

MR BLANK



**JUSTIN
ROBINSON**

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To the prettiest one.
(That's you, Lauri. That's always you.)



EVERY CONSPIRACY NEEDS A GUY LIKE ME.

I do the scut work, the crap no one else wants to do. I don't fly the black helicopters, I don't mutilate any cattle, and I sure as hell don't kill anybody. But if you need your lone nut's gun conveniently lost, I can do that. If you need a witness to get a weird visit from someone who might or might not be from the government, I have a suit one size too small and some gray pancake makeup in my trunk. I can't find the Ark of the Covenant, but if you need it FedExed somewhere, I'm your guy. If you need someone found, followed, called, hung up on, put in the dark, initiated, or just driven to the airport, I can do that, too. It's these kinds of unglamorous errands that keep the shadow governments moving, and without guys like me, nothing would get done at all.

Yeah, every conspiracy needs a guy like me. Problem is, they all have one.

Me.

I'm a Rosicrucian, a Freemason, a Templar, and a Hospitaller. I have links to double-black agencies in the CIA, the ONI,

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the NSA, and the Secret Service. I'm connected to the Mexican Mafia, the Triad, the Cosa and Kosher Nostras. I'm an agent of the Vatican, the Servants of Shub-Internet, a Discordian, and an Assassin. I'm a Knight of the Sacred Chao, a Brother of the Magic Bullet, and an Illuminated Seer of Bavaria. I can find Symbionia, Thule, Shangri-La, and the entrance to the Hollow Earth on a map. I know who really killed both Kennedys, MLK, Marilyn Monroe, and Castro. Yeah, Castro's dead—that double was doing a mean Tevye on the dinner theatre circuit when we found him. I've met Little Green Men, Atlanteans, and two of Oswald's clones. I've seen Bigfoot's W-2. The only thing I've never met is a vampire, because there's no such thing, no matter what anyone says.

I'm a member of these organizations, but I'm not high on the totem pole. I'm pretty much one step up from innocent bystander in all of them. Ever been to a fancy party? One of the really nice ones where waiters in crisp black and white wander around with trays of crab puffs and champagne flutes and there's not a single red plastic cup to be seen. Think of one of the waiter's faces. You can't, can you? No one can. The human mind has finite space to use, and it's going to ignore whatever it thinks it can, and that includes people who do menial work. Safer for the waiters, too—and no one at that party was planning to sacrifice them to some Elder God they just resurrected out of old computer parts. Anonymity is better than a bullet-proof vest down in the information underground.

I live in Los Angeles. Since the beginning, LA has been open territory; that's how how Mickey Cohen ran it for years with only Dragna giving him a hard time. The Cosa Nostra is just the most visible of underground secret societies, and they've always been trendsetters, so before long, every conspiracy worth the name had an office out here. They used the city as a place where business could be conducted with the

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side benefits of mild weather, good food, and lots of ridiculously attractive people with serious self-esteem problems.

I work for every conspiracy, secret society, and mystery cult you can think of; a few you've never heard of; and at least one I wish didn't exist. I do the work no one else can be bothered to do. Adding up all the jobs, the hours aren't bad and the pay is damn good. There's just a lot of info to keep straight.

Such as the question I'm always asking myself: *What does this guy think my name is?*

"Sam, good to see you," he said. Sam. That was it. Sam Smiley of Palos Verdes.

The man asking the question was a Satanist, and I'm not being judgmental. He was honestly a loyal member of the First Reformed Church of the Antichrist. Like any person of faith, he was inordinately proud of his membership in good standing, despite the fact that all he had to do was act superior toward anyone not in his sect. Well, that and the occasional blood sacrifice.

Now, when I say "Satanist," most people picture someone like Ming the Merciless drinking red wine out of a virgin's skull. This guy looked like an entertainment lawyer, which if you ask me is about a hundred times worse.

He and I weren't on great terms. He thought I was a dilettante, which I was, and I thought he was the kind of guy who'd take advantage of a drunk woman with Farrah hair, which I had no evidence for or against. In any case, I didn't think he really meant that it was good to see me, but whatever. It's not like there was a Satanist softball team we played on together. Besides, if he wanted the goat's blood, he could play nice.

"Delivery's here," I said.

He squinted at the truck behind me. "I can see that."

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Task number one for the day was: pick up goat's blood, deliver goat's blood, don't ask questions. Which was good, because I didn't have any that I wanted answered.

