

Martinus Publishing's Hit of the Month
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Standing Watch

by Dan Gainor

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The alarm bell clanged obnoxiously at 5:45 and John rolled over and resisted the temptation to throw the clock across the room. Like its owner, the wind-up alarm clock was a little out of date, very functional, and at times very annoying.

John liked to think of those things as some of his good qualities. In any case, they went well with being a cop. That was all John ever wanted to be growing up in South Baltimore. Dad had worked on the docks and expected his oldest to follow in those footsteps. But Uncle Willie had been a police officer and told wild tales of cops and robbers – some of them even true. By the time he was 5, little Johnny was hooked. By 10, he was reading the crime log in the newspaper.

Dad gave up fighting it and decided to help. When John got out of high school and applied to the force, his application landed deep in a pile of also-rans. The physical tests and lie detector had been easy, but John had never excelled at academics and the entrance exam was no exception.

That's where dad intervened. He took him to see City Councilman Anthony Bonanno, allegedly a distant relative to mafia don Joe Bonanno. In Baltimore's Little Italy, that actually was a vote-getting bonus and Bonanno played it up as a don of local politics.

John still remembered the look on the councilman's face as his father spoke. When Bonanno seemed confused why he should help, dad reminded him he was a shift foreman. "It's for the union," he said. That meant votes. Bonanno just smiled and replied with a straight face, "Wisnieski, eh? Good Italian name."

Like any bureaucracy, the city police operated on favors. Bonanno made a quick phone call and John's mediocre test scores were ignored. One name was added to the recruit list, another subtracted. The scales of justice went back into balance—Baltimore style.

John was determined to never need that kind of help again. He became a damn good cop.

He was still the first one in on his shift and usually the last one out. With the special events this week, he had lots of company. Everyone was pulling overtime as the city celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Ft. McHenry.

John toasted a frozen bagel and downed black coffee while scanning the headlines. The morning Sun was unusually large, filled with photos of sailing ships from around the world—in town to mark the event that gave the U.S. its national anthem. He choked slightly when he saw that the president would be joining the Sunday festivities to recall the actual flag raising. Without trying, John found himself humming the end of the anthem, the words floating through his head like a school boy. He even mentally shouted “O” like a true Oriole fan.

“O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

“Damn right it does,” he said to himself. He was happy to see the president, despite the headaches the visit would bring. But something was raising the hair on the back of his neck. The ex had called it his “Spidey sense.” And right now it was flashing warning signs. Without even thinking, he double-checked the Glock to make sure it was loaded.

He dropped the paper and headed to the office.

John was knee-deep in paperwork by 7, trying to keep crimes to a minimum with so many tourists in town. It was like feeding time at the zoo for pick-pockets, con men and snatch-and-grab thieves. Capt. Greene called a shift meeting at 7:30, a half hour before anyone was even supposed to be there. Baltimore’s underworld would have to wait.

Greene held up a copy of the Sun for all to see. “For those of you who didn’t read past the Sports section, we’ve got a special surprise. The president’s going to be part of the Sunday events.” There was a mild groan from officers who knew that meant lots more work.

The visit wasn’t unusual. Baltimore was 45 minutes from D.C. on those rare times without traffic. So presidents, especially Democratic ones, came to town on a regular basis for photo ops. Obama was no different than Clinton and Carter in that way.

But 100,000 extra tourists in town complicated things. The stadium and much of the Inner Harbor were in the Southern District and that made it Capt. Greene’s problem. Like any organization, problems flowed downhill.

“You all know what this means. Anything, I mean anything, that looks suspicious, you deal with it. Or the chief will be crawling up my ass wanting to know why you didn’t.”

He turned to look at Sgt. Wisnieski. “And I got this special from the chief. He said he wants our resident ‘he-ro’ checking out the fort to make sure it’s all on the up-and-up.”

John could feel himself turn red at that word, but he stuck to business and walked over to the captain as the meeting broke up. “What do they mean check it out? That place will be crawling with Secret Service before the event. The only thing I could do is f...” he let his voice trail off.

“Just do it, John, and keep everybody happy.”

It was a short drive from the Cherry Hill police station to the fort. It was a pretty day. He could have walked, not that anyone sane ever did that in Cherry Hill.

