

Saving the President

Ken Armstrong



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Saving the President

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My everyday work is both a creature of and a creator of the wonderful community in which I live. I am fortunate to be president of the local United Way in Florida's capital area. The freedom to be creative and confident is a gift from that community. I'm indebted to the people of my adopted hometown and particularly the people with whom I work.

To be honest, almost no one knew I was writing. The reasons I did it in secret were many. Getting my own mind around the fact that this nonprofit executive with a Ph.D. was authoring an adventure story about a master sniper was difficult enough in itself!

At the points I needed help, though, it was offered freely and without exception. Foremost was the man who filled cavernous gaps in my understanding of marksmanship and weapons. If the story works, it's because that new friend Ken Johnson helped me create the backdrop.

Had Frank Reuter been a college instructor of mine, I would have been miles ahead. As he edited my draft this summer, he taught me more about writing than has anyone else in my life.

I now know that the family of anyone who writes as a part-time job makes a greater sacrifice than does the

writer himself. Thank you, Jeanie and Christopher, for your support and love.

Now the confession: I didn't let truth get in my way. Those of you who live in Charlottesville or Tallahassee or Staunton will discern that I did minimal violence to the location of buildings and streets, but the occasional author's prerogative for the good of the story is hereby admitted. As for the rest of the dramas I describe along the way, readers will have to decide for themselves which are true and which aren't. The story will be a success if you find yourself frequently in doubt.

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Chapter One

The Best that Money Can Buy

Killing a head of state is hard to do. Assassination attempts rarely succeed. Yet in a matter of minutes he would have the leaders of four countries in his cross-hairs.

At most he would kill three. Probably he would have time to pull his trigger only twice, settling for 5 million dollars US rather than 7.5 million. This contract was easily his most valuable, having taken him 12 years to reach the pinnacle of his profession. Some in his field of work disliked the term “assassin,” but he embraced it. The word had the ring of finality and symmetry.

Earning 5 million dollars in the space of two seconds would seem outrageous if those deaths were incidental. But the deaths for which he would be responsible today were monumental and well worth the money to his employer. No doubt 100 others would have solicited his services for the same result had they been first in the queue.

He was still shocked at the brazenness of the four

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world leaders...first to have hatched their crazy scheme and then to appear in public to champion it. To believe they could reverse 75 years of history by simply saying so was the height of arrogance. Too many dollars, too many reputations, too many payoffs had been used to build an institution. Attempting to tear it down was foolishness for which he would make them pay.

He regretted for a moment that he would not be able to kill all four. But by the time the first one fell, their four security details would be moving to create the human shield. He probably could get a second shot away before they blocked his view. After that it would be easy to kill agents, but those deaths would be without purpose. Better to use that time in retreat and escape.

He invariably spent more time planning an escape than he did calculating his shot. Today for example, he had three possible ways out of his current lair, the least desirable of which was to make himself invisible until midnight and then disappear; he had three ways out of the city, two ways out of the country, and two ways to melt away inside the country. All together, he reassured himself, he had 36 ways to avoid capture. Firing one bullet too many, delaying one or two seconds too many, put himself at needless risk.

He was not a zealot. Nor did he claim the self-importance of an artist. He was a skilled laborer, one whose particular skills would mean at least 5 million US in his Caribbean account by nightfall.

The first kill would have to be the U.S. President, then whomever had the misfortune to be standing at his left side. A career of practice proved that moving the barrel of his sniper rifle a bare centimeter to the right was smoother and faster than to the left.

The President was delusional. But, the sniper rea-

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soned, that was what made him worth 2.5 million US dollars! It was clearly his personal vision; the others were willing puppets. No one knew how long the thought had taken to form in the President's mind, not even the person whose spy had set in motion this very assassination. The President had made no hints of an ideological revolution in his election campaign three years ago now. Not until this year's state of the union address could one see the seed of the idea being planted, and even at that probably only in retrospect.

No doubt a half-dozen U.S. presidents had dreamed of it, but never until now had any had the audacity to actually declare. Yes, the President would fall first, and with him his dream. The death of a second leader on the platform today would double the warning that no one else should take up the torch.

He criticized himself for the political reflections which took his mind off the immediate goal. He should have a single train of thought. He visualized what would happen on the platform. If only the security agents weren't as expert and weren't as prepared to throw away their own lives. In that case he would be able to fire four shots, four kills. They were not, he would remind them, the best that money could buy. The world would soon know that someone else owned that title.

The President had signed his own death warrant. The assassin's employer was simply the endorser. The President and his three allies intended to make history. Now in the bright Monday morning sunshine of the U.S. capital, they were about to do just that—but not in the way they expected.

