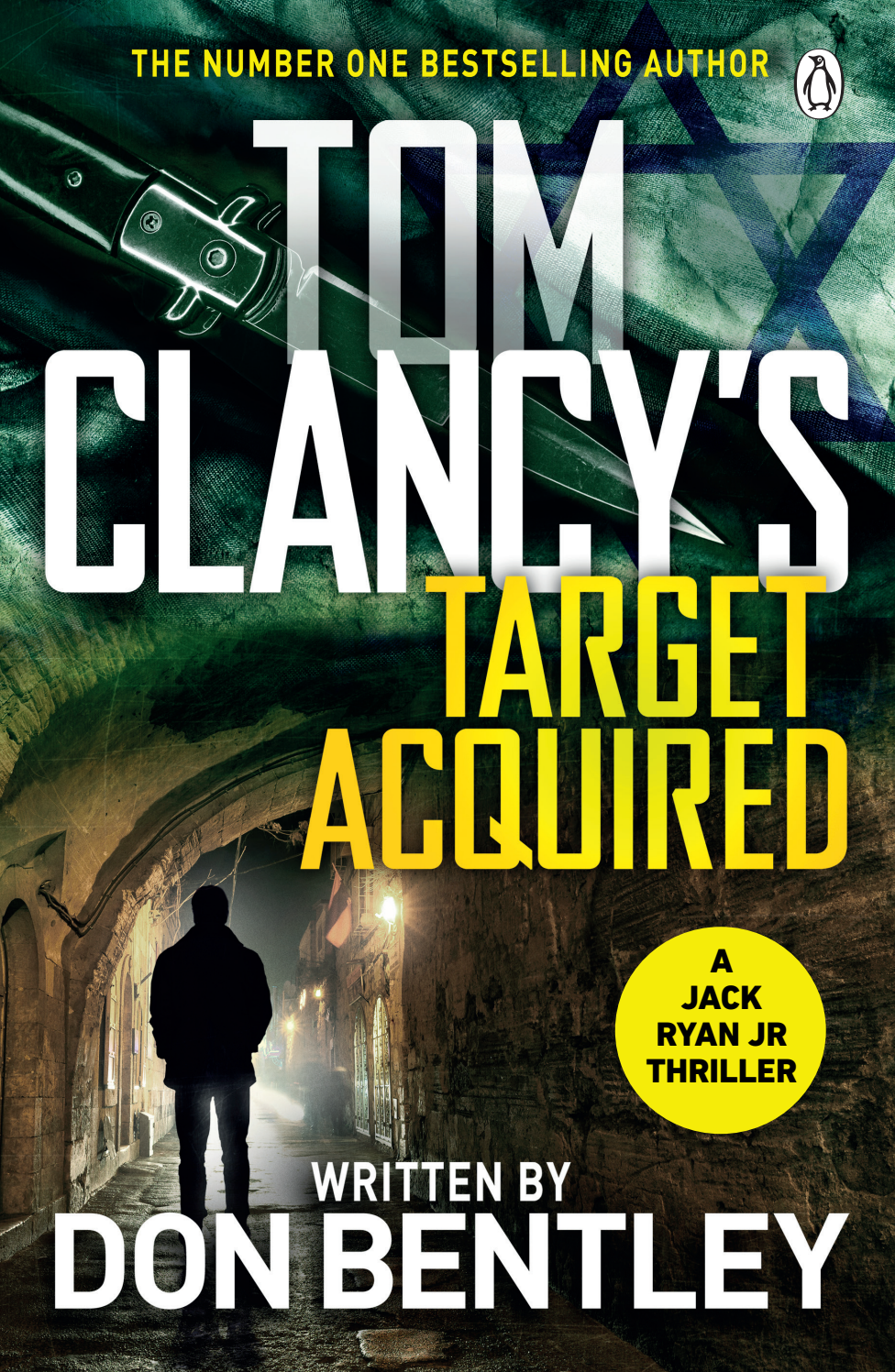

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TOM CLANCY'S
TARGET ACQUIRED
A JACK RYAN JR THRILLER
WRITTEN BY
DON BENTLEY

PENGUIN BOOKS

Tom Clancy's Target Acquired

Thirty-five years ago Tom Clancy was a Maryland insurance broker with a passion for naval history. Years before, he had been an English major at Baltimore's Loyola College and had always dreamed of writing a novel. His first effort, *The Hunt for Red October*, sold briskly as a result of rave reviews, then was catapulted on to the *New York Times* bestseller list after President Reagan pronounced it 'the perfect yarn'. From that day forward, Clancy established himself as an undisputed master at blending exceptional realism and authenticity, intricate plotting and razor-sharp suspense. He passed away in October 2013.

Don Bentley spent a decade as an Army Apache helicopter pilot, and while deployed in Afghanistan was awarded the Bronze Star and the Air Medal with 'V' device for valour. Following his time in the military, Bentley worked as an FBI special agent focusing on foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence and was a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team member.

www.tomclancy.com
facebook.com/tomclancyauthor

Copyrighted Material

Also by Tom Clancy

FICTION

The Hunt for Red October
Red Storm Rising
Patriot Games
The Cardinal of the Kremlin
Clear and Present Danger
The Sum of All Fears
Without Remorse
Debt of Honor
Executive Orders
Rainbow Six
The Bear and the Dragon
Red Rabbit
The Teeth of the Tiger
Dead or Alive (with Grant Blackwood)
Against All Enemies (with Peter Telep)
Locked On (with Mark Greaney)
Threat Vector (with Mark Greaney)
Command Authority (with Mark Greaney)
Tom Clancy Support and Defend (by Mark Greaney)
Tom Clancy Full Force and Effect (by Mark Greaney)
Tom Clancy Under Fire (by Grant Blackwood)
Tom Clancy Commander in Chief (by Mark Greaney)
Tom Clancy Duty and Honor (by Grant Blackwood)
Tom Clancy True Faith and Allegiance (by Mark Greaney)
Tom Clancy Point of Contact (by Mike Maden)
Tom Clancy Power and Empire (by Marc Cameron)
Tom Clancy Line of Sight (by Mike Maden)
Tom Clancy Oath of Office (by Marc Cameron)
Tom Clancy Enemy Contact (by Mike Maden)
Tom Clancy Code of Honor (by Marc Cameron)
Tom Clancy Firing Point (by Mike Maden)
Tom Clancy Shadow of the Dragon (by Marc Cameron)

