

The Cleaner

Chapter One

Denver was not Hawaii. There were no beaches, no palm trees, no bikinis, no mai tais sipped slowly on the deck of the Lava Shack on Maui. Instead there were people dressed like they were expecting the next ice age, directing planes down taxiways lined with mounds of freshly plowed snow. There wasn't anyone wearing a bikini within five hundred miles. Worse yet, while it was only 3:00 p.m. local time on Thursday afternoon when Jonathan Quinn's flight began disembarking, a layer of gunmetal-gray clouds made it seem like it was almost night.

It was definitely vacation over, back to work.

After he exited the plane, Quinn made his way toward the front of the terminal, pulling his only piece of luggage, a carry-on suitcase, behind him. Not far beyond his arrival gate was a small kiosk. He stopped and bought an overpriced cup of coffee.

As he took a sip he glanced around. There seemed to be an equal amount of people walking to and from the gates. A typical busy afternoon in a typical busy international airport.

But it wasn't typical people he was looking for. He did a lot of traveling and knew from experience that you could never be sure who you might run into. In his business, that wasn't necessarily a good thing. But his arrival appeared to have been unobserved. He took another sip of his coffee and moved on.

Instead of following the crowd and proceeding to the passenger pickup area, Quinn found a seat next to a set of arrival and departure screens near the ticketing and check-in counters. He pulled out the book he'd been reading on the plane, *South of the Border, West of the Sun* by Haruki Murakami, and started in where he'd left off. When he finished the book an hour later, two dozen additional flights had arrived. He closed the novel and returned it to his bag. Time to call in.

"I thought you said you'd arrive first thing this morning," the voice on the other end of Quinn's phone said, irritated.

"Selective memory, Peter," Quinn replied. "Those were your words. Is my ride here?"

"It's been there since eight a.m.," Peter fumed. He told Quinn where to find the car, then hung up.

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The ride turned out to be a blue Ford Explorer. The vehicle came equipped with leather seats, an AM/FM radio, a CD player, and two men, neither of whom felt it necessary to give Quinn their names. He designated them the Driver and the Other One.

As Quinn climbed into the back seat, the Other One tossed him a nine-by-twelve-inch padded manila envelope. It was about an inch thick and weighed maybe a pound. Quinn started to open it.

"Don't," the Driver said. He was glancing at Quinn in the rearview mirror.

"Why not?" Quinn asked.

The Other One turned toward him. "Not until we're gone. Instructions."

Quinn rolled his eyes and set the envelope on the seat beside him. "I wouldn't want you to get in trouble."

* * *

They drove in silence for the next hour, through Denver and into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. It was dark now and Quinn was getting hungry. The last meal he'd had was on the plane somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, if you could call the less-than-inviting beef Stroganoff he'd been served a meal. But he kept his hunger to himself. He knew if he didn't, his two new companions might decide that they were hungry, too. God forbid he be forced to eat with them.

Instead, he tried to imagine that the pine trees they drove by were palm trees, and that the cloudy sky was just the regular afternoon rainstorm moving onto the island. After a few minutes, he gave up and just stared out the window. The dirty snow along the side of the road was a poor substitute for the beaches of Kaanapali.

Finally, the Driver exited I-70 and drove a mile down a two-lane road into the darkened wilderness, before turning left onto a narrower, snow-packed road. A hundred yards ahead, a green Ford Taurus sedan was parked off to the side, tucked up against the encroaching woods. The Driver stopped behind it and turned the SUV's engine off. If Quinn didn't know better, he would bet he was about to be removed permanently. Deserted road. Two silent goons. A getaway car. Classic assassination scenario.

Game over, buddy. Thanks for playing, but you lose.

And though he knew he had nothing to worry about, he tensed a little, preparing himself just in case.

Without a word, both the Driver and the Other One opened their doors and got out. As they did, a blast of cold air swept into the SUV. Quinn watched as they walked over to the Taurus and climbed in. A moment later, the sedan roared to life. Without even giving the engine time to warm up, the Driver executed a quick U-turn, then sped off, back toward I-70. Quinn chuckled to himself. This sort of cloak-and-dagger bullshit was really kind of amusing, if you thought about it. Asinine, but amusing.