The fort was a madhouse. It was literally crawling with workmen, fixing the turf,

setting up a stage, cleaning, and more. Tour guides led crowds through some of the less busy areas. John had to wait 15 minutes before anyone would talk to him. Even the badge was unimpressive. There were just too many people making too many demands.

Finally a kindly old park ranger with a badge that read “Alejandro Vasquez” asked if he could help. John smiled. At 6’3” and 220 lbs., he knew he could be intimidating. But there was nothing like a tough cop who could smile. It was more disarming than slamming a perp to the pavement. Sometimes it was even more enjoyable. Sometimes.

John explained he needed to look around and make sure nobody had missed anything, to which Vasquez replied, “So, you need a tour?”

“Not just a tour. I need an all-access pass to see the stuff behind the doors.” The ranger started to speak and John cut him off. “Yeah, I know, Secret Service is doing it too. It’s either this or they flog me.” He shrugged.

The ranger looked intently at the cop. “Which one were you in?”

There was a brief silence. “Afghanistan,” he responded a bit reluctantly. “You?”

The ranger just shook his head sheepishly and pointed to his glasses. “My war should have been Vietnam, but they weren’t that desperate. They wanted me to be able to see.” Vasquez got up and handed John a map of the fort. “I’m sorry. A lot of vets come here and I get good at spotting them.”

John tried not to think about his war. He failed.

The fort oozed history and the questions took him back to the ‘Stan. He’d gone over there in 2009 as part of the Maryland Air National Guard. Even in the Guard, John was a cop. He’d trained local police in Kandahar. He had been there a couple months and never seen any action. It was a dream deployment.

That changed in an instant.

Sgt. Wisnieski was teaching a half dozen police cadets about manning a guard post. He watched out of the corner of his eye as a group of four Marines walked toward the front gate. He saw them as he talked to the recruits. They looked like Marines. They were armed like Marines and they were even dressed in Marine camo.

They didn’t walk like Marines. Marines had a way they did everything. These four weren’t Marines. He felt the MP4 jump into his hands as he yelled at the newcomers to stop. The first jihadi went for his gun and got three pinkish dots stitched in a neat row across his chest. John didn’t wait for the rest. He fired three-round bursts, taking out each of the attackers.

They were only the diversion. The main Taliban assault was aimed on the north edge of the camp, near where the planes were stored. Before John realized it, he was charging, with six confused and terrified Afghani recruits backing him up.

John kept firing. He burned through his last magazine and dropped the rifle. Now he was taking on the enemy with his Beretta, ignoring the incoming gunfire. Move, point, and shoot. Move, point, and shoot. It was almost mechanical. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was terrified. He just didn’t have time for that right now.

In a few short minutes, the small police detachment had routed the Taliban and sent them screaming back to some cave somewhere. John got the Silver Star. Two of the recruits got buried—with honors. John didn’t feel guilty for killing the jihadis. He just didn’t feel like a hero. Heroes weren’t the guys who did something brave and went home. Heroes faced the same terror day after day and still did their jobs.

The ranger's voice brought John back to reality. Vasquez just smiled and repeated himself. "Something about this place that does that to veterans," he said, pressing his hand against the brick wall almost lovingly. "This fort has 200 years of memories."

The ranger got up and led John through every corner in the star-shaped fort. This was less a tour and more of an inspection. Vasquez started them in some storage rooms in the basement, up through all four buildings and through the old powder magazine. They ended on the parapets looking out at the harbor more than two hours later. There were boats and ships everywhere enjoying the nice fall weather. The city was reveling in reveling.

"There's one more thing I'd like to show you," said the ranger. "I'd like to introduce you to Lt. Levi Clagett." He held his right hand out and pointed to ... absolutely nothing.

"Don't worry. I'm not crazy. Lt. Clagett is the most famous ghost of the fort. He was killed during the British bombardment and has been seen for many years. Someone even got a photo that showed a spectral figure right near this gun."

John smiled. Cops encountered a lot of strange things. Ghost stories went with the job.

"I've seen him, you know." For a second John thought he was joking, but the story continued. "When I first started working here, I caught a couple of teenagers trying to tag one of the outside walls. I dragged them in here and put the fear of God into them. Then I did something they didn't expect. I taught them why the fort was sacred. Why they couldn't defile it. Why no one could. That night, after everyone left, I saw someone up here. I climbed up and I saw the lieutenant just for a moment. I think it was his way of saying that I deserved some recognition."

