

**The  
Whisper  
Legacy**

by

***Tj O'Connor***

## Chapter One

### *Marlowe “Lowe” Curran*

Getting old is not for the meek. Especially when in your youth, you were an adventurer and risk taker—a man of mystery and worldliness. You know, stuff that made your heart rumba and your pulse sizzle. Having to perform menial, boring deeds in your later years is tough. Especially when you sit around with good bourbon and reminisce about the old days. You tend to drink too much and pine for those glory days and lost adventure. So much that it eats at you. Not that I’ve ever done that, mind you. Just saying, you know, it happens to *other* people.

For instance, if anyone had told me twenty years ago that one day I’d be standing outside an old, two-story brick Rambler in Leesburg, Virginia, at ten in the evening, wearing old, raggedy pajamas, an ill-fitting robe, and carrying a dog leash—absent the dog—I would have been offended. Such a scenario might have suggested I’d lost my faculties too early in life. Perhaps I’d gone crazy or became homeless. Of course, I’d never seen a homeless person wearing pajamas and a robe at ten in the evening, crazy or not. Still, you get my concern.

I’m Curran. That’s *Ker-in*, not *Kuur-an*. It’s Irish—not that it matters. But pronunciation is important.

Don’t get the wrong idea about me. I don’t normally dress up in old pjs and walk neighborhoods with a dog leash. It just seemed like the thing to do tonight. I’m also not that damn old, either. At present, I’m pushing my early-mid-fifties and have a full head of dark, reddish hair, and almost always in need of a shave. It’s not that I’m trying to be suave and cool. I’m sorta lazy about shaving. I’ve been told I look like the dashing Sean Bean. No, not *Mr.*

*Bean*—Sean Bean. Anyway, that’s me and I’ll explain more later. For now, my pjs were falling down and the ratty robe I had on wasn’t fitting all too well, either.

My feet were sore from my ambling down a block of crumbling sidewalk in the middle of this beautiful August night. Of course, August in Virginia was hot, humid, and, well, hot. My ensemble was cooler than jeans and sneakers, but it did not include slippers. Barefoot was not accidental. It’s for effect.

See, I was going for that crazy old dude persona.

Most concerning to me was my partner. Or lack thereof. Actually, he was my long-time friend and co-conspirator in many such episodes of my life. He’s missing. Stevie Keene should have been here an hour ago and running countersurveillance. He should have been watching my back and ensuring I wasn’t walking into a gunfight or a pair of handcuffs.

He wasn’t.

Stevie hadn’t responded to my cell calls. He also wasn’t in the van parked across the street from our target like he should be. That was bad. Real bad. I was going in blind.

“Stevie? Where in the flying monkeys are you?” I whispered to his voicemail again. “You’re late. I can’t wait any longer. If you get here while I’m inside, stay put and watch my escape route. And brother, you better have a good story—like being abducted by aliens.”

I peeked at the old Rambler’s front windows and dangled the dog leash. I called out as loud as I could, “Rufus? Come on boy. I’ve got cookies.”

No, I had no dog named Rufus. I also had no cookies. Try to keep up.

The house windows were blacked out—odd even for this part of town. I knew someone was inside. First, a thin sliver of light escaped through a corner of the window. Second, the electric meter around the side was whirling away like a NASA satellite station. Third, and

perhaps most important, I'd seen the short, pudgy, receding hairline kid with his embarrassing attempt at a beard slip inside an hour or so ago. He looked like he'd glued stray hair here and there on his cheeks. His eyes were inset, or maybe his fat cheeks hid them.

Billy Piper reminded me of that dumpy loser who tried to smuggle dinosaur eggs off the island in *Jurassic Park*. He got eaten in the first thirty minutes of the movie. Served him right—poor defenseless dinosaurs.

“Rufus? I’ve got cookies.” I banged loudly on the door and rattled the doorknob. “Don’t hide on me, Rufus. Don’t be a bad dog.”

If Piper was trying to be stealthy, he failed. I heard him approach the door inside before he peeled back the window covering and glared out.

“What are you doing, old dude? Get lost.”

As I’ve already said, I’m not that old. But, given I’d put on a shaggy gray wig and plastered fake beard crap on my face, I give it to him.

A dog barked then yelped as the face pushed closer into the window. “Shut up, mutt. What good are you? This old fart is almost in the house and you just noticed?”

Time to play the role.

“You got my Rufus? Give me my dog.” I banged on the door again. “Now, before I call the cops. Dog napper.”

