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Hell's Corner

Written by David Baldacci

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DAVID BALDACCI

Hell's Corner

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To Michelle

Twenty years of marriage and twenty books.

A ride of a lifetime with the woman I love.

1

Oliver Stone was counting seconds, an exercise that had always calmed him. And he needed to be calm. He was meeting with someone tonight. Someone very important. And Stone didn't quite know how it was going to go. He did know one thing for certain. He was not going to run. He was through running.

Stone had just returned from Divine, Virginia, where Abby Riker, a woman he'd met, lived. Abby had been the first woman Stone had feelings for since he'd lost his wife three decades prior. Despite their obvious fondness for one another, Abby would not leave Divine, and Stone could not live there. For better or worse, much of him belonged to this town, even with all the pain it had caused.

That pain might become even more intense. The communication he'd received an hour after returning home had been explicit. They would come for him at midnight. No debate was allowed, no negotiation suffered through, no chance of any compromise. The party on the other end of the equation always dictated the terms.

A few moments later he stopped counting. Car tires had bitten into the gravel that lined the entrance to Mt. Zion Cemetery. It was a historical if humble burial site for African Americans who'd gained prominence by fighting for things their white counterparts had always taken for granted, like where to eat, sleep, ride in a bus or use the bathroom. The irony had never been lost on Stone that Mt. Zion rested high above fancy Georgetown. It was not all that long ago that the wealthy folks here only tolerated their darker brethren if they wore a maid's starched uniform or else were handing out drinks and finger foods and keeping their obedient gaze on the polished floors.

Car doors opened and car doors closed. Stone counted three clunks of metal against metal. So a trio. Of men. They wouldn't send a woman for this, he didn't think, though that might simply have been the prejudice of his generation.

Glocks or Sigs or perhaps customized models, depending on whom they'd sent to do the deed. Regardless, the weapons would be chambering efficiently lethal ordnance. The guns would be holstered under nice suit jackets. No black-clad storm troopers rappelling from the skids of go-fast choppers in quaint, well-connected Georgetown. The extraction would be quiet, no important person's sleep interrupted.

They knocked.

Polite.

He answered.

To show respect.

These people had no personal grudge against him. They might not even know who he was. It was a job. He'd done it, though he'd never knocked beforehand. Surprise and then the millisecond-long pull of a trigger had been his MO.

A job.

At least I thought that, because I didn't have the courage to face the truth.

As a soldier, Stone had never had any qualms about ending the life of anyone who was trying to terminate his. War was Darwinism at its most efficient and the rules were innately commonsensical, kill or be killed chief among them. However, what he had done after leaving the military had been different in a way that left him permanently mistrustful of those in power.

He stood in the doorway, framed by the light behind him. He would have chosen this moment to fire, if he'd been on the trigger side. Quick, clean, no chance of missing. He'd given them their opportunity.

They didn't take it. They were not going to kill him.

It was actually *four* men, and Stone felt slight apprehension that his observations had been flawed.

The leader of the pack was trim, five-ten, short hair and efficient eyes that took in everything and gave nothing in return. He motioned to the vehicle parked by the gate, a black Escalade. There was a time when Stone would have rated a platoon of crackerjack killers coming for him by land, sea and air. Those days,

apparently, were over. A quartet of suits in a Cadillac on steroids was enough.

There were no unnecessary words uttered. He was expertly searched and ushered into the vehicle. He sat in the middle bench seat, a man on either side of him. He could feel each of their muscled arms as it lay against his. They were tensed, ready to block any attempt by Stone to get to their weapons. Stone had no thought of making such an attempt. Now, outnumbered four to one, he would lose that battle ten times out of ten, a blackened tattoo painted on his forehead, a third eye his reward for the fatal miscalculation. Decades ago it was probable that four men far better than these would lie dead as he walked away to fight another day. But those days were long in the past.

"Where?" he asked. He never expected a response and didn't get one.

Minutes later he stood alone outside a building virtually every American would recognize. He didn't stand there for long. More men appeared, better and higher-ranked than the ones who had just dropped him off. He was now in the inner ring. The personnel became more skilled the closer one approached the center. They escorted him down a corridor with numerous doorways. Every single one of them was closed, and it wasn't simply the lateness of the hour. This place never really slept.

The door opened and the door closed. Stone was alone once more, but again not for long. A door opened

in another part of the room and the man entered. He didn't look at Stone, but motioned for him to sit.

Stone sat.

The man settled down behind his desk.