He got out of the Explorer, his teeth clenching against the frigid air. The leather jacket he was wearing was a lousy barrier to the cold, but it was all he'd had with him when his vacation on the islands was cut short.

He hurried around the front of the vehicle and got into the driver's seat. The moment he had the door closed and the engine started again, he flipped the heater on full blast, letting the warm air fill the cabin. One of his first stops would be a place he could buy a winter coat, maybe even a couple of sweaters. Thermals, too. God, he hated cold weather.

Once he was reasonably warm, Quinn reached into the back and retrieved the padded envelope. He poured the contents onto the passenger seat. Inside were two business-size envelopes, a folded map, and three sheets of paper. Two of the sheets were a wire-copy news report about a fire in some place called Allyson. Apparently a vacation rental had burned down, and the person who'd been staying there—an unnamed man—had died.

Quinn picked up the final piece of paper and scanned it. It was the job brief containing his instructions and a limited amount of background information. Peter, as always, was trying to control what Quinn knew. Still, it was more information than the news article had revealed.

The dead guy's name was Robert Taggert. Quinn's assignment was to determine if the fire had indeed been an accident—which the local authorities were leaning toward—or something else.

That was all there was. Nothing else on Taggart. No helpful hints as to what Quinn should look for. Just an address—215 Yancy Lane—and a contact name with the local police force. On the surface, a piece-of-cake job. No reason for Quinn to have been brought in. Which to Quinn meant there was _probably more to it than the brief was letting on.

He grabbed the map and unfolded it. The location of the fire was marked with a small red X. It was at least a couple hours' drive from Quinn's current position. He set the map down and opened the first envelope. Cash, about five grand. A week's worth of expense money if nothing too costly came along. Longer if Quinn didn't have to pay anyone off. And if this really turned out to be a one- or two-day job, a little extra cash for his own pocket.

The other envelope held two identifications, both with Quinn's picture. The first was a Colorado driver's license. The second was an authentic-looking FBI ID. He'd played a Fed before, but it had been a while.

His new name, he was amused to see, was Frank Bennett. Peter had a thing for classic pop singers. Quinn guessed that "Tony Sinatra" would have been a little too obvious.

He set everything back down, then reached under the driver's seat looking for the one thing that hadn't been in the packet. When he pulled his hand back out, he was holding a soft leather case. He unzipped it and found what he expected inside, a 9mm SIG Sauer P226 and three fully loaded magazines. It was his weapon of choice. He put his hand back under his seat and pulled out a second pouch, this one containing a sound suppressor designed to attach to the end of the gun's barrel. Anything else he needed would be in the standard surveillance kit that was undoubtedly in the back of the vehicle.

He stored the gun, mags, and suppressor in the glove compartment, then put the Explorer in drive.

Chapter Two

Breakfast the next morning was scrambled eggs and sausage, in the restaurant at the Allyson Holiday Inn, where he'd spent the night. He sat alone in a booth, with a copy of the local paper on the table next to his plate.

It was full of the usual stuff small-town papers were interested in. A couple of short blurbs made up the international section: one about curbing ethnic tensions in Europe, and another on the continuing chaos in Somalia. The national news items were longer stories, with footers directing readers to other pages for the rest of the story—an ailing Supreme Court justice, a corporate fraud trial in Chicago, and a rundown of the expected highlights in the President's upcoming State of the Union address.

But it was the local stories that commanded the bulk of the front page. Rather, one local story. The Farnham house fire. The story was a follow-up to the piece that had been included in Quinn's brief. It contained nothing new. Just old information reworked to sound fresh and feed the curiosity of the local population. The fire investigators were calling the blaze an accident. Faulty wiring. One tourist dead. There was little else. Taggart's name still hadn't appeared. That seemed a bit unusual, but Quinn suspected Peter might have something to do with it.

A waitress walked by carrying a pot of coffee. She stopped when she saw what Quinn was reading. "That was awful, wasn't it?" she asked.

He looked up. Her nametag identified her as Mindy. "The fire?"

"Yeah," she said. "That poor man."

"Did you know him?"

