

## The Silent Watchman

### Part I. Recruit

#### 4 KILLED, 2 WOUNDED IN DOWNTOWN SHOOTOUT

(Special to the Mid-Country Clarion) This morning at the corner of Main and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets, four men died and two, including Police Chief Devon Xander, were wounded as a fusillade of bullets from automatic weapons filled the air. Dead were Reuben Ulrich, night auditor at the Marcus Hotel on Main Street, and three men yet to be identified. Chief Xander and Patrolman Timothy Murphy were wounded in the exchange of gunfire between the police and the three unidentified assailants, and were later treated and released from City Hospital.

#### Previously

Average height and weight, nondescript, someone you'd pass on the sidewalk but not notice. Oh, you'd avoid the space occupied by the mass, but nothing to call to mind.

Wearing a raincoat in the rain, topcoat on a frosty morning, midnight blue suit at a formal reception, everything fitting the time and the place and the situation.

For Amos Sanson, it had begun in the farms and forests of rural Appalachia. Later, in the jungles and mountains of Southeast Asia and Latin America, stealth and observation enabled him to locate enemy and opposition threats to his comrades and employers. Finally, his talents were honed to exquisite perfection in urban hunting grounds throughout the world. Now, he is a calm and capable sensing platform, unobtrusively observing whats and wheres, and whens and whos and hows ... the whys belonging to someone else. The present only ... the past and future belonging to someone else.

The business district was three-square blocks of quaint shops and lawyers' offices, with a sprinkling of colorful restaurants for icing. It was a small city, comfortable for the residents but perhaps a bit less so for strangers. From his place in a small corner room on the second floor over a bookstore on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Main, a place from which he could see everything that moved on the street from the hotel around the corner to the bank, Amos Sanson watched.

Among the things he noticed right away was a bay-windowed office across the street from the bookstore. When the venetian blinds were open, Sanson saw another watching. The window extended from the wall of the building, affording the man standing near it a clear view each way along the street. The sign over the door beside the window read simply, "POLICE," and the man standing there gazed out, seemingly at nothing in particular but with a commanding familiarity.

From the hotel on Main Street, Sanson's target, Reuben Ulrich (though Sanson neither knew nor cared to know his name) walked furtively around the corner, past the police station, to deposit the day's cash receipts in the downtown branch of a local bank. Ulrich was vulnerable, and afraid. He had betrayed people who brutally punished disloyalty. So, he had sought refuge in the small city and in a job that seemed to provide anonymity. He appeared to be unaware of the surveillance team following him in a smooth, well-orchestrated ABC operation.

Watching closely, Sanson recorded his observations in both sight and sound, and uploaded the information to a computer address that changed with every transmission. He wondered whether the man in the bay window had noticed the ABC surveillance; and if he did, what he might do about it?

With a shrug, Sanson returned to his observations, moving to keep the target and the surveillance team in view ... and to avoid the observer in the bay window.

Reuben Ulrich stepped out of the front entrance to the bank and turned right toward the police station and the intersection of Main and 4<sup>th</sup>. ABC moved with him, two following and one across the street. When Ulrich reached the street corner ABC walked rapidly toward him, drawing submachine guns from under their coats and loosing well aimed, disciplined shots, dropping him into a widening pool of his own blood.

Very quickly, Chief Devon Xander and Patrolman Tim Murphy ran out of the police station with guns drawn and turned toward the intersection. Quickly assessing the situation, Xander and Murphy fired at the three gunmen. Two of them were struck down immediately, but the third staggered both officers with short bursts.

With sirens wailing, police cruisers converged on the intersection, blocking the roadways as they screeched to a stop. Patrolmen leapt from their cars and loosed a barrage of bullets at the standing gunman. He spun then joined his companions face down on the sidewalk. The ABC team, expecting to act swiftly and escape before the local police could react, had underestimated the small city police force, a force prepared for rapid response and professional action by Chief Xander.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. Reuben Ulrich lay on the sidewalk with the three gunmen. The chief and his deputy shakily approached the intersection, holding free hands against bleeding wounds. The other officers formed a protective shield around the deadly scene and looked to the wounds of Xander and Murphy.

