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By Grant Blackwood

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Jack soon finds himself lost in a maze of intrigue, lies, and betrayal where no one is who they seem to be—not even Seth, who's harboring a secret that harkens back to the Cold War. A secret that is driving him to the brink of treason...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the bestselling novels of Tom Clancy

“HEART-STOPPING ACTION...entertaining and eminently topical...Clancy still reigns.”—*The Washington Post*

“BRILLIANT.”—*Newsweek*

“HIGHLY ENTERTAINING.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“[CLANCY] EXCITES, ILLUMINATES...A REAL PAGE-TURNER.”—*Los Angeles Daily News*

About the Author

Tom Clancy was the author of more than eighteen #1 *New York Times* bestselling novels. His first effort, *The Hunt for Red October*, sold briskly as a result of rave reviews, then catapulted onto the bestseller list after President Reagan pronounced it “the perfect yarn.” Clancy was the undisputed master at blending exceptional realism and authenticity, intricate plotting, and razor-sharp suspense. He died in October 2013.

Grant Blackwood is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Briggs Tanner series (*End of Enemies*, *Wall of Night* and *Echo of War*). He is coauthor of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Dead or Alive*, with Tom Clancy, and of the new thriller *The Kill Switch*, with James Rollins. A U.S. Navy veteran, Grant spent three years aboard a guided missile frigate as an Operations Specialist and a Pilot Rescue Swimmer. He lives in Arizona, where he is working on his own stand-alone series starring a new hero.

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Tehran, Iran

BE CAREFUL how you spend your time. You never get it back.

Of all the lessons he'd learned from his father, this one truly resonated with Jack Ryan, Jr.—no small feat, as he'd received the advice as a teenager with little more on his mind than girls and football games. *Go figure*, Jack thought.

In this case, with his lunch appointment predictably late, Jack was playing a round of “watch the watchers,” a game introduced to him by John Clark. His location, Chaibar, an outdoor café on a quiet Tehran side street, made the game more challenging. Nestled in the courtyard garden of a renovated villa, Chaibar was full of couples and small groups seated at wrought-iron tables. Jack caught glimpses of muted flowered murals behind potted plants and hanging vines. Overhead, boughs cast the courtyard in dappled sunlight. While most of the murmured voices were speaking in Arabic or Persian, Jack also caught snippets of French and Italian.

The premise of “watch the watchers” was a simple one: He’s in the field for Hendley Associates, aka The Campus. He’s under surveillance. But by whom? If you’re largely unfamiliar with the nuances of casual

Iranian interaction, how do you spot that one pair of eyes paying too much attention to you, or someone whose mannerisms are out of sync with the surroundings? With this checklist in mind, Jack studied faces, body language, banter between this couple, or forced banter among that group.

Nothing, Jack thought. None of Chaibar's patrons set off alarms for him. In real life, a good thing; for the purposes of this game, not so much.

If Hendley Associates, aka The Campus, were in fact what it seemed, a privately held arbitrage firm, Jack's game would have been one of fantasy, but The Campus's true purpose went much deeper, as it sat squarely in the grayest of areas in the espionage/counterterrorism world—an off-the-books intelligence group answerable only to the President of the United States. Where the CIA was a bazooka, The Campus was a stiletto.

“Pardon, sir. Another coffee, please?”

Jack glanced up. His waitress was a petite twenty-something woman in black-rimmed glasses, her hair completely covered by a light blue scarf. Her English was heavily stilted.

She wore no niqab. Perhaps Kamran Farahani wasn't simply giving lip service to his administration's moderate platform. Hell, even a year ago Chaibar might have been subject to a police raid; to the previous government, coffee shops were incubators for youthful subversives.

Jack glanced down at his empty cup. The shop's version of coffee made a Starbucks dark roast seem like weak tea.

“No, thank you, two is enough for me. Hopefully my guest will . . .”

As if on cue, over his waitress's shoulder, Jack saw a man with wild, curly black hair walking into the courtyard, his head turning this way and that. There was no mistaking that mop.

“Here he is,” Jack told her, raising his hand to get the man's attention. “Give us a couple minutes.”

“Of course, sir.”

The man walked over to the table. Jack stood up, the iron legs of his chair scraping on the cobblestones. They shook hands, shared a quick bear hug, then sat down.

“Sorry I'm late, Jack.”

“I'm used to it. What would a lunch be with an on-time Seth Gregory?”

It had been that way since high school. If the movie started at seven-twenty, you told Seth seven o'clock.

“Yeah, yeah. It's my only failing. And if you believe that . . . How's the coffee?”

“It bent my spoon.”

“Puts hair on your chest.”

“How've you been, Seth?”

“Sharp stick, my friend, sharp stick.”

Jack smiled. This was Seth's standard response to such questions. Translation: Doing better than if I had a sharp stick in the eye.

"Glad to hear it."

"I've been here before; I know what I want. The *asheh gojeh farangi*—that's a tomato stew with onions, meat, peas, spices. Delicious. Huh . . . still no alcohol on the menu, I see."

"That might take longer. Farahani can't shock the old guard too much, too quickly."

The waitress returned. They both ordered the stew. "And we'll share a basket of barbri bread," Seth added. The waitress collected their menus and disappeared.

With elbows on the table, Seth reached across and gave Jack's hand a couple of gentle slaps. "Jack, you look good! I've missed you. How ya doing?"

"Never better."

"I was surprised to get your call."

"I was thinking we'd have lunch the next time you were in the States. I had no idea you were in the area."

Seth shrugged, waved his hand. "How's the family? Olivia? And El Presidente . . . Il Duce?"

"Fine, all fine."

Jack had to smile, and not just because Seth was one of the few people who called Sally by her given name and refused to call Jack's father by his correct title, but because this exuberant and near-frenetic questioning was pure Seth Gregory. His friend not only was the quintessential people person, but also suffered from ADHD—emphasis on the "hyperactivity disorder" part. Seth had struggled in school. Jack had been his unofficial tutor.

Jack had always sensed an undercurrent of sadness behind Seth's gregariousness. Despite having known the man since St. Matthew's Academy, Jack always felt there was a part of Seth he kept hidden not only from the world, but from Jack as well. Jack had few friends at St. Matthew's, as most of his classmates had either shunned him as the stuck-up Golden Child of then CIA bigwig Jack Ryan or had been intimidated by the ostensibly lofty circles in which "Spy Boy" orbited. Of course, neither scenario had been true, and Jack had spent his first year at St. Matthew's trying to prove so, to no avail. But Seth had accepted Jack for who he was—an awkward teenager just trying to find his way like everyone else. Looking back at that time, Jack knew Seth had saved him from withdrawing into himself and spiraling into self-isolation. Seth didn't give a shit who Jack's father was, or where he lived, or that he rubbed shoulders with foreign royalty and heads of state at grand dinner parties. In fact, invariably, Seth's only question about such affairs had been whether there'd been any hot girls at the event and whether Jack had hooked up with any of them in some über-secret room at Langley.

Jack had always regretted not telling Seth how much his friendship had meant to him. Perhaps now was the time. Before Jack could do this, Seth continued his rapid-fire interrogation. Sometimes having a conversation with him was like being in the middle of a verbal tornado.

"What's going on with Olivia?"