"No," she said. "He might have come in here to eat, I guess. A lot of tourists do. Coffee?"

"Please," Quinn said, pushing his cup toward her.

She refilled it. "What I can't help wondering is if he has a family somewhere. Maybe a wife. Maybe some kids." She sighed. "Awful."

"It sure is," Quinn said.

She shook her head. "They say it happened while he was sleeping. Probably a nice guy, just enjoying a vacation, then suddenly he's dead."

She moved on, refilling a few more cups of coffee on her way back to the register. Happens all the time, Quinn thought to himself.

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The Allyson Police Department's headquarters was located about a mile from the Holiday Inn. Quinn's contact was the chief of police, a guy named George Johnson.

Quinn flashed his FBI ID to the desk sergeant and was quickly ushered into Chief Johnson's office. The chief stood as Quinn entered.

Johnson was a tall man. He'd probably been in good shape once, but now carried a few extra pounds from too many years behind a desk. His face showed the strain of his job, too, eyes baggy and dark, jowls heavy and drooping. But his smile was genuine, and his handshake was firm. Quinn took both as signs of a man who liked his job despite its difficulties.

"Agent Bennett," Chief Johnson said. "I can't say that I've ever really had to deal with the FBI before. But I guess this is a day of firsts for me."

The chief motioned to the empty chair in front of his desk. As Quinn sat down he wondered what Chief Johnson meant by "a day of firsts," but knew better than to ask right away.

"What can I do for you?" Johnson said as he eased himself back into his chair.

"Quite honestly, Chief, I'm not sure you can do anything," Quinn began. "I'm not really here on official Bureau business."

Johnson eyed Quinn curiously. "Then why are you here?"

"It's about the fire you had the other day."

"The Farnham fire," the chief said as if he'd expected it all along.

"That's right," Quinn said. "I'm here about the victim. Robert Taggart."

The chief paused, obviously surprised Quinn knew the man's name. "What about him?"

"He's apparently a relative of a special agent back in D.C. Somebody a bit higher up the food chain than I am. Since I was in the area on other business, they asked me if I could swing by and check things out. It's more soothing someone's concerns than anything else. I'm sure you have everything well in hand."

The chief was silent for a moment. "Is that why that other guy was out here earlier this morning?" _

Now it was Quinn's turn to hesitate. "I'm not sure I know who you're talking about."

The chief opened the center drawer of his desk and pulled out a business card. Reading, he said, " 'Nathan S. Driscoll. Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.' " "May I see that?" Quinn asked.

The chief shrugged, then handed the card to Quinn. "I've never talked to anyone from ATF before either," the chief said.

The card was high-quality, printed on government-issued card stock, and complete with the ATF symbol embossed on one side.

"I don't know him," Quinn said. "But could be he's here for the same reason I am. If my guy back in D.C. was desperate enough, I'm sure he'd call in as many favors as he could." Quinn handed the card _back to Johnson. "What time was he here?"

"Left no more than thirty minutes ago," Johnson said.

Outwardly Quinn forced himself to smile. "I hate to make you go over this stuff again, but would you mind?"

The chief shook his head. "No problem. But like I said to Agent Driscoll, there's really not much to tell. It was an accident. That's it."

"I heard that. But Andersen—that's the guy back in D.C.—he wasn't satisfied. I guess when all your information is coming from what you read in the paper, you just want to make sure you're not missing something."

"If he's getting his information from the paper, how did he know Taggart was the one killed?"

"That's a great question," Quinn said honestly. "I have no idea."

The chief seemed to give it some thought. "Maybe it was the sister."

"The sister?" Quinn asked.

"Taggart's sister," the chief said. "She's the only one we told."

Quinn nodded. "That makes sense. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

The chief shrugged, then said, "It's not much."

"Anything will help."

Johnson pulled a thin file off the top of a stack on the right side of his desk. He perused its contents for a moment, then gave Quinn a halfhearted smile. "As I said, it's not much. The fire was apparently electrical. We think it started in the living room. A space heater that caught fire or something similar. Taggart was in

the upstairs bedroom. He was probably overcome by smoke before he could get out. By the time the fire department got there, it was too late. Once the flames were finally out, there wasn't really much left of anything."

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