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The Watchman

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Extract

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Prologue: City of Angels

City of Angels

The city was hers for a single hour, just the one magic hour, only hers. The morning of the accident, between three and four AM when the streets were empty and the angels watched, she flew east on Wilshire Boulevard at eighty miles per hour, never once slowing for the red lights along that stretch called the Miracle Mile, red after red, blowing through lights without even slowing; glittering blue streaks of mascara on her cheeks.

Accounting for her time before the accident, she would later tell the police she was at a club on Yucca in Hollywood, one of those clubs *du jour* with paparazzi clotted by the door. She had spent an hour avoiding an aging action star while seeing her friends (trust fund Westsiders and A-list young Hollywood; actors, agents, and musicians she had no problem naming for the police), all taking cell-phone pictures of each other, blowing air-kisses and posing with rainbow drinks. The police sergeant who interviewed her would raise his eyebrows when she told him she had not been drinking, but the breathalyzer confirmed her story. One Virgin Cosmo which she did not finish.

Three was her witching hour. She dropped a hundred on the valet for her Aston-Martin, and red-lined away. Five blocks later—alone--she stopped in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard, shut the engine, and enjoyed a cashmere breeze. Jasmine and the scent of rosemary came from the hills. The engine ticked, but she listened to find the silence. The stillness of the city at this hour was

breathtaking.

She gazed up at the buildings, and imagined angels perched on the edge of the roofs; tall slender angels with drooping wings; standing in perfect silence, watching her without expectation as if in an eternal dream: We give you the city. No one is watching. Set yourself free.

Her name was Larkin Conner Barkley. She was twenty-two years old. She lived in a hip loft downtown in an area catering to emerging painters and bi-coastal musicians, not far from the Los Angeles River. Her family owned the building.

Larkin pushed the accelerator and felt the wind lift her hair. She bore south on Vine, then east on Wilshire, laughing as her eyes grew wet. Light poles flicked past; red or green, it didn't matter and she didn't care. Honking horns were lost in the rush. Her long hair, the color of pennies, whipped and lashed. She closed her eyes, held them closed, kept them shut even longer, then popped them wide and laughed that she still flew straight and true—

--85—

--90—

--101--

--a two hundred thousand dollar Tuxedo Black convertible blur, smudged by alabaster skin and Medusa copper hair, running wild and free across the city. She flashed over the arch at Macarthur Park, then saw the freeway coming up fast, the Pasadena; a wall guarding downtown. She slowed, but only enough, just barely enough, as cars appeared and streets narrowed, flying over the freeway into the tangle of one-way downtown streets—Sixth, Seventh, Fourth, Ninth; Grand, Hill, and Main—she turned where she wanted, went the wrong way, ran hard for the river; slowing more, finally, inevitably, as everything rippled and blurred--

She told herself it was the dry night wind and lashing hair, the way her eyes filled when her lonely race finished, but it was always the same whether the air was dry or not, whether her hair was down or up, so she knew. For those few minutes running across the city, she could be and was herself, purely and truly herself, finding herself in those moments only to lose herself once more when she slowed, falling behind as her true self ran free somewhere ahead in the empty night--

She lurched across Alameda, her speed draining like a wound.

--65—

--60—

--55—

Larkin turned north on an industrial street parallel with the river. Her building was only blocks away when the air bag exploded. The Aston-Martin spun sideways, then stopped. White powder hung in the air like haze; sprayed over her shoulders and arms. The other car had been a flashing shape, no more real than a shadow in the sea, a flick of gleaming movement, broken by the prisms of her tears, then the impact.

Larkin released her belt and stumbled from the car. A silver Mercedes sedan was on the sidewalk, its rear fender broken and bent. A man and woman were in the front seat, the man behind the wheel. A second man was in the rear, closest to the impact. The driver was helping the woman, whose face was bleeding; the man in back was on his side, trying to pull himself up, but unable to rise.

Larkin slapped the driver's side window.

'Are you all right? Can I help?'

The driver stared at her blankly before truly seeing her, then opened his door. He was cut above his left eye.

Larkin said, 'OhmiGod, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'll

call 911. I'll get an ambulance.'

The driver was in his fifties, well-dressed and tan, with a large gold ring on his right hand and a beautiful watch on his left. The woman stared dumbly at blood on her hands. The backseat passenger spilled out the rear door, fell to his knees, then used the side of the car to climb to his feet.