His employer had made sure that the assassin knew exactly what was at stake. That fact made this contract different: ordinarily the shooter was never told the rea-

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son for the kill. The four hoped to lead their nations to change the course of world diplomacy; they would do that in a move long thought impossible. They planned to withdraw from the United Nations. They would threaten to cease aid and trade with all who remained. They would invite others, especially democracies, to join them. The objective was to cripple the United Nations...and then perhaps to put something new in its place.

The idea was a newborn, alive only by the breath the President was breathing into it. The life was heartbeats away from a sudden end...and all would then return to normal. Normal was what his employer desired. Normal was the \$10 billion budget which the U.N. enjoyed, almost a quarter of which came from the United States. Normal brought countless dollars into his employer's annual budget, a nice percentage of which naturally found its way into his own account.

The door of the historic red mansion housing the Smithsonian headquarters opened, and the lesser dignitaries began to populate the platform. He estimated that the stage itself was 10 meters deep and twice as long. There were 60-70 seats and room for twice that many to stand. The majority of those standing would be elite members of the four national security details. The killer surveyed his own position in the few seconds he had to spare.

The platform had been constructed on Jefferson Avenue, on the grassy National Mall side of the building. His sightline was southwest between the National Gallery of Art and the National Archives. His building was near C and 6th NW, almost five blocks away, a remarkably long shot in an urban environment but still within the perimeter that the U.S. Secret Service should have been able to defend. They always thought as they

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had been trained to think. It was what made them alert to the usual threat; it was what made them blind to him.

His greatest professional asset was that he thought unconventionally. Most people are conventional in their patterns and habits; he, on the other hand, had trained himself to see every opportunity as though it were brand new.

The assassin and his custom-built McMillian rifle were well back in the building he had now occupied for two days. No sniper who lived long set up in a window, his silhouette visible and the straight line of his barrel an arrow pointing backward to his hiding place. He was approximately a meter away from the opening on a makeshift raised stand he had rigged from construction materials. The result gave him a perfect field of fire and virtual invisibility.

The location had been scouted by him on Thursday and Friday as he meandered the Mall with high-powered camera and binoculars. Anywhere else but downtown Washington his activity might have seemed suspicious. His observation time had been invaluable not just in deciding where he would set up but also getting his wind cues. In a city, the wind behaves differently with buildings and streets to swirl around and channel down. As he had walked off the Mall Friday afternoon to go take a nap he already knew everything he needed in order to take his shot.

Two days are a relatively short time for a sniper in the field. Military snipers were often in position a week waiting for a single shot. They endured fire ants, bitter cold or blistering heat, urination, bowel movements, and starvation. By comparison, these two days had been a vacation. He had adequate provisions of food and water which he consumed after dark. He could

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move and stretch with little risk, and the wildlife consisted only of an occasional cockroach or curious pigeon. Best of all, he could sleep at night knowing there was zero chance of intruders.

The building itself was barely that—just an erector set of steel girders that would morph into a building over the coming months. Without studying it intently one would never realize that a few rooms had been enclosed to prepare for heavy equipment. The killer had lived in one of those for 60 hours after his precarious climb via rope in the Friday night darkness.

He wasn't fond of heights but had climbed enough trees and cliffs in his day that he controlled this fear. Still, Friday's ascent had been uncomfortable. The construction lift was off limits, of course. The sixth floor was his objective. He did it a floor at a time, with one rope to climb and another tied around his waist to later hoist his drag bag. The fourth, fifth, and sixth floors had been easier because he had gotten high enough that city lights gave him better vision.

Having pulled up his bag, he prepared to put on night-vision goggles to negotiate several dozen meters of narrow steel girders, but the workers had conveniently laid out a network of double planks that made it easy for him.

No construction activity took place, of course, on Saturday and Sunday, and his hunch that this morning construction workers would all be gawking at the preparations for the ceremony had been correct. Nevertheless, a silenced pistol lay beside him lest any worker stray into his hide.

To call it a room would be to exaggerate—a concrete block and steel compartment the size of a small office. In order to do his final reconnaissance, he had crawled but a few minutes ago to the opening that would some-

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day be a false window. All were in their places: Secret Service agents and their rooftop countersnipers, crowd control, D.C. police, and the million people expected to greet the public announcement about which there was great anticipation and total ignorance. Several sentences into the President's speech, every spectator's anticipation and ignorance would turn to either fury or admiration.

He had no room for either of those emotions as his scope brought the primary platform party into view. Of his four targets, first came the U.S. President himself, entering from right to left. The next person onto the stage was marked for death...the Israeli Prime Minister. Third was the one who would probably lend surprising legitimacy to the U.S. leader's vision; if the President of Switzerland was prepared to propose to his historically neutral and noncommittal country that it withdraw from the U.N., well, who knew? The sniper mused that the British Prime Minister would never live another day of his life without blessing his luck at being last on the platform.