"Sally?" Jack replied. "You haven't heard? She's an astronaut."

“What? Oh, that’s very funny, Jack. You’re quite the commode-ian.”

Jack laughed. “Man, you’re still saying that? It wasn’t even funny when we were fifteen.”

“Oh, it was funny, and you know it. So: Sally?”

“She just finished with her residency at Johns Hopkins.”

“Underachiever, that one. Are you still at that place . . . that financial group?”

“Hendley Associates.”

“Right. Making tons of money?”

“Doing okay,” Jack replied. The true answer was yes. Though the investment side of Hendley Associates was merely a cover for The Campus, Jack and his cohorts had in fact made hundreds of millions playing the world’s markets. Of that revenue, only a fraction paid their salaries. The rest funded the off-the-books intelligence organization.

Seth said, “And how about—”

Jack laughed and raised his hands in mock surrender. “Enough, Seth. You’re wearing me out. Tell me about you.”

“Still consulting. Been on contract with Shell for the last eighteen months. I was based out of Baku until about eight months ago, when they moved me here.”

After high school Seth had snagged a Gus Archie Memorial Scholarship to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s College of Engineering. Now, apparently, he was parlaying that into big bucks.

“I like it in Tehran, actually. My condo’s within walking distance of here. Great place.”

“What’s your specialty?” asked Jack.

“Mostly looking at drilling rigs and refining plants. It’s a nice gig. I spend most of my time in Central Asia.”

“Dicey areas.” *Especially the two “stans” from which the Emir, aka Saif Rahman Yasin, sprang*, Jack thought. Helping to nab that son of a bitch had been not only damned satisfying, but also Jack’s first foray into the world of field operations.

Seth said, “We get good training and plenty of security when we need it—Blackwater-type guys, mostly retirees from U.S. Special Forces. Nice guys. I’d hate to get on their bad side, though.”

A sentiment most bad guys share after receiving a visit from Navy SEALs or Army Delta Force, Jack thought.

“Got any investment advice for me?” Jack said.

“No. And you wouldn’t listen if I did,” replied Seth. “You’re a straight arrow, Jack, and you know it.”

Jack shrugged. “True enough. Plus, I’ve got a healthy fear of the SEC.”

Their food came and they ate. Jack followed Seth’s lead, tearing chunks off the barbari bread and mixing it

into the tomato stew. It was delicious and filling.

“I was sorry to hear about your dad,” Jack said.

“Yeah. I got your card, thanks. Sorry I didn’t say anything.”

“How’s your mom doing with it all?”

“It’s been three years. Looking at her, you’d think he died last week.”

“It’s understandable.” Seth’s father, Paul, had died of a sudden stroke. Seth’s mother had found him in the study. She’d never fully recovered.

“Man, I don’t know what to do for her,” said Seth. “My sister, Bethany—you remember Bethany, right?—lives about an hour north of her in Georgia. She took her to the doctor, who gave her some kind of prescription—Lamictal, I think.”

“Mood stabilizer and antidepressant,” Jack said. Half expecting Seth to have jumped to another subject, Jack was surprised he was being forthcoming with such intimate details. “How long has she been on it?”

“A couple weeks.”

“If it’s going to start helping, it’ll be any time now.”

Seth smiled. “The benefits of having two doctors in the family, huh?”

“Yep. Osmotic knowledge, I suppose.”

Seth dipped a chunk of bread into his stew, then popped it into his mouth. “So, what brings you to Tehran?”

“Scouting. Iranian markets are starting to open up. If Farahani keeps his course, there’s going to be a boom. Hendley needs to be ready.”

While this was true and was certainly part of the reason for Jack’s presence in the country, this was primarily an intelligence-gathering junket. While poring over the new media outlets blossoming in Iran was informative, there was no substitute for what John Clark, Hendley’s new operations chief, called a Mark I Eyeball inspection. It was a Navy term, Clark had explained. “Walk the streets and talk to people. Best tool in a spook’s arsenal.” So far Jack had neither seen nor heard anything to suggest Iran’s new president was anything but what he seemed—the first true moderate to hold office since the 1979 revolution. Whether he’d last was anyone’s guess.

Jack put that question to Seth: “You’ve been here awhile. What’s your take on all this?”

“Hell, Jack, I don’t know. I came here for the first time after the election. I can tell you this much: Nobody’s been anything but polite to me. I get dirty looks occasionally from some of the graybeards but that’s about it. No one’s ever called me ‘imperialist Satan,’ if that tells you anything.”

It does, Jack thought. Before Farahani took office, Seth would have had minders on his tail every moment he was outside his apartment. That would’ve been the best-case scenario. And with no reports of SAVAK-style crackdowns on the population, the fact that Seth—an American, of all things—could walk the streets unmolested suggested most of Iran’s citizenry was on board with Farahani’s reforms.

Ceaseless miracles, Jack thought.

They chatted for another hour and shared half a dozen cups of mint tea from a silver samovar the size of a small terrier until finally Seth glanced at his watch. “Shoot. I gotta go, Jack, sorry.”

Seth stood up. Jack did the same and extended his hand. Seth grasped it and then did something he rarely did: He held Jack’s gaze. “Really good to see you, man. I mean it.”

“You too, Seth.” Jack hesitated. “Everything okay with you?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be? Hey, listen, my apartment’s about fifteen minutes from here.” Seth gave him the address. “It’s right off Niavarana Park. If you’re ever back in town and need a place to crash, it’s yours. Just use the key. There’re steaks in the freezer.”

“Thanks, man, that’s—”

“Travel safe, Jack.”

Seth turned and walked away, disappearing through a vine-wrapped arch.

Key . . . what key? Jack thought. He sat back down and reached for his teacup. Sitting beside it was a bronze key.

“What the hell was all that about?” he muttered to himself.

Edinburgh, Scotland

As the only member of her team to have spent time in the United Kingdom prior to the start of the job, Helen was unsurprised by the blitz of blinking lights and cacophony of voices filtering through the van’s half-open windows.

Yegor braked hard and the van lurched to a stop as a young man and woman, clearly inebriated, stumbled past the front bumper. The woman raised two fingers at Yegor and called, “Tosser!”

Helen saw Yegor’s jaw pulse with anger, but he did not respond, and instead waited for them to pass before easing the van forward. On either side of the street, similarly intoxicated youth staggered and weaved along the sidewalks. On the passenger side, outside Helen’s half-open window, a pub’s door burst open, issuing a stream of drunks and pulsing dance music.

“What’s a tosser?” asked Yegor.

Someone who desperately needs a girlfriend, Helen thought with a smile. “I’ll explain later,” she said.

“This is amazing. What are all these places?”

“Pubs,” Helen answered.

“All of them?”

“Pretty much. This is just one area. This is Rose,” Helen said. “It’s the most popular pub street for students.”

“All of these people are students from the university?”

“Most of them.”

“How do they function in the morning?” asked Yegor. “Don’t they have lectures to attend?”

Helen smiled at this. Ever the pragmatist, Yegor wasn’t so concerned about the immorality he was seeing but rather how it affected the revelers’ study habits.

“Coffee,” she answered. “And other things, I suspect.”

In the backseat, the other two members of the team, Roma and Olik, sat with their foreheads nearly pressed against the rear windows, their eyes agog. Where they came from, public displays like these were punishable by imprisonment. Or worse.