Mission accomplished, I drove the truck back into the city and dropped it off. My car was waiting for me: a hybrid with a couple of bumper stickers on the back. One look in my car and I was a slob. A closer look, and I was a collector. Those were real Styrofoam Big Mac boxes, and yes, I knew the one McDonald's that still used them. There was the open briefcase stuffed with papers. There was the hula girl on the dash, the rosary hanging from the rearview, brass washers in the change tray. My radio still had the factory settings, which in LA meant five Spanish oompah stations and KROQ, which meant I owned an iPod.

On the stereo: "More Than a Feeling."

My second job for the day was pure information. A contact of mine had something he just *had* to tell me. Ever been to a bar in Eagle Rock before noon? Probably one of the more depressing places on the planet. The lights were low, so when that door opened into the yellow morning, it was like a supernova in your retinas. The few guys in there were so listless they made Keanu Reeves look like Samuel L. Jackson. In other words, no one searching for my contact would look for him there.

"Hey, Hasim, how's it hanging?"

"Tripped over it on the way in." Hasim was the kind of guy that gets randomly selected for a strip search every time he flies. It's ridiculous. He was born in Lebanon, but there's no bigger Clipper fan on the planet. Of course, the guy *was* an Assassin, so maybe strip-searching him was a good idea.

"What do you have for me?"

Hasim took a sip out of the tiki party in front of him. "Big contract came down the pipes. That name you flagged for me.

Quackenbush.”

“Contract on Quackenbush?”

He nodded. “Already taken, too. By a bad, bad man.”

“Who?”

“Tariq Suliman.”

My voice, in a monotone, echoed through the bar. “That’s fabulous news.” Tariq Suliman was a spook story to most of the information underground, and half of them thought he was made up to keep everyone scared of the Assassins. I met the guy once. It was like meeting a combination of the Zodiac and the Dude.

“I checked the name, Quackenbush. It says he’s some re-tired security consultant?”

I nodded. Hasim didn’t need to know the whole story behind Irving Quackenbush. Really, no one actually knew the whole story, or if they did, they weren’t copping to it. The rumors said he was the guy behind Dulles, the man responsible for turning the wartime OSS into the peacetime CIA. Quackenbush supposedly retired in the ’70s and went into the private sector. He started up a private security firm, which is what you call mercenaries in mixed company, and used his contacts to get every plum government contract he could. If there’s something worth guarding in the US, Quackenbush’s guys are the ones guarding it. Calling Irving Quackenbush a “retired security consultant” was sort of like calling Genghis Khan a tourist with a mild interest in politics. But for me, the most important thing was that on the first Tuesday of every month, there was an envelope full of cash waiting for me at the South Pasadena Post Office, courtesy of Irving Quackenbush. The guy wanted eyes on the street, and two of those eyes were mine.

“So what do you care if some security guy is getting the Al-Amout Handshake?” Hasim asked.

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“Who set it up?” I knew he wasn’t going to answer.

He smiled and shook his head. “Think I’m going to tell that to an infidel?”

I stood up and dropped two twenties on the table. “Smoke something before you head back home. You smell like a distillery.”

Hasim made a gesture that convinced me he was drunker than he was letting on. I thought about reminding him that the Prophet forbids wine, but chances are the Assassins were too high to care.

I called Quackenbush’s office and got the girl with the sexy voice. I was sure what I pictured when I talked to her wasn’t even close to reality. She probably looked like Conan the Barbarian.

“Yes?” she said. It was very nearly a purr. I thought about promising her some insurance money and an anklet.

“Assassins have a target on Quackenbush. Tariq Suliman took the contract.”

“Thank you, Mr. Levitt.”

“No problem. Listen, I...”

Click. Buzz.

Yeah.

Third job was easier, but it was also more annoying. First, I had to talk to someone I found intensely unpleasant. Oana Constantinescu had taken the bronze in the women’s individual all-around in Sydney and was still bitter about it. She was tiny, had olive skin, and despite a neck like a bodybuilder’s thigh, was pretty enough. She wore her hair in a ridiculous ponytail with bangs that made me think of the ’80s. At first glance, she looked fifteen. Second glance aged her five years, third a couple more. She always had a look on her face like she disapproved of everything she could see, and was imagining a few more things to be pissed off with. Oana was one of

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the more mobile members of V.E.N.U.S., which is to say she didn't own a Rascal.

