grab onto something solid because her head felt like she was on the spinning chairs ride at the circus. The world was coming to an end. “They want blood, I tell you. Pay or die. That’s what he said.”

“He can’t be serious, just trying to scare you, mom.”

“Well, it worked. I’m scared out of my pantyhose. These men mean business.”

“Monday morning, we’ll go together. Straighten this whole thing out.”

“Astra, honey. It won’t work. I’ve got until Sunday night to come up with the money,” she sniffled, “or they’re going to send someone to make me pay...with my life. That’s the message I got.”

“Then we’ll go to the cops.”

“With what? What proof do we have that my life is in danger? Cops can’t do anything until a crime has been committed. By then, it’ll be too late for me, and then they’re gonna come after you, and it’s all my fault. I didn’t want you involved. A mother’s supposed to protect her child. Instead, I put you in harm’s way. I tried—”

“Mom. Mom. It’s okay. Relax. Breathe. We’ll get through this...together. I know some guys at the circus. They may look like clowns, but most of them can eat nails for breakfast. I’ll talk to them. Tell them what’s happening. I know they’ll help me protect you.”

“Oh, Astra. I’m so sorry...to be such a burden, but that man was right. My pride’s gonna get me killed.”

Astra hugged her. “Not if I can help it.”

“There’s no way to stop these people.”

“Then I’ll have to kill them.”

Betsy chuckled. “You? Kill anyone? You can’t kill a fly.”

“Mom. I work in a circus. Trust me. I can kill a fly.”

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Amid the Irish strumming music, stale beer, fried steak, and clinking glasses at Corey Nolan’s Pub, Henry twirled Elena on the dance floor. It was Saturday night. He was off duty. Every nerve in his body was alive and well for the love of his life.

He pulled her in close and whisked her around the floor. Hints of jasmine perfume drifted around them. Elena looked ravishing in that black blouse and tan skirt. Her boots never missed a step, never missed a beat. Raven hair rested on her shoulders, soft as doves coming home to roost.

When the lively music quieted, he nuzzled in for a kiss. “You’re beautiful tonight.”

The corners of her lips curled upward. “As I am every night, mister.” She grinned her tough-girl grin.

“Yup. I’m a lucky man.”

“And don’t forget it.”

“Let’s get a drink.”

They strode to a booth and sat next to each other, all cozy and a little winded. He ordered a Guinness, and for Elena a Raspberry Cosmopolitan.

She took hold of his arm and cuddled in. “There’s an open house tomorrow night. That three-bedroom by the Hudson. Do you want to go?”

“Can we afford it?”

“After we’re married, I think so. Combine our incomes. We could qualify.”

“Then let’s check it out.”

By that time, the drinks had arrived. U2’s *One* played on the jukebox.

“I love this song,” Elena said.

“And I love you.”

“Love you too.”

He swigged his Guinness. “It’s really going to happen for us, isn’t it.”

“It better, buster. I don’t put out for free.” She sipped her Cosmo, giggled a bit under her breath.

“A home. Kids. A family. Livin’ the dream. You and me.”

She smiled delightfully. “Two kids, right?”

“A boy and a girl. That should be a good start.”

“What if our first is a girl? How about the name Sarah?”

“I love it. Great name. My grandmother was Sarah. What do you think about Colin, if it’s a boy?”

“Sounds like a strong Irish name.”

“It tis, lassie.” Henry took a pull on his pint.

His cell phone rang. "Now who could that be this time a night?" He looked at the display. *God damned Syndicate.* "I've got to take this."

"Work?"

"I don't know." Henry charged to the bathroom where it wasn't much quieter but out of Elena's earshot, for sure. "Agent 42."

A robotic voice replied. "Authenticate."

He punched in his passcode.

"Hello, Henry Malbern. Your target is Betsy Crowley, seventy-two, 1213 Broadway, Yonkers, New York."

*That's close by.*

"Termination deadline, Sunday 11pm."

*Tomorrow night?*

"Delta also advised."

*The bastards.*

Delta was a rival organization. Competition in the hit-man business? Who would have ever thought that was possible?

He punched 'star 11' to accept the assignment and hung up the phone. To reject an assignment meant trouble on his doorstep. Syndicate trouble, but why did the hit have to be tomorrow night? Sunday night? Even God rested on Sunday. He'd already told Elena they'd go to the open house.

*What am I going to tell her now?*

*A Fairy Tale of New York* by the Pogues played on the jukebox as he returned to the booth and collapsed into the seat. Frowning, he gaped into the blackness of his beer.

Elena touched his hand. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You don't look it. What was that call about?"

He forced a smile. "Let's talk about our dream house."

"Don't shut me out. What's the matter?"

His hand shook as he gulped down the Guinness.

*I have to tell her. I can't lie to her every time I have to go to work. We're getting married. She'll need to know what I really do for a living, what I really earn, especially when it comes to qualifying for a mortgage.*

"Tell me what's going on, Henry."

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous."

"Why are you so secretive about your work?"

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Her brows lowered. "Bullshit."

"Let's dance." He stood, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

"You're already dancing enough for both of us. No more waltzing around the truth, buster. No more lies. You're a cop. You get called out at odd hours. Why is this call different?"

"It's my next assignment. I want to tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

"That's not funny. Tell me what your assignment is. And be honest with me."

"Can I get another beer first? How about you? Ready for another Cosmo?"

"Then you'll tell me?"

"Yeah. Sure." He signaled the waitress for another round. "Then can we dance?"

"You're not a cop, are you?"

"No."

"You lied to me?"

"It's better that way."

"Jesus, Henry. I don't know who you are."

"I'm the man who loves you."

"If what you do for a living puts me and our kids in danger, that's not going to fly with me, Henry."

"Come on, Elena. I'm trying..." He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in tight. There was no cuddling from her, just stiffness in her entire body. "I'm sorry for not being honest with you, but you're right. You should know. I'm a hit-man for the Syndicate."

She pushed him away. "It's not funny. I told you to be honest with me."

"I can't go to the open house tomorrow night. I have to terminate some old lady."

"If you don't want to go to the open house, just say so, mister...mister hit-man."

"So you don't believe me?"

Half-shed tears glistened in her eyes. "I can't live like this." She sniffled. "We can't live like this. A marriage has to be based on honesty and trust."

Henry felt his perfect life slipping away. He scanned the crowded bar. Some friendly faces he recognized, others not so much. He'd never met anyone from the Syndicate, so for all he knew, the strangers were there to keep an eye on him. They'd said they were always watching. Miscreants would be terminated before they could start any trouble, leak any information about the Syndicate, their dealings, their clients. He had to be careful at all times, so he whispered in her ear. "How about if I quit? Get a nine-to-fiver. Bartend in the evening. Normal. Safe."

"When are you going to stop with the bullshit? Quit being a hit-man?"

"Shhhh. Keep your voice down, for Christ's sake."

"Don't shush me. My fiancé is an assassin? You actually expect me to believe that? You haven't got a mean bone in your body."

"I kill people for a living, but I don't claim it on my taxes. All right?"

"For the government? The CIA? Who the fuck do you work for?"

"I told you, the Syndicate," he whispered.

"What's the Syndicate?"

"Telling you can get us both killed."

"Jesus, Henry. What am I supposed to say? I'm talking to a complete stranger. I don't know



if you're a killer or a lunatic. How long have you been living this fantasy?"

"Five years. Nineteen kills. Twenty tomorrow night. Then I'm done. Okay? I promise."

"No. You quit right now. There'll be no number twenty. Otherwise, I can't marry you. I won't have a family with you, knowing that murder is putting food on our table."

"But, Elena—"

"What's it going to be?"