Vasquez grew silent. It was his signal the tour was over. John walked out, keeping his eyes open.

Something still didn't feel right.

The next day he stopped in to talk with the captain. "Everything checked out. One of the rangers gave me a room-by-room tour. I didn't see anything."

Capt. Greene was quiet for a moment. "What aren't you telling me? Come on, John, this is me. Spill it."

John shook his head back and forth like he was shaking loose the cobwebs in his brain. "I don't know, boss. Everything's perfect. But I've got something in my gut that tells me it isn't."

"Your gut helped get me these captain's bars. Trust it. I sure do." The captain thought for a minute. "Tell you what. Skip your other duties the next few days. I want you wandering around the fort. Just in case."

"Sure, Cap, but what if I'm nuts?"

"Then you owe me a drink and the city will owe you some overtime."

John spent the rest of Wednesday wandering around till he was sick of looking at the fort. Thursday came and there was more of the same. Friday was more dull. Baltimore was partying and John Wisnieski was patrolling. Up and down the fort he walked, keeping his lonely vigil.

He didn't find anything. And still he had that hollow feeling in his stomach like something bad was going to happen.

Somehow Alex kept finding the time to visit and teach John about the fort and its history—first in the War of 1812, then the Civil War and since. Eventually, John told Alex why he was still there. Another set of eyes couldn't hurt.

"You're that worried?" Alex asked.

"I know it sounds crazy. It probably is crazy. But the captain is right. It's a hunch and there's too much riding on the chance that I might be right."

"Why not tell the Secret Service?"

"They always assume something might happen. They'd just think I was a loon and then ignore me if I did find something."

John didn't say it, but he was beginning to feel like Lt. Clagett, watching and waiting for what seemed like forever.

Saturday was the big day as far as crowds were concerned. It commemorated the actual barrage by the British ships. The crowd-pleaser events were on the weekend to maximize attendance.

The area around the fort smelled of popcorn, fried dough, and too many people. The sounds were just as intrusive—parents yelling for or at children, babies screaming, tour guides talking over the din. It wasn't boring. Not that crowds were ever boring to police officers. There was always larceny afoot.

John knew he had to keep focused, so he skipped the pickpockets, the pushers and the hookers. He broke up one fight but only because one of the guys pulled a knife. He "accidentally" knocked it out of the man's hand as he passed.

At least there was no paperwork.

Afternoon brought an opportunity. The Blue Angels were performing. John had never met anyone who could ignore watching something like that. Those who did were either working or usually up to no good.

The jets streaked by in formation after formation and the crowd craned their heads skyward, oohing and aahing as the jets passed. Watching the heads bounce back and forth was like watching Wimbledon spectators during a tough match. John didn't dare focus on the jets. He scanned the crowd. Nothing. Even some of the people he had flagged as crooks took time out to watch the Blue Angels. It was nice to see the local criminal element so patriotic.

His instincts couldn't be wrong. Could they? He decided to wait out the rest of the day on the parapet "with the lieutenant," as Alex phrased it. The parapet was as good a place as any to stand guard.

The grand finale came a few hours after dark—fireworks. John had to admit it; Baltimore sure knew how to blow stuff up. The fireworks show delighted the crowd. But it was easy to see how terrifying it would have been to be on the receiving end of that attack.

Clagett had seen it and it had cost him his life.

Sitting there, thinking of the lieutenant made John even more determined. If there were something wrong, he was damn sure going to find out what. He fell into stake-out mode. Keeping awake had never been hard for him, but keeping the edge was more difficult.

Doing nothing is tedious, especially when you are staying focused standing guard. The hours turned slowly—11 p.m., midnight, 1 a.m. The city rolled up the sidewalks by 2 as bars and restaurants closed. There were still people milling about near the fort, prepping for the morning events, but the numbers had dwindled.

He sat there, watching and listening and waiting. Another of the endless stream of TV trucks arrived and started setting up. Three men were moving something heavy and it slipped, nearly hitting the ground. One of them cursed.

John's blood ran cold.

