

THE BANCROFT STRATEGY

ROBERT LUDLUM



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THE
BANCROFT
STRATEGY

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JAFFEIRA: ...I've engag'd

With men of souls, fit to reform the ills

Of all mankind.

—Thomas Otway, *A Plot Discovered* (1682)

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Prologue

East Berlin, 1987

It was not yet raining, but the leaden skies would open before long. The air itself seemed expectant, apprehensive. The young man crossed from Unter den Linden to Marx-Engels-Forum, where giant bronze statues of socialism's Teutonic fathers stared toward the city center, sightless eyes fixed and intent. Behind them, stone friezes depicted the joyful life of man under communism. Still not a drop of rain. But soon. Before long, the clouds would burst, the heavens would open. *It was a historical inevitability*, the man thought, mordantly recalling the socialist jargon. He was a hunter, tracking his prey, and he was closer than he had ever been. It was all the more important, therefore, to conceal the tension that welled inside him.

He looked like a million others in this self-proclaimed worker's paradise. His clothes had been acquired at the Centrum Warenhaus, the vast department store at Alexanderplatz, for clothing of such visibly shoddy manufacture was not sold just anywhere. But more than his garb lent him the appearance of an East Berlin menial. It was the way he walked, the stolid, dutiful, draggy gait. Nothing about him suggested that he had arrived from the West just twenty-four hours earlier, and, until a few moments ago, he had been sure that he had attracted no notice.

A pang of adrenaline tightened his skin. He thought that he recognized the footsteps behind him from his traipse through Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse. The pattern seemed familiar.

All footsteps were the same, yet all were different: there were variations in weight and gait, variations in the composition of soles. Footsteps were the solfège of the city, one of Belknap's instructors had told him: so commonplace as to pass beyond notice, and yet, to the trained ear, capable of being distinguished like different voices. Had Belknap done so correctly?

The possibility that he was being followed was one he could not afford. He *had* to be wrong. Or he had to make it right.

A junior member of the ultra-clandestine branch of the U.S. State Department known as Consular Operations, Todd Belknap had already gained a reputation for finding men who sought not to be found. Like most trackers, he worked best on his own. If the task was to place a man under surveillance, a team—the larger the better—was optimal. But a man who had vanished could not be placed under conventional surveillance. In those cases, the full resources of the organization would be enlisted in the service of the hunt: That was a matter of course. Yet the spymasters at Cons Ops had long since learned that there could be advantages, too, in letting loose a single, gifted field agent. Allowing him to move about the world solo, unencumbered by an expensive entourage. Free to pursue insubstantial hunches. Free to follow his nose.

A nose that, if all went well, might lead him to his quarry, a renegade American operative named Richard Lugner. Having chased after dozens of false leads, Belknap was now certain he had the scent.

But had someone picked up on *his* scent? Was the tracker being tracked?

To turn around suddenly would be suspicious. Instead, he stopped and feigned a yawn, looking about as if taking in the giant statues, but ready to make a swift evaluation of whoever was in the immediate vicinity.

He saw nobody at all. A seated bronze Marx, a standing Engels: massive, glowering over verdigrised beards and mustaches. Two rows of linden trees. An expanse of poorly maintained turf.

Across the way, the hulking, long, coppery glass box known as the Palast der Republik. It was a coffin-like building, as if built to entomb the human spirit itself. But the forum seemed vacant.

There was scant reassurance in that—yet was he really certain of what he had heard? Tension, he knew, made the mind play tricks on itself, see goblins in shadows. He had to quell his anxiety: An agent who was excessively keyed up could make errors of judgment, missing real threats while preoccupied by imagined ones.