"It's not that simple. You don't know these people. I got a job tomorrow night. If I don't do it, I'm a dead man."

Tears streamed from her eyes. "If you do it, you'll be a dead man to me, Henry. We're done. Finished." She got up and wiped tears from her cheeks.

"Wait, Elena." He reached out to her, a man grabbing a lifeline, but he missed as she pulled away.

"Choose wisely, Henry." Elena stormed out.

Blood coursed through his veins, hot as acid. He was losing her, his future, his family, everything he'd hoped for. Moments ago it was all his for the taking, now it was all on the line. A no win situation. If Crowley lives, he dies. *There's no quitting the syndicate.* If Crowley dies, he lives, but without Elena, and right now, a life without her wouldn't be worth living.

He slammed his fist on the table.

*I'll get out. I'll escape. Live on the run. We'll have to hide, always looking over our shoulders, but it's the only way to keep Elena and stay alive.*

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The next day, as his hangover waned, he started thinking about how he could get out of his assignment and not rile the Syndicate. Betsy Crowley. Age seventy-two.

*What could this old woman have done to merit termination?*

The people he usually killed were drug dealers who ripped off the cartel, murderers who murdered the wrong people, and psychopaths destined to shoot up a school or a grocery store. Not a seventy-two-year-old woman who lived in Yonkers.

What he did next was something he'd never done before, questioned the Syndicate. Nobody ever questioned them because nobody was crazy enough to try paddling a canoe up Niagara Falls. When he got his assignments, he did them. No questions asked. Besides, questioning an organization that was invisible and everywhere at the same time would be suicidal.

He picked up his cell phone, his canoe. *Hold my beer and watch this, Mister Syndicate.* His Niagara.

He called the number to the Syndicate and went through the authentication process. Once he was done, a home agent came on the line. "What do you want, Henry Malbern?"

*What do I think I'm doing? Do I want to get myself killed? Nobody calls the Syndicate. They call me.*

"Henry? You there?"

"My assignment, sir."

“What about it?”

“The target, Betsy Crowley. What did she do to deserve termination?”

“What are you, a rookie? You know that’s classified.”

“I need to know.”

There was a long silence. Cold fear washed through his bones.

“That information is classified, period.”

“I just—”

“Agent.” The man’s voice cut him off. “Are you going to complete your assignment or not?”

He glanced outside his window. Empty street. No pedestrians. Were they watching him right now? Preparing to bust through his door with a team of armed men if he didn’t say yes.

“Henry Malbern,” the uncaring voice said. “Please confirm. Yes or no.”

He was knee-deep in shit already so:

“I just want to know what she did wrong.”

Henry pictured Betsy Crowley knitting in a rocking chair, listening to Elvis Presley on the WCBS FM Oldies radio station.

“You have five seconds.”

*Jesus Christ, she’s someone’s mother. Does she have children? Grandkids? A husband? This doesn’t seem right.*

His father had left him and his mother when he was seven. The last thing his deadbeat dad had told him was he would pick up a gallon of milk at Shop Rite. *I’ll be back soon, and we’ll throw the ball around. Maybe we’ll catch a train and check out a Yankees game.* He never returned. The bastard left his mom busting her ass waiting tables, double shifts at Yonkers Diner. His mom had done the best she could. God rest her soul.

“Three seconds.”

So, now he was killing old women. What’s next? Cripples?

“Two seconds.”

A calmer, saner voice told him: *“Nobody’s ever said no to the Syndicate. Say yes, you crazy bastard, then find out more about the old woman before you get yourself killed. Remember your plan to get out of the business for good. You and Elena will get the hell out of dodge. The plan’s no good if you’re dead.”*

“One second.”

His throat tightened, but then he spoke. “Yes, of course I’m going to complete the assignment, but I need to know—”

“Goodbye, Henry Malbern.” The home agent hung up.

Henry exhaled as his jack-hammering heart threatened to blow out his ribcage.

\*\*\*

On the day of Betsy Crowley’s scheduled termination, Henry decided to do surveillance on her. Sunday night was approaching, and he knew what he needed to do, but he didn’t like it. Not

this time. He started his old Toyota. It coughed like a chain smoker, but the ignition caught, followed by a roar from the old muffler. He patted the dashboard. "That-a-girl."

Driving a nice flashy car raised eyebrows. It was better to have a clunker nobody noticed. One of these days he'd get the old beater checked out, when he could find the time to take her in to the shop. He headed to Crowley's address.

Parking across the street, he had a perfect view of her apartment building. Pedestrians hurried down the avenue. Delivery trucks, buses, and cars sped up and down the boulevard. Down the block stood a library.

Crowley had left two hours ago. While waiting for her to return, he almost called the Syndicate again, but he thought better of doing that because a second call would definitely trigger an alert. *Rogue agent 42. Miscreant. Warning. Warning. Shoot on sight.* The Syndicate would know he was apprehensive about the kill and either replace him or kill him.

And so here he sat between the proverbial rock and a hard spot. His only redemption: kill Crowley and tell Elena he didn't. Save his ass. Save his future with her. Win. Win.

Still, killing this old woman felt wrong.

Across the street from the south, Crowley approached. She arched her back, doing her best to hold on to a stack of books. Part of him wanted to get out and help her.

Henry scrunched lower in the seat, sipped on a coffee that had long gone cold. She was just carrying books, like she'd been to the library. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

*What nefarious things could she possibly be doing?*

As she neared her apartment, a car double-parked in front, a fancy car that drew attention. Crowley was almost to the door when a heavy-set man with long hair pushed open his car door and charged toward her. He was carrying a satchel.

Henry's hand was on the door handle, ready to race across the street and put his nose in their business. If the man was going to mug her in broad daylight, it was probably for gas money to fuel his flashy guzzler. Face to face, they talked for a few seconds. He opened the satchel and held it out to her as if he expected her to put something in it. The books? What kind of malarkey was at play here?

His thoughts went to his mother, who was always busting her ass to support him and get him through school. Fat lot a good that did her.

*God, I miss you, mom. Oh, I'm just fine. I kill old women for a living now. Yeah. The pay is good, but the retirement plan sucks. No gold watch for me. Just a pine box.*

Crowley spit into the man's open satchel. Whoa. Bet he didn't expect that. The old lady had some grit. *I'll just sit here, let this play out. They can't see me anyway.*

The big man closed the satchel, made the sign of the cross on his chest, then turned back to his idling luxury car. He must've known what was coming for the old lady. As the guzzler lurched forward, Henry got the idea to follow him. It was a hunch, of course, but he could be the client who'd hired the Syndicate to take her out. Obviously, he wanted something from her but got a lugs instead.

Henry cranked the beater to life, and gassed the engine in hot pursuit. The flashy car led

him into a seedy part of Yonkers where chop shops and slum-lord tenements flourished like weeds. It pulled into Yonkers Lending Company, the armpit of the Payday Loaners. The heavy-set man got out and lumbered into the building. Odd that he didn't take the satchel with him.

*That's it. She owes money to these loan-sharking bastards, but to kill her over a bad debt couldn't be good for business.*

Speaking of which, he'd better mind his own business. He had bigger problems, life and death issues of his own. His life depended on doing his job, as he'd always done it. His future depended on lying about his job to Elena. Growing a conscience now would be self defeating and suicidal.

Still, he wondered if paying off her debt would call off the dogs. The client would get their money, the Syndicate would cancel the hit: Crowley lives, he lives, and Elena becomes a happy bride. However, he was sure that interfering in the Syndicate's business could get him killed anyway. If they caught him asking about Crowley's loan payoff, the consequences would be severe, the forty-five caliber kind of severe.