Amos Sanson had recorded the attack upon his target and the deadly encounter between ABC and the police. He uploaded the information, and after a short pause received a terse reply, “Leave now!” Immediately, and without the observation equipment and computer, Sanson went down the back stairs and silently disappeared into the maze of small shops and seedy hotels bordering the city center.

Later, in a small hotel outside the police cordon, Sanson watched the newscasts and read the Clarion accounts. They showed nothing beyond the bare events of the day, but the reporters did not hesitate to pose questions and suggest answers. A difference between Sanson and the press was that he did not question.

Three days later, Chief Xander walked into the café at the intercity bus depot, his left arm in a sling, noting that a neatly dressed elderly man was sitting alone on a counter stool near the entrance to the passenger loading platform, gingerly cradling a cup of coffee in both hands, looking directly into the mirror behind the counter as if deep in thought. On the stool beside him were a neatly folded, well-worn raincoat and hat, and between the two stools rested an equally well-worn suitcase.

Xander sat down on the stool next to the hat and coat, ordered a cup of coffee, and glancing obliquely noticed that though the dark early morning was warm and humid, the man was wearing soft cloth gloves matched to the coat and hat.

“Good morning,” Xander said, glancing at the man’s reflection in the mirror.  
“Warm day coming.”

Amos Sanson, continuing his thoughtful gaze, nodded.

“I see you are wearing gloves,” The Chief continued. “Mind telling me why?”

Still looking ahead, Sanson slowly raised his right hand and began, with his left hand, to carefully remove his right glove, painstakingly revealing the red, tautly drawn skin of a grotesquely deformed hand. Almost gently, Xander said that he understood. Sanson slowly returned his hand to the comfort and protection of the glove.

Just then, the loud speaker behind the counter blared, “The west-bound express bus is now ready for boarding and will depart in five minutes.”

Slowly, Amos Sanson rose from his seat, laid a five dollar bill alongside his coffee cup, collected his hat and coat, picked up the suitcase with his left hand, and with a brief nod toward the police chief walked through the door onto the passenger platform. A few minutes later, Chief Xander heard gears grind and saw a bus back out of the angled parking lane of the 50’s-era bus terminal and drive away. In a moment it was gone.

Devon Xander sipped his coffee and thought about the neatly dressed man with the raincoat, hat, and suitcase ... and the damaged right hand. Curious ... the man was a stranger departing in the dark hours of the morning a few days after the violent deaths of four men. Coincidence? The chief filed the thoughts in an appropriate drawer in his mind and returned to his coffee.

As the bus pulled away from the city, Sanson reviewed the encounter with the policeman. He knew that he had revealed more of himself than he wished known, and he knew that the chief had ways to satisfy his professional curiosities. Perhaps it was time for this leopard to change its spots.

And somewhere, someone who did care about the answers to many of the questions that did not matter to Sanson smiled and raised his glass to his associates.

In the early morning quiet, Chief Xander sat at his desk in the police station, unlocked the file in his mind, and extracted the information about the brief encounter at the bus station. He had little to go on, but his curiosity was aroused and he mistrusted coincidence. So he sat in the rare silence and thought, and slowly a picture of the events of the last few days and this morning emerged. The facts led Xander to conclude that connections might exist.

He had a pretty good physical description of the man he observed at the bus station. Through the routine investigation of the area surrounding the deadly attack, he discovered the temporary occupancy of a room over the bookstore that provided a clear view of the crime scene from the bank on 4<sup>th</sup> Street to the Marcus Hotel on Main. And the owner of the building gave him a partial description of a man seen entering and leaving the door to the back stairs leading up to the room. The owner, who was also the proprietor of the bookstore on the ground floor, was an old friend with whom he often talked about books, local politics, and world events. Xander had a high regard for her knowledge and analytical acumen. Her scant description fit many elderly men, including the quiet man with whom he had shared the diner earlier. Especially noted in her description, however, was a cloth glove that matched his knee-length raincoat and seemed out-of-place in the warmth of the recent weather.