She wanted to meet me at a vegan restaurant in Alhambra. I ate before I got there.

I sat down across from her. "Hey, Oana." We were the only two people in there who weren't Buddhist monks.

She looked me over. "Hello, Jonah. I was beginning to think you wouldn't show." Her Romanian accent made her sound like Dracula.

I was ten minutes late. I let her eat her stir-fry and contemplate that for a minute.

She slid an envelope across the table. "Our employers want you to deliver this."

I picked it up without even the briefest flicker of curiosity; whatever was in there was between V.E.N.U.S. and the Clone Wolves. I pocketed the envelope and left without saying anything that she could misinterpret.

I drove to the appropriate address at Caltech. My contact was waiting outside. When he saw me, he shuffled over, but never made eye contact. His name was Brian. He was like a socially awkward wall. I handed him the envelope. He took it and walked away. Didn't say a word. I shrugged.

Fourth job was even easier, although no less annoying. It required a drive out to Azusa, which is a special kind of hell. I heard one time that Azusa, which is an entirely created suburb east of LA, was named because it had everything from A to Z in the USA. Yeah, I know.

The Brotherhood of Sisterhood's headquarters was a mechanic's garage that used to be a gas station. The front was decorated with this avant-garde artwork that looked like something you'd find in Pinhead's bathroom. There was a car with its engine being rebuilt next to where the pumps used to be. I'm not a car guy, but I knew '70s muscle when I saw it.

The greasemonkeys were a pair of blondes that looked like they should be giving dumb answers to dumber questions. The truly weird thing was they both had Flock of Seagulls haircuts.

“Zeke!” the first one said. She seemed happy.

The other one looked like she wanted to see what my insides looked like. They didn’t bother to check for tails, never did, and brought me to the trunk of the car they were working on.

The happy one had GOOD tattooed on the knuckles of her left hand and FISH across the right. She wore a charm bracelet on her wrist that featured what looked like a Nazi iron cross. I didn’t bring that up. Never talk about religion, politics, or hate group affiliation.

“Ladies,” I said. I winced immediately. I sounded like a sex criminal. “Uh... what am I here for?”

“Be careful. We’re pretty sure the vampires are on the move.”

I rolled my eyes. What was it about vampires that turned everyone into fourteen-year-old girls?

They gave me the goods and my instructions, and I hit the road. Getting to the reservoir part of Silver Lake was also annoying as hell, but again, not difficult. First, it meant a little under an hour in the car, and then it was going to involve barbed wire and trespassing. Silver Lake is a section of town that was first settled by Mexicans, then gays, then finally hipsters—three tribes I didn’t really get, but all of which had excellent taste in food. The park there is formed of three parts. Down below there’s a rec center. A hill leads up to the second part, a fenced-off dog park. These two sections are next to a fence and a steep hill that leads up to the reservoir. Past that, there’s some scrub and trees, which is where the Flock of Seagulls wannabes wanted their box deposited.

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I wasn't looking forward to this part. I parked over in the residential sections, where there was some open land. Pine trees gave me a blanket of needles that led out to a grassy section. Not exactly incognito, but who wanted to break into the reservoir? I hoped that the case wasn't full of LSD or something. They had to have grown out of that by now. At least, I hoped so.

I took the floor mat out of the backseat and threw it over the barbed wire at the top of the fence. I pushed the box up over the fence and let it slam down onto the other side. I followed it, and then stashed it just out of sight behind some bushes.

I hopped the fence again and retrieved my mat. The shadows were getting a bit longer and I really wanted to be done for the day. Problem was, I'd saved the worst job for last. I had to head to West LA, which is always a great idea around four in the afternoon. There's an old LA joke about the 405 freeway. They say it's called that because you only go "four o' five miles an hour." I'd say that's being generous. There are people in LA who spend their entire lives avoiding the 405. It's considered a mark of intelligence.

Fortunately, I only needed to go two or so exits, which only took two or so hours. Driving on the west side is hell, because the average driver makes around half a million a year and drives like Jack Bauer with diarrhea. They can afford accidents, but what they can't afford is being late. It's not a good idea to point out that accidents take time, either.