In a cruel way, if they killed him, they'd be killing Sarah and Colin too. His kids would never be born. He couldn't let that happen. Surely Elena would understand how high the stakes were for their future family.

Betsy Crowley had to die. That was the bottom line.

\*\*\*

On Sunday night at eleven o'clock, Betsy Crowley gripped her pocketbook with arthritic fingers as she hustled down Broadway in Yonkers. Gnarled roots from an elm tree broke through the sidewalk. Gray clouds swallowed the moon. Her apartment was twenty feet away.

*I can't sleep.*

The incessant nightmares of the goon from Yonkers Lending coming to break down her door to collect her debt latched onto her mind like a leech to flesh. She hoped a walk in the fresh air would help her sleep.

A tall man wearing a black trench coat and mask approached her, reached into his coat, and pulled out a gun. "Betsy Crowley. Time's up."

Her eyes widened. "Please, no." She stumbled back. "Give me more time. I can get the money." Her hands trembled as shrank back to make herself small, shoulders hunched. The man advanced and raised his gun. Her mouth opened to scream. Two flashes cut off her air, and she collapsed to the cold concrete where her life bled out.

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Henry had hoped for a quick and clean kill, but when he shot the old woman, he spotted a young woman running toward her, blond hair a flurry in her wake, her face etched with horror. He thought about killing her, too, but she wasn't his assignment. Besides, he was wearing a mask.

Her scream chased him around the corner to his car, the dented Toyota that labored to start,

but he got it going and sped away.

Two blocks down the road, he ripped off his mask, gasping for air. Sweat poured down his face. His heart hammered. He pulled over and slammed his hand on the steering wheel.

*What have I done?*

He ran a hand over his face. *What have I become? The old woman begged for more time and I shot her anyway.* Most targets rarely had a chance to speak. *I killed her to save my own ass.* She was no different than his own mom. *She busted butt every day to put food on the table.* This kill was wrong no matter how he sliced it.

However, a more sensible voice, a calming voice, entered his mind. *You did what you had to do to stay alive. That's what you've always done. If you didn't kill her, the Syndicate would have killed you, then they would have killed Betsy Crowley anyway. You didn't have a choice.*

*At least now I can round up Elena and get the hell out of town.*

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Astra fought back tears and anger as she drove to her mother's apartment on Broadway in Yonkers. If only she'd gotten there sooner, after the vision of her mother walking alone on the street, unable to sleep. *What was mom thinking?* She'd arrived in time to see the loan sharks collect their fee in blood, and the cops needed proof before they'd do a damn thing about it. So screw the proof. Vengeance was in her hands now.

She let herself in with a spare key. Where had her mother stashed that notice from Yonkers Lending? She checked her desk drawers, kitchen drawers, under the mattress. No cash there either. Back in the kitchen, she spotted a yellow paper sticking out from behind the toaster. She grabbed it. *Yes.* Yonkers Lending Company on Warbatten, Final Notice. Balance due on receipt. One hundred fifty thousand and some big change. *This is it.* The original loan was fifty Gs. Damn loan sharks could bleed a rock dry. Now they had some bleeding of their own to do.

She drove to Yonkers Lending. It was hard to picture her mother in this seedy part of Yonkers. *If only she'd told me she was in trouble.* In spite of all Astra's best efforts, she was unable to protect her mom, and the guilt of that failure niggled in her gut like a tapeworm.

She entered the lobby and a bell rang. A heavy-set man with long hair sat behind a desk with his feet up. He was perusing a Playboy magazine.

"Excuse me, sir."

A bottle of soda and a half-eaten slice of pizza sat on his messy desk. "What do you want, lady? Can't you see it's lunchtime?"

"I'm here about my mother, Betsy Crowley."

The man eyed her up and down behind greasy glasses. "Never heard of her."

She held up the Final Notice and stepped forward so he could get a good look. "I found this and want to know what you do about slow payers and skips."

He put down the magazine and read the notice. "Looks like she got herself under water."

"What did you do about it?"

There was a delay in his response, and he cleared his throat. "How should I know?"

“You’re lying.”

He rubbed his sweaty temple. Flabby flesh on his biceps jiggled as he folded his arms. “Listen, lady, I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Should I call the police?”

“For what? I’m eating my lunch. Stop wasting my time and get the hell out of here.”

Astra had enough of this fat guy. She balled her fists, digging her fingers into her palms, and the veins in her neck tightened like steel cables. That made him sit back, his eyes scrunched like he was about to see a grenade go off. She grabbed the soda bottle off his desk and bashed it across his head. Glass shattered, and his roller chair flung his fat ass against the wall.

Before his eyes could stop going loopy, she jumped on him and pressed the jagged bottle neck to his flabby throat. “I’ll ask you one more time, nicely, then things are going to get messy. What did you do about my mother’s bad debt?”

“Don’t kill me.”

She pressed a little harder, drew a little blood. “Tell me what happened to my mother.”

“Okay...we gave her several warnings, but she wouldn’t pay. Interest piles up fast around here. The loan became unpayable, so we turned it over to the Syndicate. They took care of it from there.”

“Syndicate? What’s that?”

“I can’t say.”

She let the sharp edge of glass work toward his jugular. A curtain of blood ran down his neck. “Don’t get stupid on me now.”

“Okay. It’s a collection agency of some kind. They get pretty rough with deadbeats.”

“My mother was murdered, and this Syndicate had something to do with it. Where do I find them?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. My boss takes care of collections.”

“You put a hit on my mother. I want the name of the killer or you’re going to meet your maker.” By now he was bleeding pretty good.

“All right. Our usual guy from the Syndicate. Ah...Henry Malbern. He got the contract.”

“Where do I find Henry Malbern?”

“I don’t know.”

“Be a shame to go this far and get your throat cut anyway.”

“Okay. He lives off Broadway in the Arms. You know the Syndicate is going to kill me for telling you.”

“I know nothing about the Syndicate.” She kneed him in the groin. “But if you get what’s coming to you, I’m good with that.”

He passed out.

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The next day, Henry parked near an ATM on North Broadway in Yonkers and withdrew two hundred dollars. He planned to get drunk after another successful hit. It would help get his

mind off Betsy Crowley.

A colorful circus caravan of trucks, trailers, and clown cars paraded up Broadway. Clowns were everywhere: cartwheeling and tumbling along, walking on stilts, and hanging on the back of a trailer like firefighters. Carnival music blared from a loudspeaker on the roof of the trailer. Smiling clowns passed out colorful balloons and tossed candy to the onlookers. The caravan came to a halt with a grandiose flourish from a calliope. Clowns, tricksters, and jugglers took over the street with their hijinks.

Bystanders, including Henry, stopped and watched the excitement.

He remembered when his mom had saved enough money to take him to the Big Apple Circus in Madison Square Garden. He'd watched with childish amazement: tigers jumping through hoops of fire, trapeze artists flying through the air, jugglers and clowns and elephants acting silly. They munched on popcorn and Cracker Jacks. The sights and sounds he'd never forget. So seeing this little carnival show lightened his heart, even for the briefest of moments. It was the first time he'd smiled since Elena walked out of Corey Nolan's Pub.

The truck and trailer had stopped near him. A woman stuck her head out the passenger's window. She had raven-black hair, and her eyes were deep pools of midnight. "Come and see the show. Jammed and crammed with chills and thrills, we've got it all."

"Where's the show?"

"Yonkers Raceway."

"At the old fairgrounds?"

The woman didn't seem to hear his question. Her expression had turned dark with horror. "Oh, my God, no. Don't do it. Don't do it." She was looking down the block.