Of course, Helen reminded herself, Roma and Olik were men, and sheltered ones at that. Most of their astonishment probably stemmed from the sea of exposed female skin passing before their eyes. Not to mention the physical intimacy couples showed each other on the street. *Snogging* was the term here. At home, neither of these were seen outside the bedroom of a husband and wife.

Olik leaned over the front seat’s center console and said, “And this is an important school, you say?”

“One of the most prestigious in the world,” Helen replied.

There were a few seconds of silence. “And what exactly are the admission requirements?”

Helen chuckled, as did Yegor, who said, “Get ahold of yourself, Olik.”

Roma, however, muttered, “Whores, all of them. Every one of them. They should be whipped.”

This comment didn’t surprise Helen. Of the three men on her team, Roma, a last-minute addition, had been the only one chafing under her leadership. He was a zealot, and he thought like one. Theirs was a business of dispassion; Roma didn’t understand that. The man bore watching. Sooner or later she would have to put him in his place.

They drove for a few minutes before turning onto Castle Street. Here, too, the sidewalk was lined with pubs and restaurants, though these were more subdued, geared to those students who disliked the “meat markets,” she knew. *Is that the correct term now, “meat markets”?* she wondered. She would check. Standing out was a hazard to be avoided.

“My contact says her favorite spot is called The Stable,” she said.

“Like for horses?” asked Olik.

“Like for university students,” Helen answered. “There it is, Yegor, ahead on the left.”

“I see it. Olik, Roma, look for her car. A red Mini Cooper with white hood stripes.”

“How does she afford such a vehicle?” asked Roma.

A gift from Daddy, Helen thought but did not say. “Never mind that. Just keep your eyes open.”

Yegor slowed the van. Moments later, from behind them came the impatient honking of car horns.

“A little faster, Yegor,” Helen said, and he pressed the accelerator slightly. It wouldn’t do to be stopped by the police.

“Wait, I think we just passed her car,” said Olik. “On the right.”

Helen glanced in her side mirror. “Yes, that’s the one. Keep going, Yegor.”

Yegor sped up, then turned left onto Frederick Street, where he found a parking space a block away from a petrol station. He put the van in park, shut off the engine, and checked his watch. “Now what?”

“Now we wait,” replied Helen.

Now we build a pattern.

Parsian Hotel Azadi, Tehran

JACK SAT BOLT UPRIGHT in bed and looked around. *Just someone at your door, Jack. Relax.* As much as he loved fieldwork, especially the high-adrenaline stuff, it did tend to put you in that zero-to-sixty mind-set.

He exhaled and rolled his shoulders, then his neck. Hotel pillows never agreed with him.

The knock on the door came again, polite but insistent. Jack checked the nightstand clock. Six in the morning. He rolled over, got to his feet, donned his terry-cloth robe, and headed for the door. “Who is it?”

No answer, but another knock.

“Who is it?” Jack repeated a little more firmly. There was no peephole. Isn’t that against fire code? It was in the United States, at least.

“Mr. Jack Ryan?” The man’s accent was English.

Jack didn’t respond.

“Mr. Ryan, my name is Raymond Wellesley. May I speak to you for a few minutes?”

“About what, Mr. Wellesley?”

“Your friend Seth Gregory.”

This got Jack’s attention.

Wellesley said, “This is perhaps a matter best discussed in private.”

Ease up, Jack. If by some fluke there had been a coup overnight and these were in fact the Shah’s SAVAK back from the dead, he was screwed anyway. Plus, that kind of visitor didn’t knock.

Jack unlocked the dead bolt, swung the latch, and opened the door. Standing before him was a short, middle-aged man with thinning brown hair. He wore a tailored dark blue British-cut suit. Savile Row, Jack decided.

“Mr. Jack Ryan, yes?” said Raymond Wellesley.

“Yes, come in.”

Wellesley stepped through the door and strode across Jack’s suite to the sitting area beside the balcony windows. He carefully lowered himself into one of the club chairs and looked around as though checking for cleanliness.

Jack shut the door and walked over.

“Apologies for the early hour,” Wellesley said. “Pressing matters, I’m afraid. Good heavens, I’m sorry, would you care to see some identification?”

“Please,” Jack replied. Something told him he was about to be handed a nondescript business card.

He was right. The card read:

RAYMOND L. WELLESLEY

FOREIGN & COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

KING CHARLES STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AH

UNITED KINGDOM

RLW@FCO.GOV.UK

+44 20 7946 0690

Though Britain wasn’t due to reopen its Tehran embassy for another few months, something told Jack that Raymond Wellesley wouldn’t be the type to have an address here anyway. Wellesley’s business card told him nothing except the man was probably not in fact an employee of the FCO.

Jack slipped the card into the pocket of his robe and said, “You mentioned Seth Gregory. Is he okay?”

“Curious word, *okay*. Lends itself to all manner of interpretation, doesn’t it?”

Wellesley’s accent was not just British, Jack decided, but what he’d come to recognize as Received Pronunciation—RP or BBC English. Nonregional and indistinct. Apparently, Jack thought, he’d absorbed something from meeting the panoply of British diplomats that had visited the White House during his dad’s first term. RP was standard dialect among higher-echelon people at the Secret Intelligence Service, an “old boy” tradition that hadn’t changed since the First World War.

Wellesley added, “Whether Mr. Gregory is ‘okay’ is something I was hoping you could help me with.”

Jack felt his heart quicken slightly. *What the hell is going on?*

Jack said, “Answer my question, Mr. Wellesley.”

“As far as we can tell, your friend is alive and well. You had lunch with Mr. Gregory yesterday, did you not?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“No, I don’t.”

“What did you discuss during your lunch?”

“How much I was hoping to get a predawn visit from the FCO. And here you are.”

“I encourage you to take my questions seriously, Mr. Ryan. We’re affording you a courtesy we might not otherwise extend.”

The message was clear, or at least he thought so: If he weren’t *that* Jack Ryan, this talk probably wouldn’t be even remotely cordial.

Jack stepped around the club chair and took a seat opposite Wellesley.

“Would you like some coffee?” he asked.

“No, thank you. I can’t stay long.”

“Mr. Wellesley, Seth is a friend of mine. We’ve known each other since high school. I’m here on business and I asked him if he’d like to have lunch and catch up.”

“What did you discuss?”

“Family, old times, Iran’s new government, and a bit about work.”

“What kind of work does he do?”

“He’s an engineer with Shell.”

“Is that what he told you?”

“Yes, that’s what he told me. You have reason to believe otherwise?”

“I can’t discuss that.”

“Why are you looking for him?”

“I can’t discuss that, either, but if you can help us find him, we would be grateful.”

“I’d trade gratitude for equity,” Jack said. “Give me a better idea what’s going on and I’ll see what I can do.”

Raymond Wellesley pursed his lips and stared into space for a few seconds. “Very well. But not here. Are you free this afternoon?”

Is Wellesley suggesting my room is bugged? Jack wondered. It seemed unlikely, but he’d learned early on to never mistake probability with possibility.

“I can be.”

Wellesley stood up and drew another business card from the breast pocket of his suit. With a silver pen he scribbled on the back of the card, then handed it to Jack.

“Meet me there at two o’clock.”