I pulled up a couple of blocks from the police station. I threw on a tie and sportcoat I had stashed in the trunk and clipped my badge to the belt. Breaking into a police station would be hard with a fake badge. Fortunately, I sidestepped that by having a real one. Not that I had made it through the academy—that probably would have killed me. No, I got it

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a couple years back when Big Oil controlled the cops. Their crowning achievement was replacing a third of the police fleet with SUVs.

I walked right through the front door. A combination of things got me past the desk sergeant. The badge was the most obvious, although equally as important was the haircut: vintage Ronald Reagan, although some of the younger kids thought it was Stephen Colbert. None of it would have worked without the look on my face, my speed, and my posture. If cops carried clipboards, I would have been carrying one. The trick is to seem annoyed and in a hurry. People don't hassle you. Of course, this doesn't hold one hundred percent true. You also have to look vaguely like you belong. For instance, if you're trying to get to a Thuggee chief, board shorts and a Party Naked shirt will get you strangled and dumped in the Ganges. But if you've got the turban and your ceremonial kukri, you're all set.

Fortunately, none of the cops looked for a gun. I wasn't carrying one. Never do. I flashed my badge at anyone who gave me more than one glance. I had a pretty convincing ID in there if they cared to look, but no one did. I made my way to the case files. From there, it was a matter of waiting until the shift change and walking right past.

I didn't know whose semen it was. I didn't ask. It was just a series of test results that all led to the same guy. I uploaded it into their system. Whatever the hell guy who'd felt the need to spray his genetic code over that ceiling fan was off the hook, and I had just set up someone else to take the fall in his place. I hoped it was someone that at least slightly deserved it, but if I'd been the type to actually do anything about injustice, I would have found another line of work.

Dinnertime took me to a pizza parlor in Westwood. I was near enough to UCLA so that the place was full of college girls

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and I got to look at nubile flesh and feel old. It was a good combination. I had to wait for traffic to die down before I went home, anyway.

Home was in Los Feliz, a neighborhood right next to Hollywood that I was getting too old to live in. If you've seen *Swingers*, you've seen Los Feliz. I was on the creaky side of thirty, but not too far gone yet. Eventually, I'd need to buy a house just so I would have a lawn that I could keep local kids off. Along the way home, I stopped at the Echo Park Post Office to pick up a wad of cash from the Knights of Malta. I always hoped they'd get letterhead with a falcon on it, but they lacked both a sense of humor and an appreciation for the classics.

I lived in a Spanish-style complex with nice big apartments set around a central courtyard. I was on the second floor in back. From my front windows, I could see the entry into the courtyard, and my back windows dropped into the alley behind the place, beyond which was a series of easily hoppable wooden fences and one-stories with enough greenery to hide in. My living room had a window that opened up onto a tiny wrought-iron balcony. I kept two things out there: a chair and an Army-surplus footlocker with a rope ladder in it. Those were my concessions to paranoia, but I'd been doing this for seven years, and I had yet to get any inconvenient visitors.

The living room was pretty obviously a bachelor pad. Not that I'm a slob—it's just that I've never really decorated. There was a comfortable sofa and a recliner that didn't match. I had my framed *Reservoir Dogs* and *Big Lebowski* posters that I'd gotten in college (the *Princess Bride* one hid in the bedroom). A giant TV was hooked up to the stereo. I hadn't replaced the venetian blinds on all the windows because I liked the way the shadows made me feel like a noir

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anti-hero. I had an aquarium with three axolotls in one corner, and my girlfriend, the computer, in another. To the right, a small kitchen where I kept my frozen meals and the New Beverly schedule. To the left, a hallway that led to a bathroom and bedroom that would have depressed me if I ever thought about it for more than a few minutes at a time.

My bedroom closet was stacked waist-high with small bills.

I had neighbors, but we never got past the waving stage. I would have liked to have kept it at slight nods and grunts under the breath, but there was nothing I could do about that. The damage had been done. The guy that smelled like Old Spice, the single mom, the hipster couple: they could do without knowing the guy in 4B.

I booted up the computer and pulled a case from under the couch and opened it. Cellphones. These were not disposable. Each was registered to one of my aliases. I was gonna need a bigger case. I replaced the phones mapped to the organizations that I'd worked for that day. Then I dialed voice-mail on each phone in the case as I checked my fifty-odd email accounts. When I was finished, I had my jobs for tomorrow. A couple simple ones: a Huxley and a Bavarian Telephone. A light day. Perfect for a Friday.

Maybe I could catch a movie.