Henry followed her gaze to a young woman on the corner. She was looking both ways, then up at the traffic light.

"She's going to make a run for it. Stop her. Someone stop her. That woman is going to die."

"Like hell, you say?" Henry watched the young woman with widening eyes. She certainly looked like she was in a hurry, twisting and prancing like she had to pee. Cars sped past her. The light turned yellow. She stepped off the curb. The light turned red. She dashed for the other side, but a speeding car tried to beat the yellow. Tires screamed followed by a thud that made his skin crawl.

Henry slapped a palm on his forehead. He'd never seen anyone thrown so high and so far, only to come to earth in a heap on the pavement. Bile leaked up into his throat while the echoing cry of screeching tires reverberated down the valley of concrete and glass.

Bystanders screamed. Some ran away from the calamity, others ran toward the fallen woman who lay sprawled lifeless in the street.

Henry gaped at the black beauty in the truck, amazed at what he'd just witnessed. "How did you know she was going to die?"

Her expression was cold and lifeless. "Are you sure she's dead?"

Henry ran to the accident scene. The front of the car was mangled, pieces strewn about like confetti, and steam geysered from the exposed radiator. Black tire marks tattooed the street,

leaving the smell of burnt rubber fresh in the air. Fifty feet away, passersby had gathered around the woman's body. He pressed through them to see her, to be sure she was dead. Blood...so much blood. She lay lifeless as a mannequin, mangled and broken.

*How did that circus woman know this woman would die?*

The joyous circus music started up again. He looked down the street. The woman who could tell the future waved at him. "See you at the show."

"Wait," Henry yelled, but the truck and trailer turned the corner, and the vans and clown cars followed it, gaiety again on full display.

Death wasn't something that bothered him, but the power to know ahead of time was something he'd never seen before, and if he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. His brow furrowed. *How could someone have such power?*

Who was that raven-haired psychic? He knew where she was going, Yonkers Raceway. *I'm going to pay her a visit. There are a few things I need to know about my future.*

\*\*\*

Henry drove on the thruway and got off at the Yonkers Avenue exit. Tractor-trailers zoomed by as they continued south on the highway to the city. He parked in the Yonkers Raceway lot and walked to the Westchester fairgrounds. People poured in by the busloads. The August heat beat down on his head, and he licked his dry lips, yearning for that beer he'd put on hold.

Seeing children holding their parents' hands made him think of Elena, Sarah, Colin and their future together, how they too could go to the circus someday.

Henry found a beer vendor and bought a sixteen-ounce Yonkers IPA. He gulped down the beer, and escaping suds leaked down his chin. He walked around, looking for the raven-haired woman, but didn't see her.

There were several large tents ahead, and a man on stilts who appeared to be watching him. He wore a black hat, striped suit coat and pants like Uncle Sam, and he pointed to a blue tent with a picture of a crescent moon emblazoned on the front panel.

Henry finished the beer and threw the cup in a garbage can. He entered the tent and smelled incense. The dim interior was aflicker with candles. There was a table with two chairs, and a deck of cards rested in the center. Tiny bells, like wind chimes on a warm summer evening, tingled throughout the tent. The place made him feel claustrophobic but cozy at the same time.

A tapestry of pagan art parted, and the mystery woman slipped in like a soft breeze and sat at the table. "You came." She smiled. "I knew you would. Have a seat."

He remained standing, as if the chair she offered would somehow obligate him to her. "I'm not sure why I'm here."

"Let's start off slow. What's your name?"

"Henry."

"I'm Astra. Please. Sit down."

The sweetness in her voice compelled him to comply. He sat and touched his throbbing



temples, feeling suddenly light-headed from the beer, or maybe the incense, but for some reason the room shifted. Her black dress featured a low-cut neckline adorned with a golden pentagon star. She whispered, "You're wondering how I knew that poor woman would die."

He leaned forward. "How did you know?"

"I see things."

"Can you see my future?"

"Troubles with your job. Your love life. The usual, I see. For fifty bucks I can tell you more."

"Fifty bucks?"

"I know you have it."

*She had to have seen me withdraw money from the ATM.*

He dug out his wad of cash and peeled off fifty bucks.

She folded it carefully and buried it in her brazier. Then her eyes darkened and her brows furrowed. Her beauty morphed into something evil right before his eyes.

"Most people don't want to know their future, Henry. It's not often comforting."

"I'll take my chances."

"Let me look at your character first." She slid the cards aside. "Give me your hands."

He held out his hands. "Give it your best shot."

Her upper lip quivered as she stared at him and twisted his hands palms up with more force than he thought necessary. No way would he flinch or show any discomfort. She looked at his right palm and slid her soft skin over it, then traced the grooves with a black painted fingernail. "You're a dangerous man, Henry. Cruel and heartless."

He tilted his head. She got that one right, but... *I'm only cruel and heartless when I'm on the job. Even Elena knows I don't have a mean bone in my body.*

Her grip tightened as she dug her nails into his skin. "You've done terrible things, Henry."

"Everyone has done terrible things. I don't care about my past or my personality. Get to the fortunetelling, will ya?"

"Very well." She released his hands.

He put them in his lap and rubbed them together to relieve the sting.

"Let's see what's in here." She picked up the tarot cards.

"More hocus pocus? I thought you see things."

"I do." She fanned out the cards, picked one, and turned it over. "The Tower."

"What's that mean?"

"The life you know is coming to an end, your normal world destroyed."

He shrugged. *Could be.* He planned to get out of the Syndicate.

She dealt another card. "Ten Wands. Interesting."

"Wands?"

"Your burdens. You're leaving and taking them with you."

He huffed. "Where am I going?"

Next card. "Oh, the Lovers card. Who could that be?"

He knew it was Elena. It had always been Elena.

"Another card." She flipped it over on the table. "Judgment. Judgment Day. Your day is coming."

"I get judged every day."

"And finally..." A grin formed as she placed the last card face-up on the table. "The Death card."

"Of course."

"You're going to die, Henry."

He folded his arms, and his eyebrows rose. "We're all going to die."

"Yes, but I know who's going to kill you."

"Hell, you say."

She pulled on her hair, and to his horror, it all came off her head, releasing a tidal wave of blond locks. "Me."

Recognition seized the air in his lungs. "You."

"I saw you kill my mother..." From under the table she produced an 8x10 glossy of Betsy Crowley, hit number twenty, and he knew he was in deep shit. "And I'm going to kill you."

He scrambled to his feet. "I didn't kill anybody's mother. You're a hoax. A charlatan. You can't predict the future."

"You're forgetting the woman in the intersection."

"Lucky guess." He turned to leave.

"Watch your back, Henry Malbern. I'm coming for you."

"You better bring an army."

"I've got one."

He threw back the tent flap. Sunlight nearly blinded him. The stilted Uncle Sam glared at him, and a clutch of clowns had gathered around, reinforcements he guessed.

He found the beer vendor, bought an IPA, and gulped it all down. Astra had seen him kill her mother, that he believed, but why didn't she tell the cops? *Oh, she plans to kill me herself. Fat chance.*

Still, how did she find out that he was the masked man? The Syndicate had a security breach, and he'd have to close it up.

First, Astra would have to die, a hit he'd gladly do for free.

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Later that night, he unlocked the safe in his closet and took out his Smith and Wesson automatic. He mounted a silencer to the barrel, checked to see the magazine was full, and jacked a round into the chamber. After donning a jacket, he slid the gun under his belt. He'd drive to the Westchester fair, wait until Astra finished for the night, then sneak in and kill her. Stalking his prey had been half the fun of this job, but now it was a matter of life and death...for him.

