

**JAMES
SWALLOW
OUTLAW**

ZAFFRE

First published in the UK in 2021 by

ZAFFRE

An imprint of Bonnier Books UK
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square,
London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-83877-461-5
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-83877-462-2

Also available as an ebook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

For everyone who fights for truth

ONE

The house in the photograph was little different from the others facing the ocean, along the breezy stretch of Cape Cod's coastline.

Each home they passed resembled something constructed out of the same kit of parts – uniformly two storeys tall, sporting shingled roofs turned brown-grey in the dying daylight. Spotless white close-board fences hemmed in unimaginative lawns and the occasional topiary ball of greenery. Trees, where they were, stood spindly and low to the ground, forced down by the constant wind off the sea. Vehicle headlights illuminated them in brief, skeletal flashes as the bulky black Cadillac SUV negotiated turns on the unmarked road.

Hiroshi Saito studied the picture of the house on his smartphone, the device strapped to the inside of his forearm in a pouch. He flicked the screen with a gloved finger and the image swiped away, replacing it with the face of the target.

The new photo was something from an official document, perhaps a passport or a security ID, and it made Sean Harlow look washed-out and old. Saito's briefing said the man was in his late forties, but the image aged him another decade. He had deep-set eyes and a long gaze with no focus.

Did Harlow know someone wanted him dead? Saito tried to put himself behind that face and see things from his perspective, to understand what sort of man he was. It would help when the moment came to kill him.

Saito darkened the smartphone's screen, covering it with the cuff of his windbreaker, and concentrated on letting his vision adapt to the evening gloom. Inside the SUV, the only light came from the dashboard dials set to night-mode red. The splashes of crimson over the assassin and the other men riding with him gave their

faces a faintly demonic cast. The Japanese man was the smallest of them, a spare but solid figure of below average build, with a round and inexpressive face.

In the seat next to Saito, the driver, who hadn't uttered a word since the team had gathered in Fairhaven two hours earlier, now broke his silence.

'Next turning. One minute out.'

He pointed with a finger over the steering wheel. He had a low New England drawl and a face that was all hard angles. The driver's manner suggested to Saito that he had been police at one point in his life, before circumstances drew him into a darker profession. They shared a similar origin.

In the back of the Cadillac, the other two members of the kill team zipped up their jackets and checked their pistols. Both were broad and muscular; one man sported a dull white scar on his narrow chin, and the other man had a heavy, Neanderthal brow. They had an air of boredom, as if participating in this was somehow beneath them. It made Saito frown.

He'd expected the usual protocol on arrival in Massachusetts, but it was not to be. Typically, Saito would lead a unit of private contractors sourced from the Moscow-based mercenary group his paymasters favoured. Admittedly, he disliked the Russians for their coarse demeanour, but he respected their skills.

These men worked directly for one of the committee, for the American, and they were coloured by his arrogance. Their employer had insisted on having his own people be part of any sanction taking place on United States soil, and none of the other members of the committee had seen fit to question that.

The American didn't trust Saito. He didn't trust foreigners as a matter of policy, and he made that clear through his business transactions and the politicians he backed. And yet he was happily part of a cabal of men from across the globe who enriched one another through their clandestine dealings, nationality be damned.

The American, like the rest of the committee, put ideology aside where money was concerned. Still, this was his territory, so Saito was beholden to his wishes.

He followed along with the pre-mission rituals, making sure that the sound suppressor was fully set to the muzzle of the Glock 17 semi-automatic on his lap. Satisfied, Saito slipped the gun into a deep inner pocket of his windbreaker and waited. He pulled an elasticated half-mask of black cloth up over the lower half of his face, and the others did the same.

The SUV slowed to a crawl, rolling quietly down the side road, finally coming to a halt a hundred metres short of the driveway leading to the target's house. Saito exited silently, the other armed men following. As they moved in, the vehicle reversed, easing back into the thickening darkness. It would wait at the turning, out of sight of the main road, ready to whisk them away once the objective was complete.

They advanced, sure-footed and careful to stick to the shadows. Ahead, the house from the photograph was a charcoal sketch with soft, homely glows burning in the windows. A spotlight embedded in the lawn threw brightness up a flagpole, atop which the Stars and Stripes snapped and crackled in the stiffening wind.

'Movement,' said the man with the scar, indicating a direction with a terse nod of the head. Saito saw a figure inside the house walk past one of the windows, out towards the eastern corner where the study was located.

He'd committed the floor plan of Harlow's home to memory on the flight into Boston, and he knew that there was a side door closer to the study. A blink of hazy, distant white flickered in the corner of Saito's vision, and he saw the stroke of the beam from Chatham Light far down the shoreline as it crossed the trees and vanished out to sea. He waited for it to pass again, and in the moments between the lighthouse's sweeps, he moved across the lawn to the house. The other men came up in formation, moving to their designated

positions with their weapons out and ready. The long-nose shapes of their silenced pistols stayed down, close across their chests.