NON-FICTION

Submarine: A Guided Tour Inside a Nuclear Warship
Armored Cav: A Guided Tour of an Armored Cavalry Regiment
Fighter Wing: A Guided Tour of an Air Force Combat Wing
Marine: A Guided Tour of a Marine Expeditionary Unit
Airborne: A Guided Tour of an Airborne Task Force
Carrier: A Guided Tour of an Aircraft Carrier
Into the Storm: A Study in Command with General Fred Franks, Jr (Ret.), and Tony Koltz
Every Man a Tiger: The Gulf War Air Campaign with General Chuck Horner (Ret.) and Tony Koltz
Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces with General Carl Stiner (Ret.) and Tony Koltz
Battle Ready with General Tony Zinni (Ret.) and Tony Koltz

Copyrighted Material

Tom Clancy's

Target Acquired

DON BENTLEY



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by G. P. Putnam's Sons 2021
Published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph 2021
Published in Penguin Books 2022
001

Copyright © The Estate of Thomas L. Clancy, Jr; Rubicon, Inc.;
Jack Ryan Enterprises, Ltd.; Jack Ryan Limited Partnership, 2021

The moral right of the author has been asserted

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales is entirely coincidental

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–94761–9
OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–94762–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

Principal Characters

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

JACK RYAN: President of the United States
MARY PAT FOLEY: Director of national intelligence

THE CAMPUS

JOHN CLARK: Director of operations
DOMINGO 'DING' CHAVEZ: Assistant director of operations
GAVIN BIERY: Director of information technology
JACK RYAN, JR: Operations officer/senior analyst
LISANNE ROBERTSON: Former director of transportation

OPERATIONAL DETACHMENT ALPHA (ODA) 555

CAPTAIN ALEX BROWN
MASTER SERGEANT CARY MARKS
SERGEANT FIRST CLASS JAD MUSTAFA
DOUG 'CRUMDOG' CRUM: MEDIC
SERGEANT FIRST CLASS BRIAN MARTIN
STAFF SERGEANT GREG GLASS
STAFF SERGEANT JEFF MISHLER

SHIN BET OFFICERS

TAL LEVY
DUDU

Copyrighted Material

OTHER CHARACTERS

DR CATHY RYAN: First Lady of the United States
GENERAL FARHAD AHMADI: Iranian Quds Force
DARIEN MORADI: Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)
KATERINA SIDOROVA: Wagner Group
PETER BELTZ: CIA case officer
DR REBECKA SCHWEIGART: American scientist
TOMMY SCHWEIGART: Son of Dr Schweigart
CAPTAIN NATALIE 'DAISY' SMITH: Air Force F-35 pilot

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

Al Tanf Outpost
Syria

'Why are we here again?' Master Sergeant Cary Marks said, shifting his weight for what seemed like the hundredth time.

The two-man sniper hide site that Cary and his spotter were nestled beneath offered a number of advantages to its occupants, not the least of which being near invisibility in both the thermal and visual spectrums. It was the closest thing to a Harry Potter cloak he'd seen in his decade and a half of service with 5th Special Forces Group.

But for all the hide site's technical prowess, it didn't make the Syrian soil any more comfortable.

'Because we're Special Forces,' Sergeant First Class Jad Mustafa said, tuning the focus on his M151 spotting scope. 'That means we get to do special shit.'

As always, Jad's gift of understatement had reared its ugly head. *Special shit* didn't come anywhere close to capturing the pure and unadulterated joy that had been the last twelve hours. Per the techniques, tactics, and procedures Cary and his fellow long tabbers had perfected during their countless combat deployments in support of the never-ending war on terror, he and Jad had infiltrated about 0300 local time.

Copyrighted Material

The hour had not been randomly chosen. BMNT, or Begin Morning Nautical Twilight, was at 0500. This was the time of day when the human eye could start to discern objects from shadows. Even after thousands of years of civilization, human beings were still attuned to the world around them. Though they might not recognize it as such, the average person's circadian rhythms programmed them to feel restless around dawn.

With that in mind, Cary and Jad had wormed their way into the shallow depression they now occupied while the rest of their world was fast asleep. And though the rocky soil and surrounding scrub brush had provided exactly the hide hole they'd been hoping for, the accommodations were not exactly five-star.

The two men had made camp on a sand flea nest.

A large one.

Green Berets might be renowned for their ability to destroy enemy forces much larger than their organic twelve-man A-teams, but this was a different kind of battle. Cary had been waging a bloody war of attrition against the little beasties for the last several hours, but the pecker fleas were winning.

'Goddamn it, Jad,' Cary said, trying to ignore the burning sensation dangerously close to his right testicle. 'Can't you just ask some of your cousins for help?'

'Hey, now,' Jad said. 'Just because a bunch of biters are munching their way up your leg doesn't mean you need to get all cranky. Besides, I'm Libyan, not Syrian, you uneducated hick.'

The language exchanged between the two special operators was harsh, but the sentiment behind it was anything

Copyrighted Material

but. The two men couldn't have looked more different. Cary Marks was a blue-eyed, blond-haired farm boy from New England whose vowels gave away his Yankee roots under moments of duress. Jad Mustafa's dark complexion and SoCal surfer accent made him Cary's polar opposite. Jad was suave where Cary was simple, and Jad's teammates often kidded him about being a SEAL in disguise due to his affinity for hair gel and fashionable clothes.

But despite their differences, the men were opposite sides of the same coin. Physically, their years serving on an Operational Detachment Alpha, or ODA, team had given them bodies uniquely suited to their type of work. Both boasted wide shoulders, broad backs, and well-developed chests complemented by an endurance athlete's lung capacity.

Mentally, the pair were even more alike. Though each man's upbringing and cultural heritage was radically different, this wasn't important. As with most men and women who served in the armed forces, and certainly those within the Special Operations community, differences in skin color and nationality ceased to matter long ago. In the Army there was but a single skin color – green – and just one blood type – red.

After half a dozen shared combat deployments, Cary and Jad were brothers in a way that superseded such trivial matters as birth parents or family lineage. Theirs was a familial bond conceived in the most arduous training the military offered, birthed in the fires of combat, and nurtured into the bone-deep trust shared only by men who've guarded each other's backs as bullets whipped past their heads.

Copyrighted Material

The two Green Berets might pick at each other, but woe to the uninformed observer who tried to come between them.

'That's funny,' Cary said, panning his SIG Sauer TANGO6T riflescope across his sector, ''cause when we were in Iraq, I'm pretty damn sure you said you were Lebanese.'