He hurried out of his apartment and strode down Harding Avenue toward his car. As he turned the corner at The Suds Car Wash, three men approached him. "Hey, fellas."

Instead of a cordial greeting in return, the men stopped in front of him and glared.

Henry darted his eyes left and right to check his flanks. All clear. "What's up?"

"You some kind of tough guy?" one of them asked.

"Hey, I don't want any trouble." Henry put his hands up. "But if you're all feeling froggy, go ahead and leap."

The men balled their fists and charged him. He grabbed for his gun, but they were on top of him too quickly. A sledgehammer hit him in the face. He blocked one punch but another blow hit him in the stomach. With the wind knocked out of him, he buckled. Waves of pain dropped him to his knees. They kicked and punched him 'til he couldn't tell night from day. All he could do was curl in a fetal position and wheeze.

"Drag him behind the car wash," one attacker said.

The lull in the attack gave Henry a chance to pull the gun out of his jacket, but before he could get off a shot, a boot kicked it out of his hand. The momentary shift of their attention to the clattering gun gave him a chance to find his feet. He ran toward his apartment. Didn't take long for the men to give chase. He bolted up the stairs to the front door of the building, pushed inside, then slammed and locked the door behind him. The men pounded on the door with their fists. His heart thudded in his chest, and his lungs were on fire, but he made it to his apartment and locked himself inside. Cursing drew him to the window. Below the fire escape ladder, the men glared up at him, the anger in their faces clearly visible in the glow of a streetlight.

Frosty fingers of fear raked down his spine. He inhaled a sharp breath and collapsed on the couch.

*Who were those guys? Why did they attack me?*

"Damn clowns," he muttered. They were too clumsy to be professional hit men from the Syndicate.

Clowns? Maybe Astra had something to do with it, sent them to do her dirty work, but how would she have known he was going out? Psychic bitch. Yeah, she sees things. "Well, see this." He flipped her the bird.

*I'm going to kill that gypsy...first thing tomorrow. Oh, hell. I have to bartend tomorrow.*

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Henry fell into a deep sleep. He found himself standing on a long road at night. Trees loomed over him, like tainted jurors, and a column of people appeared from a fog down the road. Twenty people strode toward him, stoic, animated, like the lumbering dead. He attempted to move, to flee, but his feet wouldn't obey. As the people neared, he recognized them. He'd killed every one of them. Cold fear gripped him. The first person in line raised a gun at him. A bullet blasted from the barrel. Fire exploded in his stomach, and he slammed his eyes shut, hoping the others wouldn't see him, just pass on by. He opened his eyes just in time to see the next person in line shoot him. Blood sprayed from the wound in his chest, but he didn't go down, he didn't die, he just stood there waiting for the next bullet to tear into him.

The realization that his victims were people with lives and families crashed down on him

like a tsunami. They weren't just deserving targets. Every bad guy was the hero of his own story. They were living, breathing people who cherished life as much as he had, and he had stamped it out as easily as squashing an ant on the ground.

Visions of sadness and mourning surged through him like a lightning flash. He was the harbinger of doom, the bringer of death, and he too would reap what he had sown.

*Please forgive me.* His victims were deaf to his pleas as he was to theirs and continued their shooting. He realized he didn't deserve any better. Another bullet mushroomed through him, doubling him over.

*Please stop. I'm a changed man. I quit the hit-man business.*

A full moon suddenly shone above. He looked up to see Astra Crowley's face glowering down at him. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you."

He awoke, screaming, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." The moon was gone, the people too. Reality pulled him back together. His t-shirt was stuck to his sweaty skin. Aches and pains were a welcome reminder of the car wash attack.

After looking at the clock, he slapped himself on the head because he was supposed to start work at Corey Nolan's at noon, but it was 1:00 pm.

He ran to the bathroom. The mirror revealed his right eye was a swollen bruise, and the cut on his fat lip made for a horrific sight. "Damn." He showered and dressed in record time. There were three missed calls on his cell, all from the bar. He grabbed a bagel, ran out the door, and hurrying down Harding Avenue, he remembered his dropped gun.

*I hope it's somewhere behind the car wash.*

A line of cars waited from McLean Avenue to the wash bay. He walked past two men drying cars and searched the fence line. The gun wasn't there. He kicked the fence, and the metal rattled, drawing unwanted attention from the men, but he had to keep looking. He checked the nearby bushes, behind a tree, around the dumpster, but found nothing. The missing gun could cause problems. His fingerprints were on it, and ballistics would prove it was a murder weapon. He had to hope those clowns found it and not the police.

*I have another weapon in the safe.*

Irish music strummed inside Corey Nolan's. He entered the bar and said hi to Frank, the bouncer. Frank gave him a dirty look as he passed. Corey Nolan stormed toward him, past the patrons drinking at the bar. Drinks he hadn't served, but should have...

"Where the hell have you been, Henry?" Corey was spitting mad. "You look like shit."

Henry had to think fast. "I was in a car accident."

"Get your ass behind the bar."

"I'll be all right, Corey. Thanks for your concern."

Henry was serving beer and mixed drinks to patrons when he got a call on his cell. He recognized the number as his other job and rushed to the bathroom.

A robotic voice spoke. "Agent 42, Authenticate."

Henry punched in a four-digit code.

"Hello, Henry Malbern. Your target is Mark Johnson. 2405 Roberts Avenue. Hudsonville,

New York. Deadline 5:00 pm. Delta also advised.”

*Damn competition.*

“Accept? Yes or No.”

He punched ‘star 11’ to accept.

The line went dead. Damn Syndicate... *Oh, hell, what have I done?* After last night’s beatdown, he wasn’t thinking straight and accepted another assignment. Force of habit? A subconscious desire to kill? Was he that far gone? *Elena. Oh no. I can’t tell Elena. She’ll leave me for sure.* A picture popped up on his burner phone, a tough-looking guy, ex-military, he guessed. He was stepping deeper into the shit, but he couldn’t back out now. The Syndicate would kill him for sure. *Think, Henry, think.* He took a deep breath. Okay. He had one more kill, then Astra Crowley, and then he was out for good.

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Henry finished a ten-hour shift at Corey Nolan’s and couldn’t wait to get off his feet. Patrons had treated him differently. The tips were half of what he would normally get, and most everyone sat farther away from his end of the bar. He was at a loss for an explanation, until he rubbed his tired face and felt a stinging reminder of what he looked like. A zombie would have gotten better tips. The song “The End” by the Doors played on the jukebox as he walked outside to the glow of streetlights.

A man with a bald head and goatee bumped into him as he walked down McLean Avenue. The impact magnified the pain in his gut from the fistfight the night before. Liver damage was a high probability. A warm breeze pushed past him. Cars barreled down Broadway, and the bar crowd was out in full force. Fearful of another attack, he hurried to his apartment.

Muscles relaxing, he slipped inside and locked the door. He poured a beer and powered up his computer, focusing on his assignment for tomorrow to kill Mark Johnson. He typed in the address on Google maps. His destination was an hour north. The weatherman forecasted a storm would hit Westchester County tomorrow, high winds, heavy rain.

Henry awoke to rain spattering against his bedroom window. It was nine o’clock, and he needed to get ready. He opened his safe, got his spare gun and another burner phone. After a hot shower, he dressed, and with his gun in his coat, he rushed out the door. The wind and rain pushed him down the street to his car. He attempted to start the engine, but it failed to fire up. After another attempt, it finally started.

On his way to the highway, the car died. He pounded his fists on the steering wheel. *God damn. Not now. I need to get going. I can’t be late.*

A nearby garage towed his car, and he sat in the waiting room, hoping the fix wouldn’t take long.