Belknap impulsively walked toward the malignant shimmer of the Palast der Republik, the regime's flagship building. It housed not only the G.D.R. parliament, but performance spaces, restaurants, and endless bureaucratic offices that processed countless bureaucratic applications. It was the last place anybody would dare follow him, the last place a foreigner would dare show himself—and the first place Belknap thought of to make sure he was as solitary as he had hoped. It was either a inspired decision or a beginner's error. He would know which soon enough. He willed himself into a state of bored complacency as he made his way past the granite-faced guards at the door, who glance impassively at his worn-looking identification card. He continued through the balky turnstile, the long wraparound entrance hall smelling of disinfectant, the endless directory of offices and rooms, mounted overhead like the flight times at an airport. *You don't pause, you don't look around; act as if you know what you're doing and others will assume that you do.* Belknap might have been taken for—what? A low-level office worker back from a late lunch? A citizen in need of documents for a new car? He rounded the corner, and then another corner, until he arrived at the doors on the Alexanderplatz side of the building.

As he walked away from the Palast, he studied the images reflected on the building's mirrored glass. A lanky fellow in workman's shoes and a lunch pail. A big-breasted frau with puffy, hungover eyes. A pair of gray-suited bureaucrats with complexions to match. Nobody he recognized; nobody who triggered any sense of alarm.

Belknap proceeded to the grand promenade of Stalinist neoclassicism known as Karl-Marx-Allee. The extra-wide streets were fronted with eight-story buildings—an endless stretch of cream-colored ceramic tiles, tall casements, rows of Roman-style balusters above the shop level. At intervals, decorative tiles showed contented laborers, such as the ones who had built the promenade three and a half decades earlier. If Belknap recalled his history correctly, it had been those very laborers who led rebellion against the socialist order in June 1953—an uprising ruthlessly crushed by Soviet tanks. Stalin's favored "confectioner's" style of architecture was bitter indeed to those who were compelled to bake it. The promenade was a beautiful lie.

Richard Lugner, however, was an ugly one. Lugner had sold out his country, but he hadn't sold cheap. The fading tyrants of Eastern Europe, Lugner had grasped, had never been more desperate than they were now, and their desperation matched his avarice. The American secrets he had been purveying, including the names of deep-cover American assets in their own Soviet-style security bureaus, could not be passed up; his treachery presented a rare opportunity. He made separate deals with each member of the Eastern bloc. Once the "goods" had been sampled and proven authentic—the identity of perhaps one American asset, who would be carefully monitored before being arrested, tortured, and executed—Lugner was able to name his price.

Not every merchant stays on good terms with his customers, but Lugner had obviously taken precautions: He must have led his clients to suspect that he had kept a few cards to himself, that his stores of American secrets were not wholly depleted. As long as that possibility remained, such a man would have to be protected. It was appropriate that he should have found quarters among the Stasi officials and GDR nomenklatura who had settled in what had once been proclaimed "workers' housing," even as the true workers found themselves forced into featureless boxes made of concrete slabs. To be sure, Lugner was not a man to stay in one place for long. A month and a half before, in

Bucharest, Belknap had missed him by a matter of hours. He could take no chances of that happening again.

Belknap waited for a few battered-looking Skoda cars to pass, and crossed the boulevard just before the intersection, where a decrepit-looking hardware store advertised its wares. Would anybody follow him in? Had he only imagined that tail in the first place? A cheap door of Plexiglas and enameled aluminum banged behind him as he entered—a screen door that had no screens—and a dour gray-haired woman with a slight mustache peered at him bleakly from behind a counter, making him feel as if he had interrupted something, committed an act of trespass. The cramped space was suffused with the smell of machine oil; the shelves were filled with items that—it was clear at a glance—nobody had much use for. The dour woman, the shop's *Eigentümer*, continued to scowl as he found items that suggested someone doing maintenance in the apartment blocks: a pail, a container of ready-mixed plaster, a tube of grout, a wide-bladed spackling knife. Within a city in constant need of repairs the tools would immediately explain his presence almost anywhere he appeared. The counter woman gave him another grudging, the-customer-is-always-wrong glare, but sulkily took his money, as if accepting compensation for an injury.