Xander's friend, Rosada Angel Jesus, had come to State College as its principal reference librarian. She had retired from federal service after a career that began in Washington, DC, took her to posts throughout Latin America, and brought her back to Washington. Immediately, she established herself as a respected scholarly librarian whose skills enriched the college's research and learning environment. The faculty loved

working with her, and students thought of her as a doting aunt constantly challenging and uplifting their academic interests. When the owner of the bookstore at 4<sup>th</sup> and Main retired, Rosada bought the store and the building that housed it, and reveled in her new role as bookseller. Now, she was “reference librarian” to the neighborhood as well as the college.

Chief Xander was immediately drawn to the ebullient proprietor and spent time almost every day in conversation at the aromatic coffee bar in the store’s front window. From there, the Chief could see the street, and ask questions endlessly. Rosada loved having the inquisitive policeman in her shop and found many of Xander’s questions stimulating in a way she remembered from her government work.

Settling into a cozy chair, Rosada placed her herbal tea on a low table piled high with books, looked across the table at Xander, and, in a reminiscing tone, continued her response to one of his endless questions, “After the break-up of the Soviet Union, intelligence, military, and law enforcement professionals no longer needed to fight the cold war roamed the world, selling their services to industry, governments, politicians, even NGOs. Generally, good ones can be found on the open market, so they’re available to all who can pay. Add private military firms to the mix and someone can be found for any operation if the price is right. Its big business, operating for high stakes.”

Xander understood. During his military police deployments to the Balkans and Afghanistan, he had encountered many experienced operatives who fit Rosada’s narrative.

From the questions asked by Chief Xander's investigators, Rosada had inferred that the man upstairs was a "person of interest," perhaps even an accomplice, in the recent killings. After talking with Xander and learning more about the execution of the assassination, she suspected that it was not a typical small-town mystery. The team's techniques were similar to many she had analyzed in her former life, and they were probably caught off guard by the unusual quality of Xander's police force.

With a slight lowering of her eyes, Rosada smiled to herself, an absent-minded behavior that Xander noticed. Curiously, some seemingly unrelated dots were connecting in his mind.

A month passed without adding to Xander's information about the incident. His inquiries through regular law enforcement channels had provided nothing of substance, and though the crime weighed heavily upon his mind, eventually other matters caught him up in police routine. His moments in Rosada's shop were fleeting, and she was constantly involved in her dual roles. For both, days were long on the minutiae of their respective businesses. Indeed, at that very moment, Rosada was attending a book fair in Indianapolis.

Rosada Angel Jesus approached the refreshments table in the lobby of the convention center. She had just ambled through the reference and nonfiction rooms, pausing here and there to leaf through a volume or exchange conversation and business cards with a publisher's representative. As she filled her teacup with hot water, she noticed a man dressed neatly in a business suit, holding a coffee cup in his left hand and cradling a book in the crook of his right arm. As he turned slightly to his right, she

noticed something else, something that nearly evoked a gasp ... a cloth-gloved right hand. With images flooding through her mind, she watched him move easily and quietly among the people in the room, toward a cluster of comfortable chairs in a well-lit corner. Quietly, Rosada aimed the camera in her cell phone and clicked several snapshots. Moving away from the corner, she dialed Xander's cell phone and sent him the pictures with a brief question, "Look familiar?" Almost immediately appeared an even briefer response: "Yes!"

Rosada eased herself into a chair in the corner cluster, busied herself with her tea and a few brochures, and glanced at the man sitting nearby. She sighed and said, "Well, it seems to be the usual problem of separating the wheat from the chaff ... lots of books, but who knows which ones are most likely to sell." "Yes, the book seller's conundrum," came the quiet reply. Offering her right hand, Rosada introduced herself. "Hi. I'm Rosada Jesus." Raising his eyes from the open book in his lap and setting aside his coffee cup, he softly grasped her hand and responded, "Amos Sanson."