• • •

AS HAD BEEN drummed into him by Ding Chavez, Hendley’s senior operations officer, Jack arrived by taxi an hour early for the meeting, then got out and walked the ground, familiarizing himself with the neighborhood around the address Wellesley had given him, the upscale Zafaraniyeh district in northern Tehran. Always know your egress—or, in Ding’s SpecFor-influenced vernacular, “Know your GTFO plan”: Get the Fuck Out.

According to the travel websites Jack had consulted, Zafaraniyeh was home to mostly Iranian and expatriate millionaires. Behind tree-lined sidewalks, the apartment façades were done in Pahlavi style, a circa-1960s mix of traditional Persian and modern European.

A light rain began to fall. Jack opened the umbrella the hotel’s concierge had suggested and continued down the damp sidewalk. The few passersby he saw, mostly Europeans in casual sport coats and trousers, offered him a perfunctory smile. The locals were a mix of men and women, the latter wearing no headscarves at all, simply nodding. No smiles. Neither friendly nor unfriendly. A good sign, Jack knew. He had chosen his attire in hopes of blending in.

At one-fifty, Jack made his way to the correct address, an apartment fronted by granite columns and a line of neatly trimmed squared hedges. He climbed the steps into the tiled foyer and found the intercom panel. He pressed the button labeled *VII*. A moment later a voice said, “Come up, Mr. Ryan.”

Good guess or foresight? Jack thought. Assume the latter, Jack.

The foyer’s inner door let out a soft buzz. Jack opened it, stepped through, and followed the carpeted runner to the elevator, an old-style accordion-gated elevator that took him to the seventh floor and another tiled foyer. As the gate parted, a door across from him opened, revealing Raymond Wellesley.

“Early is punctual,” he said. “A man after my own heart. Come in.”

Jack followed Wellesley inside and down a short hallway to a spacious room decorated in what Jack could only describe as gray, with furniture and decor that were neither British nor Persian, neither colorless nor vibrant. A perfectly forgettable safe house with furnishings that came with the place, Jack thought.

He stopped at the entrance of the room and looked around. To his left a pair of hallways led back to what he guessed were bedrooms; to his right was an alcove minibar. Standing beside a sectional couch area in front of the windows was a second man of medium height, with dark cropped hair and a heavy beard. His face was deeply tanned, as though he spent more time outdoors than he did indoors.

Wellesley said, “Jack, may I introduce Matthew Spellman.”

Spellman stepped around the couch and extended his hand. “Matt.”

“Jack Ryan.”

“Coffee, Mr. Ryan?” Wellesley asked.

“Thanks.”

They settled into the sitting room, Jack taking a wingback chair, Spellman on the couch opposite him.

Wellesley poured Jack a cup of coffee from the carafe on the low table between them, then joined Spellman on the couch.

Jack raised his mug in a half-toast. “To Anglo-American cooperation.”

“Let’s hope so,” Wellesley replied.

Having already guessed Wellesley was SIS, Jack surmised Spellman was CIA. Whatever Seth Gregory had done or was suspected of doing, his friend had attracted some powerful attention. Jack was tempted to take a hard line, to demand answers, but he knew it would get him nowhere, not yet. Moreover, aggression might only pique their interest in him. Better to let his hosts make some progress on their agenda.

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding,” Spellman began, “we know who you are.”

“And who am I?”

“First Son of President Ryan.”

“And if I wasn’t?”

“Please, Mr. Ryan,” said Wellesley. “We’re not thugs. What’s your business in Iran?”

“Market scouting. I’m with Hendley Associates. We do—”

“We know what Hendley does. But why are you here, in Iran?”

“I told you. Market scouting. President Farahani’s move toward moderation may open things up to foreign investment. If so, we want to get ahead of that.”

“Makes sense. Heck, maybe I should get some stock tips from you,” Spellman said with a chuckle.

“How long do you plan on being here?” This from Wellesley.

Good cop, bad cop, Jack thought. Though Hollywood had made the technique a cliché, it was tried-and-true. Spellman and Wellesley were giving him a mild form of it now—affable cop, slightly testy British bobby.

“It’s open-ended,” he replied.

“How well do you know Seth Gregory?” asked Wellesley.

“We’re old friends from high school.”

“When was the last time you were in touch with each other?” Spellman asked.

Intentionally covering already plowed ground, Jack thought. “Yesterday, at lunch. But you know that.”

Wellesley said, “Before that, is what he means.”

“E-mail, to set up the lunch.” *You know that, too.*

The questioning continued for another ten minutes, Wellesley probing and reprobing the nature and depth of Jack’s relationship with Seth. They were setting a baseline and looking for inconsistencies. Aside from interjecting bits of lighthearted humor to keep Jack on the roller coaster, Spellman said nothing, but simply

sipped his coffee and studied Jack's face.

Finally he said, "Do you know where he is?"

"Have you checked his apartment?"

"Yes," said Wellesley. "Have you been there?"

"I don't even know where it is."

"Pardis Condos, off Niayesh Expressway."

Jack recalled his still-spotty mental map of Tehran. The Niayesh Expressway was nowhere near Niavaran Park, where Seth had claimed his apartment was located. *What the hell is going on?*

Jack shook his head. "I haven't been there."

"I went there after our meeting this morning," said Wellesley. "He's not there. In fact, it looks like he hasn't been there for quite some time."

"He travels for work."

"We know that," Wellesley replied, with a tinge of exasperation in his voice.

It sounded genuine. Perhaps a button Jack could push later if necessary.

"Did you two talk about his work?" asked Spellman.

"Only in passing. He consults for Shell."

Jack watched for a reaction from either man, but got nothing but impassive gazes. He said, "Guys, I don't know what to tell you. You seem to know more than I do about what's been going on with Seth. Are you going to explain what's going on? Come on, give me something."

Wellesley let out a sigh. Spellman set his cup on the coffee table and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "We think Seth's gotten himself into trouble. We want to help him."

"Listen, I don't even know who you are, but I've read enough John le Carré novels to make a guess. You don't have to tell me all your secrets, but if Seth's in trouble, I need to know what's going on."

"No, you don't," replied Wellesley. "I suggest you—"

Spellman raised a hand to cut off his colleague. "Hang on a second, Raymond. Okay, Jack, that's fair. I'm going to stick my neck out. Don't chop it off, okay? I got kids to feed." Spellman gave him a sheepish grin.

Jack found himself not disliking Spellman—which was probably the point, he reminded himself.

"I'll do my best, Matt."

"We've had an op going for the past year or so. Seth's been running it for us, but it's got nothing to do with Iran. Something else. After you two had lunch he was supposed to come here for a sit-down, an update meeting. When he didn't show, we checked his apartment. He hasn't been staying there. The super said he's been collecting Seth's mail for almost a month." Spellman hesitated and glanced at Wellesley, who gave him

a slight nod. "He's also taken some money—our operational fund. And we think he left the country."

Damn it, Jack thought. Spellman wasn't kidding; Seth was in deep trouble. Was Seth, his old high school buddy, what he seemed to be? *Too many questions*, Jack thought.

Jack almost forgot to ask the next obvious question, one he knew they wouldn't answer but one a civilian would certainly ask: "What do you mean, 'op'? You mean operation? What kind? To what end?"