'That's because you listen about as well as you shoot. Which we both know is for shit. Without me as your spotter, you'd – wait a minute now. Boss, I think I've got something.'

The change in Jad's tone was unmistakable. Though Cary had whiled away countless uncomfortable hours shoulder to shoulder with his barrel-chested spotter in more combat theaters than he cared to count, the half-Lebanese, half-Syrian, and all-American Green Beret knew not to mix business with pleasure.

As soon as Jad called Cary *boss*, the time for joking was over.

'Whatcha got, brother?' Cary said.

'Convoy of three Land Cruisers headed toward the front gate. Shift three hundred meters west of point Alpha and you'll see 'em.'

Cary swung his rifle to the prescribed azimuth and turned on the laser range finder mounted to his scope ring. In that instant, the stifling heat, glaring sun, tired muscles, and even the merciless pecker fleas gnawing their way up his inner thigh were forgotten. This was no longer a game of hide in the dirt and hope for the best. The convoy of factory-new vehicles with tinted windows, sparkling paint jobs, and shiny black tires didn't fit the surroundings.

Copyrighted Material

They were an anomaly.

And anomalies were what Cary was paid to notice.

Though, to be fair, nothing about the fortress the men were surveilling approached normal. And in Syria, that was saying something. Rather than the traditional stucco walls that denoted a compound or the concrete-and-cinder-block houses that signified more modern accommodations, the structure one thousand meters distant was unique.

As in Cary hadn't seen anything like it anywhere.

Earthen berms that stretched fifteen feet tall and ten wide formed something more reminiscent of a medieval castle than a Middle Eastern homestead. The sand and dirt had been bulldozed into a natural barrier and flattened on top into a plateau wide enough to situate fighting positions equipped with crew-served weapons. Earlier that morning, Cary had watched stupefied as vehicles drove on top of the densely packed barriers, bringing to mind the stories of chariot races atop the walls of the biblical city of Jericho.

Cary hadn't seen any chariots yet, but after hours of logging the occupants' comings and goings, he wouldn't be surprised. Unlike the hodgepodge of vehicles common to Syria's many militias and self-proclaimed armies, the earthen fortress's occupants had a motor pool with a surprising amount of sophistication.

Cary had already noted half a dozen technical vehicles, but on closer inspection, the converted Hilux trucks didn't have the hodgepodge look he'd expected. Traditionally, militia groups paired their vehicles with outsized weapons like DShK antiaircraft machine guns or M40 recoilless

Copyrighted Material

rifles. Matches like this were just as likely to destroy the host vehicle as the target at which they were aimed.

No, what Cary had observed reflected a customized integration between vehicle and armament. The compound's weapons tech wasn't some fly-by-night machinist recruited into turning out weapons of war. The Hiluxes prowling the fortress's walls resembled something that might have been produced in a 5th Special Forces Group motor pool back in Kentucky.

This was, to say the least, troubling.

And that was before he'd seen the Humvees.

About two hours into his watch, Cary had gotten the shock of his life when a pair of up-armored Hummers had taken a turn around the south side of the compound. The vehicles still had US markings, leading him to believe he was seeing an American patrol. He'd been on the verge of calling in his discovery when the doors had opened and Syrians poured out. Promised mystery visitor aside, the presence of American Humvees was worth investigating by itself.

Unfortunately, he didn't get the chance.

Cary and Jad had planned their observation post after spending hours poring over satellite and drone imagery, searching for a spot that would offer both concealment and line of sight into the fortress.

They'd managed only one of the two goals.

Biting fleas aside, Cary was pretty happy with the seclusion offered by their vantage point. But visibility inside the compound was a big miss. He could see some of the buildings on the far side of the fortress, but the walls were just too steep to get eyes on much more. After disgorging

Copyrighted Material

their passengers and loading up the old guard shift, the Hummers drove back along the wall and then took a ramp to the fortress's interior, where they promptly disappeared from view.

Even so, Cary had elected to remain in position. Mystery Hummers aside, the sniper's nest offered a commanding view of the roads approaching the compound, and the Agency asset who'd been the genesis of this operation had been firm on this point. The important visitors the asset claimed were coming would be approaching from the west in tricked-out black SUVs.

And here they were.

'Who do you think these guys are?' Cary said.

'Fuck if I know, boss. The folks inside are a cult, right?'

'That's what the intel folks believe,' Cary said, cheek still welded to his rifle's stock.

The CIA case officer had tried his best to explain, but Cary was still a bit iffy about what was going on behind the earthen walls. Something about an apocalyptic cult. If he remembered correctly, the head dude was convinced he was an ancient Shia imam reincarnated.

Or something like that.

Like most Green Berets, Cary was an expert on a good many things. That said, weighing in on whether the head crazy on the other side of the Jericho walls really was a holy man reborn was a bit outside his wheelhouse. Then again, as long as the cult members kept to themselves, Cary didn't really care whether the guy inside thought he was Muhammad, Jesus, or Elvis.

As was the case with most of the men and women who made a living going into harm's way, as long as the people

Copyrighted Material

in question weren't bothering anyone, Cary was a big fan of live and let live. There were already plenty of malcontents actively working to visit hellfire and brimstone on America's sons and daughters.

No sense creating any new ones.

But based on what Cary had observed, the folks inside the compound didn't much look like they intended to keep to themselves. People content to peacefully wait in seclusion for the end of times didn't usually arm themselves with crew-served weapons and American Humvees. And the thing most apocalyptic cults had in common was an unwillingness to sit passively by while their prophecy unfolded. In fact, many of them believed their leader had a role to play in bringing about the end of the world.

And that role usually involved the shedding of innocent blood.

In this case, the Agency spook asked the Green Berets to keep the compound under surveillance in an attempt to learn how the crazies intended to bring about the apocalypse. And, perhaps more important, whether they had help.

If Cary had to guess, the cult's plan for world destruction probably had something to do with murderous pecker fleas. But guessing wasn't the same thing as knowing. The asset said the people who were arming the cultists would arrive in a trio of black vehicles.

And here they were.

Hallelujah.

'Satellite uplink ready?' Cary said, holding his aim point on the center vehicle.

Cary didn't know who these guys were, but statistically,

Copyrighted Material

the middle vehicle in a convoy usually had the best chance of surviving an IED. If there was an Important Person in this motorcade, that's where he'd be.

'Negative on the uplink,' Jad said. 'We're getting interference from somewhere.'