Gaining entrance to the apartment block turned out to be child's play—an ironic advantage of living within a high-security state. Belknap waited as a couple of pungently perfumed hausfraus with canvas bags of groceries entered the doorway marked HAUS 435, and followed them in, his tools earning him not merely instant legitimacy but unspoken approval. He got off at 7 Stock, the floor above theirs. If he was right—if his scrawny, greasy-haired informant was playing it on the level—he was only yards away from his quarry.

His heart started to thud, a tom-tom of anticipation that he could not dampen. This was no ordinary quarry. Richard Lugner had eluded every conceivable snare, having designed more than a few when he was still in the service of the United States. American intelligence officers had accumulated a vast compendium of reported sightings in the past eighteen months, and gave credence to few. Belknap himself had drilled dozens of dry holes during the past three months, and at this point, his superiors were only interested in a bona fide DPS, a “direct and positive sighting” of his quarry. This time, though, he wasn't merely staking out a bar or café or airport lounge; this time he had an address. A real one? There were no guarantees. Yet his instincts—his nose—told him that his luck had turned. He had taken a stab in the dark and had struck something.

The next moments would be crucial. Lugner's quarters—evidently a substantial suite, with windows facing both the main street and the narrow side street, Koppenstrasse—were down one long hallway, and then a short one. Belknap approached the door to the suite and set down his pail; from a distance, he would look like a workman repairing one of the missing floor tiles in the corridor. Then, checking that the hallways were clear, Belknap knelt down before the lever handle—round doorknobs were almost never seen in this country—and inserted a small optical scope through the keyhole. If he could establish a DPS, he could effectively keep a watch while a proper ex-filtration team was mobilized.

A big if—yet this time the trail was short enough that Belknap felt hopeful. It had begun with a late-night visit to the pissoir of the Friedrichstrasse train station, where he had eventually accosted one of the so-called Bahnhof Boys, the male prostitutes who frequented such sites. They shared information with far greater reluctance than they did their bodies, as soon became clear, and for a much steeper price. The very predilections that had led Lugner to cross over, he had always been convinced, would betray the betrayer. An appetite for underaged flesh: Lugner's indulgences would have caught up with him had he stayed in Washington, and it was not an appetite easily or long slaked. As a privileged guest of the Eastern bloc countries, Lugner could count on the fact that his appetites would be overlooked, if not abetted. Then, too, operating in a police state, the Bahnhof Boys were, of

necessity, a close-knit group. If any of their number had been “entertained” by a generous American with a pitted face and a taste for thirteen-year-olds, Belknap figured it wasn’t improbable that the news had spread among his brethren.

It had taken a good deal of cajoling and reassurances, not to mention a sheaf of Marks, but the hustler finally went off to ask around, returning two hours later with a scrap of paper and a triumphant look on his lightly pimpled face. Belknap remembered his informant’s sour-milk breath, his clammy hands. But that scrap of paper! Belknap dared to take it as vindication.

Belknap twisted the fiber-optic scope, moving it slowly into position. His were not the most practiced fingers. And he could afford no slips.

He heard a noise behind him, the scrape of boots on tile, and whirled around to see the business end of a short-barreled SKS carbine. Then the man holding it: He wore a dark blue-gray uniform with steel buttons, and a beige plastic communicator strapped beneath his right shoulder.

Stasi. The East German secret police.

He was an official sentry, no doubt, assigned to guard the eminent Herr Lugner. He must have been seated within a dimly lit, recessed corner, hidden from view.

Belknap rose slowly to his feet, his hands raised, affecting bewilderment while calculating his counterstrike.

The Stasi sentry barked into his beige walkie-talkie with the distinctively hard consonants of a true Berliner, his other hand loosely gripping a handgun. The distraction of the communicator meant that the sentry would be ill-prepared for a suddenly aggressive move. Belknap’s own gun was holstered at his ankle. He would pretend to be showing the sentry the contents of his spackling kit while retrieving a tool far more lethal.