He said, 'We're okay. It's nothing.'

Larkin realized her cell phone was still in her car. She had to get help for these people.

'Please sit down. I'll call—'

'No. Let me see about you.'

The man from the backseat took a step toward her but sank to a knee. Larkin saw him clearly, lit by the headlights from her car. His eyes were large, and so dark they looked black in the fractured light.

Larkin hurried to her car. She found her cell phone on the floor, and was dialing 911 when the Mercedes backed off the sidewalk, its rear fender dragging the street.

Larkin said, 'Hey wait--!'

Larkin called after them again, but they didn't slow. She was memorizing their license plate when she heard the man from the back seat running away hard up the middle of the street.

A tinny voice cut through her confusion.

'Emergency operator, hello?'

'I had a wreck, an auto accident—'

'Was anyone injured?'

'They drove away. This man, I don't know--'

Larkin closed her eyes and recited the license number. She was scared she would forget it so she pulled out her lip gloss—Cherry Pink Ice—and wrote the number on her arm.

'Ma'am, do you need help?'

Larkin felt wobbly.

'Ma'am--?'

The earth tilted and Larkin sat in the street.

'Ma'am, tell me where you are.'

Larkin tried to answer.

'Ma'am, where are you?'

Larkin lay back on the cool, hard street. Dark buildings huddled over her like priests in black frocks, bent over in prayer. She searched their roofs for angels.

The first patrol car arrived in seven minutes; the paramedics three minutes later. Larkin thought it would end that night when the police finished their questions, but her nightmare had only begun.

In forty-eight hours, she would meet with agents from the Department of Justice and the U.S. Attorneys. In six days, the first attempt would be made on her life. In eleven days, she would meet a man named Joe Pike.

Everything in her world was about to change. And it began that night.

day one: stay groovy

1.

The girl was moody getting out of the car, making a sour face to let him know she hated the shabby house and sun-scorched street smelling of chili and episote'. To him, this anonymous house would serve. He searched the surrounding houses for threats as he waited for her, clearing the area the way another man might clear his throat. He felt obvious wearing the long sleeved shirt. The Los Angeles sun was too hot for the sleeves, but he had little choice. He moved carefully to hide what was under the shirt.

She said, 'People who live in houses like this have deformed children. I can't stay here.'

'Lower your voice.'

'I haven't eaten all day. I didn't eat yesterday and now this smell is making me feel strange.'

'We'll eat when we're safe.'

The house opened as the girl joined him, and the woman Bud told him to expect appeared; a squat woman with large white teeth and friendly eyes named Imelda Arcano. Mrs. Arcano managed several apartment houses and single family rentals in Eagle Rock, and Bud's office had dealt with her before. He hoped she wouldn't notice the four neat holes that had been punched into their left rear fender the night before.

He turned his back to the house to speak with the girl.

'The attitude makes you memorable. Lose it. You want to be invisible.'

'Why don't I wait in the car?'

Leaving her was unthinkable.

'Don't say anything. Avoid eye contact. She doesn't know

anything about us, so let me handle her.'

The girl laughed.

'That would be you all over it. I want to see that, you *handling* her. I want to see you *charm* her.'

He took the girl's arm and headed toward the house. To her credit, the girl fell in beside him without making a scene, slouching to change her posture the way he had showed her. Even with her wearing the oversized sunglasses and Dodgers cap, he wanted her inside and out of sight as quickly as possible.

Mrs. Arcano smiled wider as they reached the front door, welcoming them.

'Mr. Johnson?'

'Yes.'

'It's so hot today, isn't it? It's cool inside. The air conditioner works very well. I'm Imelda Arcano.'

After the nightmare in Malibu, Bud's office had arranged the new house on the fly--dropped the cash, and told Mrs. Arcano whatever she needed to hear, which probably wasn't much. This would be easy money, no questions part of the deal, low-profile tenants who would be gone in a week. Mrs. Arcano probably wouldn't even report the rental to the absentee owner; just pocket Bud's cash and call it a day. They were to meet Mrs. Arcano only so she could give them the keys.

Imelda Arcano beckoned them inside. The man hesitated long enough to glance back at the street. It was narrow and treeless, which was good. He could see well in both directions, though the small homes were set close together, which was bad. The narrow alleys would fill with shadows at dusk.