Given that the two snipers had just checked in with their team leader via satellite uplink less than thirty minutes ago, Cary didn't think the sudden loss of connection was a coincidence. In the two-plus decades since the war on terror had kicked off in earnest, tactical technology had progressed by leaps and bounds. While the United States had been behind many of the most exponential advances, America's adversaries had done a respectable job of trying to thwart the technology overmatch.

Case in point, terrorist organizations didn't have fifth-generation fighters equipped with smart bombs, but more and more were using equipment that jammed the GPS signal that guided smart bombs to their targets. By the same token, the bad guys in Cary's weapon's sight probably didn't have a constellation of geosynchronous cubesats to ensure uninterrupted communications.

But they just might possess the ability to jam the necessary wavelengths.

Either way, this wasn't Cary's concern. In the lexicon of Green Berets, he was an Eighteen Charlie – a Special Forces engineer specializing in demolition. Jad, on the other hand, was an Eighteen Echo – a communications expert capable of fashioning a radio from a coat hanger, car battery, and calculator.

Or at least it seemed that way to Cary. If there was a way to reestablish the satellite uplink, Jad would do it.

Copyrighted Material

Otherwise the sniper team would do things the old-fashioned way – take pictures and then wait until nightfall to exfil and carry the intelligence they'd gathered back to the COP, or combat outpost, they called home.

'Roger that,' Cary said, maintaining his sight picture on the rear passenger's window. 'Keep recording.'

In addition to riding in the middle vehicle, Important People usually sat in the back, behind the front passenger's seat. This allowed the muscle on the passenger side of the vehicle to take care of business while the precious cargo hunkered down behind armored doors and Kevlar-reinforced seats.

While this little excursion had been briefed solely as a sneak-and-peek, Cary viewed every operation as one mistake away from going kinetic. That way, when the inevitable happened and steel started flying, he was prepared rather than surprised. Already the part of his mind occupied by the black magic practiced by every good sniper was considering *dope*, *terminal ballistics*, *Coriolis effect*, *hold*, *relative wind*, and a host of other arcane-sounding words.

In layman's terms, Cary's fire-control-computer of a brain was calculating all the environmental factors that might or might not affect a shot he might or might not ever have to take. As his instructor had told him during the first day of Special Operations Target Interdiction Course, pressing the trigger was the easiest part of the job.

It was everything that happened prior that separated a sniper from a shooter.

A slight breeze tickled Cary's cheek, probably no more than two or three miles per hour. Even so, it might be worth asking Jad for a formal wind check just in case things

Copyrighted Material

didn't go according to plan. That was the second-most-important lesson he'd learned at sniper school – nothing ever went according to plan.

This truism applied to both sides of the battlefield.

As if to drive this notion home, a blast of dirt and rubber erupted from beneath the SUV as the front tire exploded. A second later, the breeze carried the sharp *pop* to Cary's ears.

'Looks like someone forgot to pick up their tire spikes,' Jad said. 'Sucks for our guy.'

'Yep,' Cary said. 'But great for us. Get ready for the money shot.'

'Come on, darling,' Jad whispered, 'hike up your skirt.'

At first the SUV's driver seemed determined to roll through the checkpoint. Then physics stepped in. The front tire was done. Not only was the wheel deflated, but the rubber had disintegrated around the rim. The engine revved, and the wheel spun, churning away what was left in black spongy chunks, but the truck wasn't going anywhere.

'No run-flats,' Jad said.

'Nope,' Cary said. 'Looks like he's going to try and ride in on the rim.'

'Not going to work,' Jad said. 'Too sandy.'

Once again, his spotter proved prescient. The now rubberless rim spun impotently, throwing up a fountain of stones and dirt as the vehicle settled into the soil. After several seconds spent trying to rock the truck free, the roaring engine idled.

'Protection detail fucked this one up,' Cary said. 'They should have evaced the principal by now. If this had been an ambush, the middle vehicle would already be toast.'

Copyrighted Material

'Hard to find good help,' Jad said. 'Okay, here we go.'

The passenger-side doors of the lead and trail vehicles opened in unison, releasing a scrum of gun-toting occupants who swarmed over the middle vehicle. Only once the screen was fully in place did the rear passenger door open.

'All right, beautiful,' Jad said, 'let me see your face.'

Cary increased the magnification on his optic, centering it on the opening door. A moment later a bearded face swam into view.

A familiar bearded face.

'Well, son of a bitch,' Cary said. 'Look who's slumming with the locals.'

'You recognize him?' Jad said.

'Indeed I do. Contrary to popular belief, you Syrians do not all look alike.'

'I'm not Syrian, you racist son of a bitch. I'm Libyan. Now, tell me who we're seeing before I whoop your farmboy ass.'

'That, my uneducated friend, is General Farhad Ahmadi.'

'As in commander of the Iranian Quds Force?'

'One and the same.'

'What's he doing with a cult hell-bent on bringing about the apocalypse?'

'Nothing good.'

Copyrighted Material

1

Shuk HaCarmel Open-Air Market
Tel Aviv, Israel

Jack Ryan, Jr, took another bite of falafel, hunching his broad shoulders to protect his prize against the press of hundreds of bodies. At six-foot-two and two hundred and twenty pounds, Jack was a big man even by American standards. In Israel, he towered over most of the crowd. Even so, he still felt like a lion guarding its prey from a pack of circling wild dogs.

Jack smiled at the image, expertly using a thick forearm to guide a chattering trio of teenagers away from his dripping food. Wild dogs on the savannah would try to rob the lion of his food, despite their small size. But the crowd that ebbed and flowed up the narrow confines of HaCarmel Street was absent of the malicious intent of an African predator, regardless of how small. Over the last decade or so, Jack had become adept at reading crowds, and this one radiated benevolence.

The Mediterranean sun shone from a sky the kind of perfect blue usually seen only in Photoshopped travel brochures, bathing the crowd in soothing light. The air was warm without the stickiness of the hot season, while the faint smell of salt water blowing in from the ocean just blocks away mingled with spicy scents of food cooking

Copyrighted Material

in the countless booths lining the street. Jack caught bits and pieces of a handful of languages as vendors and potential buyers argued over prices and wares.

Jack was no stranger to foreign locales, but there was something inherently magical about Tel Aviv. The city felt electric, full of entrepreneurs whose agile minds and unbounded dreams rivaled those of Silicon Valley. Here, in the Middle East's only democracy, the weather was excellent, the women beautiful, the people friendly, and the food fantastic. In short, the perfect vacation city.