The mechanic came in. Wiping grease from his face, he gave Henry the bad news. “Your fuel pump crapped out, my friend. I don’t have one handy, so I have to get it from the parts store. For five hundred bucks, I can have it ready by five.”

Henry’s mouth dropped. He had to get up to Hudsonville and kill Mark Johnson before

five. He had never failed an assignment, and there were rumors the Syndicate had killed an agent who missed a deadline. It was already ten-thirty. The storm raged and the wind howled. He called the car rental company. They had no cars left.

A train was an option, but the target's house was several miles from the station. What if the storm delayed the train? What if the target wasn't home? What if he ran? A car would be necessary for pursuit.

"I need a car...I'm desperate. Do you have a loaner?"

The mechanic grinned, revealing flecks of chewing tobacco on his teeth. "I have a Toyota out back I can sell you for two grand."

"I'll take it."

"It needs tires."

"I'll take it anyway."

"Two hundred bucks. I can put them on in thirty minutes."

"No thanks. I'm in a hurry." Henry wrote him a check, and by 11 am, he was turning onto the thruway's north exit, smack-dab into a traffic jam, a miles-long line of cars, idling with their hazard lights flashing.

He slammed his hands on the wheel. *What else can go wrong?*

With the wipers on full, he drove on the shoulder to the Saw Mill River Parkway exit. The road was clear, and he headed north, but as he careened onto Taconic Parkway, he heard a bang and lost control of the car. It skidded across the shoulder and into the mud. Stepping out into the torrential rain, he spotted the problem right away. A flat. *I hope this piece of shit has a spare.* He popped the trunk and found a donut, lug wrench and scissors jack. *Good. I don't have to go back and kill the mechanic.*

While kneeling in the mud to replace the tire, cars sped by, splashing him with cold water. *Shit! Everything is all fucked up!*

At one o'clock, he got back on the road. The GPS said he would be at the target's house in twenty minutes. He drove like an old lady for fear of another blowout. Getting off at the Hudsonville exit, he drove past a Metro-North train station on his left. As if God himself had decided to give him a break, the storm let up.

Mark Johnson lived in a gated community, Unit 303. As Henry idled toward the front gate, he spotted a security guard in a booth. To avoid an inevitable confrontation, he pulled into the guest parking area outside the gate. Guests could walk past the guard on a path. Beyond the fence and the complex pool, boats skimmed along on the Hudson River.

Donning a Yankee hat and sunglasses, he got out of the car, resituated the pistol under his coat, and joined a group of guests carrying wrapped presents as they walked by the booth, laughing and joking around. The guard motioned everyone through with a smile. Following the house numbers, he came to Unit 303. Stepping to the front door, he didn't see any movement through the window. Oddly enough, the door was ajar. He peeked inside. Streaks of sunlight shone on a body on the living room floor, lying in a pool of blood.

*Oh God, I'm too late. I'm a dead man.* His stomach clenched, and his heart pounded. Did

the competition get to the target first? If they did, he was screwed.

He needed to go inside to ensure the body was that of Mark Johnson.

*Don't touch anything.*

He crept inside, wary of anyone else in the house, and bent down to the body. His mouth slowly dropped when he saw the corpse's face, which had a bruise on the forehead. Cold fear stabbed him in the heart.

*It's not Johnson.*

There was movement, and as he turned, a sharp blow to his head knocked him to the floor. Pain seared through his brain like the tip of a hot poker. Someone had sucker-punched him in the face.

"You're too late," Mark Johnson shouted. "That clown already tried to kill me. You guys don't give up."

Johnson swung a bat at his face, but Henry rolled away in time before the it bashed in his skull. The bat came down again, just missing his leg. He scrambled backward until the dining room table stopped him.

Johnson was relentless in his attack. He slammed the bat down again.

Henry grabbed a wooden chair to ward off the blow. A leg broke off like a brittle bone. As Johnson reared back for a homerun slammer, Henry managed to pull out his gun, the great equalizer. It was enough to make Johnson throw the bat at him. He ducked, giving Johnson time to run out the open front door.

"Damn it." That was close. He struggled to his feet, and dizzy as he felt, he stutter-stepped to the door just in time to see a yellow Camaro scream away.

He put the gun back in his jacket. "I hate it when they run."

Limping down the steps, past the hanging trees, and under the glaring sun, Henry watched the yellow car speed through the open exit gate. He fought the pain, ran to his car, and keyed the ignition. Instead of hearing the ignition roar, there was a rapid clicking noise.

*Now, the battery is dead? What else is wrong with this piece of shit car? I'm going to kill that mechanic, after all.*

A cab dropped off a passenger at the gate. Henry raced to it and jumped in. "Follow that yellow Camaro."

The Camaro faded away like a yellow blur.

The cab lurched forward. He fell back into the seat. The light was red at the next intersection. "That'll slow him down." Instead, the Camaro blasted through the intersection, barely missing a city bus and tractor-trailer.

"Don't stop," Henry shouted.

"You're crazy, mister. I'm not wrecking my cab."

"I can't lose him." Henry pulled out his gun and pointed it at the driver. "Just drive, and you'll get a big tip."

"Don't shoot me."

"I'm a police officer. That guy in the yellow car is an escaping criminal."

The cab blasted through the red light. Cars honked and people yelled.

“What the hell. I got good insurance.” The cab driver followed the Camaro on Riverside Drive. Ahead, a beer truck with Hudson IPA on the side was backing into the driveway of a bar named Dan's Place. Heavy traffic stopped in both directions and blocked the Camaro from getting around.

The cab skidded up behind the Camaro, and Henry jumped out. He rushed to the driver's door and aimed his gun at Johnson. “Get out of the car.” Henry sounded as official as any cop.

Johnson scrambled over the console to the passenger seat, opened the door, bailed, and ran into the bar.

Henry darted around the Camaro, ignoring curses and the cabbie's voice, “Hey, where's my money?”

Diving into the bar, Henry was momentarily blinded by the contrast between sunshine and sudden darkness. He damn near tripped over a bouncer on the floor, cupping his bloody nose.

“Where is he?”

With his free hand, he pointed toward the bar. “Get that sonofabitch.”

Several patrons turned from their drinks. “He ran into the kitchen,” one man said.

The kitchen door was flapping back and forth. Henry bolted through the door where scents of steak and fried onions greeted him. A pot of spilled chili lay on the floor, and the chef was screaming obscenities and shaking his fist at the back door.

Henry didn't need a neon sign to tell him where Johnson had gone. He busted out into an alley where Johnson was in the process of climbing a twenty-foot fence, topped with razor wire. On the other side of the fence, a pit bull jumped and barked.

“Give it up, Johnson,” Henry demanded. “That dog looks hungry.”

“I just want to get back to my kid.”

“Shoulda thought of that before you pissed off the Syndicate.”

Johnson slid down the fence and faced him. “I'll get the money. I just need more time.”

“That's what they all say.” Henry raised the gun.

“Look, let me show you my phone. A picture of my little girl. One minute. You can give me that much, right?”

“Make it fast. I've got another job to do.”

He pulled the phone from his back pocket, finger-punched it a couple times, then held up a picture of a smiling little girl with blond curls. Her shirt read: I love Daddy. “Wouldn't you borrow money from the devil to save her life? Heart surgery isn't cheap. She's alive because of that money, so if killing me satisfies the debt, then go ahead. Shoot me. Kill me. Her life is worth mine any day of the week.”

Henry thought he'd heard all the excuses, the pleas, and they'd always meant nothing...he'd always ignored them, but this one was different. Seeing the picture of the little girl, the tears rolling down Johnson's face, gave him pause.