Spellman gave him another disarming smile. "Sorry, that's need-to-know stuff. Suffice to say, we're the good guys."

"You're kidding with this, right? This can't be real."

"This is quite real, Mr. Ryan," said Wellesley. "You'll agree the circumstances don't look good for your friend. Of course, all this could be a misunderstanding—"

"Crossed wires," Spellman added.

"—which is why it's imperative we find Mr. Gregory."

"No, hey, I get it," said Jack. "All I've got is his cell-phone number and e-mail address, but I'm guessing you've got those, too."

"What are they?" asked Spellman. Jack recited them and Spellman nodded. "Yeah, those are right."

"I don't believe Seth would do something like what you're talking about. You're suggesting he's a traitor, a spy."

"People change," Spellman replied.

"That's not the Seth I know."

"You're familiar with the apple-tree aphorism, I assume?" said Wellesley.

"What, about one not falling far from the other? What the hell does that mean? Are you talking about Seth's dad? He worked for the Department of Agriculture, for God's sake."

"Of course."

Jack stood up. "I've told you everything I know. If I hear from him, I'll tell him to call you. For the record, I think you're wrong."

Spellman and Wellesley stood up as well. The American said, "Hang on, Jack . . ."

"No, I'm done." Jack headed for the door.

Wellesley called, "Mr. Ryan."

Jack turned around.

"If you're lying to us, or you try to reach out to your friend behind our backs, we'll know about it. If that happens, your father's influence will only go so far."

“Are you threatening me?”

The SIS man was doing just that, Jack knew, and he wasn’t particularly surprised by it, given the alleged stakes. Still, the natural reaction of his public persona, Jack Ryan, Jr., First Son and workaday financial analyst, would be one of outrage and fear. *Give them what they expect.*

“I told you what I know. Seth and I had lunch for about an hour. End of story.”

Spellman raised his hands in surrender and stepped around the couch. “Hey, Jack, you’re probably right. We just need to find him, that’s all. You’re his friend and you probably want to protect him. I’d feel the same. But you really don’t want to get in the middle of this. Just get ahold of us if you hear from him. Use the e-mail on Raymond’s card. And don’t go hunting for him, Jack.”

Raymond Wellesley said, “Very good advice, that.”

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AS SOON AS he stepped out onto the street, he took a deep breath, trying to wrap his head around what had just happened, then started walking. The cool spring air felt good on his face.

God damn it, Jack thought. *Can’t be. Not Seth.* Spellman’s warning about not getting involved had barely registered with Jack. *Not help Seth? No way.* The question was, Where the hell should he start?

As crazy as the man had been, James Jesus Angleton, Cold War CIA spymaster and raging paranoid, had gotten it right when he assigned the Yeats line “wilderness of mirrors” to the world of intelligence and espionage. The fact that Jack could still remember the poem was either a testament to or an indictment of his Catholic-school upbringing.

Jack’s next thought about the meeting would have made Angleton proud: *Are Raymond Wellesley and Matthew Spellman who they claim to be? And if not, who are they? And if . . .*

Stop, Jack commanded himself. Those kinds of spiraling questions would drop him squarely down the rabbit hole. He needed facts. He needed a foundation he could stand on.

First: Know who he is dealing with.

Second: Find Seth Gregory before Wellesley and Spellman did.

SHORT OF SPENDING weeks tailing Spellman and Wellesley and trying to build a profile on each man, Jack had only one way of knowing their pedigrees. Tap into The Campus’s resources. But as there was no remote log-in portal to Hendley’s intelligence gold mine, he had to call in a favor.

Twenty minutes after he left the Zafaraniyah apartment, the wheels were in motion.

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JACK SPENT the rest of the afternoon killing time, then had a dinner of lamb khoresh in the hotel restaurant, followed by two cups of espresso, before leaving and walking two blocks south, where he caught a taxi and set out for Niavaran Park.

The sun was setting when the taxi dropped him off at the park's tree- and streetlight-lined southern entrance. As Jack made his way north deeper into the park he could hear strains of what sounded like Persian pop music and laughing. Improbably, Niavaran Park was not only the former home of the last shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, but also currently a public library and a roller-skating rink and teenage hangout. Jack resisted the urge to go watch the spectacle and made his way through the park to Pourebtehaj Street, the park's northern border. From there, Seth's apartment—the one Wellesley and Spellman didn't know about—was a five-minute walk to the east.

The apartments here were built in the fifties, old but well-kept brownstones with fresh white paint and neat grass strips lining the sidewalks. Seth's building was in the middle of the block. Jack walked to the far end, where he found a coffee shop. He took a seat near a window with a view of the building and ordered a cup of decaf tea.

He started watching.

• • •

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, after seeing only a trio of people out and about—two of them walking dogs, the third hurrying to catch a bus on the corner—Jack felt his phone vibrate in his jacket pocket. The screen read *Gavin*.

Gavin Biery's official title at The Campus was director of information technology, but he was also an information scrounger without equal. He hadn't hesitated when Jack asked him to do an unofficial search into Wellesley and Spellman. He'd said nothing about Seth Gregory.

"Hey, Gavin, what's up?"

"We've got sleet here. That's what's up." Gavin wasn't a fan of the outdoors, or weather, or things that didn't involve computers, for that matter.

"Sorry to hear that. What've you got for me?"

"Raymond Lamont Wellesley and Matthew Spellman both look legit. They've got pretty vanilla titles, but you'd expect that. Wellesley is Foreign Office, no department or division named, which says something in itself, and Spellman is Department of State, Political Affairs, European and Eurasia.

"But once I dug a little deeper I started hitting layers of stuff that reeked of backstopping," said Biery, referring to administrative details used to bulwark a cover identity. "I'll keep digging."

"No red flags?"

"Not so far. I'll step lightly. Are you in trouble, Jack?"

"Just being overcautious. Probably nothing. Thanks, Gavin."

Jack disconnected.

He nursed his tea for another twenty minutes until satisfied the block was clear, then paid the tab and walked outside, across the street, and up the brownstone's front steps. The outer foyer door was unlocked. He stepped through. Unlike the building's nondescript façade, the foyer was pure Persian, with blue-and-white mosaic floor tiles and pristine white walls. He stood still for a few moments, listening, then took the stairs to the fourth floor and into the hallway. It was empty, lined on both sides with four apartment doors; Jack heard

no sound filtering through them. He felt a prickle of apprehension on his neck. In an American apartment hallway you'd at least hear faint television noise. Different culture, Jack decided. He walked down the hallway, past Seth's apartment door, number 406, and stopped at the fire exit, where he again stood still, listening. If he'd collected a tail here, they had two choices: wait until Jack emerged from the building again or come find him. Jack sat down on the windowsill, his back resting against the roman shade, and waited.

Hurry up and wait. It was a phrase both Clark and Ding had used many times. In both the military and intelligence work, patience was an indispensable virtue.

He waited ten minutes, then gave it an extra five minutes for caution's sake, then returned to Seth's door, pressed his ear to the door for a few moments, then inserted the key and turned the knob and stepped through. He turned the dead bolt back into place with a soft snick. Save the moonlight coming through a pair of windows on the other side of the room, the space was dark.

