

# Prologue

It would be the first kill.

The apprentice understood the years of practice, the countless targets destroyed, the training, the discipline, the hours of study, all led to this moment.

This cold, bright afternoon in January 2061 marked the true beginning.

A clear mind and cool blood.

The apprentice knew these elements were as vital as skill, as wind direction, humidity, and speed. Under the cool blood lived an eagerness ruthlessly suppressed.

The mentor had arranged all. Efficiently, and with an attention to detail that was also vital. The room in the clean, middle-class hotel on Second Avenue faced west, had privacy screens and windows that opened. It sat, unpretentiously, on a quiet block of Sutton Place, and offered a view of Central Park—though from nearly a mile away.

The mentor had planned well, booking a room on a floor well above the trees. To the naked eye, Wollman Rink was only a blob of white catching glints from the strong sun. And those who glided over it were only dots of moving color.

They'd skated there—student and teacher—more than once, had watched the target skimming, twirling, without a care in the world.

They'd scouted other areas. The target's workplace, the home, the favored shops, restaurants, all the routines. And had decided, together, the rink in the great park offered everything they wanted.

They worked well together, smoothly, and in silence as the the mentor adjusted the bipod by the west-facing window, as the apprentice attached the long-range laser rifle, secured it.

Cold winter air eked in the window as they raised it a few inches. Breath even, hands steady, the

apprentice looked through the scope, adjusted.

The ice rink jumped close, close enough to see blade marks scoring the surface.

All those people, the brightly colored hats, gloves, and scarves. A couple, holding hands, laughing as they stumbled over the ice together. A girl with golden blond hair, wearing a red skin suit and vest, was spinning, spinning, spinning until she blurred. Another couple with a little boy between them, their hands joined with his as he grinned in wonder.

The old, the young, the in-between. The novices and the show-offs, the speedsters and the creep-alongs.

And none of them knew, none of them, that they were caught in the crosshairs, seconds from death. Seconds from the choice to let them live, make them die.

The power was incredible.

“Do you have the target?”

It took another moment. So many faces. So many bodies.

Then the apprentice nodded. There, the face, the body. The target. How many times had that face, that body been in the scope? Countless. But today would be the last time.

“Have you selected the other two?”

Another nod, as cool as the first.

“In any order. You’re green to go.”

The apprentice checked the wind speed, made a minute adjustment. Then with a clear mind, with cool blood, began.

The girl in the red skin suit circled in back crossovers, building speed for an axel jump. She began the rotation forward, the move from right skate to left, arms lifting.

The lethal stream struck the center of her back, with her own momentum propelling her forward. Her body, already dying, struck the family with the little boy. Like a projectile, that already dying body propelled them back, down.

The screaming began.

In the chaos that followed, a man gliding along on the other side of the rink slowed, glanced over.

The stream hit him center mass. As he crumbled, two skaters coming up behind him swerved around, kept going.

The couple, holding hands, still tripping along, skated awkwardly to the rail. The man gestured toward the jumble of bodies ahead of them.

“Hey. I think they’re—”

The stream punched between his eyes.

In the hotel room, in the silence, the apprentice continued to watch through the scope, imagined the sounds, the screams. It would have been easy to take out a fourth, a fifth. A dozen.

Easy, satisfying. Powerful.

But the mentor lowered his field glasses.

“Three clean hits. Target’s down.” A hand laid on the apprentice’s shoulder signaled approval. Signaled the end of the moment.

“Well done.”

Quickly, efficiently, the apprentice broke down the rifle, stored it in its case as the mentor retracted the bipod.

Though no words were exchanged, the *joy*, the pride in the act, in the approval spoke clearly. And seeing it, the mentor smiled, just a little.

“We need to secure the gear, then we’ll celebrate. You earned it. We can debrief after that. Tomorrow’s soon enough to move on to the next.”

As they left the hotel room—wiped clean before they’d begun and after they’d finished—the apprentice thought the next couldn’t come soon enough.