Stone was an unofficial visitor here. Normally a log was kept of everyone passing through this place, but not tonight. Not him. The man was dressed casually, chinos, open-collared shirt, loafers. He slid glasses over his face, rustled some papers on his desk. A single light burned next to him. Stone studied him. The man looked intense and determined. He had to be to survive this place. To manage his way through the world's most impossible job.

He put down the papers; slid up the glasses onto the lined forehead.

"We have a problem," said James Brennan, the president of the United States. "And we need your help."

2

Stone was mildly surprised but didn't show it. Registering surprise was never good in situations like this. "A problem with what?"

"The Russians."

"All right." *Nothing new there*, thought Stone. *We often have problems with the Russians.*

The president continued, "You've been there." It wasn't a question.

"Many times."

"You speak the language." Again, not a question, so Stone remained silent. "You know their tactics."

"I used to know them. That was a long time ago."

Brennan smiled grimly. "Just like hairdos and clothes, if one hangs around long enough, things come back in style, including, apparently, espionage techniques."

The president leaned back and put his feet up on the *Resolute* desk that had been a gift from Queen Victoria to America near the end of the nineteenth century. Rutherford B. Hayes had been the first sitting president to use it, and Brennan the latest.

"The Russians have a web of spy rings entrenched in

this country. The FBI has arrested some of them, infiltrated others, but more are out there of which we have no information."

"Countries spy on each other all the time," said Stone. "I would be stunned if we didn't have intelligence operations going on over there."

"That's beside the point."

"All right," said Stone, who actually thought that *was* the point.

"The Russian cartels control all the major drug distribution pipelines in the eastern hemisphere. The monies involved are truly enormous."

Stone nodded. This he knew.

"Well, now they control it in the western hemisphere as well."

This Stone didn't know. "I understand the Colombians had been muscled out by the Mexicans."

Brennan nodded thoughtfully. Stone could sense in the man's weary expression the mounds of briefing books he had no doubt pored over today to understand this and a dozen other critical matters thoroughly. The presidency would suck up every ounce of energy and intellectual curiosity one cared to give the job.

Brennan said, "Pipeline trumps product, they finally figured that out. You can make the crap anywhere, but getting it to the buyer is the real key. And on this side of the world *Americans* are the buyers. But the Russians have kicked our southern neighbor's ass, Stone. They have killed and clawed and bombed and tortured and

bribed their way to the top, with the result that they are now in control of at least ninety percent of the business. And that is a major problem."

"I understood that Carlos Montoya—"

The president brushed this comment aside impatiently. "The papers say that. Fox and CNN broadcast that, the pundits fixate on it, but the fact is Carlos Montoya is done. He was the worst of the scum in Mexico. He killed two of his own brothers to win control of the family business, and yet he proved no match for the Russians. In fact, our intel leads us to believe that he's been killed. The Russians are about as ruthless as they come in the drug world."

"All right," said Stone evenly.

"So long as the Mexican cartels were the adversary it was manageable. Not ideal, of course, but it didn't reach national security status. We could battle it on our borders and in the metro areas where the cartels had infiltrated primarily through gang ranks. It's different with the Russians."

"Meaning a connection between the spy rings and the cartels?"

Brennan eyed Stone, perhaps surprised he'd made the connection so fast. "We believe there is. In fact, our belief is that the Russian government and their drug cartels are one and the same."

"That's a very troublesome conclusion," said Stone.

"And the correct one, we think. Illegal drug sales are

one of the leading exports from Russia. They make it in the old Soviet labs, and ship it all over the world through various means. They pay off the people they have to and kill the ones they can't bribe. The monies involved are enormous. Hundreds of billions of dollars. Too enormous for the government not to want its share. And there's more to the equation."

"You mean the more drugs they sell to America the weaker we become as a nation? It drains dollars and brain cells. It increases the level of both petty and major crime, taxes our resources, shifts assets from productive areas to nonproductive ones."

Again, Brennan looked surprised at Stone's nimble articulation. "That's right. And the Russians know something about the power of addictions. Their populace certainly abuses both drugs and alcohol. But we have detected a purposeful, enhanced effort by the Russians to basically overwhelm America with drugs." The president sat back. "And then there's the obvious complicating factor."

"They're a nuclear power," replied Stone. "They have as many warheads as we do, in fact."

The president nodded. "They want back in the top tier. Perhaps they want to be the sole superpower, supplanting us. And on top of that they are vastly influential in the Middle and Far East. Even the Chinese and Israelis fear them, if only for their unpredictability. The balance is getting out of whack."

"All right. Why me?"

"The Russians have gone back to old-school tactics, Stone. From your era."