Suddenly he heard the door to the apartment open behind, felt the warm air inside—and felt a forceful blow to the side of his neck. Powerful arms wrestled him to the ground, hurled him facedown onto the wooden parquet of the foyer. Immediately someone had a boot on the back of his head. Unseen hands patted him down, extracted the small handgun secreted in its ankle holster. Then he was hustled into an adjoining room. A door closed behind him with a heavy *thunk*. The room was darkened, the main blinds closed; the only light came from a narrow bay window that faced the side street, and the gloom outside hardly penetrated the gloom within. It took him a few moments before his eyes adjusted.

Goddammit! Had they been on to him all along?

Now he made out his surroundings clearly. He was in something like a home office, with a costly-looking Turkish flatweave on the floor, an ebony-framed mirror on the wall, and a large Biedermeier-style desk.

Behind it stood Richard Lugner.

A man he had never met, but a face he would know anywhere. The slitlike mouth, the deeply pitted cheeks, the two-inch-long scar that curved across his forehead like a second left eyebrow: The photographs did him full justice. Belknap took in the man’s small, malevolent, anthracite eyes. And, in Lugner’s hands, a powerful shotgun, its twin boreholes bearing down on him like a second pair of eyes.

Two other gunmen—well-trained professionals, it was obvious from their bearing, their firing stance, their watchful gaze—stood to either side of Lugner’s desk, their weapons trained on Belknap. Members of his private guard, Belknap immediately guessed—men whose loyalty and competence he could trust, men on his own payroll, men whose fortune depended upon his. For a man in Lugner’s position, the investment in such a retinue would have been well worth it. The two gunmen now crossed over to Belknap, holding their weapons level as they flanked him.

“Persistent little bugger, aren’t you?” Lugner said at last. His voice was a nasal rasp. “You’re lil

a human *tick*.”

~~Belknap said nothing. The configuration of gunfire was all too clear, and professionally arranged there was no sudden move he could make that would change the geometry of death.~~

“My mother used to remove ticks from us kids with a hot match head. Hurt like hell. Hurt the critter more.”

One of his private bodyguards emitted a soft, throaty laugh.

“Oh, don’t act like such an innocent,” the traitor went on. “My procurer in Bucharest told me about your conversation with him. It left his arm in a sling. He didn’t sound happy about it. You’ve been *bad*.” A moue of ironic disapproval. “Fighting never solves anything—weren’t you paying attention in seventh grade?” A grotesque wink. “Pity I didn’t know you when you were in seventh grade. *I* could have taught you a few things.”

“Screw you.” The words flared from Belknap in a low growl.

“Temper, temper. You have to master your emotions, or your emotions will master you. So tell me, greenhorn, how’d you find me?” Lugner’s gaze hardened. “Am I going to have to garrote little Ingo?” He shrugged. “Well, the child did claim he liked it rough. I told him I’d take him to a place he’d never been before. Next time we’ll just take it to the next level. The final level. I don’t guess anybody will mind all that much.”

Belknap shuddered involuntarily. Lugner’s two hirelings just smirked.

“Don’t worry,” the traitor said in a voice of pretend reassurance. “I’ll be taking *you* to a place you’ve never been before, too. Have you ever discharged a point-four-ten Mossberg tactical shotgun close range? At a man, I mean. *I* have. There’s nothing like it.”

Belknap’s gaze moved from the fathomless black of the shotgun muzzle to the fathomless black of Lugner’s eyes.

Lugner’s own gaze drifted to the wall just behind his captive. “Our privacy won’t be disturbed, I can promise you. Wonderful thick masonry in these apartment blocks—the soft lead pellets will hardly blister the skim coat. Then there’s the soundproofing I had installed. I figured it wouldn’t do to disturb the neighbors if some Bahnhof Boy turned out to be a *groaner*.” Flesh retracted from porcelain teeth in a hideous simulacrum of a smile. “But you’ll be taking a different kind of load today. You see this Mossberg will actually blast away a large portion of your midriff. It will, mark my words, leave a hole you can reach your arm through.”