“Her name is Sarah. Please don't make her grow up without her dad.” He slumped his shoulders, a defeated man.



“Sarah?” Henry lowered his gun, looked at it, puzzled that it was in his hand, shocked that he’d used it twenty times and never knew why. Never cared why. Just did his job with it, like a carpenter uses a hammer, a writer a pen, a mother a loving hand.

“Sarah.” Henry and Elena had decided on Sarah for their daughter’s name. He imagined Sarah and Colin running into his arms, hugging and kissing and happy to be together. His kids, he could take to the circus, go get some ice cream, cheer with them at a ball game, or even share pizza by the slice.

*I’m not going to be like my father, a dead beat dad who made promises but didn’t keep them.*

“If she was your daughter,” Johnson went on, “wouldn’t you do everything you could to save her?”

An image of him cradling a baby, his baby Sarah, blurred the gun, and he hoped his own child had a chance at life. His bottom lip quivered. “Get outta here.”

“What?”

“Go back to your daughter.”

When he looked up, Johnson had disappeared.

Letting him go had signed Henry’s death warrant. He had little time left. He ran back through the bar to the cab out front.

The driver glared at him. “You owe me money, mister.”

He got in and ran a hand through his hair. *Things are different now.* “Don’t worry, I’ll pay you when you drop me at the train station.”

Five minutes later, the cabbie drove away with his money.

Henry bought a one-way ticket to Yonkers and got on a southbound train. As the train rumbled along the Hudson riverside, he sat in a three-seater and watched speedboats cruise by on water smooth as glass. The scene reminded him of Lake Lucerne.

*Switzerland is where we need to go.*

His phone rang, and he looked at his watch. It was 5:00 pm. The Syndicate was calling to check his progress. He considered not answering but knew that would send out an immediate alert.

“Agent 42.”

“Authenticate,” a robotic voice said.

He punched in his passcode. If only he was sitting in a park at Lake Lucerne. He’d order a crepe from a sidewalk vendor and watch skiers race down the nearby Alpine slopes. Elena would be sitting beside him, and their kids would be feeding the ducks. All his Syndicate troubles would be half a world away.

“Assignment status, agent 42.”

“Negative.” That was a first failed hit for him, felt weird saying it, but gratifying at the same time.

Alarms rang in the background. Alert. Alert. How long would it take for bullets to start flying his direction?

“Goodbye, Agent 42.” The robot hung up.

“You can’t fire me. I quit.” He threw the burner phone out the window. At least Elena would be happy...if he lived long enough to give her the good news.

After getting off the train at Yonkers Station, he took a cab to the mechanic to pick up his car, paid five hundred dollars for the new fuel pump, and then drove it to his apartment. He got to work packing, grabbed his passport and cash.

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Astra Crowley waited in her car across from Henry’s apartment. She’d been watching him carry things out to his car: suitcase, clothes, books. He looked like a rat fleeing a fire.

Tarot cards lay in a row on the seat beside her: the Tower (his old life destroyed), Ten Wands (he’s leaving with all his burdens), The Lovers (he’s in love) Home and celebration (he finds happiness) Judgment (the day of reckoning comes) and the Death card at the end. She palmed the Crystal Ball in her lap. Sensations of time and space tingled her fingers and visions of her dead mother pervaded her thoughts. Four of her friends from the clown brigade waited at the apartment door. As a resident stepped out, three of them pushed by him and charged inside. She moved the death card to the front of the row.

\*\*\*

Henry’s passport and gun lay on the table beside his computer while he purchased two tickets to Zurich online and printed the boarding passes for tomorrow at JFK. He emailed a contact who would meet him with a new identity. Now all he had to do was convince Elena to drop everything in her life and go on the run with him.

Someone knocked on his door.

“What the hell?” Nobody ever knocked on his door. He grabbed his gun off the table and stalked toward the door. “Who is it?”

Bullets splintered wood into flying shrapnel. He dove to the floor and rolled to the side as the rata-tat-tat of military-grade hardware pulverized the door. It shuddered as an operative from the Syndicate attempted to kick it in. Henry, heart stampeding, trained his gun on the doorway, but the window behind him exploded, and forced him to duck flying shards of glass, sharp as razor blades. A grenade rattled across the living room floor.

*Oh my God! It didn’t take long for his fellow assassins to find him.*

He grabbed his passport and jumped out the glassless window to the fire escape. The grenade exploded, the building shook, and the window above him vomited all his worldly possessions. Billowing smoke stained the warm summer air and curled skyward. “Holy hell.” Sparks zinged off the metal ladder he was scrambling down. The familiar *putt* of a silenced revolver drew his attention to the lawn. “Hey, that’s my gun.” He fired down at the operative standing in the grass below. The bullet hit the thug’s leg, and as he stooped in pain, Henry dove down on top of him and slammed his head into the ground. Gun barrel to the assassin’s throat, Henry growled in his ear, “Tell the Syndicate to back off, or all you bastards are gonna die.”

“Syndicate?” he choked out. “What Syndicate?”

Footsteps pounded behind him. Gunfire cracked. Divots leaped from the lawn. “Son of a bitch.” He cold-cocked the idiot with the gun butt, took back his lost gun, then raced to his car. It started right up, well worth the five-hundred bucks, and he gunned the engine toward the thruway, leaving tire smoke and curses in his wake.

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Astra grinned with satisfaction as flashes of light and blasts of bullets exploded from Henry's apartment building.

*I wish I could plunge a knife in his heart and twist the blade.* However, the men inside were doing their job as she watched from the safety of her car. An explosion blew debris from the window, followed by smoke and fire. *Yes. Yes. Revenge is sweet, mom.* “Oh, no. What's this?” She went wide-eyed when she saw Henry scale down the fire escape then tackle one of her clown friends on the ground. Words were exchanged. Her hopes lifted when reinforcements stormed out the front door. *Yes.* The hunter had become the hunted. *Get him. Get him.* Henry bludgeoned the guy then sprinted to his car, which peeled off in a big hurry. She dug her hands into her hair. *No. That's not possible.* She moved the Death card back to the end of the row, started her car, and took chase. “Want something done right, gotta do it yourself.”

\*\*\*

Henry gripped the steering wheel as he sped down Hutchinson River Parkway. A check of the rearview told him he'd lost his pursuers...for now.

His flight wasn't until tomorrow night, but no price was too high to leave right away.

*When I get settled in Switzerland, I'll contact Elena. Right now, it's too dangerous to go anywhere near her.*

Crossing the Whitestone Bridge, he saw a plane soar overhead. Right now, he'd give anything to be on it. Another glance to his rearview mirror, still there was nothing suspicious, no black SUVs bearing down on him, no police cruisers with lights flashing and sirens blaring.

He reached JFK airport and parked in long-term parking.

*I'm never coming back. I hope Elena understands. I'm doing this for her, our unborn children, Sarah and Colin, and our future.*

Opening his trunk, he hauled out a suitcase. After wiping his gun, he dumped it in a garbage can then hurried inside the airport, to become instantly invisible amid the many departing passengers.

Finally, he got to Delta's counter. “Any seats left for Zurich?”

The agent checked her computer. “Let me see...”

*Come on. Hurry up.*

“I have one ticket left in first class.”

“I'll take it.” He handed her a boarding pass for tomorrow night. “Exchange this, will you?”

“First class? No problem.”

His foot tapped as he waited in line for security, which was moving as slow as a herd of cows. At the security check-in desk, the agent's eyes shifted between Henry's passport and his face. He stamped a blank page. "Have a pleasant trip."

"Thank you, sir."

After passing through the screening device, he shoved his shoes on. Dodging passengers like a running back, he approached the boarding gate just as the agent was closing the door.