Sanson did not recognize Rosada. He had not met the owner of the building at 4<sup>th</sup> and Main. All arrangements had been made without his involvement; he had only to go there, complete his mission, and walk away.

Rosada offered her business card to Sanson, and he handed her his. Quickly scanning her card, he was startled by her business address. He checked his meeting agenda and his watch, then asked Rosada if she would accompany him to the book fair's closing luncheon. Chatting about books they had noted while touring the publishers' displays, they walked toward the dining room. After a pleasant lunch, Sanson and Rosada shook hands and said good-bye.

After receiving Amos Sanson's photograph and business address from Rosada, Xander called a trusted few of his law enforcement counterparts and discovered that Sanson was a respectable businessman and Viet Nam war veteran. The disquieting factor, however, was the lack of detail about his past ... he seemed to have emerged from nowhere into a life made to order. Skirting regular channels, Xander called two old friends, retired colleagues who had been part of his mobile training teams in the Balkans and Afghanistan and now were federal investigators. Both reported rumors of a reconnaissance/surveillance expert who met Xander's description but had disappeared in the mountains of Colombia or Panama while working for US drug enforcement advisors. At the same time, Rosada contacted a former coworker who recalled hearing of a DEA tracker/surveillance contractor who had been held briefly by a drug cartel somewhere in the South-Central America border region, was treated "roughly" and escaped, and was administratively retired because he was believed to be irreparably damaged physically and psychologically. Neither of these inquiries turned up information that fit the standards of legal proof; both, however, were plausible reports from reliable sources.

Shortly after his inquiries, Xander received a message in a familiar format: "Man meeting your description seen several times recently on second floor balcony of the Meridor Café in Panama City's Casco Viejo from sunset minus 15 to plus 45. Suggest you take a look."

In a small city a hundred miles away from the book fair, Amos Sanson inserted a key into a dead-bolt lock, turned the key, opened the door, and entered a small, neatly arrayed

second-floor apartment over a modest, national-chain bookstore. For the second time in recent weeks, Sanson felt threatened. He knew that the results accompanying many of his assignments crossed over the line legally, and while previously he had neither known nor cared to know the ultimate outcomes with which he was involved, he was beginning to think about the consequences of his actions. He knew Xander to be an able policeman; and, from the small talk with Rosada, he suspected that she might be able to peer into the shadows that had cloaked his activities for decades. Meanwhile, another mission was in motion, a mission that might provide a point of departure into a new life.

In the predawn darkness, Sanson was awakened by soft beeps from his secure satellite phone. He read as the text moved across the screen: "Its on. Be in country within two days. Xander is on his way and remains unaware of your plan." Satisfied, Sanson acknowledged the message and went back to sleep.

From a doorway across the street, Sanson watched Devon Xander enter the Meridor Café. A moment later, Xander appeared at a balcony table, sitting where he could see the entrance into the second floor bar and watch the sun descend into the western sea. Fifteen minutes before sunset, Sanson crossed the street, entered the bar, and much to Xander's surprise, walked directly toward him, stopped at his table, and with a brief bow said quietly, "Buenos tardes, Senor Xander. May I join you?"

Xander pointed to the chair opposite him. Sanson sat, and the waiter brought him a dark red wine of local vintage.

For a few moments, they sipped their drinks. Then Sanson broke the silence. "You are a persistent man."

“And perhaps a bit lucky.”

“A bit of luck is helpful, but by far the greater fractions are experience and preparation. I suspect that in your eyes much of my career has been equivocal; however, on madam’s scale, I believe the greater weight to lie on the side of justice. Please permit me to explain why you have been brought to this place at this time.”

“*Brought here?*”

“For my current project, I require a reliable partner. You are experienced and know the value of preparation. And, I believe you can be trusted.”

“Compliments, but nothing of substance. Why should I choose to work with you?”

“A few weeks ago, rebels kidnapped a senior executive of Seaboard Shipping. They are holding him at a remote ranch in the mountains. They hoped to convince Seaboard to assist their enterprise. Failing that, they would simply negotiate a considerable ransom. Seaboard is negotiating. Their risk assessment, however, favors a rescue attempt. I am to spot their rescue operation, and for that I need a reliable partner to protect me while I concentrate on bringing the rescue team onto the target.”