Belknap tried to move but felt himself clamped in place by hands like steel.

Lugner glanced at his two henchmen; he had the air of a television chef about to demonstrate a surprising culinary technique. “You think I’m exaggerating? Let me show you. You’ll never experience anything like it.” There was a quiet *snick-click* as he released the safety of the shotgun. “Not ever again.”

Belknap was able to make sense of the ensuing seconds only in retrospect. A loud crash of window glass; Lugner, startled by the sound, turning to the bay window to his left; muzzle flash from a handgun, a split-second later, sparking into the darkened apartment like a lightning bolt, glaring off mirrors and metal surfaces; and—

A plume of blood at Richard Lugner’s right temple.

The traitor’s expression suddenly went slack as he collapsed on the floor motionless, the shotgun falling with him like a stroke victim’s cane. Someone with perfect aim had put a bullet through Lugner’s head.

The guards spread out in either direction and aimed their weapons toward the broken window. The work of a sniper?

“Catch!” a voice called out—that of an American—and a handgun came sailing through the air toward Belknap. Belknap snatched it by sheer reflex, alert to the half-second of indecision between the

two gunmen, who now had to decide whether to shoot first either at the prisoner or...the lanky stranger who had just swung through the four-paned casement. Belknap dropped to the floor—felt a bullet zing just above his shoulder—and fired twice at the gunman closest to him, striking him in the chest. Center mass: standard procedure for shooting on the fly. But it wasn't adequate for a close-range standoff like this one. Only a central-nervous-system shot would instantly neutralize the threat. Mortally wounded, scarlet blood gouting from his sternum, the first gunman began discharging the rounds in his magazine wildly. The sturdily constructed suite amplified the *boom* of the large-caliber shells, and, in the gloom, the repeated white muzzle flare was painfully bright.

Belknap fired a second time, shooting the man in the face. The gun, an old-style semiautomatic Walther, favored by certain ex-military types because it reputedly never jammed, fell heavily to the floor, followed by its owner moments later.

The stranger—he was tall, agile, clad in tan workman's coveralls, glittering with shards of broken glass—leaped to one side to avoid the other hireling's fire even as he returned fire with a single perfect head shot, another instant drop.

The stillness was eerie, long seconds of the profoundest quiet that Belknap had ever known. The stranger had looked almost bored as he dispatched Lugner and his crew, nothing indicating that his pulse had risen in the slightest.

Finally, the stranger spoke to him in a languid tone. "I assume they had a Stasi lookout stationed in one of the alcoves outside."

Which was precisely what Belknap should have assumed. Not for the first time, he silently cursed his stupidity. "I don't think he'll be coming in, though," Belknap said. His mouth was dry, his voice scratchy. He could feel a muscle in his leg trembling, vibrating like a cello string. Outside of training exercises, he had never stared down the wrong end of a shotgun before. "I think the play was to leave their special guest to his own devices in...disposing of unwanted visitors."

"I do hope he has a good housekeeper," the man said, flicking shards of glass from his tan coveralls. They were standing among three bleeding corpses, in the middle of a police state, and he seemed in no hurry at all. He extended a hand. "My name's Jared Rinehart, by the way." His handclasp was firm and dry. Standing close to him, Belknap noticed that Rinehart was free of sweat; not a hair was out of place. He was a model of sangfroid. Belknap himself, as a glance in the mirror confirmed, was a mess.

"You made a frontal approach. Ballsy, but a little headstrong. Especially when there's a vacant apartment one floor up."

"I see," Belknap grunted, and he did, immediately working out Rinehart's movements, the nimble sense of situational strategy behind them. "Point taken."

Rinehart was slightly elongated, like a Christ in a mannerist painting, with long, elegant limbs, and oddly soulful gray-green eyes; he moved with a feline grace as he took a few steps toward Belknap. "Don't beat yourself up for missing the Stasi man. I'm frankly in awe of what you've accomplished. I've been trying to track down Mr. Lugner for quite some months, and without any luck at all."