He wanted Mrs. Arcano out of the way as quickly as possible, but Mrs. Arcano latched onto the girl—one of those female to female things—and gave them the tour, leading them through the two tiny bedrooms and bath, the microscopic living room and kitchen, the grassless backyard. He glanced at the neighboring houses from each window, and out the back door at the rusty chain link fence that separated this house from the one behind it. A pale beige and white pit bull was

chained to an iron post in the neighboring yard. It layed with its chin on its paws but it was not sleeping. He was pleased when he saw the pitbull.

The girl said, 'Does the TV work?'

'Oh, yes, you have cable. You have lights, water, and gas—everything you need, but there is no telephone. You understand that? There really is no point in having the phone company create a line for such a short stay.'

He had told the girl not to say anything, but now they had a conversation. He cut it off.

'We have our cells. You can hand over the keys and be on your way.'

Mrs. Arcano stiffened, indicating she was offended.

She said, 'When will you be moving in?'

'Now. We'll take the keys.'

Ms. Arcano peeled two keys from her key ring, then left. For the first and only time that day he left the girl alone. He walked Ms. Arcano to her car because he wanted to bring their gear into the house as quickly as possible. He wanted to call Bud. He wanted to find out what in hell happened back there, but mostly he wanted to make sure the girl was safe.

He lingered at his car until Ms. Arcano drove away, then looked up and down the street again—both ways, the houses, between the houses—and everything seemed fine. He brought his and the girl's duffels into the house, along with the bag they had grabbed at the Rite-Aid.

The television was on, the girl hopping through the local stations for news. When he walked in, she laughed, then mimicked him, lowering and flattening her voice.

'*Hand over the keys and be on your way.*' Oh, that charmed her. That certainly made you forgettable.'

He turned off the television and held out the Rite-Aid bag. She didn't take it, pissed about him turning off the set, so he let it drop to the floor.

'Do your hair. We'll get something to eat when you're finished.'

'I wanted to see if we're on the news.'

'Can't hear with the TV. We want to hear. Maybe later.'

'I can turn off the sound.'

'Do the hair.'

He peeled off his shirt and tossed it onto the floor by the front door. If he went out again or someone came to the door he would pull it on. He was wearing a Kimber .45 semi-automatic pushed into the waist of his pants. He opened his duffel and took out a clip holster for the Kimber and a second gun, this one already holstered, a Colt Python .357 Magnum with the four-inch barrel. He clipped the Kimber onto the front of his pants in the cross-draw position and the Python on his right side. He hadn't chanced the holsters with Ms. Arsano but he hadn't wanted to take the chance of being without a gun, either.

He took a roll of duct tape from his bag and went to the kitchen.

Behind him, the girl said, 'Asshole.'

He made sure the back door was locked, then moved to the tiny back bedroom, locked the windows, and pulled the shades. This done, he tore off strips of duct tape and sealed the shades over the windows. He taped the bottoms and sides to the sills and jams, all the way around each shade. If anyone managed to raise a window they would make noise tearing the shade from the wall and he would hear. When the shades were taped, he took out his Randall knife and made a three-inch vertical slit in each shade, just enough for him to finger open so he could cover the approaches to the house. He was cutting the shades when he heard her go into the bathroom. Finally cooperating. He knew she was scared, both of him and of what was happening, so he was surprised she had been trying as hard as she had. And pleased, thinking maybe they would stay alive a little while longer.

On his way to the front bedroom he passed the bath. She was in front of the mirror, cutting away her rich copper hair. She held the hair between her fingers, pulling it straight from her head to hack it away with the cheap Rite-Aid scissors, leaving two inches of jagged spikes. Boxes of Clairol hair color, also fresh from the Rite-Aid, lined the sink. She saw him in the mirror and glared.

'I hate this. I'm going to look so Melrose.'

She had peeled down to her bra, but left the door open. He guessed she wanted him to see. The five hundred dollar jeans rode low on her hips below a smiling dolphin jumping between the dimples on the small of her back. Her bra was light blue and sheer, and the perfect color against her olive skin. Looking at him, she played with her hair, which now stuck out in uneven spikes. She fluffed the spikes, shaped them, then considered them. The lavatory and floor were covered with the hair she had cut away.

She said, 'What about white? I could go white. Would that make you happy?'

'Brown. Nondescript.'

'I could go blue. Blue might be fun.'

She turned to pose her body.

'Would you love it? Retropunk? So totally Melrose? Tell me you love it.'