“It’s my dog, old dude,” Piper yelled. “Get off my property or I’ll kick your old ugly butt.”

I held up the leash and took a step back, turned in a slow circle to appear dazed. Then, I began to cry. It took nearly a full minute before Piper opened the door and stepped cautiously outside.

“What the hell is wrong with you, old dude? My dog isn’t Rufus.”

I turned to him, reached up to wipe my tearless eyes, and let my bright red identification bracelet show below my pajama sleeve.

“Where am I? Who’s Rufus?” I turned in a circle again and let a few more whimpers out. “Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

At first, Piper turned red-faced with anger. Then, when he saw my medical bracelet, he reached out and grabbed it. “Oh, you’re one of those Alzheimer’s people. Get the hell out of here. Understand? Go home. Shoo.”

Home, indeed. “This is my home. What are you doing here?”

Beside Piper, a brawny black lab trotted into the doorway and barked. Not a threatening bark. More like an obligatory “woof.” After two such woofs, he trotted up to me and sat wagging.

“Useless dog. What are you doing inside?” He grabbed the dog by the collar and dragged him past me. He shook him several times, cursing. After berating him again with another smack to his hindquarters, he found a short chain affixed to a big walnut tree in the front yard and clipped it on his collar. “Flippin’ mutt. You’re supposed to warn me before they get to the door.”

“Don’t hurt my Rufus,” I yelled.

The chain was twisted and wrapped around the tree. The lab only had about two feet of room to move. There was no water bowl and no signs of one anywhere. The wear marks on the grass suggested the dog spent too much time chained to that tree.

What an asshole.

“What are you doing to my Rufus?” I growled. “Where’s his food and water?”

“Screw the dog. Maybe now he’ll bark when he’s supposed to.” Piper shoved me sideways and reentered the house. “Get the hell out of here or I’ll call the cops.”

“Call? I didn’t call you.”

“Jesus, I don’t have time for this.” He squared off on me in the doorway. “Get lost, old dude.”

“What about my Rufus?” I shoved Piper back a step. That surprised him. I guess old men with Alzheimer’s should be weak and defenseless. “Get out of my house.”

Piper reared back to strike me and held his fist in a threat. “I’m gonna put you straight.” His smartwatch buzzed wildly and flashed like Dick Tracey was calling. If you don’t get the shout out to Dick, forget it. You’re way too young to understand. “Go dammit.”

“Not until I get my Rufus.”

His watch signaled him again.

“Ah, shit. No. No. No.” Piper shoved me sideways and I feigned a fall just inside the doorway. He kicked at me and barely connected as I parried with my arm. “Get outta here, old dude. Wander or doddle your way back where you came. I got my own problems.” He shoved me out the doorway, swung the door to shut it, and ran down the hallway.

I, not being a confused old geezer, lodged my foot in the door before it closed. With no more than a sore big toe when it hit, I kept the door ajar.

I followed his footfalls to the back of the house. I might be committing a few felonies soon, so I slipped on leather driving gloves to eliminate the chance of any fingerprints. After all, my felony count had just started and the night was young.

I know cool TV stuff like that.

At the end of the hall, I descended the stairs into a dark basement. There, a small room lay ahead, lighted by a single overhead light that bathed the room in a hazy illumination. There were only a few old boxes stacked around and a bicycle hanging on a wall rack. Ahead was a heavy, steel door, still ajar. A carnival of flickering lights escaped through the opening. Beyond, I heard Piper cursing and babbling in a panicked voice.

I eased inside and found a larger section of the basement. The space was lined with soundproof tiles and heavy industrial carpeting. There was a refrigerator and small stove on one side of the room, and cabinets of computers and electronics on the other. Between them was a command console and two gamer's chairs facing a wall of computer monitors and large video screens. The walls not blocked by computer gadgets were covered with movie and book posters of every major spy thriller I'd ever heard of. One was a poster of a pale-faced Alec Guinness wearing oversized, dark-framed glasses—an aged, probably original collector's poster of John Le Carre's *Smiley's People*.

Holy crap, Billy Piper was a wannabe spy.

"Shit, they caught me." Piper stood in front of a shelf of electronics and spun around when I stepped inside. "What the hell, old dude?"

We had to talk about that old dude thing. I was getting there, but really, how rude?

"I told you what would happen if you didn't leave." Piper balled his fist and came toward me. "It's gonna cost you. You should've left to find Rufus."

"Who the hell is Rufus?" I asked.

I don't know if it was my sudden calm, steady voice, or the silenced .22 pistol in my hand—aimed at him—that startled him the most. Either way, I had his attention.