"You caught up with him this time," Belknap said. *Who the hell are you?* he wanted to ask, but he decided to bide his time.

"Not really," said his rescuer. "I caught up with *you*."

"With me." The footsteps in Marx-Engels-Forum. The disappearing act of a true pro. The reflection of the lanky workman ghosted in the amber-tinted glass of the Palast der Republik.

"The only reason I got here was by following you. You were something, let me tell you. A hound on the trail of a fox. And me, breathlessly following like some country gent in jodhpurs." He paused, looked around with a stock-taking air. "Goodness gracious. You'd think some hotel-room-trashing

rock star had paid a visit. But I think the point's been made, don't you? My employers, anyway, won't be at all displeased. Mr. Lugner had been such a bad example to the working spy, living high and letting die. Now he's a very *good* example." He glanced at Lugner's body and then caught Belknap's eye. "The wages of sin and all."

Belknap looked around him, saw the blood of three slain men seeping into the red carpet, oxidizing to a rust hue like the one it had been dyed. A wave of nausea passed over him. "How'd you know to follow me?"

"I was reconnoitering—or, to be honest, *loitering*—around the souks of Alexanderplatz when I thought I recognized the cut of your jib from Bucharest. I don't believe in coincidence, do you? For all I knew, you were a courier of his. But connected in one way or another. The gamble seemed worthwhile."

Belknap just stared at him.

"Now then," Jared Rinehart went on briskly. "The only question is: Are you a friend or a foe?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's rude, I know." A mock wince of self-reproach. "Like talking shop at dinner, or asking what people *do* for a living at cocktail parties. But I have practical interest in the issue. I'd rather know now if you're, oh, in the employ of the Albanians. There was a rumor that they thought Mr. Lugner had kept the really good stuff for their Eastern bloc rivals, and you know what those Albanians are like when they feel stiffed. And as for those Bulgarians—well, don't get me started." As he spoke, he took out a handkerchief and daubed at Belknap's chin. "You don't encounter that combination of lethality and stupidity just every day. So that's why I've got to ask—are you a good witch or a bad witch?" He presented the handkerchief to Belknap with a flourish. "You had a little splash of blood there," he explained. "Keep it."

"I don't understand," Belknap said, a mixture of incredulity and awe in his voice. "You just risked your life to save mine...without even knowing whether I was an ally or an enemy?"

Rinehart shrugged. "I had a good feeling, let's say. And it had to be one or the other. A chancy business, I grant, but if you're not rolling the dice, you're not in the game. Oh, before you answer the question, you'll need to know that I'm here as an unofficial representative of the U.S. Department of State."

"Christ on a raft." Belknap tried to bring his thoughts into focus. "Consular Operations? The Pentheus team?"

Rinehart just smiled. "You're Cons Ops, too? We ought to have a secret handshake, don't you think? Or a club tie, though they'd have to let me choose the design."

"The bastards," Belknap said, whipsawed by the revelation. "Why didn't anybody tell me?"

"Always keep 'em guessing—that's the philosophy. If you ask the op boys at 2201 C Street, they'll explain that it's a procedure they occasionally use, especially when there are solo operatives involved. Separate and de-linked clandestine units. They'll say something fancy about operational partition. The potential downside is you trip over your tail. The upside is you avoid groupthink, lockstep, get a wider variety of approaches. That's what they'll tell you. But the truth, I bet, is that it was an ordinary screwup. Common as crabgrass." While he spoke, he turned his attention to a mahogany-and-brass liquor stand in one corner of the study. He lifted up a bottle and beamed. "A twenty-year-old slivovitz from Suvoborska. Not too shabby. I think we could both stand a wee dram. We've earned it." He splashed a little in two shot glasses, pressed one on Belknap. "Bottoms up!" he called out.