Jack thought: *Gloves. Should have brought gloves.*

In the corner of his left eye, he saw movement—a shadowed figure rushing down the side hall. Jack spun on his heel to face the charge. In rapid fire, Jack's brain dissected the incoming attack: probably no gun, or the man wouldn't be trying to close the gap; the man's arms and hands were tucked close to his body, so probably no blade or blunt object. This kind of blind rush suggested Jack's arrival had surprised him.

Now Jack's brain switched to autopilot. He let the man cover a few more feet, then dodged right, off the line of attack, spun on his heel again, and twisted his body, slashing at the passing man with his elbow, catching him on the back of the head with a glancing blow. It wasn't enough. The man turned, hunched in a fighter's stance, and lashed out with a Muay Thai-style kick. His shin landed hard on Jack's left thigh. Jack immediately felt his quadriceps muscle go numb. The kick wasn't one of desperation reaction, Jack realized. His attacker had skill.

He stumbled backward, trying to regain his balance, trying to transfer weight onto his good leg, but the man charged again, backing him toward the windows. A back full of glass shards would end the fight, he knew. He sidestepped, a half-stumble, then took a step forward, ducked under the straight right punch from the man, then slammed his own right hook into the man's ribs. The man staggered sideways. Jack's damaged thigh felt dead. He wasn't going to win this standing up.

He pushed off with his right leg and crashed into the man. Together they fell in a heap on the floor, the man pinned beneath Jack. The man turned onto his back, encircled Jack's waist with his legs, and pulled his head down against his chest. *Shit.* The man had Brazilian jiu-jitsu, too. If Jack didn't extricate himself quickly, he'd no doubt find himself in a rear naked choke. Lose standing up, lose on the ground. *Do something, Jack.*

The man slammed an elbow into Jack's temple. Bright light flashed behind his eyes. He felt his body swaying sideways, saw blackness creeping into his vision. Knowing more strikes would be coming, Jack bracketed his head with his forearms, absorbing blows until he could right himself. He jerked back, breaking the man's grip, then snapped his torso downward. His forehead smashed into the man's cheekbone. Jack heard the soft crunch. The man shoved his arm up, palm-striking Jack's chin. Jack felt the man's fingers clawing up his face toward his eyes. He jerked his head sideways and broke the man's grip.

Don't let up, Jack thought. Finish him before you go out.

He lifted his head again, brought it down again, then once more. Before his assailant could recover, Jack reached down blindly, grabbed the man's ears, and slammed the back of his head against the hardwood floor. Then twice more until the man went limp.

Gasping, Jack rolled off the man and scooted sideways, disentangling himself from the man's legs, and craned his neck until he could see down the hallway from where the man had charged. Thankfully, there was no one there; he was in no shape for another fight. His head throbbed and he could hear the rush of blood in his ears.

Half conscious, moving on instinct alone, Jack crawled over to the man, flipped him onto his belly, and pressed his left knee against his neck. The man didn't move, made no sound. The hardwood beneath his head was slick with black blood. Jack reached down and felt the man's throat for a carotid pulse. It was there, steady and strong.

Good, Jack thought. While he'd killed before and accepted the necessity of it, he'd never liked the feeling. It always made him mildly queasy—a good thing, John Clark had told him: "When it has no effect on you, either when it happens or later, when you're alone with your thoughts, you got a problem." That admission from a man like Clark had surprised Jack, and he'd wondered if Hendley's operations chief was becoming more reflective in his golden years. Of course, *golden years* wasn't a term he ever uttered in Clark's presence.

Jack realized his left thigh was twitching uncontrollably. He sat down on his butt, scooted himself backward over the floor, then began kneading the quadriceps muscle until finally the quivering subsided. Damn, that kick had been unlike anything Jack had ever felt. A second one would have dropped him. Time to do some Muay Thai training, Jack thought absently.

Think, Jack. Had his attacker been surprised by his arrival, or had this been an ambush? One way to find out. Jack crawled to the man and frisked him. There was a wallet in the back pocket; Jack pulled it out and stuffed it into his front waistband. On the man's right hip was a paddle holster; inside it, a nine-millimeter semi-auto. Jack ejected the magazine, found it full, then eased back the slide and saw there was a round in the pipe.

Surprise, then, Jack thought. If this had been an ambush, the man would have been waiting, gun drawn. Even so, he'd had time to draw down on Jack. The man had probably panicked. Good dumb luck for Jack.

"Who the hell are you?" Jack muttered to the unconscious man. A question for later.

He withdrew the nine-millimeter and stuffed it into his jacket's side pocket.

Jack pushed himself to his feet, limped over to the windows and drew the shades, then back to the door, where he flipped on the overhead light. Save a floor lamp in one corner, the room was empty. Jack walked over and unplugged the lamp, then jerked the cord free and used it to bind the man's hands.

Jack made his way into the kitchenette off the main room and turned on the range hood light. He found a glass on the counter and filled it with water from the sink, drank it, then another. His hands were shaking. He put down the glass and clenched his fists until they were steady again.

He opened the mostly empty freezer and found a bag of frozen carrots. With it pressed against his thigh, he headed down the short hallway, where he found a bathroom, empty except for a bar of soap in the shower, a hand towel, and a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste sitting on the edge of the sink. In the medicine cabinet he found a bottle of what looked like Iranian-brand ibuprofen. He downed four of them, then inspected his face in the mirror. A half-dollar spot on his forehead was bright red and his right cheekbone was swollen and scraped. Could be a lot worse, Jack knew. He turned on the faucet, splashed water on his face, then wiped it once with the hand towel.

At the end of the hall was a bedroom containing a camping cot, a folding chair, and a card table with a flex-neck lamp clamped to its edge. The single window was covered by blackout curtains, their edges taped with silver duct tape. Only a ribbon of light showed through the center. In the corner sat a two-by-two-foot floor safe, its door closed.

“Nice digs, Seth,” Jack whispered. “What the hell are you up to?”

Why had his friend abandoned his real apartment for this spartan bolt-hole? According to Spellman, Seth’s mail had been piling up for almost a month. Providing that was when Seth had moved here, what had prompted it? And why had Seth given him the key? It certainly wasn’t so Jack would have an alternative place to lay his head. Seth had wanted him to come here, to find something—most likely whatever was inside that safe.

Jack crossed to the safe, knelt down, and tried the handle. It was locked.

Unbidden, Seth’s final words at Chaibar café popped into Jack’s head: “There’re steaks in the freezer.”

“Clever boy,” Jack muttered.

He stepped out of the bedroom.

And froze.

At the end of the hall stood a man; he was pointing a gun at Jack’s chest.

“Not a sound, or I’ll put you down.”

• • •

THE MAN’S ACCENT was American. His face was covered by a balaclava. *Quiet bastard*, Jack thought. Was he dealing with one of Matt Spellman and Raymond Wellesley’s men? If not, this was a hell of a coincidence.

The man held a semi-auto affixed with a noise suppressor the size of a soda can. With a suppressor of that size, a shot would be softer than a paperback book being slammed on the floor. Jack’s heart started to pound.

“Hands up,” the man said.

Jack raised his hands.

The bag of carrots he’d had pressed to his thigh hit the floor.

The man asked, “Did you kill him, that one out there?”

“Not quite.”

“Bloodied him up a bit, though.”

“Him or me. Friend of yours?”

“Shut up. I ask, you answer.”

