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Last Days of the Condor

Written by James Grady

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LAST DAYS OF THE CONDOR

JAMES GRADY



NO EXIT PRESS

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for

*Desmond Jack Grady . . .
... running toward tomorrow*

1

SOMETHING'S HAPPENING HERE

- Buffalo Springfield, 'For What It's Worth'

A cover team locked on him that rainy Washington, D.C., Monday evening as he left his surface job, flipped up his hood and stepped outside the brass back door for the Library of Congress's John Adams Building.

A white car.

Indicator One on the white car as a cover team: Tinted windows and windshield.

Indicator Two: A car engine suddenly purred to life as raindrops tapped the blue mountaineering coat's hood over his silver-haired skull. He spotted the white car parked illegally at the Third Street corner of A Street, SE, a town house-lined road that ran from Congress's turf through Capitol Hill's residential neighborhood.

Indicator Three: The chill in the rain let him see wisps of gray exhaust from behind the purring white car. As it didn't pull out into traffic. As it sat there, wipers off, heaven's tears dotting the tinted-glass windshield.

Indicator Four: No one hurried to the white car from a nearby home. No commuter leaving work splashed through the rain toward it to be greeted with a spouse's kiss.

Indicator Five: He felt the cover team. Chinese martial artists talk about the weight of a stalker's eyes, feeling the pressure of an enemy's *chi*. Kevin Powell - who got his throat

cut in an Amsterdam brothel the year the CIA-backed Shah fell in Iran and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan - Kevin insisted you must pay attention to your guts, your feelings. Or you'll get butchered on some midnight street. Or wake up screaming in a windowless steel room. That Monday D.C. evening, the silver-haired man standing on hard cement in the chilly spring rain knew what his tingles meant.

One, two, three, four, five. Like fingers of a hand, a hand that meant *cover team*.

He looked to his left along the sidewalk running past the Adams Building with its six stories of white stone plus basements of knowledge and secrets. The brass door behind him could withstand a car ramming into it or a giant gorilla banging on its locked metal.

Walking down Third Street as if to pass the Adams Building came a man: Caucasian, dark hair, late thirties, white-collar-warrior suit and tie under a tan coat, brown shoes not built for running, holding a black umbrella in one brown-gloved hand, the other holding a cell phone pressed to his face as he said: 'Where are you located?'

Could have been a cover team communications ploy.

Feed data via a phony phone conversation.

But the silver-haired man didn't think so: *Too unnecessary.*

Suit & Tie Cell Phone Umbrella Man walked closer, now nearly perpendicular to him, brown shoe step by brown shoe step rippling puddles on the dark, wet sidewalk.

A stream of strangers joined Mister Cell Phoning Suit & Tie, all looking like innocent Americans headed somewhere after work on a Monday evening.

If your cover team is there for wet work, sometimes a better option than running from them is to imbue your assassination with Elevated Exposure Costs.

The silver-haired man in the blue hooded coat put his hands in its storm pockets as he stepped away from the Adams Building. Run, he did not run. He joined that stream

of eight pedestrians, five of whom walked under umbrellas. Like a blue penguin, he wove a crooked course to the center of the umbrella group - innocent bystander casualties being a classic EEC.

The smart move.

Unless the cluster of strangers he'd slid into belonged to the cover team.

The Israelis used a twenty-nine-member cover team for the Dubai hotel room assassination of one Hamas executive back in 2010.

Of course, a cover team didn't necessarily mean a hit or mere surveillance: these strangers walking with him under their umbrellas on a Washington, D.C., Capitol Hill sidewalk could be a snatch crew which he'd now let surround him.

But none of his fellow pedestrians vibed *hunter* as they marched toward the restaurant row on Pennsylvania Avenue just up from the House of Representatives' three castle-like office buildings. He flashed on sixth grade, walking to school with other kids. He remembered the smell of bicycles.

We're all kids on bicycles, he thought. *A flock of birds*.

Wondered if *whoosh* his flock of umbrella strangers would sense a shift in the universe and bank another direction and *no*, he hadn't run to join them, though he remembered the joys of long-distance jogging before his knees, back, and the bullet remnants in his left shoulder all conspired against him.

Back then, he'd been passing through Washington as the powers that governed this hydrogen bomb-blessed country argued about blow jobs in the White House. When he jogged during that work trip, his aches & pains decoded as *no more running for fun & fitness*. He accepted that evolution.

But like he remembered blow jobs, he remembered how if you run fast and there's a littler kid near you, you've got a better chance because Beirut snipers prioritize wounding the littlest kids to tempt rescuers. *Run*, you can make it to that doorway if only that doorway were there instead of the

intersection of Third Street, SE, and Independence Avenue where it's tonight, you don't have a bicycle, and there is no sheltering doorway or black-smoke stench of burning rubber tires at street barricades.

Focus: This is here. This is now. Washington, D.C. A chilly rainy evening.

Hold on to that.

You can hold on to that.

