

# HOUR OF THE ASSASSIN

# 1

**ASSASSINATION IS A** tense, sweaty business. So Nick Averose found it odd, as he sat inside this bush for the fifty-third minute, how cozy his spot had become. Berry and pine scented the air, and the little enclosure reminded him of childhood games. He could almost forget the Smith & Wesson hanging on his hip and the knife sheath in a horizontal draw on his belt.

The air shook with the sound of a heavy V-8. Nick pressed his back against the brick wall at the base of the fence. The six-bedroom mansion was all stone with slate roofs, fit for an Ivy League campus, though its perimeter was more appropriate for a military installation. It seemed unbreachable without raising the alarm.

But every defense had its weakness. Nothing was perfect. No one was safe. Nick had to believe that, to prove it tonight and every night.

As the black Chevy Suburban pulled up the driveway, Nick stole toward it. The faint blue glow of a cell phone lit the interior and the face of his target, Malcolm Widener, the former

director of the CIA. The job was simple enough: kill him with no trace.

Once Widener had commanded an army of spies and paramilitaries, and a round-the-clock detail from the agency's Security Protective Service had lived on this property. Now he worked for a global hedge fund, trading on what and whom he knew. His company provided him with the best guards money could buy.

There were a few ways to get through that fence, but the easiest was the most obvious and the most dangerous: the front driveway. All Nick needed was a stalking horse and some way to open the wrought iron gate. Widener's own vehicle would do both.

Nick waited, taking measured breaths as the gate rattled back. When the Suburban rolled forward, he stepped onto the driveway and walked toward the car's rear right tire, moving in a fast crouch in its blind spot.

Getting through that gate was the crux of the entry. He knew the compound's layout by heart. Once inside, he moved in a careful choreography: dart right into the blind spot of the southwest corner camera, sprint to the hanging vines of the pergola, duck behind the stonework of the outdoor kitchen, then wait one hundred and forty seconds. He stared at the faint green glow of his watch, cupped in his hands, while a drop of sweat rolled down his lower back. Footsteps hushed across the lawn. A flashlight's beam swung toward him and glinted off the grill.

It lit up the grass behind him and the other side of the stone wall where he had taken cover but left him in a long shadow. The light swung away. The guard moved on, barely a minute off schedule. The security, armed with SIG semiautos, worked methodically through any spots the cameras wouldn't touch.

Nick waited ten seconds, stood, and continued on, his eyes on the guard's back, staying fifty feet behind him, relying on the fact that the man's attention would be focused ahead. If he turned around, he could easily put a pair of nine-millimeter holes in Nick's heart.

He stalked in the man's slipstream toward the rear of the house, then cut under the south portico and took up a post next to a door of breakproof glass. He could see inside, down a long corridor lined with landscapes, family portraits, and a few classical pieces in marble.

His fingers closed on an acrylic box the size of a pack of cigarettes in his pocket. He stood close to the white circle next to the door, where access cards were swiped. Widener came around the corner at the far end of the hall and walked straight toward him.

Nick waited, calm. Because it was dark outside and light within, he knew that Widener could see only his own reflection, but that did little to kill the eerie feeling of staring eye to eye at his target.

Widener came closer, until he was six feet away, then turned right down a hall as Nick pressed a button on the side of his device. It was a Proxmark amplifier—he'd built it himself—that boosted the signal between the key fob in Widener's pocket and the receiver by the door. The lock slid back with an expensive, beautifully engineered silence.

Nick opened the door an inch, waited a few seconds, then entered, trailing Widener on the long runner across the herringbone floor. He was moving away from the living room toward a set of stairs that led to the upper floors, where Widener would be most vulnerable.

Nick followed him as he went upstairs and disappeared into

the bedroom suite. Nick didn't enter, just listened to the sounds of running water as he continued to the top floor and turned left into Widener's office. An antique desk commanded half the room, facing the windows and a sitting area with two club chairs, a sofa, and a wall-mounted television.

Moonlight filtered in. Nick looked over the frames on the wall. There were class portraits from St. Albans and Georgetown, and shots of Widener with the past two US presidents, with prime ministers, with senators. These were real photos of friends, of intimates, not staged handshakes at fund-raisers.

Nick had spent a decade in the Secret Service. He had once protected men like this, which had taught him how to get to them. He crossed the room and tucked into a dark nook where a copier and office supplies were stacked.

Through a window, Nick had a view of the driveway and the staff cars parked beside the garage. The wife was in New York. He could see everyone coming and going, would know when he was alone with Widener, when no one would be around to hear him call for help.

Widener entered, now without his jacket and tie, and switched on a lamp. He poured himself a small glass of scotch and added a few drops of water, as he did every night. A man of routine.

It would be easy enough to do it now. Killing wasn't the difficult thing, though it was harder, louder, and shabbier than most suspected. Killing and getting away was the true test.

Widener sat at his desk, his back to Nick. He flipped on the TV, tuned to a Hoyas basketball game, then pulled his laptop toward him and set to work.