He continued on to the front bedroom without answering. She hadn't bought blue. She probably thought he hadn't been paying attention, but he paid attention to everything. She had bought auburn, brown, and black. He locked and taped the front bedroom windows as he had done in the rest of the house, then returned to the bathroom. Now, the water was running, and she was leaning over the sink, wearing clear plastic gloves, massaging color into her hair. He wondered how long it would take for the red to be hidden. He took out his cell phone, calling Bud Flynn as he watched.

He said, 'We're in place. What happened last night?'

'I'm still trying to find out. I got no idea. Is the new house okay?'

'They had our location, Bud. I want to know how.'

'I'm working on it. Is she okay?'

'I want to know how.'

'Jesus, I'm working on it. Do you need anything?'

'I need to know how.'

He closed the phone as she stood, water running down the trough

of her spine to the dolphin until she wrapped her hair in a towel. Only then did she find him in the mirror again, and smiled.

'You're looking at my ass.'

The pit bull barked.

He did not hesitate. He drew the Python and ran to the back bedroom.

She said, 'Joe! Damnit.'

In the back bedroom, he fingered open a slit in the shade as the girl hurried up behind him. The dog was on its feet, squinting at something he could not see.

She said, 'What is it?'

'Shh.'

The pit was trying to see something to their left, the flat top of its head furrowed and its nubby ears perked, no longer barking as it tested the air.

Pike watched through the slit, listening hard as the pit was listening.

The girl whispered, 'What?'

The pit exploded with frenzied barking as it jumped against its chain.

Pike spoke fast over his shoulder even as the first man came around the end of the garage. It was happening again.

'Front of the house, but don't open the door. Go. Fast.'

The towel fell from her head as he pushed her ahead. He hooked their duffels over his shoulder, guiding her to the door but slipping ahead as he moved so much faster. He checked the slit he had made in the front window shade. A single man was walking up the drive as another moved across the yard toward the house. Pike didn't know how many more were outside or where they were, but he and the girl would not survive if he fought from within the house.

He cupped her face and forced her to see him. She had to see past her fear, and hear him. Her eyes met his and he knew they were together.

'Watch me. Don't look at them or anything else. Watch me until I motion for you, then run for the car as fast as you can.'

Once more, he did not hesitate.

He jerked open the door, set up fast on the man in the drive, and fired the Colt twice. He re-set on the man coming across the yard. Pike doubled on each man's center of mass so quickly the four shots sounded like two—baboombaboom—then he ran to the center of the front yard. He saw no more men, so he waved out the girl.

'*Go.*'

She ran as hard as she could, he had to hand it to her. Pike fell in behind her, running backwards the way cornerbacks fade to cover a receiver, staying close to shield her body with his because the pitbull was still barking. More men were coming.

When Pike reached the bodies, he dropped to a knee and checked their pockets by touch. He was hoping for a wallet or some form of ID, but their pockets were empty.

A third man came around the corner of the house into the drive, saw Pike, then dove backwards. Pike fired his last two shots. Wood and stucco exploded from the edge of the house, but the man had made cover and the Python was dry. The third man popped back almost at once and fired three shots – *bapbapbap* – missing Pike, but hitting his Jeep like a ball peen hammer. Pike didn't have time to holster the Python. He dropped it to jerk free the Kimber, pounded out two more shots, then ran for the car. The girl had the drivers' door open, but was just standing there.

Pike shouted, 'Get in. *In.*'

Another man appeared at the edge of the house, snapping out shots as fast as he could. Pike fired, but the man had already taken cover.

'*In.*'

Pike pushed the girl across the console, jammed the key into the ignition and gunned his Jeep to the corner. He four-wheeled the turn, buried the accelerator, then glanced at the girl.

'You good? Are you hurt?'

She stared straight ahead, her eyes red and wet. She was crying again.

She said, 'Those men are dead.'

Pike placed his hand on her thigh.

'Larkin, look at me.'

She clenched her eyes and kneaded her hands.

'Three men just died. Three more men.'

He made his deep voice soft.

'I won't let anything happen to you. Do you hear me?'

She still didn't look.

'Do you believe me?'

She nodded.

Pike swerved through an intersection. He slowed only enough to avoid a collision, then accelerated onto the freeway.

They had been at the house in Eagle Rock for twenty-eight minutes. He had killed three more men, and now they were running. Again.

He was sorry he lost the Colt. It was a good gun. It had saved them last night in Malibu, but now it might get them killed.