But Jack wasn't on vacation.

As if on cue, a man settled into a plastic seat adjacent to a table at the opposite side of the alley. He was late forties to early fifties, with a full head of blond hair that was just beginning to gray at the temples. The man dusted off the table with the fastidious nature of someone unaccustomed to the grit and dirt common to open-air markets. Once he'd cleared the spot in front of him of all debris real and imaginary, he flagged down a waiter.

The proprietor came over with a smile and the man ordered a coffee in English before adding the obligatory *toda*, thank you. The waiter smiled again before leaving to fetch the man's order.

Just another foreigner in a diverse, multinational crowd.

But to Jack's practiced eye, the man still seemed out of place.

It wasn't so much his fair complexion in the sea of olive-toned skin or his attire. Though the majority of the shoppers were Israeli or Arab, plenty of Europeans mingled with the natives. And the man had done a fairly respectable job of incorporating local fashion. He wore a

Copyrighted Material

button-down shirt in the local style, open at the collar so that a tuft of chest hair poked through, and jeans and sensible shoes.

No, it wasn't the man's wardrobe or genetics. His actions were the problem. Rather than the laissez-faire attitude coupled with liberal shoving that pervaded the rest of the afternoon shoppers, the man was clearly on edge. His head moved with sharp, birdlike movements as he looked from one end of the alley to the other, scrutinizing each passerby like he was a man on a mission.

Which he was.

But he was supposed to be behaving as if he wasn't.

Popping the last bite of falafel into his mouth, Jack dusted off his hands and then slid his cell from his pocket. Opening the notes app, Jack began to annotate his initial impressions. Tel Aviv was already one of his favorite cities, and while he'd like to do nothing more than go for a run along the beach and admire the local talent, that wasn't why he was here.

Technically.

Espionage was a tricky business. Even with mind-numbing advances in technology, running an agent or asset was still a deeply personal endeavor. As such, much of it was based on impressions, or gut feelings, and right now the man who'd just ordered a coffee was acting like he'd consumed far too much caffeine already.

The man's drink came Mediterranean-style, pitch-black and piping-hot, in a small glass cup. The man acknowledged the waiter with a curt nod and a handful of shekels. Then, with a start, he seemed to remember the leather satchel hanging across his chest. With quick, furtive movements the

Copyrighted Material

man yanked the bag over his head and placed it at his feet, glancing left and right as he did so, as if trying to determine if someone was paying attention.

Someone was.

Jack.

Jack thumbed a couple more notes into his cell before dropping the device back into his pocket. Had he really ever been that green? He answered his unspoken question with a chuckle.

Without a doubt.

Fortunately, Jack's teachers were some of the very best in the business. Warriors like John Clark and Domingo Chavez, plank holders in the storied Rainbow team, had been his tactics and firearms instructors. Master spy Mary Pat Foley, current director of national intelligence and onetime CIA case officer famous for running an agent nestled in the bowels of the Kremlin, had coached him through the finer points of clandestine tradecraft.

Though Jack had never attended the CIA's school for fledgling clandestine operatives known as The Farm, he'd been through a different school of hard knocks staffed by a cadre that was no less prestigious. But the apprentice asset slurping his coffee had none of this training. He wasn't an intelligence professional. He was simply someone with access to information the CIA deemed valuable. If this was a different vocation, Jack might be tempted to offer the newbie a bit of grace.

But it wasn't.

Those who played the game of espionage did so for keeps, and Jack had the scars to prove it. In the rough-and-tumble clandestine world, doing your job well meant

Copyrighted Material

that you lived, while the consolation prize for second place was often a body bag. This was why it was imperative to determine if the potential asset had the required operational chops *before* lives were truly on the line.

Jack glanced at his watch. According to the pre-mission briefing, the fun should commence in exactly five minutes. Since this was Jack's first joint operation with the Agency, he wasn't sure how closely Langley's boys and girls adhered to timelines. But if he had to guess, things would be wired down to the second. Peter Beltz, the case officer calling the shots, had served with Jack's mentor, Ding Chavez, back when both men were young soldiers in the *Ninjas,* 3rd Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment.

Military men loved their timelines.

Across the alley, the man with the satchel lifted his coffee to his lips, but then slammed the glass back on the table without drinking, craning his neck to focus on something to Jack's right. The scalding liquid cascaded over the cup's rim, leaving a brown puddle on the table's white plastic surface.

Jack winced.

The violent motion had undoubtedly upset the collection of grounds settled at the bottom of the cup, rendering it undrinkable. But the travesty that had just occurred went beyond the now ruined cup of coffee. The would-be asset's actions were attracting attention. The sharp sound of glass on plastic caused several people to turn toward the commotion's source. At the same time, the shop's owner left his perch behind the bar to see if his singular customer required a refill.

Even worse, the man seemed unaware of the notice he

Copyrighted Material

was attracting. When the waiter reached his table, responding to the disturbance by sopping up the rapidly growing spill with a checkered cloth, the man couldn't have cared less. Instead, his attention was focused over Jack's right shoulder.

Which was entirely the wrong direction.

Jack sighed as he mentally added additional comments to his running critique, now trying to find something positive to offset the growing negatives.

The asset's contact window didn't open for another five minutes, and this was important. Doctrinally, the time before the window opened was allocated to ensuring that the asset hadn't been followed and that the meeting site wasn't under surveillance. A good asset used this period to attempt to identify other intelligence professionals while remaining inconspicuous.

But instead of calmly drinking coffee while committing the faces of seemingly random passersby to memory, the man was almost vibrating with tension. A counterintelligence FBI agent straight out of the Academy would have keyed off the asset's nerves from a dozen feet away. To Jack, the man might as well have been a strobe light.

And the real fun hadn't even begun.

Copyrighted Material

2

'See the pretty colors?'

The question, posed by a female voice, cut through the marketplace's hustle and bustle. Or perhaps the American accent just made the words more noticeable. Jack shifted his attention toward the unexpected interruption. A woman and child were standing in front of a booth selling brightly colored fabrics to his left.

The woman was several years older than Jack, probably late thirties, with a runner's trim build. She was wearing shorts, a tank top, and athletic shoes, and her chestnut-colored hair was arranged in a messy bun.

The travel attire of moms the world over.

'Which is your favorite?' the woman said, running her fingers along a length of fabric dyed a brilliant green.