"I'm not that old. Aren't there spies from my era still at the Agency?"

"No, there's really not. There was a hiring freeze before 9/11 and a lot of voluntary and involuntary retirements of older personnel. After those planes hit the buildings, there was considerable ramp-up. The result is that three-quarters of the CIA is comprised of twenty-somethings. The only thing they know about Russia is they make good vodka and it's cold there. You *know* Russia. You understand the trenches of espionage better than most of the people sitting in the executive offices at Langley." He paused. "And we all know you have special skills. Skills this country spent good money instilling in you."

The guilt factor. Interesting.

"But all my contacts there are gone. Dead."

"That is actually an advantage. You go in with a blank slate, an unknown quantity."

"How will we start?"

"By you going back in unofficially, of course. There will be training, getting you up to date on things. I suspect you will be ready to leave the country in a month."

"Going to Russia?"

"No, Mexico and Latin America. We need you on

the ground where the drugs are coming through. It'll be rough work. And dangerous. I guess I don't need to tell you that." He paused and his gaze flicked to Stone's close-cropped white hair.

Stone easily interpreted the observation. "I'm not as young as I was, obviously."

"None of us are."

Stone nodded, his mind racing ahead to the logical conclusion of all this. He really only had one question. "Why?"

"I already told you why. In many respects you're the best we have. And the problem is very real and getting worse."

"Can I hear the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?"

"Why I'm really here."

"I don't understand," the president said irritably. "I thought I had made myself clear."

"The last time I was here I told you some things and intimated other things."

The president made no reaction to these words.

"Then I was offered the Medal of Honor."

"And you turned it down," Brennan said sharply. "A first, I believe."

"You have to turn down what you don't deserve."

"Bullshit. Your actions on the battlefield more than earned it."

"On the battlefield, yes. But in the greater scheme of

things, I didn't deserve it. And with an honor like that, *all* things have to be considered. Which I think is why I'm really here."

The two men stared at each other across the width of the *Resolute* desk. By the look on his face the president very clearly understood what "all things" meant. A man named Carter Gray. And a man named Roger Simpson. Both prominent Americans. Both friends of this president. And both dead. Directly because of Oliver Stone, who'd had good reason to do it, but he'd still killed them. And there was really no legal or even moral excuse for that. Even as he'd pulled the trigger on each man, Stone had known that.

But it still didn't stop me, because if anyone deserved killing those two did.

"You saved my life," Brennan began in an uneasy tone.

"And I took two others."

The president abruptly rose and walked over to the window. Stone watched him closely. He'd said it. Now he was just going to let the other man talk and let the chips fall.

"Gray was going to kill me."

"Yes, he was."

"So your killing him didn't bother me as much as it ordinarily would have, to put it bluntly."

"But Simpson?"

The president turned to look at him. "I did some

research on that. I can understand why you would have wanted to eliminate the man. But no man is an island, Stone. And cold-blooded killing is unacceptable in a civilized world."

"Unless it's been authorized by appropriate parties," Stone pointed out. "By people who have sat in the chair in which you now sit."

Brennan snatched a glance at his desk chair and then looked away. "This is a dangerous mission, Stone. You will be given every asset you require to succeed. But there are no guarantees."

"There are never any guarantees."

The president sat back down, made a steeple with his hands, possibly an impromptu shield between himself and the other man.

When Brennan didn't say anything, Stone did. "This is my penance, isn't it?"

The president lowered his hands.

"This is my penance," Stone said again. "In lieu of a trial that no one wants because too many unpleasant truths will come out for the government, and the reputations of certain dead public servants will be tarnished. And you're not the sort to order my execution because, as you said, that's not how a civilized people resolve their differences."

"You don't mince words," Brennan said quietly.

"Are they true words or not?"

"I think you understand my dilemma."

"Don't apologize for having a conscience, sir. I've served other men who held your office who had none at all."

"If you fail, you fail. The Russians are as ruthless as they come. You know that better than most."

"And if I succeed?"

"Then you will never have to worry about your government knocking on your door again." He leaned forward. "Do you accept?"

Stone nodded and rose. "I accept." He paused at the door. "If I don't make it back, I would appreciate it if my friends were told that I died serving my country."

The president nodded.

"Thank you," said Oliver Stone.

3

The next night Stone stood where he had for decades, in seven-acre Lafayette Park across from the White House. It had originally been called President's Park, but now that title encompassed the White House grounds, Lafayette Park and the Ellipse, a fifty-two-acre parcel of land on the south side of the White House. Once part of the White House grounds proper, Lafayette Park had been separated from that august property when President Thomas Jefferson had Pennsylvania Avenue plowed through.