He didn't know what the words meant, but he knew the language. It was Pashto, native to Afghanistan—Taliban Central. The recruits had tried to teach him and failed. The workman was probably just another immigrant tossed into the American melting pot, but John had to be sure. He needed to move closer.

John stretched his limbs slowly and carefully. He had been sitting for a few hours and had to move quietly. Moving in dark is easy. Moving quietly in the dark took concentration and muscle control. He watched the workmen struggle with the box and take it into one of the buildings. John carefully massaged out his legs and arms, making sure he was ready not just to move, but to fight if needed. Once he was ready, the Glock slipped tight into his right hand. The left grasped the muted iPhone that the department supplied.

John worked his way down close to the trio who had returned to the van. The three men stood in the vehicle's shadow and spoke quietly. All three were speaking Pashto. The nearby generator for another TV truck revved loudly enough to muffle the exchange, but John wouldn't have understood anyhow.

The Army had taught John how to get small even at 6'3". It required effort and dexterity as he moved silently along the wall, working his way around a corner. He pressed the phone and tried to cup the screen against his body. The lighted face of the iPhone was still like a beacon.

Three apparently-Afghan nationals were sneaking a large heavy box inside in the middle of the night. It reeked of danger. He began to text 911 as quickly as he could. A big man slammed into John before he could type more than two words. Both iPhone and pistol went flying into the dark.

John staggered and tried to focus. Even darkened, the damn phone had messed with his night vision. He moved carefully and tried to keep his opponent back while the pupils adjusted.

The other man was close to John's size but seemed unsure of himself. The attacker whipped out a KA-BAR and 7 inches of sharp steel gave him confidence. The man slashed up toward John's eyes and then tried to lunge down into his mid-section. He was strong, but amateurish.

John caught the wrist with his right hand and grabbed the upper arm with his left. In the wink of an eye, he jerked the arm around the man's back and slammed him onto the ground. The knife went deep into his back. John relied on his military training and reached down to finish the kill. He heard a heavily accented voice that stopped him. "Do. Not. Move."

Someone kicked John's legs out from under him and they grabbed him roughly by the arms and dragged him inside and downstairs into one of the little used storage rooms. There was enough noise in the basement from the furnace that John's cries would never

be heard.

The man with the gun looked to be the leader. His face radiated hate, even smiling. After they handcuffed John to some heavy pipes, the man laughed. "Perhaps you would like some company."

They dragged in Alex's body and tossed him on the floor, still making sure they had handcuffed him so he couldn't escape. A quiet moan came from the body.

"If you are lucky, you just might wake up in time to enjoy the second fireworks display." One of the men hit John hard on the head with the butt of a pistol. The pain clouded his mind. He could feel blood run down his face as he struggled to stay awake.

With that they were gone. The heavy metal door closed and they could hear it being locked and bolted.

John passed out.

Alex moaned, and called for help, barely above a whisper. It was enough to wake John. He struggled to focus and as he did, he saw the broken body of the ranger at his feet, a puddle of blood beneath the body. He'd be dead within the hour, probably sooner.

Of course, if they couldn't figure out a way to get help, John would be joining him. It appeared the terrorists had a bomb and if it was big enough to do what they wanted, John and Alex would both be killed.

These weren't rookies. The handcuffs were well-secured. There was no way either of them was going to break loose. "Alex. Alex can you move?"

"Yeah," the ranger gasped.

"No one can hear us if we yell and I can't break free. Any bright ideas? From here it sure looks like we're screwed."

Alex gradually pulled his hands beneath his torso and pushed himself up into a sitting position. His tan shirt was soaked in blood, his face tormented by the pain of several knife wounds.

"I only know one person who can help us."

"There's another ranger on duty? Did they leave you your phone?"

John felt a fleeting sense of hope.

"No. I'm the only man on guard tonight—the only one living, that is."

John figured the ranger was just making gallows humor, but the dying man's voice grew stronger.

"We need to ask the lieutenant to help us. He's the only one who can."

John started to speak, to silence the silly idea, but Alex was concentrating. He put his bloody right hand on the brick wall, "Lieutenant. Lt. Levi Claggett, the fort is under attack! We need your help!"