If these two men were partners, this one was giving nothing away.

“You got his gun, yeah?” the man said. “Face away from me and pull it out—two fingers on the barrel, nice and slow, put it on the floor.”

Jack turned away from the man and, as he pulled out the nine-millimeter, sucked in his gut, then hunched forward slightly, edging the wallet down the front of his pants. He knelt down, repeating the undulation motion, then, hoping the wallet was out of view, laid the gun on the floor.

“Turn around and kick it over to me,” said Balaclava.

Jack did so. The nine-millimeter spun across the hardwood floor and bounced to a stop at the man’s feet. His own gun never wavering, Balaclava knelt down, picked up the gun, and stuffed it into his waistband.

Jack thought, *I’m still alive*. That was both very good news and very bad news. Something told Jack this new player wasn’t the kind of man you wanted to spend any alone time with.

“Listen,” Jack said, “I walked in here and that guy attacked me. That’s all I know. Let me go and—”

The man chuckled. “Not happening, pal. Walk toward me. Careful or I’ll put one in your knee, got me?”

“Got you.”

Hands raised, Jack walked down the hall. The man maintained his distance, backstepping until he and Jack were in the main room.

“Stop there.”

The man stepped to the door and flipped off the overhead light. The room went dark, save what little light filtered out from the kitchenette.

“On your knees, ankles crossed.”

Jack hesitated, considering his options. There was almost no chance he could close the gap. The man could put three rounds into Jack before he took two steps.

“Best not to think about it too much,” the man said. “Do what I say and maybe we’ll get to be friends.”

Jack knelt down.

The man walked to the unconscious figure on the floor, knelt down, and pressed his fingers to the man’s throat.

“Still alive?” Jack asked.

“He is. Good luck for you.”

“Maybe he’s got identification—”

“Damn, man, shut your mouth. You’re not exactly a quick learner, are you?”

Jack shrugged.

“Turn around, face away from me.”

Jack shook his head. “If you’re going to kill me—”

“Nah, see, I’m more of a face-to-face guy. We’re going to have a nice private chat. How you come out the other end will depend on your answers. Turn around.”

Jack’s heart was in his throat. He had no choice. He was going to turn around either of his own volition or because he had a bullet in his knee. *Shit, is this where it ends?* he thought. Again he quashed the impulse to charge the man. Jack guessed this man’s idea of a chat was going to involve a lot of pain and blood, but it might also buy him some time. Either way, at the end of whatever was coming, Jack was going to end up dead. *Play for time, then.*

The man groaned, rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, man—”

He fired a round into the floor before Jack’s knees. Wood chips peppered his thighs. He squeezed his eyes shut. *Son of a bitch.*

“—you’re testing my patience. Turn around. Last warning.”

Jack maneuvered himself so he was facing the windows.

Footsteps clicked on the wooden floor behind him.

He felt something slam into the back of his head. Then nothing.

JACK FELT HIS body lurch upward. His head banged against something with a dull thunk. He opened his eyelids slightly; waves of pain radiated across his head and pulsed behind his eyes. He squeezed them shut again, took several deep breaths, until finally the pain eased. What had happened? *Ambush . . . Balaclava Man.*

The floor beneath Jack was shuddering, emitting a crinkling sound. Jack’s brain started assembling pieces: He was moving. Inside a vehicle. He opened his eyes again and scanned his surroundings. A small panel van, white walls, tool racks holding spools of wire and hand tools. An electrician’s van. *Remember that, Jack thought.*

He was lying on a plastic tarp, feet toward the front seats, his head resting on the driver’s-side wheel well. His jacket was gone, leaving him in only a polo shirt. Jack rocked slightly onto his butt and could feel his back pocket was empty.

They’d taken his wallet, which contained his Virginia driver’s license, personal credit cards, hotel room key card, and his hybrid satellite cell phone. None of these would lead his kidnappers anywhere of value. As did all of The Campus’s operations officers, Jack practiced good digital tradecraft: In addition to having his phone AES-256 password-protected, Jack religiously cleared his call history, discussed nothing over instant messaging or e-mail that was confidential or extraordinary, kept nothing but innocuous contacts in his address book, and aside from Hendley’s main line, there were no numbers on his speed dial; the rest he’d committed to memory. In short, his phone was as gray as could be—as was his room at the Parsian Hotel Azadi. Still, if they realized he was Jack Ryan, Jr. . . . Like it or not, Jack knew he was a high-value target.

The tarp he lay on was a bad sign. It suggested they were going to start working on him here. It wouldn’t do to have the van’s interior bloody. His hands were bound before him with a thick zip-tie, but not his ankles. Better news.

From the front seat a voice said, "Check on him." Jack recognized the voice: Balaclava.

Jack shut his eyes. Through his lids he sensed a flashlight beam pass over his face. The beam went dark.

"Still out," came the reply.

This voice Jack didn't recognize, but the accent was American, a rough New York one. Jack felt certain he'd broken the nose of his assailant in Seth's bolt-hole, but he heard no trace of it in this man's voice and his head was covered in a dark wool beanie, which could be covering any scalp laceration. In Seth's apartment Balaclava had seemed both interested and disinterested in the man Jack had taken out. His kidnappers were American, and Wellesley and Spellman had warned him not to get involved. Was this their response?

"How far?" Balaclava said.

"Two miles. Take a left on this road up here. There are headlights behind us."

"The ones from the Shomal?"

"I don't know. Can't tell. Shit, maybe—"

"Relax. It's probably nothing."

After a few moments, Jack heard the soft tick-tock of the van's turn signal, then felt the vehicle turning. He opened his eyes and craned his head backward. Upside down, through the van's rear window, he caught a glimpse of the moon; as the van finished the turn, it slid from view. The tires began crunching slightly. They'd turned onto a gravel road. Were they outside Tehran? This, too, was a bad sign: dark, isolated road, hands bound, lying on a tarp-covered van floor.

Shomal, Jack thought. The name sounded familiar, and Balaclava's use of *the* suggested a highway or freeway. Jack tried to recall his mental map of Tehran, but he drew a blank.

Doesn't matter, he thought. One thing mattered: He had to get out, make a break. If they reached their destination with him inside this van, he was finished. How far would he get, though? The hell with it. Better to die running than lying down.

"Did they make the turn?" asked the American.

"No, it kept going. We're okay."

Not so fast, Jack thought.

He curled his legs until his knees touched his chest, took a deep breath, then mule-kicked the driver's seat. Balaclava lurched forward, his head smacking the steering wheel. The van skewed to the right, wheels thumping on the road's berm.

"Get him, get him," Balaclava yelled.

Jack spun on his butt, curled his legs again, and kicked the back doors. Knowing it would take more than one try, Jack kicked again, grunting with the effort, then again and again, until finally the rear doors burst outward. The thrum of the tires and the red glow of the taillights filled the interior. The van veered left. Jack bounced off the side wall.

He rolled onto his side, got his feet under him, and stood in a half-crouch. His head banged against the van's roof. He felt a pair of hands on his hips, pulling him backward. Headlights flooded the interior. A horn began honking. How close, Jack couldn't tell. With his eyes squinting against the glare, Jack twisted sideways, broke free of the hands.

"God damn it . . . !" the American shouted. "Get back—"

"Grab him!" called Balaclava.

