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An Honorable Man

Written by Paul Vidich

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AN HONORABLE MAN

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For Linda, with love

MARK ANTONY:

The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious.
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answered it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest –
For Brutus is an honorable man;
So are they all, all honorable men;
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.

– Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar,* Act III Scene ii

1

WASHINGTON, DC, 1953

Mueller stood at the apartment's third-floor window and said to the FBI agent, 'It's been too long. He won't show.' He ground his cigarette into the overflowing ashtray. 'We're wasting our time.'

'He'll come. He can't resist the bait.'

Mueller looked across the icy street at the dilapidated apartment building separated from the sidewalk by a wrought iron fence. Bars protected first-floor windows. There was no activity and there hadn't been since he'd arrived. A streetlamp at the corner cast its amber glow up the block, but it didn't reach the stoop. An unmarked car stood at Twelfth Street NE and Lincoln Park, and a black Buick was around the corner, in the alley, out of sight, but Mueller had seen it on his way over. Further up the block, an agent waited in the dimly lit phone booth, self-conscious with his newspaper.

'He's been scared off.'

'He has no reason to believe we're here.'

'He doesn't need a reason. It's instinct. Even an amateur would wonder why that man's been in the phone booth an hour. For you it's a job.' Mueller dropped the curtain. 'It's his life. He knows.'

Mueller glanced at his watch. 'When do you call it quits?'

'There's time. We spotted her making the drop at five. She's Chernov's wife. She went in the lobby with the package. She came out without it. He'll come.'

'You're sure it was her?' Mueller asked.

He waited for FBI agent Walker to respond. Mueller thought Walker flamboyant, enjoying his status as agent-in-charge, eager to hunt. He dressed the part: dark hair combed straight back, polished shoes, double-breasted suit, and thin moustache like a Hollywood leading man. Through the window street sounds spilled into the darkened apartment – a car's honk, a woman's anger. The agent raised opera glasses and scanned the street and then shifted his attention to the edge of Lincoln Park. Automobiles cruised single men sitting alone on wood benches. A giant mound of dirty snow from the weekend storm buried parked cars.

'We *know* it was her,' Walker said in his drawl. 'We have surveillance. Two cars. She left the Soviet embassy, took a taxi to the residence, and walked here with the package. It's still inside.'

Mueller waited. He looked at his watch again, and then without thinking, he did it again. Waiting was the hardest part. He moved to the center of the room. There was the rank smell of cigarettes in the small apartment, half-drunk coffee cups, and the wilted remains of a take-out dinner. All waiting did was give him time to be irritated. He took a tennis ball from

the table and squeezed it, working out his tension, squeezing and resqueezing. At another window he lifted the curtain. The street was dark, quiet, empty. Walker didn't understand that double agents lived in fear, chose their time, and that a cautious man wasn't going to take an unnecessary risk.

Lights in the building across the street were dark except for a top-floor apartment. A big woman at the window pulled her sweater over her head and then reached behind to undo her bra. Mueller looked then glanced away. A light on the second floor. Had someone entered the building lobby? Through the window an older man stood in boxer shorts before an open refrigerator. He drank milk straight from a quart bottle and then he shuffled off to the kitchen table and sat by a console radio. Mueller looked back at the top floor, but the curtain was drawn.

How long should he stay? Walker and his men wouldn't abandon the stakeout until long after it was an obvious bust. No one wanted to admit failure, or have to invent excuses. Mueller was officially just an observer.

He saw a young man with a notepad approach from across the room. Crew-cut, freckled face, no tie, boyish smile. Too young for this type of assignment.

'You the CIA guy?' the young man asked.

Mueller narrowed his brow. 'Who are you?'

'The *Star*.' He lifted the press badge hanging around his neck.

Mueller confronted Walker by the fire escape window. Two men standing inches apart in the darkened apartment. Mueller snapped, 'What's he doing here?'

'He's okay.'

'We said no press. No surprises. No embarrassments.' He didn't hide his anger.

'I had no choice,' Walker said laconically.

Mueller gave the agent-in-charge a cold, hard glare and considered who in his chain of command had authorized a reporter. He held back what he wanted to say, that under the circumstances the best outcome for the CIA was that their man didn't take the bait, didn't show. 'We had an understanding,' Mueller said. 'This wasn't it.'

'He's a kid. He'll write what he's told to write.'

'What does he think is happening?'

'Vice squad got a lead on a State Department guy who cruises Lincoln Park. Security risk. We arrest him and book him. Metro Police give the kid the story. He'll write what he's given.'

Mueller headed to the apartment door.

'Where are you going?'

'A little fresh air.'

Walker raised his voice so that it carried to Mueller in the hall stairway. 'He's okay.'

Outside, Mueller stood hidden from view on the top step of the building's stoop. He lit a cigarette. Habit. Then thought better of it and flicked it in the snow. His eyes settled on the empty street where he saw nothing to change his mind that the night was a bust. The Capitol Building fretted the tree line of the park, a gleaming dome in the night, a navigation point above the neighborhood's sprawling poverty. In the distance Mueller heard the anxious wail of a police siren and then behind him, the soft click of the door closing. He saw Walker. They stood side by side without talking.

'I hear you're leaving the Agency,' Walker said.

'Who told you that?'

'One of the guys.'

Which guy? Mueller nodded. 'If we get him tonight I'll be gone by the end of the month.'

'What's next?'

'Fly-fishing.' A lie.

'That will last a while.'