That plea had taken almost every last bit of energy Alex had. He collapsed on the floor in a heap. His chest showed breathing had slowed to almost nothing.

The room grew cold. Cold like winter had come and had left the door open.

In walked the ghostly image of a soldier in a blue-and-white uniform, complete with tall hat with a little plume coming out the top. Alex had called that a "shako" during one history lesson. The soldier carried a musket in his right hand complete with a nasty-looking bayonet.

John was too dumbstruck to be afraid.

The ghost looked down at Alex and just stared.

No matter how many times John closed his eyes and opened them again, the ghost was still there. John finally got the courage to speak. “Lieutenant, he can’t help you. We can both see he’s dying. But you know me. You’ve seen me walk these walls every night for days—on guard, just like you. The fort is under attack. They mean to blow it up and kill the president. You’re the only one who can help us.”

It sounded almost sane when he said it. And the ghost was still there, seeming to listen. “You have to stop them. Kill the bastards and stop that bomb or help me loose and let me try. Please.”

Clagett walked toward the wall he had come from. John started to cry out, to beg him not to go. Then he realized the ghost was going nowhere. He took his musket in both hands and struck the butt of it against the wall.

There was no sound, but John could feel the pounding in his bones, maybe down to his very soul.

Another ghost appeared and another, each walking from the wall like Clagett had done. Each man dressed in the same uniform. They didn’t utter a sound. Still, John knew that these were the men of 1814, the men who had stood against the mightiest navy in the world and won.

Soon the room was full of ghost soldiers. John couldn’t count them. They seemed to float forward and back. The basement was silent, yet it pulsed with emotion, with anger. Then Clagett floated toward the door and the others followed, grim-faced and determined.

John could only guess at how long they were gone—seconds, minutes. It was impossible to tell. Then he blinked and the room began to fill again. They were standing tall now, marching in line first through the door and then through the wall.

That left only Clagett. He turned toward John and saluted. Then he reached down and touched Alex’s limp body. The body didn’t move, but a spectral version of Alejandro Velasquez stood up and walked with the lieutenant through the brick wall. John thought the old man winked at him as he left. It was hard to tell through his own tears.

The room grew warm again as soon as they were gone. John realized his handcuffs were now unlocked and the door to the room open. Laying next to Alex’s body was an ancient bayonet, now bloodied from use. It sat next to John’s cell phone.

Of course. The defenders could never let it be known what they had done. They set it up for John to play the hero once more. John grabbed the evidence and climbed outside to make a call.

Capt. Greene wasn’t the first on the scene, but he was close. Two beat cops were securing the perimeter and EMTs worked on the sergeant. Sirens blared everywhere. It sounded like half the city police and fire departments were coming.

“John, you look like hell,” said the captain, sitting down next to him on the edge of the ambulance.

“Figures. I’ve been there.”

John told the story that would soon be on every TV station in America—the story how he and Alex had hunted down the terrorists. He was deliberately sketchy on the details, telling the captain how he had been hit on the head. It was all a blur, he said. The bloody bandage on his head underlined the account.

The flag-raising went on as planned—delayed several hours until SWAT and

Secret Service agents were 100 percent sure the site was safe and there was no secondary bomb. They had begged the president to cancel, but he refused, insisting that an American had died so he could speak there that day and he was going to do it.

There was no speech that could handle what the nation felt that bright Sunday morning. The story of the foiled terror attack had riveted the American people. When the president went to the podium, he merely read the lyrics to “The Star Spangled Banner,” all four stanzas. Then he asked that the nation pray for all those who defended it and those who died doing so.

No one who watched that flag raising was ever going to forget it.

The captain came and visited John later that evening in University of Maryland hospital. He sat down next to the sergeant and waited for the nurse to leave. “I knew you were lying before. I could see it in your eyes. So what really happened?”

John told the stunned captain the real story of the second defense of Ft. McHenry. “I wish I had seen it, seen them punish those bastards,” John complained. “These men were amazing. Held off the British Empire the first time. And then for their reunion tour they stop a terrorist bombing that would have killed the president. Somehow, I don’t think anybody’s ever going to mess with that fort again.”

John got quiet for a minute and thought of Alex and added, “Especially now that’s there’s one more defender. Alejandro Vasquez finally got his war, and when it came he was ready.”

THE END