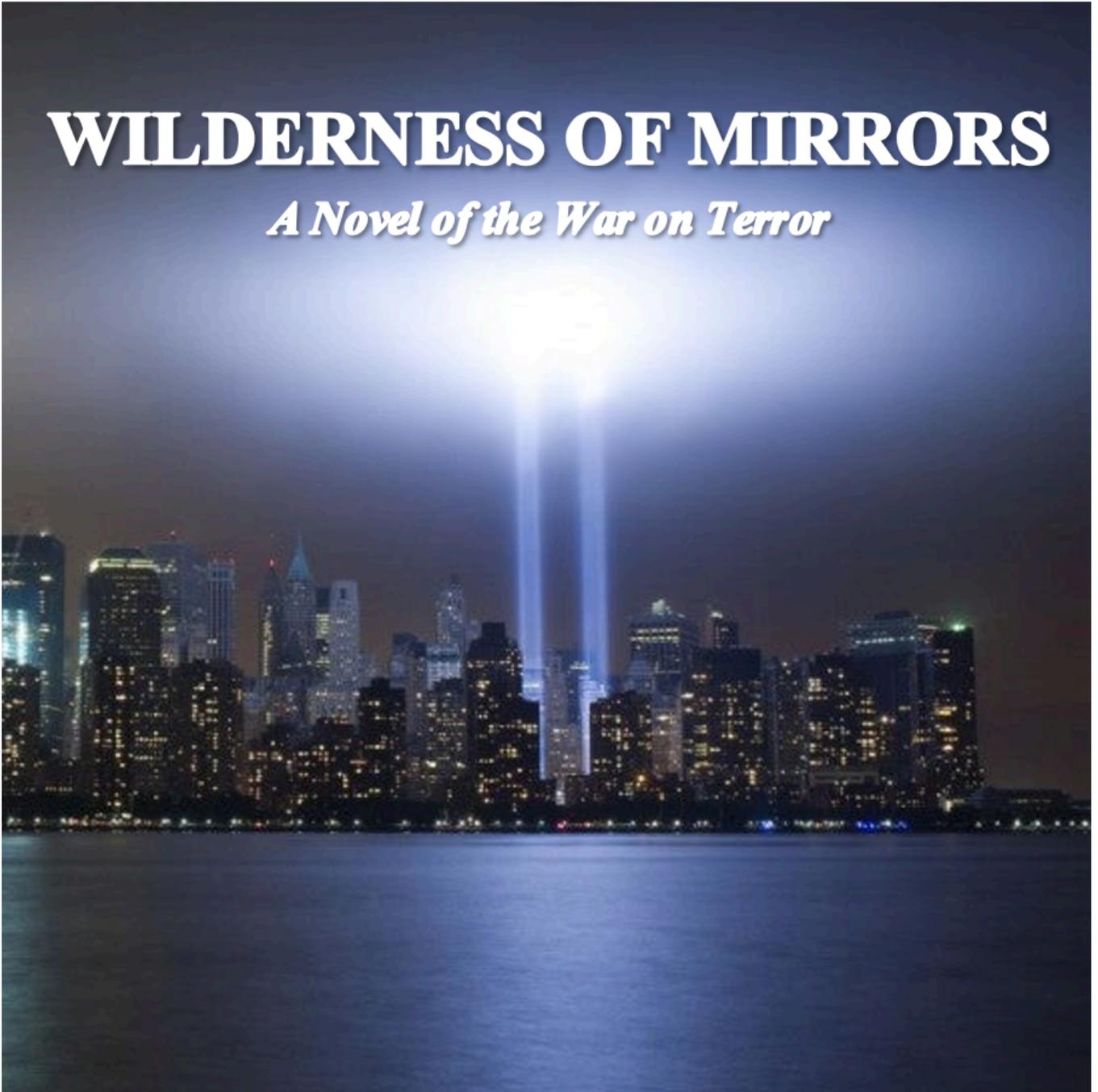


# WILDERNESS OF MIRRORS

*A Novel of the War on Terror*



**FIRST CHAPTER PREVIEW**

***NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE***

**by Nick Hallum**

**CHAPTER 1****2012  
LOS ANGELES  
CALIFORNIA**

Faint lines of light shot through the trees, thin as tracer bullets marking the dark fog over Los Angeles. Peter stirred in his sleeping bag in Griffith Park. He glanced down at the mounded shape of his legs. Wings covered him. Feathers.

Creatures of the air found him at night: when he lay down, birds nestled into his warmth. In the back of his shell-shocked memory he felt there was a reason they came, yet he could never grasp it plainly upon waking. His history was a half-forgotten miasma; as he woke his short-term memory faded into hissing static.

The mist remained after his eyes were open. An ocean of fog had covered the city in the night, the tidal marine layer flooding in across from Santa Monica.