Sure.

There's a cover team on you.

If nothing else, have some pride. Make them work for it. Whatever *it* is.

Third Street, SE, is a one-way route from busy Pennsylvania Avenue, passes Independence Avenue that heads out of D.C. like an illusion of escape. Third Street means rows of parked cars on both its Adams side and across the road in front of town houses often harboring political action committees for Congressmen whose public offices are two blocks away, only a four-minute walk from their official duties to private property where they can make legal phone calls whoring money for elections. Any car -

Say a cover team's white car.

- any car parked facing the Adams Building on A Street, a block up from Independence Avenue, was stuck with a right-hand turn: the only legal choice. Parking where they had meant they couldn't pull out of their surveillance spot, turn, and drive down Third Street the wrong way against traffic, the route he always walked home, so -

So the cover team knew his predictable route. So they were that kind of *they*: informed, *briefed*. Knew he wouldn't - *couldn't* - walk past them, put his shoes on the sidewalk of A Street, SE, that close to *where*. Once they knew he was out & on the move, on foot, going toward Independence Avenue, the white car would turn right with the one-way traffic flow as if they weren't covering him.

Then circle the block. Given rush-hour traffic, rainy weather, odds are they'd be at the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and Third Street, SE, in time to spot whether he diverted down to Pennsylvania's main street of bars & restaurants or continued on his normal route up Independence. Odds are, he'd be walking with the outbound traffic, so the white car could slowly drive behind him, leapfrog parking to keep him ahead of their windshield. Eyes on him the whole way home.

Just in case they'd put shoes on him too, he didn't look back.

Instead, he scanned the bright lights of the restaurants and chain-store coffee shops and bars that served both Congressional staffers on beer-bottle budgets and lobbyists who made champagne flow. He cranked his head as far as he could toward the giant yellow-bulbed traffic sign that had been set up after 9/11, with its insistent arrow ordering all trucks to turn off Pennsylvania Avenue's route between the House of Representatives' office buildings and the Congress's iconic Capitol building.

He saw the Congressional cop standing in the rain beside a cruiser parked next to the flashing detour sign. Wouldn't matter if the truck that disobeyed the detour warnings was a cargo of dead tree products driven by a lost fool or a suicide bomber's rental truck packed with fertilizer in a concoction powerful enough to devastate two city blocks, the cop knew he'd need to risk holding position in the kill zone and try to shoot out the truck's tires before it blasted America's core of government.

The silver-haired man peered past the cop outside his cruiser and the yellow detour arrow. Told himself that through the bare trees and over two blocks away, he could see the edge of the Capitol building; visualize its dome, white and slick in the rain.

Before and for a while after Watergate, the FBI maintained a covert station on Pennsylvania Avenue in the first block of

private commercial buildings he saw as he turned back from staring at Congress's domain. That former FBI lair had been a flat-faced concrete building with an underground garage, always shut. He'd learned about the building back when *this life* began. That the three-story gray building belonged to the FBI was gossiped about by all sorts of people who worked on Capitol Hill, including many of Congress's members and staffs. If any of them had the guts and power to ask the Bureau about the building at the corner of Congress & the world, the official FBI response labeled the substation 'a translation center.'

Sure, he thought: And how does that translate?

He stood on the corner of the block where he now worked, obeying the traffic light, faced down Independence Avenue with his head turned in its blue hood just enough so his peripheral vision might pick up the appearance in traffic of, *say*, a white car.

The DON'T WALK traffic signal he faced glowed orange with a line slashed across the orange stick figure image of a walker and counting-down flashes:

... 30 ... 29 ... 28 ...

On the way to his rampage in 1998, a lone gunman from Montana who killed two Congressional cops while trying to shoot his way into the U.S. Capitol visited the for-decades town house headquarters of a fringe political group across the street from where the silver-haired man now stood. What the diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic gunman wanted from that political group is unknown, but he was drawn to them. The since-moved political group's revered but deceased founder kept a life-sized black metal statue of Adolf Hitler at the foot of his bed and the group openly but illegally sold the same phony cancer-curing drug that failed to save movie star Steve McQueen.

... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... WALK flashed in traffic-light white and freed a white stick figure.

Hope you get where you're going, telepathed the silver-haired man to the white stick figure in the signal light as he himself crossed the road for his eight-block journey with the traffic flowing along Independence Avenue.

He didn't flinch when his peripheral glimpse of the intersection showed the rain-slick black street reflecting a red light and an idling white car.

At the next corner, Fourth Street, he let the green light send him to the right, across the road. Didn't look behind him up that street to *where it happened back then*. Didn't look sideways to see the white car he hoped was blocked a few vehicles back, not at this crosswalk revving its engine to roar off the slick street, smash into his blue-hooded figure, hurtle him to his death or under crushing wheels.

Rundowns are tricky.

What's the Mission Risk Allotment for the cover team in the white car?

He made it to the curb. Didn't look back as he turned left, his usual route.