“What the ... who are you, old dude?” He stared at the pistol. “You don’t have Alzheimer’s.”

“Nope.”

“Who then?” He took a step back as his face tightened and filled with so much anger his cheeks were ablaze. “Ah, shit. Are you with them?”

“Them?” I waived my pistol back and forth to keep his attention. “Explain.”

“Screw you.” He spun around as his computers began wailing some kind of alarm. “Come on man, I got bigger problems than anything you can bring. If you don’t get outta here, those problems are going to be yours, too. Go find Rufus or whatever. Get out.”

I aimed the pistol at his head. “I think not, Billy.”

He spun back around at me. “You know me? Did they send you?”

“Oh, I know you.” Boy was he slow. “I’m here about money and information. I have no idea who ‘they’ are. Although, ‘they’ might be like my clients. You hacked them and now they want their files and money returned. Right, Chip Magnet?”

“Oh, man. You *are* them.” His face blanched and the tough guy drained away. “Dude, I got money. I can pay. I pay you and you say I wasn’t home. Deal?”

Desperation replaced his bravado he’d taunted me with moments ago. “Chip Magnet, are you for real? What a totally bullshit handle, Piper.”

He shrugged. “It means—”

“I know what it means, idiot. Look, Billy, you hacked the wrong people—my people. I’m here to fix things. And in the future—if you have one—you might take care who you hack. Some folks out there don’t go to the police. They don’t hire lawyers or call the credit bureau.”

“Huh?” His eyes locked on my pistol as it raised to eye level. “What?”



“They send me.”

## Chapter Two

### *U.C.*

The man in the expensive Saville Row suit and Gucci loafers sipped his vodka martini and settled back on his king bed, pillows plumped and perfectly positioned by the staff. He glanced around his Waldorf Astoria suite feeling very pleased with himself. Never had his accommodation been as nice. Never had his payment been as nice—nor as often—as with this assignment. He wondered how long it would be before it would all end.

The man wore a collarless shirt that fit snug over ripped muscles. His head was mostly bald but for close-cut, thinning dark hair around the sides and back. His face was narrow and strong, accentuated by a salt and pepper beard that was three days of growth meticulously trimmed for effect—a dangerous, stay-clear effect. In the years he'd operated at the higher end of his profession, he found his persona and image as daunting to his prey as his skills. The million-dollar benefactors he serviced expected a little refinement and image, not to be confused with Hollywood assassins cloaked in black leather feigning brooding personalities. His clients demanded thoughtfulness, the ability to move in any surroundings—Washington dinner clubs or Bangkok brothels.

U.C. had mastered the chameleon persona years before.

The satellite phone on his nightstand vibrated. He scooped it up. The Controller didn't like to wait. Not for the million-dollar price tag for U.C.'s services. Glancing at the screen, the

call wasn't from the Controller, but one of the minions sitting in a lesser hotel room somewhere in the bowels of Alexandria, Virginia.

"Yes?"

The voice was frantic. "U.C., I found him. There's a problem."

"Problem?" U.C.—bestowed upon him many years prior because of his preference to operate against his targets *Up Close*—sipped his drink. "If you found the target trying to hack our servers, just send me the address and—"

"He got through."

"What?" U.C. bolted upright and spilled his drink. "You told me the security was impenetrable."

Silence.

"Well?"

"Someone left some nodes insecure, maybe. I don't know."

U.C.'s mind raced. "An inside job?"

"Maybe."

He closed his eyes. "Sweet Jesus."

"U.C.?" The caller hesitated. "The hacker got all the way into the E-Suite."

He was on his feet now, moving around the room gathering his things—the most important ones—his shoulder bag, jacket, and silenced pistol.

"Did you hear me?"

U.C. grunted, "Text me the address. Get four men there fast. I'll meet you there."

Hesitation, then, "Orders?"

"Don't be stupid."

U.C. tapped off the call and instantly activated the satellite text program. As he did, the Sat phone concurrently launched an encryption program that NSA would take years to break—another luxury of working for the Controller.

He typed out a simple message—*Urgent. Hack successful. Compromised. I'll contain.*

Miles away, across the Potomac, the Sat Text arrived at the Controller's private office. It took only moments to return a response.

U.C. rarely initiated such calls. Rarely one marked with "Urgent."

The Controller—*Define compromise.*

U.C.—*Total.*

The Controller—*Confidence?*

U.C. finished his text and exited his suite—*Whisper is compromised.*