Nick stepped out of the shadows. One turn, one careful look, and Widener would see him. But people so rarely stop to examine the familiar world around them. We walk blindly through

this life.

This was the most difficult part: to hold, silent and still, in the same room as the mark, even as the adrenaline raced through his body like flame up a fuse.

Time was his weapon, isolating them. Nick watched through the window as the housekeeper pulled out in her Honda.

Malcolm Widener would have a place in the history books. But at the end of the day, he was just a man, sitting alone and vulnerable. Following someone this closely inevitably created sympathy. Nick used it as a tool to put himself inside a target's head. Now he tuned it out. This was a job, and he was a professional.

The gate opened and closed. One guard remained on the property, finishing his patrol before he went to check the security feeds from a post inside the pool house. There were no cameras here. Nick was inside the sanctum. It was time.

He closed on Widener with silent steps, stood behind him, and touched his fingers to the sheath.

Nick didn't draw a knife or gun. In his other hand he held a small envelope marked "Indicator of Compromise." He laid it on the ground a few feet from the chair and stepped back into the shadows.

Tonight everything was real but the killing.

# 2

**NICK WAITED FOR** his moment, with Widener's eyes fixed on the game, then slipped through the side door into the back hall.

He took the rear stairs down and crossed to the front door, double-checking for the guard, timing his exit.

Heavy steps sounded from the top of the main staircase. He turned and saw the former CIA director staring down at him, holding his drink in one hand and Nick's letter in the other.

"So you're the red team?" he called down.

"Yes, sir," Nick said, doing his best to keep the smile off his face.

"And I'm dead?"

"In this scenario, yes."

Widener took a sip of scotch and raised his glass.

"Well roll away the stone. Come up here."

Nick was a security consultant. He posed as a threat in order to find the weaknesses in anyone's defenses, testing systems under real-life conditions, as he had done tonight. The profession was known in its different varieties as red-teaming, security au-

dition, or penetration testing.

Nick had worked protective details as a marine before he joined the Secret Service, where he had learned to put himself into the mind of the adversary, to live the part.

Clients normally needed to be handled with kid gloves, but Widener was oddly unfazed. He'd run the agency. He was used to living in a bubble of guards and bug sweeps and assuming everyone around him was watching and listening.

"We don't have to go over everything now," Nick said. "I don't want to put you out."

"Any more than breaking into my house and killing me? No, come on up. I want to know how you did it."

Nick climbed the stairs and followed Widener into his office. He sat behind his desk while Nick stood in front.

"I got the email from Aegis saying they'd be testing security," he said. "I didn't expect anything this intense." Aegis was the company that handled Widener's protection and employed the guards Nick had slipped past.

Widener looked over the letter. It was proof of a successful break-in, lovingly known as the "you're dead" letter.

He studied Nick's face. "Have we met before?"

"Not formally. I was Secret Service when you were the president's briefer."

"You were on the West Wing detail."

"That's right."

Widener sat back, his shoulders relaxing. Nick could see that had won him some trust.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Nick Averose."

"Malcolm," Widener said, then stood and shook Nick's hand across the desk, his palm like leather.



Nick was impressed. Guys like him were often invisible to someone at Widener's level, just part of the scenery. When he'd first seen the former director, a man with the natural dignity of a weathered elm, he'd imagined he'd be reserved and a little haughty, but face-to-face he was all old-school establishment charm and ease.

"And now you work for Aegis?" he asked.

"I contract with them," Nick said. "You should have been briefed on the scope of tonight's test. I have the paperwork here," Nick said, and pointed to his pocket.

Widener nodded. Nick slowly pulled out a second piece of paper, a letter of authorization. He passed it across the desk. Red-teamers always carried a contract with the client's signature, just in case they ever ran into trouble with the law and needed to prove they were on a security audit. The industry shorthand for it was "a get-out-of-jail-free card."

Widener looked it over.

"The guard outside?"

"I made it past him. He's still there."

"Are you armed?" he asked.

"An unloaded pistol and an empty knife sheath. Everything is as realistic as possible."

"Show me."

Nick cocked his head and considered the request. It felt intensely wrong to draw the pistol, even unloaded, on a man like Widener.

"Slowly," Widener said. "Just finger and thumb on the grip."

Nick showed the sheath and then reached inside his jacket and brought the gun out like a cop holding a piece of evidence. He laid it on the desk.

Widener nodded gravely, then checked that the chamber and

magazine were empty.

“And how do you go about it? Killing me?”

Nick weighed his answer. There was a danger in getting too real with a client.

“Indulge me,” Widener said. “Surely you know how it’s done.” He took a sip and waited.

“The knife,” Nick said.

“To keep it quiet?”

“Yes.”

“Odd way to make a living,” Widener said, his eyes on the gun. “Why did you leave the Service?”

“I got married. It was time.”

Widener nodded. It’s hard to be a family man when your job is catching bullets. “So my company spends whatever ungodly sum of money on all this security, and I’m still dead.”

“The system is one of the best I’ve seen on a private residence.”

“Then—no offense—why are you sneaking up on me with a gun?”