The leaders reached their prospective marks about a meter from each other. They were, they presumed, the drum majors leading an international band to a new and better day. Before the announcement, all those watching were marchers along with them. After the announcement, half the world would march with them, the other half hating the parade.

They waved and pointed as stiffly as all politicians do, planted in place. Their stillness was an added benefit to him as he brought the crosshairs to bear on the President's chest. He had long since factored in the wind. It was calm enough that he could manage a head shot for the President and a chest shot for the Israeli, but chest shots for both were safer. He knew his bullet

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would strike within 10 centimeters of where he aimed; fatality was not in doubt.

The killer breathed in and then out. In the natural respiratory pause before his next inhalation he prepared to send his message of dissent to the world across the space of 900 meters. An Olympic runner could cover that distance in two minutes. His round would be there in just over a second. It was all in front of him in his crosshairs.

In that moment the world behind him exploded—a blast in the back wall above him that he knew instinctively was the impact of a bullet. The noise was deafening, and concrete debris rained down on him. He almost laughed out loud as he brought the crosshairs back to the President's heart. His own body was invisible and safe from this pest who had fired wildly into the wall. The sound might make a dull echo outside, but could never be located by any watchers...at least not in time.

A moment apart two more bullets smashed into the same place behind him. The word "idiot" formed on his lips but came no further. In glancing over his shoulder, he saw that one concrete block was gone, its neighbors untouched, and he realized this was no idiot: this was a master marksman who from what had to be an impossible distance had pulverized a single concrete block, turning it into dust. That word now formed on his lips as he coughed. "Dust" surrounding and enveloping him meant dust pouring out of his single window into the clear air outside. Visible. Vulnerable.

Before he could move, the five Secret Service rooftop semi-automatic weapons he had casually counted a few minutes before sent 50 projectiles ricocheting into his concrete and steel coffin tearing his body and his life apart.

Chapter Two

The Secret Room

Tuesday, June 21

“So it wasn’t actually you who got him?” the President asked.

“No, all I could see was a shadow when he came to the window a few minutes before. I never had a shot, really nobody did. He was very good. It wasn’t until the last second that the idea hit me to try to expose him to ricochets. Thank heavens the Secret Service counter-snipers use semi-automatics.”

He and the President lapsed into silence for a few moments, their thoughts running parallel. It was no secret at all to the world that the “Secret” Service protected the president. And today they were crowing about it. The Secret Service had no idea whatsoever, and never would, that the President’s final line of defense was a single master marksman known by himself and the President as “the President’s Protector.”

The first time they had met had been in this same

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room. It was winter, and the tunnels that led the President's Protector to this secret spot were cold. The room wasn't much better. Despite having had 40 to 50 meetings there, the President's Protector didn't positively know where the space was that he referred to simply as the "secret room." He assumed that it was underground, from the absence of windows, but could have been mistaken. He couldn't vouch a guess as to whether they were technically in the White House or somewhere between there and the EOB, the Old Executive Office Building next door to the White House.

The EOB was open 24 hours a day, and that was where he entered. Only once had he been escorted through the EOB hallways and then downward through a series of staircases, doors, passages, tunnels—he had a set of keys and passcodes that were changed from time to time. After that first guided trip, he did it from memory. It took him fifteen minutes to make the whole distance, longer than it would take to walk east from the EOB to the White House above ground. From this he guessed that they were at least near some White House basement.

He and the President always entered by two different doors. The secret room was larger than it first seemed, with cabinets, tables, files, and bookcases placed willy-nilly, some against walls and others just out in the middle. The décor was of six decades. You could track the furniture and the files from the 1950s to the present. "Track" was too generous a word because it implied a sequence, of which there was none. If this had not been obvious at the first glance, his explorations would have soon disclosed it.

"Well, Boss," he remarked breaking the silence, "I have to say it took some guts for the four of you to come back out on that platform yesterday afternoon

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and tell the world what you intend to do.”

With a wry smile the President replied, “Yes, I’d say our television audience probably went up a few Nielsen points after what happened at 9:00!”

“Nothing you could have done by yourself would have emphasized the magnitude of your plan and the vested interests that support the status quo. It’s amazing how many exclamation points a splash of gunfire puts at the end of a paragraph!”

Changing subjects, the President quizzed the Pro, which was the common shorthand the two of them used for *Protector*: “You’re sure that no one could deduce that someone...specifically you...fired the initial bullets? If the Secret Service or anyone else is on to you, we are in a mess.”