Her questions were directed toward a boy who looked to be about seven or eight. Like his mom, the boy was dressed for a day outside, in shorts, a Marvel T-shirt, and running shoes. A Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, worn at a jaunty angle to permit a mass of brown curls to escape the bill, completed his wardrobe.

But this is where the similarities ended.

Unlike his mom, who seemed to be genuinely taken by the sights and sounds of the bustling market, the boy wasn't focused on his surroundings. But not because he

Copyrighted Material

was heeding the siren song of a cell phone or some other form of hypnotizing electronics.

This was something different.

Though he held tightly to his mother's hand, the boy was concentrating on the ground. His gaze swept left and right, as if the trash and debris were interesting, but too slippery to capture his attention.

'Are you hungry?' the woman said, allowing the shimmering fabric to slip from her fingers, much to the vendor's dismay. 'Want some ice cream?'

With this question, Jack fully expected the boy's blank expression to transform into a smile. While it had been a long time since he'd been that age, Jack could sympathize with the boy's plight. His parents had also recognized the value of exposing their four children to other cultures, and some of Jack's earliest memories involved trudging through English museums during his dad's rotation with the British Secret Intelligence Service.

Not any toddler's idea of fun.

Still, the magic words *ice cream* could usually transform even the most dreary day. But to judge from the boy's reaction, his mother might as well have been asking him if he'd like to spend the day browsing the Old Masters section in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. He kept his head down, his face expressionless, while his gaze roved across the ground, settling on nothing.

Squatting so that she was eye level with the child, the woman tried again. 'Ice cream, Tommy? Mommy needs to know.'

Tommy's head suddenly stopped, his eyes fixated on

Copyrighted Material

something past his mom's right shoe. Reaching pudgy fingers into his back pocket, he produced a Captain America figure. Without breaking eye contact with whatever bit of grit had captured his attention, Tommy dipped the figure forward twice, approximating a nod.

'Okay,' the woman said, cupping her son's face in both hands. 'Ice cream it is.'

The woman smiled brightly at Tommy for a beat before standing, tracing his chubby cheeks with her fingertips.

In that moment, Jack understood. Growing up, he'd had a boyhood friend on the autism spectrum. As mother and son faded into the crowd, the boy shoved Captain America into his rear pocket, but not quite deeply enough. A collision with a passerby dislodged the action figure, sending the toy tumbling to the dirty concrete.

Without thinking, Jack was out of his seat, slicing through the crowd toward the fallen figure.

Jack had met Aaron in kindergarten. He was high-functioning, enough so that casual acquaintances probably wouldn't have recognized the symptoms. But he did have a few unusual qualities that his no-nonsense mother had termed quirks. One of these was a corroded penny he carried everywhere. In the fourth grade, a schoolyard bully had stolen the penny in a misguided attempt to make Aaron cry. Misguided, because the bully had been the one in tears after Jack had fallen on his friend's oppressor like thunder.

Jack and the bully had both been sent to the principal's office, and in true Ryan fashion, Jack Senior had been the one to attend the mandatory parent–teacher conference.

Copyrighted Material

Jack never did learn what was said behind those closed doors, but he'd also never forgotten the conversation during the car ride home.

'Son, you broke the school's no-fighting policy, so you're suspended. That's the way life works. But sometimes a good man has to be willing to pay a price for doing what's right.'

As Jack scooped the action figure from the grimy concrete, it wasn't a seven-year-old boy with curly brown hair and a ballcap that he saw. It was Aaron. Aaron and his penny crusted with green corrosion.

'Ma'am,' Jack said, touching the woman on the shoulder. 'I think your son dropped this.'

The woman turned, her eyes going from Jack to the Captain America figure in his outstretched hand.

'Oh, goodness, thank you,' the woman said, taking the toy from Jack with the reverence it deserved. 'Here you go, buddy,' she said, offering the figure to Tommy with a smile. 'It wouldn't have been good to lose this, would it?'

Tommy released his mother's hand in favor of taking Captain America in both of his. His fingers flew over the figure, performing a frantic triage as his gaze remained focused on his feet. Only once he was certain that no harm had come to his friend was the superhero returned to his back pocket.

Still looking down, Tommy murmured two words.

'Thank you.'

The woman stifled a gasp as she looked from her son to Jack, her face now radiant. She began to speak, the words trickling out at first but quickly becoming a deluge.

Copyrighted Material

Jack felt the warmth of her happiness, but he wasn't paying attention to what she said because he was focused on something else.

A man bearing down on her from behind.

A man with a knife.

Copyrighted Material

3

In skilled hands at close range, a knife was a much more fearsome weapon than a gun.

The man stalking Tommy's mom was less than three yards away.

If pressed, Jack couldn't have articulated exactly how he knew what the man intended to do with the six-inch folding blade. He just did. Perhaps in the same manner that a sheepdog instinctively recognized a threat to the sheep, whether that threat approached on two legs or four.

Jack understood what the man represented with the primal part of his being. The part honed by years of training alongside some of the world's deadliest men and women. In the span of a single heartbeat, Jack had identified the wolf. Now it was time to do what sheepdogs did.

Protect the sheep.

Lunging past the woman, Jack hip-checked her out of the way as he intercepted the blade inches from her kidney. Jack gripped the attacker's wrist with both hands while interposing his linebacker-sized frame between the mom and knifeman. Jack was aware of the mom tumbling to the ground as a line of fire opened across his forearm. But these neurological inputs were muted, as if shrouded by a foggy haze. Instead, the sum of his existence was laser-focused on just one thing – staying alive.

Copyrighted Material

The flickering steel reversed course, hunting Jack's abdomen in a blur of silver as the knifeman shook off Jack's wrist lock. As he'd been taught, Jack sacrificed a second forearm, this time his left, to parry the knife away from his vulnerable abdomen.

Another line of fire, this time accompanied by the sticky sensation of blood curling down his arm.

Chasing the blade, Jack crashed the knifeman, attempting to immobilize the knife arm by pinning it against the attacker's torso. Now Jack was body-to-body with the attacker. He could smell the man's sour odor, hear his rasping breath, and feel his muscles harden.

This was the intimate, visceral nature of hand-to-hand combat that movies omitted.

Jack compressed the knifeman's arm against the man's rock-hard torso, coming nose-to-nose with the attacker's Asian features and cold, dark eyes. Jack was tempted to go for the wrist again, but didn't. Instead, he kept the knife immobilized while launching a knee at the man's leg, aiming for the sciatic nerve.

In the half a dozen seconds they'd been grappling, Jack had been subconsciously assessing his opponent. The man was good, maybe better than Jack. A wrist lock alone wouldn't be effective unless the knifeman had something else to think about.