“Nothing is perfect and no one is safe.”

Widener regarded him, and Nick realized he had spoken it like the article of faith that it was.

“Your setup is damn close.”

“What needs fixing?”

“This may sound odd, but I would encourage the guards to be a little less punctual.”

“Too predictable?”

“That’s right. And there are some firmware updates you can make on the access card system.”

Widener looked Nick up and down, noting the dark pants, the running shoes, the button-down under his jacket.

“I was expecting . . .”

“A black turtleneck? Fatigues?”

Widener laughed. “I guess so.” He pointed to the gun. “Those guards could have killed you.”

“It’s a real-world test. And that’s why I don’t wear the turtleneck. No one gets shot to death in business casual.”

The other man nodded, seemed to appreciate the point.

“I’ll send a report to Aegis covering everything in detail,” Nick said. “A few tweaks and no one will be able to get to you.”

Widener narrowed his eyes. “You will.”

Nick took a moment, trying to get a read on him.

“I’m fucking with you,” he said, and tapped the signature on the contract. “Do you have the email for this woman from Aegis? Alexandra Hart.”

She was the company lawyer who had contacted Nick and arranged this test.

“Sure. You didn’t talk to her?”

“No.”

Nick crossed his arms. That wasn’t right. She’d said she had cleared this with Widener personally. He took a step back and looked out the window.

*Tss tss.* The noise came faint through the window on the other side. It sounded like a rattrap snapping, but Nick knew it in an instant.

Silenced shots.

Nick turned and rushed to the other window as time seemed to slow, the seconds like minutes, his vision narrowing to a tunnel as he scanned the yard.

A still form lay on the ground. The guard was down.

# 3

**NICK FELT HIS** stomach turn as he moved toward Widener.

“Sir, call the police.”

“What?”

“Someone else is here.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.”

The former director went to say something, then stopped, his face tightening with fear. He lifted the phone on his desk.

“Do you have a gun, any kind of weapon?” Nick asked.

“No. But the guard does.”

Nick took his empty pistol off the desk and holstered it, then strode through the main door. “Lock both doors behind me and don’t come out.”

He moved along the corridor, then down the stairs to the ground floor. At the landing he scanned the entry hall, then crossed the marble tiles toward the front door. He paused by a window, approaching it from the shadows to avoid being seen, and peered through.

A silhouette shifted in the dark. Someone was out there. Nick stepped back and took out his phone. *No signal.*

He muttered a curse and watched the figure passing along the fence. The training took over. *Protect the principal. Get a weapon. A kitchen knife. The guard's gun.*

The doors were locked. He couldn't let the threat inside, no matter what it took.

He crossed the living room and caught movement in the side yard through a window. The attacker was circling him.

Pacing toward the rear of the house, Nick felt a draft run over his skin, as if a door had been opened. Someone was already inside.

How many of them were there? Dread washed through Nick, left an acid taste in his throat.

A faint noise near the back stairs: footsteps. Nick stalked closer. It was an echo from above.

Two low thumps sounded through the ceiling, somewhere on the upper floors, between him and Malcolm Widener. Nick's breath caught. It felt for an instant like all the air had rushed out of the room and there was nothing to fill his lungs.

He sprinted to the stairs and climbed, then edged into the hallway that led to Widener's office, scanning in both directions. The office's side door was open.

Nick moved toward it, the adrenaline pushing him forward like an automaton. He pressed against the wall, left side, then right, buying as much of a vantage on the room as he could.

He saw the desk, the back of Widener's chair, a still hand palm-to-ceiling on the armrest.

*Fast through the door.* He blew into the room and circled. A glossy red-black puddle inched across the floor. He stepped to the side and saw Widener, sprawled across the chair, his clothes

slick as a barber's gown, wet with his blood.

Nick scanned the room. No one else was here. His eyes went back to Widener's throat. Whoever had done this was a professional, moving quickly with no sign of hesitation.

*Pressure. Airway. Breathing. Circulation.*

Nick took two long strides toward him and clamped his hand over his neck. He felt for a pulse. It was there.

No. That was his own. Nick's heart banged against his chest like an unbalanced dryer. He looked into Widener's eyes, searching for a spark of life, but they were like glass.

A knife lay on the floor. Nick knew that blade. He crouched and reached for it, felt the blood drip down his fingers. He lifted it and examined the weapon, the tip rounded from resharpening, the handle worn, smooth and shining where the index finger would rest, with a large chip missing near the lanyard hole. It wasn't just the same kind of knife. It was *the* knife, his knife.

Nick had left it at his office two hours ago.

His face felt hot, fevered. *Now would be a great time to wake, Nick.*

He regripped the knife and spun. He was still alone. He looked on the desk for the letter of authorization. That document would prove he was no criminal. It was gone, along with the other papers.

Whoever had killed Widener had taken them.

Nick held the knife and looked to the body, then the blood on his hands. He understood the scene, the simple story it told. Nick Averose, who could get to anyone, anywhere, had murdered the former director of the CIA.