Saito didn't anticipate needing their talents tonight. They were there to cover the front and rear of the building, in case the target got past him and tried to flee. But that wasn't a likely scenario. Harlow was an analyst, a desk jockey, and unlikely to put up a fight.

At the side door, Saito pulled a pump tube the size of a lipstick from a sleeve pocket and sprayed the handle and hinges with a fine mist of liquid lubricant. He let the lighthouse sweep past twice more, and then put his free hand on the handle, applying slow, steady pressure. It turned gently and soundlessly, the door coming open.

Saito opened it enough so he could slip through the gap, conscious that the wind would push a draught of cold air in with him. He pulled the door shut and drew his pistol.

He was in a corridor that ran the length of the house. At the far end, flickering light from a television in the lounge threw odd shadows on the wall, and Saito heard muffled voices from whatever programme was playing.

The door to Harlow's study was five metres away, slightly ajar. As he watched, the man moved past the gap, lost in thought, tapping a pencil to his lips. He appeared to be looking for something.

Three steps brought Saito to the study door. He put the flat of his hand on the unpainted wood, raised the gun to chest height, and pushed forward.

Harlow sat in a mesh-back office chair at a side-on angle, leafing through a stack of papers. The small room was built around a desk and workspace, and every square metre of the walls groaned with heavily laden bookshelves, pictures and other ephemera. The man caught the motion from the corner of his eye and jolted back in shock, into the narrow depths of the study.

‘Wait!’ Harlow’s hands came up in a warding gesture, as if that could stop the bullet that would end him.

Saito had no intention of waiting, and his finger tightened on the trigger. He had no interest in who Harlow was, past any data relevant to the task of efficiently ending his life. He managed a communications office for one of the American security services, he had previously served in the US Navy on board nuclear submarines, he was a divorced father of two sons, and he owned a decrepit boat and three firearms, the closest of which was in a gun safe two rooms away.

Sean Harlow’s life was surplus to requirements. Someone wanted him removed from the world, perhaps because he was an impediment to the ambitions of others or because he knew something he was not meant to know. It didn’t matter.

Saito was the instrument of that cold and uncompromising truth, and if the assassin held any disquiet about that, for now he repressed it. Until Harlow spoke again.

‘Please don’t kill them.’ He whispered the plea, turning it into something intimate between gunman and victim. Into Saito’s hesitation, he added more. ‘You’ve come for me. Okay. But they’re not part of it. Please.’ His eyes welled with shimmering tears and he swallowed a sob. ‘Please don’t.’

Harlow’s gaze flicked to a framed photograph on the wall. Two teenage boys with big smiles, unlucky enough to have been born with their father’s pudgy nose but blessed with laughing eyes. For a fleeting moment, Saito saw a memory of his own family reflected in those happy faces, and he didn’t like what it stirred in him.

From down the hall, he heard the television switch channels abruptly, and the cries of delight from two young voices.

Harlow’s sons were supposed to be with their mother in Hartford this weekend, as the details of their separation agreement stipulated. The data provided by the American’s people had stated categorically that the target would be alone here for the

next forty-eight hours. The expected outcome was that he would be found dead some time early next week, after being reported missing by his employers or discovered by a curious neighbour.

The plan did not account for two more targets, both young men whose social media usage was considerable, whose silence would be noted by their friends within hours, not days, whose eliminations would greatly complicate this operation.

And even as part of Saito's mind calculated these new variables, another part dredged up the old memory that he could only ever half-bury, half-ignore.

'Please don't hurt my boys,' Harlow implored him. 'I won't resist you. I won't cry out or try to run. But give me your word, I'm begging you. They're all I have.'

'You have my word,' said Saito. The voice came from him, but it was as if someone else spoke. A version of Hiroshi Saito that didn't exist anymore. 'They will live.' Saito had broken protocol, but now it was done, he felt compelled to add something else, like a confession. 'I have a child of my own. A girl.'

'What's her name?'

Saito shot Harlow through the forehead and he fell back, the frangible bullet from the Glock tearing into his brain matter, killing him instantly.

'Rumiko,' said the assassin, uttering her name for the first time in a very long while. 'My daughter's name is Rumiko.'

Saito slipped carefully out of the study and moved back towards the side door. The plan had been to terminate Harlow and then turn over the house to make it appear as a robbery-murder. Harlow was a man of good means, and he was known to possess a collection of military challenge coins of some moderate value. Saito's post-kill actions would be to set the scene for the local police, take the coins and leave enough false clues to fog what had really happened.

He removed a sealed plastic bag from a pocket and scattered the contents, a collection of hairs and fibres painstakingly gathered from the furniture of a homeless shelter a few miles away in New Bedford. Perhaps he could still salvage something of the plan.

Then a suffocated yell from the lounge told him that would not be possible.

Saito drew himself up and walked to the end of the corridor. He found the man with the thick brow standing over two cowering youths on their knees before him. The older of the boys was already injured, bleeding badly from a cut on his cheek where the other man had pistol-whipped him.

‘The fuck is this?’ said the gunman, gesturing at the youths with his pistol. ‘They ain’t supposed to be here.’