Like pain radiating down his leg.

Jack hammered the man's leg with two rapid strikes, picturing his patella snapping the offender's tibia in two. But instead of turning away to take the blows on his meaty hamstring, the knifeman rotated toward Jack. This meant that Jack's knee bludgeoned the man's quadriceps, but the

Copyrighted Material

attacker bore the attack with nothing more than a hiss of displeasure.

Then Jack understood why.

While Jack had been doing his best to shatter the assassin's leg, the Asian had switched the knife from his pinned left hand to his free right. Now that hand was a blur of motion headed for Jack's rib cage.

Leaping back, Jack planted his feet, and locked both hands on the knifeman's left arm. Snapping his heavy shoulders in an ever-tightening arc, Jack ripped the attacker's arm across his own body and shot his rear leg across the circle of violence he'd perpetrated.

While unorthodox, the maneuver was an effective substitute for a shoulder throw. Between the amount of energy Jack harnessed by torquing his shoulders and waist through a vicious arc and the attacker's own forward momentum, the throw should have generated enough force to dislocate the knifeman's shoulder while snapping his wrist in the process.

The operative words were *should have*.

Once again, the attacker seemed to defy physics. Nimbly leaping over Jack's blocking leg, the knifeman somehow slipped his hips around Jack's. Then, rather than fight the power generated by the corded muscles in Jack's back and shoulders, the attacker went with the throw, catapulting himself headlong into the crowd and ripping his arm from Jack's grasp.

In the time it took Jack to process what had just happened, the man was back on his feet, no worse for wear, minus the knife Jack had stripped from him. And then he reached into his pocket and extracted a second blade.

Copyrighted Material

His backup knife.

Of course.

Spying the original blade where it had fallen to the cobblestone street, Jack scooped up the weapon. As his fingers touched the hardened plastic handle, Jack dropped into a knife fighter's crouch, expecting the Asian to be on top of him. But the assassin was nowhere to be seen. Jack scanned the crowd for the attacker, trying to understand why the assassin had ceded the advantage.

Then a pistol pressed into the small of his back, and Jack wondered no longer.

Copyrighted Material

4

'Who are you?'

'Already told you,' Jack said, shifting his weight in an attempt to get more comfortable. This was a losing battle for two reasons. One, Israelis didn't design their chairs with meaty Americans in mind. Two, interrogation rooms weren't known for their comfortable furniture.

'Tell us one more time.'

This time the request was softer, more like casual conversation between friends, and Jack felt inclined to answer. He'd already spent more than an hour going over his story and wanted to bring this part of his Israeli adventure to a close. But more important, the second questioner didn't seem to believe that Jack was responsible for the attempted knifing.

It also didn't hurt that she was pretty easy on the eyes. Who needed the good cop/bad cop routine when one of the interrogators could give Gal Gadot a run for her money?

'My name is John Patrick Ryan, Jr,' Jack said, directing both his gaze and his answer solely toward the female interrogator seated across the metal table. This was partly to encourage the woman into thinking that her efforts to establish a bond were succeeding and partly to annoy the shit out of her male partner. Besides, her olive skin, dark eyes, and sun-streaked brown hair were far more interesting

Copyrighted Material

than the interrogation room's off-white cinder-block walls and scuffed linoleum floor.

Her partner more mirrored the room's uninspiring decor. He had a squat, stocky build and his hair was cropped to brown stubble on his shiny skull. His lips were set in a permanent scowl, and he was constantly clenching and unclenching his fists as if he was searching for a neck to throttle.

Like Jack's, for instance.

The woman's disarming appearance aside, the man stalking back and forth across the narrow room behind her more resembled a caricature of the organization that held Jack in custody. The organization's official name was long and not easily understood by non–Hebrew speakers, but its abbreviation was known well enough. *Shin Bet* – Israel's internal security service.

'Why are you in Israel, Jack?'

The question again came from the woman. She smiled as she spoke, as if she and Jack were friends knowingly exchanging falsehoods to avoid an embarrassing topic.

How's your mom doing?

Great – never better.

'Sightseeing,' Jack said, shifting in the chair for the hundredth time. 'We've been over this already.' The chair's steel frame seemed determined to put his ass cheeks to sleep.

'Bear with me, Jack,' the woman said. 'We're almost done.'

Her smile widened as she spoke, revealing twin dimples. Jack didn't smile back, but it wasn't easy. He wondered just how many hardened terrorists she'd cracked with her bright eyes, sunny personality, and heart-stopping smile.

Copyrighted Material

The Shin Bet officer was pretty without being intimidatingly beautiful. The kind of woman a man wanted to talk with, just to feel the warmth of her undivided attention. Her brooding, muscle-bound partner aside, Jack's intuition said that she was the more dangerous of the pair.

'I'm done talking,' Jack said, leaning forward, his posture challenging. 'Someone tried to kill an American woman, and I stopped him. A simple thank-you would have been enough. Instead, your jackass of a partner shoved a pistol into my back, and the bad guy got away. We've been over this three times. I'm not doing it a fourth. Either release me or let me speak to my embassy.'

'You think you're a tough guy because you're American?' the woman's partner said, looming over her shoulder.

'Nope,' Jack said, his Irish temper rising. 'I'm a tough guy because I'm a tough guy. Want to see?'

The man lunged across the table, grabbing Jack's shirt collar.

'You're in my country now, Jack Ryan,' the man said, rolling his knuckles into a cross-collar choke. 'Your constitution doesn't protect you here.'

'Shit or get off the pot,' Jack said, locking eyes with the man. 'Your choice.'

The man's face darkened, and for a moment, Jack thought the Shin Bet agent would take him up on his offer. Then a female voice cut through the testosterone with a string of Hebrew. The man barked a reply, but the tension on Jack's collar didn't get any tighter.

'Listen to Mom,' Jack said. 'She's trying to keep you from getting hurt.'

Copyrighted Material

The man's face mottled red. He slammed Jack back into the chair, but instead of applying the choke his fingers so obviously craved, he released Jack's shirt and stepped backward.

'You Americans,' the man said, dusting off his hands, 'such arrogant pricks.'

'Maybe,' Jack said. 'But that woman's alive because of me. More than I can say for you.'

The Shin Bet officer took a stutter step forward, but once again the woman intervened. What she said was incomprehensible, but Jack understood the gist all the same. The man rolled his shoulders and turned his head from side to side, cracking his neck.

