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next thrilling Lee Henry Oswald mystery

**CROSSHAIRS**

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- CHAPTER ONE -

The man in the tinted sunglasses couldn't decide whether to kill or only maim. The many options available left a pleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach, not unlike the initial stages of sexual arousal.

He smiled and slid a bullet into the chamber of the sniper rifle, the brass cartridge clinking when it hit the hardened steel. The forearm of the customized Remington 700 rested on a sandbag, which in turn sat on a makeshift table assembled from pieces of scrap lumber he'd found downstairs. The table was set a few feet back from a square opening where a window would eventually be placed in the unfinished second-story bedroom.

The man shifted his rifle to the left, toward a large stucco residence across the street and down three lots. Like most houses on this block, it had been built in the past year, a gargantuan, Mediterranean design on a too-small, featureless lot, ostentatious and pathetic at the same time, jutting up from the flat Texas prairie.

He pushed the sunglasses over his temple and squinted in the eyepiece of the Leopold scope. The details of the suburban yard sprang to life, the deep green of the chemically-treated grass, the black mulch in the beds lining the front of the house, the yellow and red and blue of the flowers bursting from the plastic garden center trays

resting haphazardly on the lawn, waiting to be planted.

He eased his sunglasses back down and from a black duffle bag at his feet pulled out a handheld radio scanner. The device had been programmed with the frequencies for police and city services for Plano, Texas, the location of the house and this street. His employer was not without influence in certain government agencies and had made sure the frequencies were accurate. He turned on the scanner, set the volume to low, and placed a wireless earpiece in one ear.

Next, he removed a black plastic device about the size of a deck of cards. He extended a stubby antenna and switched on the power, making sure the LED indicator was lit.

The electronic instrument operated an extremely small and carefully placed explosive charge, designed to succeed if for some reason he chose not to use the rifle.

He ignored the smell of raw lumber and fresh plywood tickling his throat. He didn't know how long the wait would be, so he removed a small bag of organic cashews and ate a handful, keeping his attention focused on the house.

Fifteen minutes later, a figure appeared in the front yard.

The man removed his shades and peered through the scope. The optics brought the image into plain view: a tall, thin woman, olive-skinned, attractive, in her late thirties. She wore a pair of dirty khaki shorts and a faded, oversized red sweatshirt with the sleeves cut-off.

The owner of the house.

The man nestled the butt of the Remington against his shoulder and placed his index finger on the trigger.

- CHAPTER TWO -

Dr. Anita Nazari wiped the perspiration from her face with the bottom of her red sweatshirt. She tried not to think about the email and its implications, telling herself she was sweating from the heat of a Texas springtime, too intense after the past three years in Denver.

She grabbed a tray of petunias and began to work, placing each tiny container exactly equal distance from its siblings, forming two perfectly parallel rows in the bed in front of her new house. The symmetry reminded her of test tubes in a rack.

Ordered and precise. Safe.

Anita picked up Container One, Row One and—with more force than intended—plunged the trowel into the moist earth, making a deep, wedge-shaped hole. She squeezed the container until the roots slipped free from the sides and dropped the plant into the hole before patting the dirt around the tiny stem. With a steady rhythm, she planted five more flowers and then stopped to wipe the sweat out of her eyes again.

Her heart was racing, her face slick and beaded. She could no longer pretend it was from the exertion. She had hoped the mindless activity would take her mind off the email but it didn't.

She jumped at the sound of a throaty exhaust rumbling down the street.

Anita turned as the yellow Porsche Boxster belonging to Tom Maguire, her boyfriend of the past two months, stopped in front of her mailbox.

He got out, waved once, and approached.

Anita sat back on the grass and hugged herself.

“How’s it goin—” Tom stopped, the smile slowly disappearing from his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Anita’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Mira okay?” Tom looked toward the house. Mira was Anita’s ten-year-old daughter.

“Yes.” Anita nodded. “She’s inside, doing her homework.”

As if on cue, the front door opened and a gangly girl in jeans and a Britney Spears tee shirt stepped outside.

“Hey, Tom.” The girl grinned, teeth too big for her head.

“Hey, kiddo.” Tom smiled back.

“Your homework.” Anita stood and tossed the trowel into the dirt like it was a dagger. “Are you finished yet?”

“Almost.” Her daughter sat down on the steps and yawned. “Long division sucks.”

“Please go back inside and finish.” Anita looked up and down the street. No cars that didn’t belong were visible. “And don’t use that kind of language.”

“Wait ‘til you get to algebra.” Tom winked. “That *really* sucks.”

They both laughed. Anita bit her lip and closed her eyes, trying to control the feeling of anger masking the helplessness rising like a bubble from her stomach.

“Mira.” Anita’s voice was tight and low. “Go inside. And finish your homework.”

“C’mon, let her stay out here for a while,” Tom said. “It’s a gorgeous day.”

Anita turned to her boyfriend, a happy-go-lucky former college football player who sometimes acted like he might have played one too many games without a helmet. She wondered if he had ever known true fear, the kind that makes your bowels watery and forces you to question the existence of anything but the evil humans do to each other. She wondered what it would be like to not know fear, to simply enjoy life and a sunny afternoon.

She tried to remember what things were like before the first email.

But she couldn’t.

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### - CHAPTER THREE -

The shooter in the second story bedroom was known as the Professor in certain circles, the nickname derived from his ill-fated tenure as an instructor at Camp Peary, the CIA training facility also euphemistically known as The Farm. His current alias was unimportant, one of a dozen or more identifications he kept at the ready in safe locations accessible to wherever an assignment took him.