Before dusk, Sanson reported that he was in position to guide the rescue team to the shed where the hostage was being held. He had not informed mission control that Xander was with him. Xander was his secret, his security blanket.

Darkness came quickly, and Sanson’s earphone commanded, “Paint the target.” He pushed a button just as two unmarked helicopters descended silently into the clearing in front of the sheds and the main house. One chopper moved toward the shed and six

shadowy figures stepped onto the ground, moved directly to the shed, broke open the door, threw a package into the shed, and returned to the hovering aircraft. As the helicopter lifted into the air, the shed exploded in flames and flying debris. Suddenly, the clearing was bathed in light and armed men were running out of the main house. The second helicopter opened fire, dropping several of the men and shredding the front of the house. Then, it too swept out of the clearing.

A message sounded in Sanson's ear, "Pick-up at LZ Alpha Mike, Out."

Sanson was already moving. He piled the surveillance and targeting equipment upon a thermite grenade and pulled the pin. Followed closely by Xander, he moved quickly away from the chaos along their planned escape route. But, he was not going to LZ Alpha Mike.

"We're on our own."

"What happened back there?"

"Later."

Grabbing Sanson's arm, Xander stopped and turned him. "Now!"

Xander felt the point of Sanson's knife against his throat. "Now is not the time. We must move quickly! I was briefed for a *rescue* mission."

Xander loosed his grip on Sanson's arm. With Sanson leading, they hurried along their way.

Two days later, at 11 a.m., at his regular table on the balcony, Sanson sat reading the news about a jungle shoot-out between two drug cartels. Killed in the crossfire was a shipping official being held for ransom by one of the cartels.

Xander crossed the room and sat down. Immediately, the waiter placed two cups of steaming coffee on the table. “Is now a good time?” Sanson handed him the paper as he replied, “Now is a very good time.”

Sanson concluded his explanation, paused briefly, and continued, “The lines have become blurred. No longer am I comfortable with the old ways. On this card is the name of my attorney. I would like to instruct him that he may respond to you as my partner. We will ask Ms. Jesus to support our activities with her impeccable research and analysis; but, at this time, her identity will not be made known to him. If you agree to the arrangement as we have discussed, join me for breakfast here between 1000 and noon tomorrow. If not, simply board your plane tomorrow afternoon and fly home.”

The following morning, Sanson finished his breakfast and signaled for coffee. It was 1155. He looked out at the sun-swept, undulating sea. At the sound of footsteps, he turned expecting to see the waiter with his coffee. Xander nodded. Gesturing to the waiter, Sanson smiled and said, “Dos tazas de cafe, por favor.”

Rosada sat comfortably in the bookstore coffee bar listening intently as Xander reported. After a thoughtful pause, Xander concluded: “During a layover in my flight home, I was engaged in conversation by an impeccably dressed fellow traveler. He handed me this.” Rosada removed a folded paper from the envelope Xander gave her and read:

Reports originating in Colombia indicate that a senior Seaboard Shipping executive believed to have died in the crossfire between warring drug cartels was really the victim of a well orchestrated assassination directed by unknown forces. The death of Amando Garcia, Seaboard’s chief operating officer, had been defined as collateral damage resulting from a battle for dominance in the lucrative narcotics trade. The report also states that the farmstead “shed” in which Garcia died was really a comfortably appointed bungalow at a safe house maintained by the public prosecutor.

Again, Rosada felt herself easing back into a world she thought she'd put behind her. Initially adversaries, Sanson and Xander had collaborated in a way that capitalized on their professional skills. She had seen such transformations before, and she was not surprised by the twists and turns that had led to the unexpected outcome and, for both Xander and Sanson, a sense of betrayal.

For now, however, Sanson had disappeared into the shadows that had harbored him for so long. And Xander had reappeared after a brief immersion in a sea of contradictions.

They sat quietly as the fog settled about them.