The park had been used for many purposes over two centuries, including as a graveyard, a slave market and even a racetrack. And it was also notable for having more squirrels per square inch than any other place on earth. To this day, no one knew why. The place had changed dramatically since Stone first planted his sign in the ground, the one that read *I Want the Truth*. Gone were the permanent protestors like Stone, their ragged tents and their boisterous banners. Majestic Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House was closed to vehicular traffic and had been ever since the Oklahoma City bombing.

People, institutions and countries were scared, and Stone couldn't blame them. If Franklin Roosevelt had been alive and occupying the White House once more he might have invoked his most famous line: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." But even those words might not have been enough. The bogeymen appeared to be winning the war of perception in the hearts and minds of the citizenry.

Stone glanced to the center of the park, at the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans and America's seventh chief executive. Jackson sat on a pediment of majestic Tennessee marble. It was the first statue of a man on horseback ever cast in the United States. The monument was surrounded by a low wrought-iron fence, with a scattering of ancient cannons inside this space. Four other statues memorializing foreign Revolutionary War heroes anchored each corner of the green space.

North of Jackson were rows of colorful flowers and a large newly placed maple. Yellow tape was wound around flex poles set in the ground ten feet out from this tree because of the open hole several feet deep and three feet wider than the huge root ball. Next to the hole were blue tarps with the displaced dirt piled up on them.

Stone's gaze rose to elevated points where he knew the countersnipers were stationed, although he couldn't see them. He assumed that many of them were probably drawing practice beads on his head.

Hell's Corner

No trigger slips please, gentlemen. I like my brain right where it is.

The state dinner at the White House was winding down and well-fed VIPs trickled out of the "People's House." One such guest was the British prime minister. His waiting motorcade would carry him on the brief trip to Blair House, the residence for visiting dignitaries, which was located on the west side of the park. It was a short walk, yet Stone supposed government leaders could not safely walk anywhere anymore. The world had long since changed for them too.

Stone turned his head and saw a woman sitting on a bench near the oval-shaped fountain on the east side of the park midway between Jackson and the statue of Polish general Tadeusz Kościuszko, who'd helped the fledgling English colonies free themselves from British rule. The irony that the leader of that same monarchy was now staying at a place overlooking this monument was not lost on Stone.

The woman was dressed in black slacks and a thin white coat. She had a large bag next to her. She appeared to be dozing.

That's odd, thought Stone. People did not doze in Lafayette at this time of night.

She wasn't the only person in the park. As Stone looked toward the trees on the northwest side of the park he spied a man in a suit carrying a briefcase. His back was to Stone. He'd stopped to examine the statue of German army officer Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben,

who'd also helped the colonists kick Mad King George's royal behind more than two centuries ago.

And then Stone noticed a short man with a large belly entering the park from the northern end where St. John's Church was located. He was in jogging attire, though he looked incapable of even walking quickly without collapsing from a coronary. What looked to be an iPod was strapped to a belt around his ample middle, and he had on earphones.

And there was a fourth inhabitant of the park. He looked like a street gang foot soldier, dressed in prison shuffle jeans, dark bandanna, muscle shirt, camouflage jacket and stomp boots. The ganger was walking slowly right through the middle of the park. This too was odd since gangers almost never came to Lafayette Park because of the heavy police presence. And that presence was strengthened and even more vigilant tonight for a very simple reason.

State dinners put everyone on edge. A spring in the step of a patrolling sentry. A lawman's hand a smidge closer to the trigger. A heightened tendency to shoot and pick up the pieces later. If a leader went down, no one escaped responsibility. Heads and pensions rolled.

But Stone had not come here to think about those things. He had come here to see Lafayette Park for the last time. In two days he would be leaving for his monthlong training session. And then it was off to Mexico. He had already made up his mind. He would not tell his friends, the members of the Camel Club. If

he did they might sense the truth, and nothing good could possibly come out of that. He deserved to be sacrificed. They didn't.

He drew one more long breath and looked around. He smiled as he saw the gingko tree near the Jackson statue. It was across from the maple that had just been installed. The first time he'd come to this park it had been fall and the gingko leaves were a gloriously bright yellow. It was magnificent. There were gingko trees all over the city, but this was the only one in the park. Gingkoes could live well over a thousand years. Stone wondered what this place would look like in ten centuries. Would the gingko still be here? Would the big white building across the street?

He was turning to leave this place for the final time when his attention focused on what was coming down the street right toward him.

And his beloved park.