Mueller didn't indulge Walker's sarcasm. He didn't like Walker, but he tolerated him, and he kept him close to keep himself safe. Walker was too ambitious for Mueller's taste, quick to take credit for success, quick to blame others for his own mistakes. Mueller didn't like Walker's having that detail of his personal life. He kept private matters away from his job, but the daily grind made that hard. Each morning he got up to face the endless urgency of ambitious colleagues inventing useful crises. Politics had taken over everything. He was tired of the double life, the daily mask, and he'd lost his ability to appear interested in a conversation when he was bored out of his mind. Walker bored him. But he knew Walker well enough not to trust him. Walker was a good weatherman of Washington's changing political winds and he was a good spy hunter.

Mueller's exhale came at last. 'Where'd you get the tip?'

'The mailbox on East Capitol we've been watching. Someone left a chalk mark. This is the dead drop.'

'You know, or you think?'

'She left the lobby without the package. What else would it be?' Then, confidently, 'He'll come.'

The two men stood in the dark. 'I don't get it,' Walker said. 'Great reputation, but your results stink. Vienna was a failure. So was Hungary. Last week you lost Leisz.' Walker paused. His breath fogged in the chilly night air. 'Word is you guys got the news Stalin died by listening to Radio Moscow.' Walker flicked

his butt to the snow. 'Great reputation, but your results stink.'

'Piss off,' Mueller said. He thought about the damn fool Leisz. Ignored the rules after he'd been warned, thinking he wasn't at risk, then got sloppy and paid for it.

'Someone's coming.' A voice from the window above. Mueller and Walker saw the young black woman at the same time. Blond wig, leopard-skin coat, stiletto heels, and a tiny rhinestone purse clutched in one hand. She had emerged from the tree line at Lincoln Park and glanced both ways before making a two-step hustle across the street. Mueller and Walker stepped back deeper into shadow.

When she achieved the opposite sidewalk she glanced over her shoulder. Mueller followed her line of sight to the streetlamp cleaving the darkness at the park's edge. From the trees stepped an army enlisted man. Mueller saw the drab sameness of style of someone who sought to fit in, go unnoticed. Long khaki coat, a visor cap pulled down on his forehead, and a steady stride that didn't bring attention to itself. She baited him with exaggerated hip movements and a calculated head nod. The start of another war had kept Washington filled with single men, and with single men came dreary bars with women who sold themselves.

'He won't come with this sideshow,' Mueller said.

'They'll leave. Hail a taxi. Go to a hotel.'

Mueller lit another cigarette and then regretted his choice again. He ground it under his heel. Drinking and smoking, two occupational hazards that had begun to wear on him.

The woman walked up the block, but slowed her stride to allow the man to catch up. The air was cold and crisp, sharp like flint. Suddenly she stopped. The two talked on the sidewalk. A bargain was struck.

'There's something odd about him,' Mueller said.

'Odd?'

'The uniform. His shoes. He's wearing loafers.'

The enlisted man opened the iron gate for the woman and then followed her up the steps to the apartment house lobby. He shot a glance over his shoulder before disappearing inside.

'What are you saying?' Walker asked. 'It's him?' Then a demand. 'You think it's him?'

'Not my call.'

Mueller saw Walker's discomfort and he felt the torment of the decision he faced. Both men knew it would be impossible to recover from a bad call.

'So be it,' Walker muttered. He pulled on his glove, stretching his fingers deep into the leather, and clenched a fist.

Mueller watched the FBI assemble. Walker signaled his agent in the phone booth, who in turn placed a call. It took a minute, or less, for the Buick and two unmarked cars to converge on the apartment building. Two agents, handguns drawn, stepped from the first car and hustled up the steps to the lobby. Four other men took up positions at their cars, and one crouched agent scrambled toward the rear of the building.

Walker stood in the street barking orders to his team, and the sudden noise brought neighborhood residents to their windows. They saw black cars stopped at oblique angles on the street, doors flung open.

Mueller stayed out of sight, alone. He saw an FBI agent escort the army enlisted man down the stoop tightly gripping his arm. The enlisted man had lost his hat, his wrists were handcuffed behind his back, and his unbuckled pants rode down his hips. He looked dazed and embarassed.

A second agent had cuffed the prostitute and guided her,

protesting, toward a car. Her wig was gone and she was hobbling on one broken heel, shouting fierce baritone obscenities at the agent who hustled her down the steps.

'Don't rush me,' the transvestite yelled, 'I'll sprain an ankle.' Mueller waited until Walker emerged from the apartment lobby and then he stepped out from his hiding spot. They met halfway across the street, Walker agitated, his face twisted in a scowl. He waved a stack of bills at Mueller as he walked past. 'Keep this farce to yourself,' he snapped. 'Don't say a thing. Not a word. Hear me?'

Walker slipped in the Buick's front seat and slammed his door shut. In a minute the cars were all gone and Mueller stood alone. There was one orphaned stiletto heel on the sidewalk that he dropped in a garbage can.

He walked rapidly away. He didn't bother to look behind to see if anyone noticed him, or to check on the curious neighbors. But at the end of the street he happened to turn. An instinct he'd acquired in Vienna after the war, the feeling of knowing when he was being observed. There at the corner in the shadow of a mature tree, a tall man in a gray homburg, hands shoved in the pockets of a long trench coat. There was something suspicious about the figure. Mueller read into every stranger the possibility the person was tailing him, and this man got his attention. Mueller stood there thirty feet away on the other side of the street, staring at the motionless figure, who stared back. Mueller couldn't make out the man's face, or the shape of his jawline in the hat's deep shadow.

'Hey, you,' Mueller yelled.

He went to cross the street, but a garbage truck fitted with a snowplow lumbered by in a riot of noise. When the truck passed, Mueller looked for the man, but he was gone.