Don't let them know the weight of your eyes.

The rain stopped two blocks later as he slogged past the long low barn of Eastern Market where J. Edgar Hoover had worked as a grocery delivery boy before his left-wing subversive hunting days during the last century's Palmer Raids.

Cars whooshed by his lone man walking. Homeward-bound citizens.

Four blocks later, as he neared his corner of Eleventh Street, he spotted the white hat and dark blue sweater of a Navy officer leaving the neighborhood dry cleaner's that often served personnel stationed at the nearby Commandant of the Marine Corps. Flashed to cradling a Marine corporal shot in Afghanistan as that man, *that boy*, who'd saved his life flopped, gurgled, and died without ever knowing the truth about his fellow American or having it told to his family back in Oklahoma.

The Navy officer at the dry cleaner's that evening drove away in a minivan outfitted with an empty child's car seat.

The silver-haired man noted the red neon sign in the dry cleaner's barred window:

ALTERATIONS

If only.

He focused on an address just past the corner: 309, a two-story blue-brick town house, four black metal steps up to its turquoise door, walked one step after another until *finally*, as he slid his key into the lock, he looked behind him, checked his four to eight.

The white car cruised past him, made a languid U-turn into one of the parking spots across the street, tinted windshield facing where he stood on his front stoop.

The white car's engine turned off.

No one got out of the white car. Those tinted windows stayed closed.

He slid his key into the turquoise door, unlocked it, turned the doorknob. His eyes caught a downward flutter by his thigh, as low as he could reach without showing what he was doing every day when he put a stolen leaf in the crack of that door he pulled closed. Last summer, he'd worried his neighbors might notice their bushes being nibbled in this neighborhood that had yet to be invaded by the deer who bred madly in D.C.'s Rock Creek Park.

But no one mentioned that to him. Not even the wild-haired witch next door who often stood inside the low black iron fence around her front yard with her yippy filthy white dog to scream: *'This place ain't near nothing like North Carolina!'* She was wrong, but like everyone else, he never risked correcting her.

Today's torn leaf fluttered from the doorjamb.

But it could have been replaced.

Someone could still have opened that door. Be inside.

Fuck 'em.

Then he was in the house, his back pressed against the door he slammed shut. Sundown pinked his landlord's lair, the furniture she'd left when she had to rush move to her new GS insurance & pension federal job in Boston on seventeen days' notice in order to hold her place for computation in the next budget. The flat-screen TV his Settlement Specialist insisted on delivering to him hung over the fireplace in which he burned papers along with pine wood bought from pickups from West Virginia that cruised the city during the cold months. The green sofa belonged to the landlord, as did the brass bed upstairs in the front bedroom where he slept. The rest of the household contents - a couple chairs, a little of this and less of that, what was on the walls, a satellite radio with speakers, those things belonged to him.

No one attacked him in pink light streaming through the house's barred windows.

Yet.

This row house with common walls was six paces wide and twenty-one paces deep. That journey from the front door back to the kitchen took a jag around the bathroom under the stairs leading up to where he showered and slept. He walked toward the kitchen, glanced at the brown wooden stair eye level to him, and saw that the clear dental floss strand strung there had not been blown or pushed away by a passing shoe.

Or the strand had been replaced.

If they were that good, that compulsive, waiting upstairs in his bedroom or in the junk-filled back room, hiding in a closet, then *fuck it: call him already deleted.*

He checked the downstairs half bath: toilet seat up. Only his reflection haunted the mirror above the sink. He pushed the blue hood off his silvered head.

No one waited in the kitchen, the inside back door still shut and the outer iron-bars door locked in place. Beyond those black iron bars waited a wooden slab deck in a tiny fenced backyard with nothing but a waist-high Japanese maple tree rising from an engineered square opening in the deck. The hook & eye latch on the weathered gray back gate looked in place, but anyone who walked past that wooden fence in the alley knew such security was a joke.

They let him have knives.

For cooking.

The Settlement Specialist casually mentioned that need as she filled his shopping cart on their Household Establishment visit to the Fort Meade PX between D.C. and Baltimore where the National Security Agency keeps its official headquarters. He had a set of steak knives, plus a kitchen counter wooden slotted 'display holder' with a knife sharpener, a rapier-strong filleting blade, a serrated-edge bread knife, a monstrous isosceles triangle-bladed *très Français* carver, and a butcher blade that reminded him of Jim Bowie and the Alamo.

He refused to clutch one of those knives, sit *waiting* like a doomed fool on the living room couch.

His blue shell mountaineering coat was soaked. He shivered with that chill. Took the coat off, started back toward the living room -

Stopped in the bathroom to urinate. Told himself that wasn't nerves.

Heard the flush shut off as he hung his wet coat up on the living room coat rack.

They were out there. *Of course they were out there!*

But they might not come tonight.

Or ever.

The cover team might be taggers on a Sit & See, or -

The turquoise front door boomed with a knock.