A black car passing in the distance caught the corner of his vision – *was it slowing or speeding up?* Some half-recognized tune echoed in the air. He caught the license plate. He wrote down the plate numbers in his notebook. *What if they'd returned?*

Deep in the night, he sensed the birds on him. If he moved too fast on waking, they'd flurry away, leaving only feathers behind in a sudden desperation to escape. Carefully, he reached from his sleeping bag for his notebook and a pencil stub.

He tried to write to Sū Lín every day. He scribbled notes in a made-up private cipher, based on Chinese telegraph code.

Then a spiderweb on a nearby tree caught his eye. Two errant threads no longer fit the orb pattern. Something had broken them. He murmured anxiously; this could be nothing.

He glanced up at the tree branches, trying to divine the augury of the day before him. The whorling patterns within the branches brought a tremble of the past to him now. They echoed with the memory of desert explosions, they spoke of Mahmoud's death. The pattern was wrong.

*You'll know, you'll always know, his handler once said. It's not one thing, it's never just one thing, they pull the strings of a web, never just ring the doorbell.*

Peter blinked and breathed deeply. *Calm.* He finalized the encryption algorithm and encoded the specific words he wanted to send to Sū Lín this morning. He would leave the note in a trashcan, maybe down a drain. *Dead drop.* That's the only way she would ever find it. *In the dark.*

After he was done writing, Peter rubbed his sleep-numbed head and carefully slid himself out of his sleeping bag. He shivered with cold. Instinctively, he stood to seize the threadbare sweatshirt hanging on a branch.

Birds burst upward at his motion, scattershot to the wind. Peter covered his face as the plumage swept over, feathers and claws scraping past in departure.

After they were gone, Peter rolled up the sleeping bag. That's when he found the solitary bird left behind. A small creature: a brown-feathered sparrow. At first he thought it was dead. It looked at him with one functional eye, a tiny black coal. It cocked its head in curiosity.

He reached out, sliding his hand under its warm belly. He flicked his fingers in a careful pattern that a *brujería* had taught him would calm the bird. Watching him, the ember of its eye never blinked: *did birds blink?* He couldn't remember. This one didn't.

He picked it up in a calloused hand and slid the bird inside the pocket of his jacket. It was warm against his skin; it nestled in beside the notebook.

He found the water jug, unpacked the kettle, lit the stove. He tried to shake the sense he was living in a dream. These years were all a bad dream, a mystery from which he hadn't yet woken. He focused, trying to hold onto the fading memory of Sū Lín's face.

The birds called out from the jacaranda trees in the faint blue light of dawn. Steam rose white from the tea water. Opaque circles formed from nothing and emerged as bubbles. A tiny whistle rose in the old kettle. He flicked off the flame. As he picked up the kettle, he saw his fingers: they were wrinkled, tufts of gray hair sparked out from between the knuckles. *When did he get old?*

The car came around the median strip again. Peter flipped open his notebook to compare his memory of the license plate: same digits. Same car. German car. Fast. Lethal.

Without wasting movement, Peter stepped behind a jacaranda tree. From behind the tree, he watched the car pass his campsite. The driver was in shadow. But he could hear the radio, blasting loud in the early dawn.

“... *Like a Rolling Stone*,” came the Bob Dylan lyric. “*Like a complete unknown... like a rolling stone.*” It came to him that the same tune had been on the wind when he woke. The same old song on repeat.

A signal.

But no one had used that signal for as long as he could remember.

Once upon a time, he memorized signals. None of them were ever used.

*Dylan lyrics, from the initial invocation done in 1969.* So damn useful.

*Man with a hat, playing this tune.* Also meaningless.

*Pattern of speech, and here's the response code. Memorize this poem.*

What was the point of all that damn folderol?

Peter was supposed to check in with the CIA every two months, like a prison parolee. But despite all their vigilance, he'd managed to slip off the grid. He'd been out of the game for years.

The birds' cries from the trees converged then; they all cried out in one voice, their shrieking calls collapsing into the distant bark of a dog, the overlapping sounds synchronizing weirdly. The hair on his arms rose in sympathy with the discordant notes.

Peter shivered. *NSA ultrasonic.* They could listen to anything, at any distance.

Maybe this was just PTSD in his head. He'd woken in the night, shrieking in remembered agony, holding the wound in his side, struggling for a memory he could not name.

*Did he have explosives in his cart?* He could improvise. *Maybe use coffee creamer?*

He quickly scribbled down notes on his situation; he wrote to Sū Lín about timing his exit poorly, about how he should have moved on. He told her that he'd been thinking of hitching a ride to *Tijuana*, maybe leaving LA, disappearing for good.

Too late now.

It was years since his last encounter with them. Yet now someone was driving past him with a warrant code that was years old. Trying to bring him in from the cold. With an expired passphrase.

The same car drove past, revealing itself to him again. Blown protocol. *Red flag*. He could almost see the title of an old training manual: "*Exfiltration: Capture and Retrieval in Hostile Territory*." Dammit.