Then he made for the exit.

'Good talk,' Jack said, as the man opened the door.

He looked over his shoulder, dark eyes finding Jack's.

'Go to the airport and get on the first plane heading somewhere else,' the man said. 'Anywhere else.'

'Thanks for the advice, Sparky,' Jack said. 'Now let me offer some in return – fuck off.'

The man glared at Jack before storming through the door and banging it closed behind him.

'You and Dudu certainly seemed to hit it off,' the woman said, another smile brightening her face.

'Don't take this the wrong way,' Jack said, 'but your partner is an asshat.'

The woman tilted back her head and laughed, the bubbly sound bringing a smile to Jack's face in return.

'Asshat,' she said, wiping tears from her eyes, 'I must remember that.'

'Glad I could help with your English,' Jack said. 'Now,

Copyrighted Material

as much fun as this has been, I'd really like to get back to sightseeing.'

'Yes, yes,' the woman said, waving away Jack's concern. 'My country has many amazing sights. Can I point you toward anything in particular?'

'I have a degree in history,' Jack said, 'so there's not much in Israel that doesn't interest me.'

'Well, then,' the woman said, getting to her feet, 'perhaps you'd like a local to show you around?'

She smiled again as she asked the question, but this time there was something more behind her eyes. Something . . . interesting.

'Do you make that offer to everyone you interrogate?' Jack said.

'Oh, Jack. This was just a friendly conversation. If you were being interrogated, you'd know.'

The woman's lips might still have been smiling, but her eyes weren't.

'Okay,' Jack said, pushing himself out of the chair. 'As much as I'd like to take you up on that, I'm going to pass. I've had about all the excitement I can stomach. Besides, I need to see to these.'

Jack lifted his arms, showing the twin bandages on his forearms. The knife cuts had been fairly shallow, but Jack knew from experience that assassin's blades were seldom clean. The Shin Bet medics had done a respectable job of patching him up, but Jack wanted to stop by a pharmacy on the way back to his Airbnb and take a look for himself.

'Too bad,' she said, opening the interrogation room door. 'If you change your mind, give me a ring.'

The woman passed a card to Jack. The name *Tal Levy*

Copyrighted Material

was printed in dark ink with a 972 telephone number written beneath.

Nothing else.

'Thanks, Tal,' Jack said. 'I'll keep your offer in mind.'

'Do more than that,' Tal said. 'My partner might have let his emotions get the better of him, but he wasn't wrong. Our nations are friendly, but it's still bad form to operate on allied soil without coordination. I'd strongly suggest calling the number on that card if you intend to leave your residence at Shefer Street for anywhere other than the airport. I'd hate for any more misadventures to mar your stay.'

A final smile accompanied her words, but Tal's flirty attitude was gone, replaced by something else.

Steel.

Copyrighted Material

5

Jack pondered Tal's parting words as he waited for his server. Like intelligence offices the world over, the Shin Bet station to which Jack had been taken didn't exactly advertise its presence. Located on a leafy, tree-lined boulevard close to the ocean, the nondescript building competed with trendy clothing stores on one side of the street and cafés with tables arranged for outdoor seating on the other.

People strolled along the pedestrian area as the sun's light softened, casting writhing shadows through the eucalyptus branches. Bikes competed with motor scooters as Israelis wrapped up work and headed for their flats, never suspecting that they were passing by one of the outstations belonging to their nation's feared intelligence apparatus.

But Jack knew. And if Tal's inference was to be believed, the Shin Bet now knew about him. Like it or not, that changed things.

Jack considered the cardboard box sitting on the table in front of him as he thought about his next move. As per protocol, the Shin Bet agents had confiscated his personal items after taking him into custody. A dour-faced security guard had returned them in an unassuming box as Jack had left the building. He'd kept the box unopened while putting some physical distance between himself and the Shin Bet station.

Copyrighted Material

Now it was time to decide what to do next.

The waiter wandered over, and Jack ordered a cappuccino. The server frowned and asked Jack to repeat his order, as if unsure of his English. Jack reiterated that he had indeed said *cappuccino*. In Italy the blasphemy of ordering that particular coffee this late in the day would not have been tolerated, but the Israeli waiter was much too polite to comment on the American's obvious lack of sophistication.

Jack had traveled extensively enough to know that anywhere other than America, espresso was the only acceptable form of caffeine after 11 a.m. Even so, the jet lag and stress of an operation gone sideways were starting to catch up with him and he craved the frothy drink. Besides, what was the point of being American if you didn't use the stereotype to your advantage?

Jack waited for the man to leave before sliding his thumbnail into the tape binding the box and then shaking the contents on to the table. His phone fell out first. Jack eyed the electronic device before placing it back in the container. He'd spent about an hour separated from the device while in Shin Bet custody. That was probably fifty-nine minutes too long. The cell was undoubtedly compromised, and this, combined with Tal's less-than-subtle implication, made his next moves somewhat more difficult.

The irony was that while Jack often worked as a clandestine operative for The Campus, the organization was a private entity and technically outside the umbrella of the American intelligence community. Jack was not a CIA officer, or member of any sanctioned intelligence agency,

Copyrighted Material

for that matter. He did not draw a government paycheck and therefore was not bound by the unwritten rule that required that he declare himself when working on allied soil.

Usually.

But this trip was different. It was actually supposed to be Ding Chavez, not Jack, observing the CIA asset-validation exercise. The man in charge of the exercise, Peter Beltz, had asked Ding to serve as an outside observer. While Peter didn't know that Ding, like Jack, was a Campus operative, he figured that when his friend had vanished from the Army's ranks without a trace, he'd been 'sheep-dipped' to one intelligence organization or another.

When Campus OPTEMPO necessitated a last-minute change in plans, Ding had asked Jack to pinch-hit. Jack had been only too happy to oblige for a number of reasons. For one, Jack respected Ding immensely. The significance of the Rainbow Six legend vouching for Jack's competency to a former comrade-in-arms wasn't trivial. Jack had sought the respect of the senior members of The Campus, and this gesture by Ding meant he was well on his way.

Second, the personal sacrifices Jack was making for his dual life were substantial. His father had already met and married his mother and welcomed Sally to the family by the time he was Jack's age. While Jack certainly didn't feel like he was having a midlife crisis, he was keenly aware that forty loomed much closer than twenty. As his mother, Cathy Ryan, reminded him at every opportunity, not only was Jack still single, but he didn't even have any real prospects.

Copyrighted Material