‘Your orders were to wait outside,’ Saito insisted.

‘This messes shit up,’ said the other man. ‘You gonna deal with it?’

Saito nodded at the door. ‘Go. Leave them. They are not important.’

‘What?’ The other man’s jaw worked beneath his half-mask. ‘That’s not gonna work. You got a problem doin’ kids? I’ll handle it.’

‘I said *we leave them*,’ insisted Saito, as an old fury stirred in him.

‘What you say means dick to me,’ the gunman replied, and fired two shots into the younger boy. The first went in the belly, the second through his neck. The older brother let out a howl and grabbed at his dying sibling, and a third bullet went through the back of the other youth’s skull.

Harlow’s sons slumped against each other and bled out there on the wooden flooring, while the gunman moved to the coin collection displayed on the wall and tore down the racks.

Saito watched the two boys die. The old fury in him ossified, becoming thick and sluggish, as if the blood in his veins had turned solid.

Finally, he found his voice again. ‘There . . . was no need for that.’

‘Seriously?’ The gunman hesitated, sizing him up. ‘Next time you come to America, bring your goddamn balls.’

Saito still had his pistol in his hand, and for a fleeting moment he thought about putting a round in the middle of that thick brow. But the fire and the fuel he needed to complete that action were absent.

He couldn’t muster the rage. It had passed through him like liquid mercury, impossible to grasp. Instead, Saito felt hollow inside, sickened at himself.

At length, he spoke.

‘Finish up, then. Make it look convincing.’

Saito left through the front door, summoning the scarred man with a low whistle. After a few minutes, the other gunman followed him outside, carrying the coin collection under one arm. As the door clicked shut, Saito saw that he had made a mess of the lounge to sell the lie they wanted the police to accept.

The attenuated beam from the lighthouse at the Coast Guard base washed over them as they pulled away in the vehicle, heading back towards the Mid-Cape Highway. The coin collection went into a lake in the nearby state park, and once they were heading west, Saito made the call.

He checked the time as the encrypted Blackphone connected. It would be before midnight in Paris, where the man who held his leash waited.

Pytor Glovkonin answered on the second ring.

‘*Report,*’ he demanded.

Anyone else might have delegated the job of taking the call to a subordinate, and, given the man’s great wealth, Glovkonin could certainly have afforded to do so. But the Russian oligarch did not trust anything that was done at arm’s length, so he micromanaged and interfered with every element of his operations.

Glovkonin liked to say that he 'kept the chain short' but in reality, his deep-seated suspicious nature was one of the core forces that drove him. Saito had come to understand this after he had been indentured to the Russian as his personal hit man and troubleshooter.

'It is done,' said Saito. 'Do you have further orders for me?'

There was a pause, and Saito could picture the Russian considering that question.

'You've been difficult to locate recently. Off the grid, as it were. Why is that?'

Saito worked hard to keep the sudden tension he felt from his voice.

'I have been dealing with other tasks. Preparatory work. Prevention of blowback.'

The last phrase would hopefully be enough to put off Glovkonin from pressing the point. A large part of Saito's job was ensuring his primary was isolated from any connection to the illegal actions committed at the Russian's behest.

'Good.' Saito waited for Glovkonin to end the conversation, but the line stayed open. *'I take it you played well with my American colleague's men? There were no complications?'*

'Nothing that need concern you.'

Saito knew that Glovkonin would want a better explanation than that, but this wasn't the time.

'Good,' repeated the Russian. *'I look forward to telling him. I think he wanted it to be a mess, in point of fact. He's quite out of his depth over here with us. Having something to complain about would mollify him.'*

As often happened, Saito felt as if Glovkonin was talking to himself, performing out loud for some invisible audience, rather than to his assassin. When he didn't reply, the Russian became bored.

'I will require your presence in a few days. Make sure you are ready to move when I make contact.'

‘Understood.’

Saito was about to cut the call, but Glovkonin – as always – wanted the last word.

‘Whatever you are doing on your own time,’ he said coldly, ‘if it interferes with my requirements, I will have no further use for you.’

The line went dead, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

If the day came when Glovkonin no longer considered Saito a useful asset, the assassin would be crossed off as easily as Harlow had been. If he was considered disloyal, he would be ended.

Saito glanced at the other men in the car. Perhaps people like them would be sent to do it. The committee had many resources to call upon, as well as more insidious ways to hurt him.

He reached for those buried memories again, glimpsing them in his thoughts like part of a rocky shoal breaking the surface of black waters.

His daughter’s face. The last thing she said to him. The years that had passed since he breathed the same air as her.

Saito’s lost anger rekindled. *I am already disloyal*, he told himself. *I have already defied my masters.*

The question now was, how far would he take it?

The driver eyed him. ‘Boss cracking the whip on you, huh?’

Saito turned away, ignoring the comment.

‘Get me to the airport.’

Three hours later, Saito was on the red-eye overnight to Cairo, and he dwelled on his unanswered question every step of the way.