Jack curled himself into a ball and heaved himself out the doors.

• • •

HE HIT THE ROAD HIP-FIRST. The impact jarred his spine and knocked the air from his lungs. He barrel-rolled over the road, stones gouging and scratching his arms, his eyesight filled with snatches of dark sky, dirt, tall grass alongside the road, and headlights. Behind him an engine roared. Tires skidding. A gust of air buffeted him as the car swerved around him. Jack felt himself plowing through grass, then down an embankment. He stopped rolling, faceup and staring at the sky. His stomach filled his throat and his eyesight sparkled. He rolled onto his belly, got his bound hands beneath his chest, and pressed himself up, then onto his knees. Down the road he saw the van's brake lights flash as it skidded to a stop amid a cloud of dust. Thirty feet behind, the trailing car was also sliding to a stop.

Damn, Jack thought. Frying pan to fire. Now he had at least three pursuers to elude.

The van's driver's-side door swung open and Balaclava hopped out.

Jack got to his feet, started to turn to run. He stopped.

The trailing car's engine revved, veered sideways around the van, its nose aimed at Balaclava, who flung himself back into the van. The car plowed into the open door; it tore free and skipped over the car's hood and roof in a shower of debris. The car skidded to a stop, the reverse lights came on, and it backed up until it was even with the van. As it passed, out the passenger window came a trio of orange muzzle flashes.

"What the fuck?" Jack muttered.

Spewing a rooster tail of gravel, the van surged forward, its rear doors banging open and shut. The brake lights went dark and faded into the dust cloud.

The car kept backing up, picking up speed, then did a J-turn and skidded to a stop across the road from Jack. The car was black, a Mercedes E-Class.

From the driver's window a female voice shouted, "Get in!"

Jack didn't move.

"Get in before they regroup and turn around!"

No choice, he thought.

Half stumbling, half running, Jack crossed the road, went around the car's rear bumper, then opened the passenger door, threw himself inside, and slammed the door shut. A moment before the dome light went dark and the car sped off, Jack glimpsed long black hair, and manicured nails on the steering wheel.

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WITH THE CAR'S HEADLIGHTS OFF, the Mercedes's powerful engine ate up the gravel road until they reached the intersection. The woman turned left onto pavement. In the flash of headlights Jack glimpsed a square, white-on-blue sign: a single number 3. The woman floored the accelerator and within seconds the speedometer swept past 140 kph.

In silence they drove on, the woman's eyes flashing between the windshield and the rearview mirror. She was in her mid-thirties, with large black almond eyes, high cheekbones, and an ever-so-slightly hooked nose. She was Iranian, Jack guessed, but he'd detected little trace of a Persian accent, rather a mix of British and something else.

"It's probably not a good idea to jump out of this one, yes?" the woman finally said. "You would end up a red smear."

"Everything's relative," Jack replied. He glanced over the seat through the back window. There were no headlights.

"They won't catch up," she said. "They don't have the horsepower."

The question is, Jack thought, am I better off with this woman?

As if reading his mind, she said, "You're safe. I am not with them."

The conviction in her voice was genuine, Jack decided.

"There's a penknife in the glove compartment," the woman said.

Jack opened it, dug around until he found the knife, then used it to saw through the zip-tie securing his hands. He rubbed his wrists; they were slick with sweat-diluted blood.

"Your car is going to need some bodywork."

"I have another. How do you know Seth Gregory?" she asked.

"Who says I do?"

"You went to his apartment building. You had lunch with him."

This surprised Jack; his countersurveillance skills were solid, yet he'd missed her tailing of him. "How do you know Seth?" he asked.

"Answer my question." A little steel in her voice.

"We're old friends."

"What high school did he attend?"

"Saint Matt's—Matthew's—Academy. Your turn: How do you know him?"

"Seth and I worked together."

Something told Jack this woman wasn't with Shell Oil.

The woman slowed the car, turned right onto another paved road, then accelerated again. Through the windshield Jack could see the lighted skyline of what he assumed was Tehran.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“We don’t know each other well enough yet.” Jack thought for a moment, then said, “How long did Seth spend in the Marines?”

The woman sighed. “I do not like dancing. In case you’ve forgotten, I just rescued you.”

“Answer my question.”

“He tried to join after college—University of Illinois, by the way—but he wasn’t eligible. He wrecked his knee playing football and had to have it rebuilt. Three times. He still wears a brace and needs cortisone shots.”

It was the right answer. The military disqualification had nearly crushed Seth, so badly had he wanted to serve. In fact, Jack had flown down to Illinois in hopes of cheering him up. It had worked, but only a bit. For Seth, being turned down for service would be a regret he never got over.

“He also tried to join the Coast Guard, but they denied him, too.” She turned toward him and said, “Satisfied?”

While her knowledge of Seth’s background wasn’t definitive proof of their relationship, it would have to do. “I’m Jack.”

“Jack Ryan? Seth has spoken of you.”

Thanks a lot, Seth. He waited for the follow-up from her—“*The Jack Ryan, son of President . . .*”—but she only took her right hand off the steering wheel and clasped his in a firm grip. “I’m Ysabel. Ysabel Kashani.”

• • •

HAVING SPENT TIME in his early days with the CIA, John Clark had learned his share of Russian. One of his nuggets of teaching wisdom was *Doveryai no proveryai*—trust but verify, a phrase used to great effect by Reagan during INF treaty negotiations. A proverb, Clark had told Jack, that could also be applied to intelligence work.

Jack decided he would trust Ysabel to a point. How he would verify her bona fides was a question he couldn’t yet answer. Nor did he know what exactly he’d gotten himself into. Either way, he could use an ally.

They drove in silence for fifteen minutes until reaching the northern outskirts of Tehran. Jack asked, “Is this the Shomal?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I overheard the driver.”

“It’s the Tehran-Shomal; outside the city it becomes Freeway Three.”

“Any idea where they were taking me?” Jack asked.

“You mean aside from a shallow grave?” Ysabel replied. “No idea.”

“Do you know who they are?” Even as the words left Jack’s mouth, the word *wallet* popped into his head. In the commotion, he’d forgotten about the second American’s wallet. He patted his crotch; the wallet was still here. Thank God for bad frisking technique.

“Do you need some alone time?” asked Ysabel.

“Funny.” Jack pulled out the wallet and opened it.

Ysabel glanced over. “Where did you get that?”

“Off one of them back there.”

“What about yours?”

“They’ve got it.”

Inside the man’s wallet was a driver’s license and two credit cards. He stuffed it into the back pocket of his khakis. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“My apartment. We need to talk. Plus, you’re a mess. Your arms, your face . . .” She grimaced and said, “You look awful.”

Jack checked his forearms; below the sleeves of his polo shirt, his arms looked like they’d been worked over with a belt sander.

“It’ll have to wait. I need to go back to Seth’s.”

“Why?”

“Steaks.”

Ysabel paused, then with a flash of revelation in her voice, echoed Jack: “Steaks.”

• • •

YSABEL PICKED HER WAY through the city, taking a circuitous route to Seth’s apartment, skillfully doubling back and traversing alleys until she seemed satisfied they weren’t being followed. She had tradecraft, Jack realized.

“Who taught you?” he asked.

“Seth. Just a few things, really.”

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