“I don’t see how, sir.” Even their almost-three-year relationship that had turned into a friendship couldn’t keep him from the occasional formality. “Although I never expect for one of my bullets to be found, I’m awfully glad that they shatter to metallic powder on impact. By the time they all emptied their rounds into that little room no lab could possibly figure out whose bullets were whose. And the Service can’t do anything more than conjecture about the dust that attracted their attention. I think we’re good.”

“Well, I know you are,” complimented the President. “How far away were you?”

“About 2,600 yards.”

Any military or ballistics expert listening to their conversation would have choked. The numbers were unimaginable, at least 1,000 yards farther than any sniper would consider squeezing off a shot. Yet yesterday, the Pro had cycled three rounds into a space half the size of a computer keyboard. The President knew he was neither bragging nor exaggerating.

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These distance capabilities were at the heart of the success of the President's Protector. For over 50 years the Pros had lain invisible outside the known sniper range of would-be assassins and the Secret Service who would hunt them. Never once had any of them known that the Pro was on duty. His anonymity was essential. That fact was sacrosanct.

"Did you write it in the book?" asked the President.

"No, I wasn't sure about whether this incident qualified."

"Seems like a no-brainer to me. Put it down."

Nodding, he got up and moved toward a low bookcase. On top of it was an old book perhaps a 1/2-inch thick. It was speckled black and white and said simply Ledger on its front. The first entry was from January 28, 1954. Flipping to the fourth page, the Pro wrote the next consecutive number, 95, then yesterday's date, Washington, D.C., and in the last column "Pres. Charles Langford." No columns existed for the name of the Pro or the identity of the would-be assassin.

It was the eighth time he'd entered a number in the ledger. Each president's name since 1954 was in the book at least once.

The President watched him write, feeling a sense of pride and gratitude. This young man who could just as easily have been taken for a real estate salesman was the President's personal lifesaver. Six-feet tall and 180, the President calculated. His brown hair wasn't so much parted down the left as that it just fell that way. The permanent tan added to the athletic look of the Pro. The tendency in good-looking people was to say they didn't look their age, but that didn't exactly fit in this case. The man looked his 44 years—but what could be safely said was that he looked great for his age. The President had never met the Pro's parents, but he imag-

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ined them being attractive and engaging people.

Having finished writing, the Pro turned around to find the President appraising him. He wondered what thoughts were behind that look. A partial answer was forthcoming. "Doc, I know why I'm not married. I couldn't do better the second time around than I did the first. Glenda was a once in a lifetime. I hate that she didn't get to live in the White House. I think she'd have been a terrific First Lady. But I don't get why you don't have your own first lady."

"Simple, sir, haven't found my Glenda yet."

The President, taking that answer to be both a truthful and conclusive, stretched his lanky 6'4" frame and returned to business. Nodding at the ledger, he asked, "What's the number?"

"95."

"You've written my name in there four times, right? I hope you keep writing it. You writing it means I'm still alive and kicking!" President Charles Wilson Langford was a name that would become a landmark if he could finish what he and three other chiefs of state had begun.

Neither the President nor the Pro called each other by their real name, although each had encouraged the other. "I'm Charlie to my friends." "Please feel free to call me Patrick, sir." Instead the President preferred to call him "Doc." No one else, not even at the University called him "Doc" despite the fact that he had earned his Ph.D. in Finance. Patrick had never asked him why the nickname. The only thing Patrick could imagine was that it underscored the secrecy of the Pro—if I don't use your real name, you're anonymous. Therefore, you're safe.

That worked fine for Patrick. As for him, the most personal title with which he could become comfortable

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was "Boss."

"Doc, you're going to think I've lost my mind when I ask this next question."

"You mean like most of the world thinks you have after your announcement yesterday?" the Pro retorted with a grin. At 44, a life full of interesting experiences had given him an innate charm, and that grin was both attractive to women and friendly to men. He and the President had hit it off immediately when they had met nearly three years before. This was the third president for whom the Pro had worked. He wondered whether the President was about to ask the question he knew would eventually be raised by one of them—when was it going to be time for him to retire?

The President waited for a second, sensing that the Pro was following a train of thought that would have to come to an end before he would have full attention. "Do you think we should tell the Secret Service about you?"

A chop to the throat would have been no less of a shock. Patrick was stunned. The President's proposition had never been even a consideration, as far as he could tell, for any of the dozen previous presidents and the eight pros that had protected them.

"I haven't made up my mind," continued the President, "but we have to at least talk it through. First, as I push forward on my United Nations initiative and some other related policies we'll talk about another day, the threats to me are going to multiply. You and the Secret Service working together might have an advantage. Second, I worry about you becoming a victim of friendly fire. The Secret Service is going to be even more paranoid than usual, pushing the envelope, stretching their perimeter. Some day they may spot you, accidentally, and that could be your funeral."