The Professor ignored the arrival of the boyfriend, a minor obstacle that could be dealt with at his leisure. He kept the reticule of the scope centered on Anita Nazari but cranked the magnification back to widen the field of view.

The smell of the pine resin and the glues from the plywood was overpowering. He took shallow breaths, trying to keep his inhalation of the toxic fumes to a minimum.

While the doctor talked to the man from the yellow Porsche, the Professor looked away for a moment and pulled a leather case from his duffel bag.

The case contained an optical device that resembled a pair of binoculars with a head band attached, the latest in thermal imaging technology. He slipped the eye piece over his skull and flipped on the unit, adjusting the sensitivity down almost as far as it would go. The sunny day disappeared, replaced by a surreal world of impressionistic pastels: blue and gray, and orange tints, the sidewalks and asphalt street appearing as hot

red strips and the suburban lawns cooler and darker.

He stood in the middle of the bedroom and made a 360 degree sweep through the open framing, checking for any human-sized heat sources. Squirrels were oblong orange smudges, birds a tiny dab of pale pink.

Two doors down an orange blob too small to be an adult but too large to be a dog seemed to be welded to a white-hot square slowly traversing the gray earth.

A neighbor kid was mowing the lawn.

The Professor was satisfied that no one was around who didn't belong. The chatter on Scanner One was minimal. He sat back down behind his makeshift bench and picked up the rifle.

The girl was on the front porch now, talking to the doctor and the man from the Porsche.

The Professor smiled.

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Anita felt a needle in her temple, the stress headache arriving like the sudden thunderstorms that plagued the Texas prairie. Tom and Mira were talking, chattering on about some new television show on FOX featuring a group of California teenagers notable mainly for their grotesque wealth and promiscuity.

Mira reminded Anita of herself at the same age, the way she moved her hands when she talked, the angle of her head. Anita hoped her only child would never have to endure the same things that she had faced.

Anita thought again of the email, and her stomach lurched.

“Mira,” she said. “Please go inside and do your homework.”

“Aw, mom.” Mira stood up.

“Hey, kiddo.” Tom pointed to his car. “I’ve got those DVD’s you wanted. Grab ‘em before you go.”

“Alllll riiight.” Mira jumped up and headed to the Porsche.

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The Professor saw the girl run toward the street, putting herself between a row of recently planted Bradford pear trees and the muzzle of the Remington. He kept the rifle in position but grabbed the remote control device.

As a field operative, he was allowed a certain latitude when it came to specific techniques. His employers wanted results. The details didn’t matter.

He pressed the button.

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Anita had closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between a thumb and forefinger when the explosion came, a low thump all the more threatening for its lack of intensity.

Mira screamed.

Anita opened her eyes and ran. She didn’t see the bag of fertilizer and tripped, her forehead connecting with the turf.

Squeals of pain from her daughter, shouting from Tom.

“*MIRA*.” She scrambled up. “I’m coming.”

Tom was by the Porsche, a frantic look on his face. Mira huddled in a ball, near the curb.

Anita’s senses weren’t functioning correctly, her brain not processing data fast

enough. She ran toward the two of them, the movement of her limbs agonizingly slow like the air around her was heavy syrup.

Nothing made sense. Tom wasn't shouting; he was laughing. Mira's squeals sounded wrong too, not painful anymore, happy now, full of excitement.

"Mira." She slid next to the child, embracing her in a protective clutch. "Where are you hurt?"

"Mama, look." Her daughter held up a colorful plastic box marked with the familiar Apple logo. The latest generation iPod, a must-have accessory for the middle school set in Plano, Texas.

"What the . . ." Anita looked at the multi-colored package and then at her daughter. "The blast?" She placed two fingers on Mira's carotid artery, felt a strong pulse. She looked for broken skin or protruding bones. Nothing.

"Anita?" Tom had stopped laughing. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you hear it?" Anita stood, full of anger now, and nowhere to direct it but at the man in front of her.

"Hear what?"

"There was an explosion." Anita looked around her yard. "I thought . . ."

"Oh quit the act, for Pete's sake." Tom pointed to a cardboard container next to a pile of grass clippings sitting on the curb. A large jack-in-the-box was in the middle, its head swaying in the still air.

"What in the world?" Anita squinted at the toy. The pop-up part was a teddy bear, and its arms had been bent and cupped in the approximate size of an iPod box.

She quickly scanned the length of the block but saw nothing except her neighbor

across the street in his front yard, chatting with the postman, both men smiling and laughing.

The music player must have popped out of the jack-in-the-box; the vast noise she'd heard had been her imagination.

“That was a great surprise.” Tom stood and ruffled Mira's hair.

“Mommy, thank you thank you thank you.” Mira squeezed her thin arms around her mother, the music player pressed between them. “I knew you didn't mean it when you said I couldn't have one.”

“That was awfully spontaneous for you.” Tom smiled. “Great idea though.”

Anita opened her mouth but any words of substance died on her lips.

The message was clear. Nothing was safe. Ever. She wanted to tell Tom that she had never seen the cardboard box nor the iPod. She wanted to tell him about the emails. But that meant committing a child's future to be a repeat of the mother's past. Which meant that Anita Nazari, MD had precious few choices left.

She fought away the tears and did what any mother would do. She smiled and said, “Happy birthday, Mira.”