At the other end of the field, fog lifted off the green expanse of Griffith Park. Just at the edge of the mist, a ghost of memory flickered: the old man with his white hair and the same slight limp acquired in a battle before Peter's time. *Robinson Gale, his old mentor*.

At least he wasn't alone out here anymore, on a weekday morning with no one else around. Even if his only friend was a memory.

Peter squinted through the fog. At the other end of the field, across the green, men in incongruous suits and ties were pivoting in his direction. Heaviness at their hips, guns or tasers under suit coats. He glanced to his right. A woman with a baby stroller moved at an accelerated pace. *Not a stroller at all, maybe heavy munitions*. His brain was already absurdly calculating velocity and distance. He should go to a fallback position.

On second glance, the people on foot and the people in the car weren't well coordinated. Perhaps they didn't even know about each other. *Different factions? Circles within circles? Perhaps just civilians? Collateral damage?*

His head whirled. He could escape again, but only if he left a remnant of his soul behind. He muttered a phrase, and then he stood and said it louder, holding hard to the tree, so that he wouldn't fall over from the force of the same ancient powerful words on his lips:

*All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,*

*Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you, whose eyes*

*Shall behold the Gods...*

Peter quickly flicked water on the tree, ripped open a scab on his hand, and pressed the welling drop of his own blood to the tree's flesh, muttering under his breath as he stepped away from the trunk. He knew he was now cheating his own presence, like a street *brujo*.

He stepped away from his worldly possessions. Left behind the cart and his coffee creamer and the packed duffle bag. Left the tea kettle on the stove. He reached down and touched the notebook in his pocket. He stroked the warm sparrow beside it, hoping it would bring him luck.

As he walked away, his feet performed a complicated little dance. Sū Lín had taught it to him. And if he kept the one-man *Butoh* evasion pattern with his feet, Peter might be able to get out of this one too.

If he left his things behind with the mark of blood and water on the tree, his pursuers would think he was still present in the park. He knew this would work. The tricks you learned to survive their tricks. *Tricks within tricks. Circles within circles.*

He went to the north end of Griffith Park. He vaguely remembered a Metro redline station over there. Peter headed in that direction. If there was the station he could lose himself in the morning commuter crowd. He was not going to be exfiltrated. *Not agin.*

But he knew the momentary disguise and the blurred movement afforded by the *Butoh* dance would only work temporarily. He needed to shake off his tail. He glanced backward. The men with ties and guns had faded back. To the north now were only two brightly dressed female joggers. They ran briskly from east to west. The duo was not in a position to signal backup, and they were looking elsewhere. Perhaps merely civilians. If there were any civilians left.

The coast was clear. Peter sprinted out of range. To the train.

But then someone was waiting for him on that trajectory. Right outside the station. “Hey man, you don’t know Figueroa street, do you?” asked a husky young man wearing a concert t-shirt. *Corporate Suicide*, said the faded logo. The shirt was torn, held together by safety pins.

“You know, where you can buy enchiladas, tacos, tortas, tostadas, and uh,” Corporate Suicide motioned to his head. “Those, what do you call them – those Mexican hats?”

His heart sank. Even performed this clumsily, Peter recognized the pattern. The monologue was obviously a trade phrase, a call and recognition. Questions, citations on the E, T, T pattern, followed by the opening for a response. Awaiting a counter-sign now.

*Match the second question, but not the first. Direct toward open water.*

If he answered, he revealed – at least to this courier – who he was, and that he was still complicit in the old game. He glanced at the young man. Corporate Suicide picked at the safety pins on his shirt. He spoke the words as if they’d been memorized. The young man’s shirt stank of old sweat and rotten marijuana. *Was that stink supposed to be cover?*

Had bona fides been established, or not? *Was it even a call sign, or was he losing it all over again? Was he part of the game or not?*

Peter opened his mouth. He would answer, but he would compose his own responses, leaving them wondering, leave himself plausible deniability if confronted.

“Nah,” he said. “I don’t know that street. But those hats – they’re called sombreros. You gotta hit the pier, I think.” He pointed out towards Santa Monica and the ocean. The acne-spotted youth turned his back on Peter: a tactically weak position. He squinted into the sun – another tactically weak move – and Peter relaxed his guard.

Without warning, the young man swung violently, stabbing something upward toward Peter's heart. The weapon the youth was holding penetrated the thin cotton of his coat and scrape against his skin.

Forcibly, Peter struck out, a *Krav Maga* lunge. The bloody syringe fell to the ground.

Corporate Suicide was loping away before Peter could take him down. It took a moment longer to realize the small fluttering heartbeat he'd felt all morning wasn't there anymore. Peter gently put his hand into his pocket, but his fingers came out bloody.

The man's syringe had pierced the warm sanctuary holding the bird and speared through the small body, injecting it with a dose of something. But the needle merely scratched Peter's flesh. The man missed his target, because of the innocent creature who blocked the blow.

The sparrow was dead.

*The story continues at...*

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