

—APPLE

by Marc Paoletti

The airport was the perfect place to kill her. In the crush of people, she'd never see it coming.

Was he worried the country was at Threat Level Orange? Are you kidding? Fuck Homeland Security, you could throw all the money in the world at technology, but if you had losers running the chem-sniffers and x-ray machines and face recognition software, you were screwed, and at JFK, you couldn't throw a Filet-o-Fish three fucking feet without hitting a loser. These twelve-dollar-an-hour ghetto kids barely old enough to drive and white-trash remainders who couldn't hack the postal exam were given uniforms and were all that stood between passengers and total catastrophe.

John Doe knew this and watched the black woman walk toward him through the international terminal. She'd flown all the way from Ethiopia and was the mayor of some tiny province, like the title she held there meant anything real over here. The U.N. was having a summit, about what, who gave a shit? The U.N. liked to pander, got off on making countries they raped for raw materials feel like they had clout, go ahead, give us your opinion, we're interested, really, say all you have to say, because later you'd better lay back and relax and act like you enjoy what we're doing to you.

So he didn't know exactly where she was from or what she stood for, not that it mattered. All he knew was the faceless guy who'd left a suitcase full of cash behind the Bald Eagle strip joint on Court Street wanted her dead.

She wasn't close yet, but she was within clear line of sight. She wore some glorified housedress with white tribal markings on it that hung to her ankles and swirled around her body as she walked. She moved with the carefree recklessness of someone who thought she had nothing to fear. He looked at her clinically as he looked at everyone and all things when he was on a job. People were simply that—man, woman, boy, girl. Things, they were just things, even if they posed a threat. The clinical distance allowed him to keep focus and react appropriately with ruthless precision, had allowed him to rack up the best win/loss ratio in the business.

Around the African woman a throng kept pace, sixty people, maybe more, all disembarked from the same transoceanic airliner, all heading for customs: A reed-thin woman wearing a shear sweater the color of menstrual blood; a man in an ash three-piece suit; a gaggle of tittering Asian girls with pigtailed and fine clean bones, all wearing white blouses and blue skirts; a boy no taller than three feet with a smiley-face watch around one wrist and string tied around the other that led up to a green

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helium balloon that bobbed with every step. Plenty of others made up the human herd, all shapes and sizes and colors, a seething mass of bodies, nobody visible or in the same place for very long except the woman's bodyguards. Let's not forget them. Two men, marching on either side of her like movable walls of muscle, skin the color of pitch, wearing navy suits and mirrored sunglasses. Their jackets bulged at the right breast. Obviously, they'd been cleared to carry weapons.

He didn't give a rat's ass. They could carry fucking Stinger missiles for all he cared. The woman would still die. All he had to do was wait for the beep.

* * *

His father was a teacher, and starting at seven years old, he watched his father work. He was home schooled and traveled with his father to a different country every year. This year it was Bolivia. Last year it was Sudan.

It was 8 a.m. sharp, and at seven years old, the toes of his Adidas barely scraped the floor as he sat in the elbow desk. The classroom was crescent-shaped and antiseptic smelling with a stage placed up front and a white tiled floor that sloped toward a center drain the size of a 45 record. Florescent lights hummed. The brown-faced men sitting around him that first day, dressed in khaki uniforms with small colored ribbons on the lapels and shiny black holsters at the hips, patted his head and called him *pequeño asesino*.

His father stood before the officers wearing blue powdered surgeon's gloves and a white lab coat over a charcoal business suit. Next to him on a metal table, angled up so the whole class could see, was a naked man, strapped down spread-eagle by his wrists and ankles. The man was very thin and his flesh was the color of sun-damaged leather. There was a patch of brown hair covering his chest between the nipples that mirrored a patch at his groin. Thick black-rubber dental stoppers had been wedged between his teeth and kept his mouth stretched open. The man whined softly, and the noise reminded John of when he'd come upon a dog once that had been struck by a car and lay in the middle of the street with its hindquarters crushed. The dog made the same noise that the man was making, and listening to it made John squirm. Didn't the man want to be here? Was the man afraid?

His father pressed a button on his jeweled watch--beep--and then said to the class, *Let us begin*. There was a rustle of paper as the officers opened notebooks and readied pens. John watched his father produce a long-necked plastic bottle from the pocket of his lab coat. The bottle was filled with a liquid that glimmered like diamonds in the greenish fluorescent light. When his father stepped toward the table with the bottle, the naked man began to scream through his fixed-open mouth. The sounds were panting and hollow, like gusts of wind through a rusted chimney flue, and then his father pushed the long neck of the bottle deep into the man's throat, causing him to gag violently, a hard grating sound that made John jump in his chair.

John expected the man to cough the bottle free from his throat like he coughed up aspirin sometimes when he didn't swallow right, but his father held the bottle fast, making the naked man gag harder and then swallow, swallow, swallow. John watched the level of glittering liquid in the bottle sink lower and lower in jerks and