"Wait, I'm on this flight." He was out of breath as he showed the woman his boarding pass.

"You're lucky, ah, Mister Jones." She got that from the boarding pass. "One more minute and you would've had to wait for the next flight tomorrow night."

"Thanks." Feeling like an astronaut who'd just returned safely from the moon, he walked the Skybridge to the cabin door where a flight attendant directed him to his first-class seat. With a thump, the door closed on his past.

\*\*\*

The ticket agent told Astra there were no more flights to Zurich until tomorrow night, on which there was one vacant seat in first class, but only because of a recent cancelation.

"I'll take it."

Her fingers curled into fists. The hit man had gotten away, but only by the skin of his teeth. His luck couldn't hold out forever. *I'll find him, mom.*

\*\*\*

Three months later, Henry relaxed on a park bench, arms spread, enjoying his life at Lake Lucerne. Sunlight glistened off the water while distant clouds sat atop the Swiss Alps' snow-capped peaks.

He had found a job at Café Geneva as a bartender. He didn't know anyone, and no one knew him. He had changed his name and appearance. So far, the Syndicate hadn't been able to find him.

A crepe vendor came by, pushing his cart. Henry stopped him and ordered a blueberry crepe. Vanilla and blueberry scents wafted to his nostrils as the vendor poured the batter, and it sizzled on the hotplate. Henry's mouth watered in anticipation.

The vendor seemed friendly enough. "I don't know how they live in China with everybody on top of each other."

Henry nodded in agreement.

"When one can live near Lake Lucerne..." he flipped the crepe, "why would anyone live anywhere else?"

"That's what I told my wife." He looked around. "Elena should be here pretty soon."

"So you're married. That's swell." He set the fresh crepe on a napkin.

Henry dared not elaborate on how he'd almost lost her. "And she's pregnant. The doc tells us it's a girl."

"A girl? Ain't life grand?" He scooped blueberries from a tub and set them in the middle of the crepe then drizzled honey over them. "Got a name picked out for her yet?"

"Sarah. After my grandmother."

"Sarah. That's swell." A dollop of heavy whipped cream topped off the sweet treat. "You live close by?"

"We've got a little chalet in town, nothing like the big three-bedroom on the Hudson we'd wanted, but it's a home full of love."

"Ah. An American." The vendor folded the crepe into a triangle and wrapped the napkin around it. "Two euro, my lucky friend."

He paid the man and returned to the bench. Just as he was about to take the first bite, cold metal pressed against the back of his neck. He froze.

"Don't move," a woman's voice ordered.

She couldn't be a hit woman from the Syndicate, more likely a mugger. "Easy now, lady. My wallet is in my back pocket."

"Is that so, Henry?"

*Nope. She's not a mugger.* He slowly turned his head to look back, and there she was, Astra Crowley, the last person in the world he ever thought he'd see again. The air went out of his lungs, and he dropped the crepe. "What are you doing here?"

"I've finally found you."

"Shouldn't you be back at the circus?"

"Three months, Henry. Yonkers Lending took my truck, my trailer, my tent, my livelihood, but you took my mother first, and then they came after me."

He looked away. "Your mother, Betsy. I'm sorry. It was a job. Nothing personal."

"Maybe not for you, but finally you're going to pay." She reached around and showed him the Death card. "Remember this?"

"You can't get away with killing me."

"Who said anything about me getting away with it? I've got nothing to lose." She leveled another card over his shoulder. "Eight Swords. My future is confinement, tied, blindfolded, imprisoned. It's judgment day for both of us."

*No. This can't be happening.*

"Stand up."

"All right." He stood. "Don't get jumpy with that thing. Guns are dangerous."

She stepped around the bench and jammed the gun in his back. "We're going to the pier."

"The pier? What for?"

"They'll eventually find your body in the lake."

*There has to be a way to get out of this mess.*

"You want money? I've got money."

"I don't want your blood money." She jabbed him with the barrel. "Now move it or I'll kill you where you stand."

"All right." The pier wasn't far, maybe fifteen steps and he took each one slowly, buying time for a miracle. "All this time I've been worried about the Syndicate finding me, and instead, you show up."

"It's not the first time. Remember the attack at the car wash, the attack on your apartment?"

"Yeah, the Syndicate almost got me twice. How do you know about them?"

"It was me. I sent my friends at the circus to kill you. You should've been dead, that day, but you proved yourself a slippery sort."

"Look. There has to be some way we can come to terms."

"My mom made a deal with the devil, Yonkers Lending. You made a deal with the Syndicate. How's all those terms working out for you now?"

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"Yes it does."

He stood at the end of the pier, the end of his rope, his last stand. "No mercy, huh. You're just like me, Astra. Just like a hit man. You've become everything you've despised."

"Yeah. Funny how evil begets evil. You made me just like you, molded me, Henry. Revenge has a way of changing one's perspective on what's right and what's wrong. You lost your moral compass a long time ago."

"Henry." His name floated on the breeze, soft as an angel's voice calling. Elena's voice. *No. No. Not now.*

He turned to see her approaching with a wave and a smile.

"So that's the Love card. Elena, is it? She's looking a little pregnant there, Henry."

"My daughter...please don't harm them."

"Let's see? My mother for your wife and daughter. Sounds fair to me. You can watch them die, like I watched my mother die."

"No please."

When Elena neared, her eyes narrowed. "Henry? Who's the woman?"

"Elena," he said calmly. "Run," he shouted. "Run, run, run." He turned and connected his elbow to Astra's head.

The blow knocked her backward but not down and out.

"This is for my mother." She fired at fleeing Elena.

"No." He grabbed for her gun arm, but she was quick to swing it around and pull the trigger. It felt like Ali had punched him in the gut. The majestic Alps cried out. Lake Lucerne cried out. Elena cried out, but all Henry saw was the evil slant in Astra's eyes, the hate that had brewed in her heart for months, all glaring at him with no more sympathy than one would have for a worm on the ground. How horrible it felt to be on the receiving end of no mercy.

The vendor was right. Henry was lucky, but his luck had just run out. He managed a step backward, turned to see Elena running away, saving herself and their daughter, but that's not what he saw. She was sprawled on the sidewalk, face-down, in a growing pool of blood.

Waves of agony and revulsion ploughed over him. His family lay on the ground. His future. Everything he'd wanted, everything they had together, suddenly gone. An angry, hateful scream gurgled in his throat. He lunged at Astra, but she pumped another bullet into his gut. His legs failed him, and he fell to the pier, flat on his back looking up at the last blue sky he'd ever see.

She stepped up and dropped a card on his chest. He didn't have to look at it to know it was

his Death card.

“I told you you were going to die. The cards never lie, but sometimes they need a little help.”

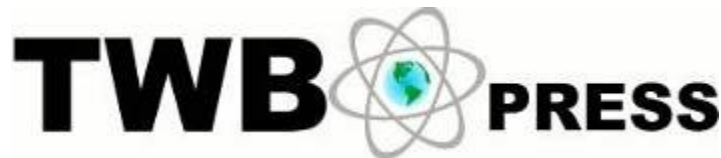
With a boot, she rolled him off the pier. Cold. Suddenly cold. He gasped, sucked in icy water, but didn't fight it. Let it happen. Without Elena and Sarah, what good would life be anyway?

He sank deeper into the reddening water, deeper into the icy depths, and for the first time he realized what a waste his life as a hit man had been.

### About the Author



Born in the Bronx, **Jim Keane** is a fiction writer. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from Mount Saint Mary College and completed several fiction and creative writing classes. He's written several fiction short stories and three novels and has more in the works. Jim resides in Westchester, New York, with his family.



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