Belknap hesitated, and then swallowed the contents of the shot glass, his mind still whirling. Another operative in Rinehart's position would have maintained an observation post. If a direct intervention had to be staged, it would have been timed to a moment when Lugner and his henchmen

had put their weapons away. Some moment *after* they had been used. Belknap would have been given a posthumous ribbon to be placed on his casket; Lugner would have been killed or apprehended. The second operative would have been praised and promoted. Organizations valued prudence over valor. Nobody could be expected to enter, alone, a room that contained three gunmen with weapons drawn. To do so defied logic, not to mention all standard operational procedures.

Who was this man?

Rinehart rummaged through the jacket of one of the slain guards, retrieved a compact American pistol, a short-barreled Colt, released the magazine, and peered inside. "This yours?"

Belknap grunted assent, and Rinehart tossed him the weapon. "You're a man of taste. Half-jacketed nine-millimeter hollowpoints, scalloped copper on lead. An excellent balance between stopping power and penetration, and definitely not standard-issue. The Brits say you can always judge a man by his shoes. I say his choice of ammunition tells you what you need to know."

"Here's what *I'd* like to know," Belknap said, still piecing together his fragmented memories of the past few minutes. "What if I *weren't* a friend?"

"Then there'd be a fourth corpse here for the cleanup crew." Rinehart put a hand on Belknap's shoulder, gave a squeeze of reassurance. "But you'll learn something about me. I take pride in being good friend to my good friends."

"And a dangerous enemy to your dangerous enemies?"

"We understand each other," his voluble interlocutor replied. "So: Shall we leave this party at the worker's palace? We've met the host, paid our proper respects, had a drink—I think we can go now without giving offense. You never want to be the last to leave." He glanced at three slack-faced corpses. "If you'll step over to the window, you'll notice a bosun's chair and scaffolding, which is just the thing for an afternoon of window-washing, though I think we'll skip that part." He led Belknap through the smashed casement and onto the platform, which was secured to cables anchored to the balcony of the apartment above. Given all the maintenance work done on these apartment buildings, it was unlikely to attract notice on the side street, seven floors below, even if there had been anyone around.

Rinehart brushed a remaining fragment of glass from his tan coveralls. "Here's the thing, Mr...."

"Belknap," he said as he steadied himself onto the platform.

"Here's the thing, Belknap. You're how old? Twenty-five, twenty-six?"

"Twenty-six. And call me Todd."

Rinehart fiddled with the cable lanyard. With a jerk, the platform started a slow, erratic descent, as if lowered by a series of tugs. "Then you've been with the outfit for just a couple of years, I guess. Me, I'll be thirty next year. Have a few more years of seasoning on me. So let me tell you what you're going to find. You're going to find that most of your colleagues are mediocre. It's just the nature of any organization. So if you come across someone who has genuine gifts, you watch out for that person. Because in the intelligence community, most of the real progress is made by a handful of people. Those are the gemstones. You don't let them get lost, or scratched, or crushed, not if you give a damn about this enterprise of ours. Taking care of business means taking care of your friends." His gray-green eyes intent, he added, "There's a famous line from the British writer E. M. Forster. Maybe you know it. He said that if he ever had to choose between betraying his friend and betraying his country, he hoped he'd have the guts to betray his country."

"Rings a bell." Belknap's eyes were glued to the street, which thankfully remained vacant. "Is that your philosophy?" He felt a drop of rain, solitary but heavy, and then another one.

Rinehart shook his head. "On the contrary. The lesson here is that you need to be careful about picking your friends." Another intent look. "Because you should never have to make that choice."

Now the two stepped onto the narrow street, leaving the platform behind.

“Take the pail,” Rinehart instructed. Belknap did so, recognizing the wisdom of it at once. Rinehart’s coveralls and cap were a formidable disguise in a city of laborers; carrying the pail and spackling kit, Belknap would look like a natural companion.

Another heavy drop of rain splashed on Belknap’s forehead. “It’s gonna start coming down,” he said, wiping it away.

“It’s *all* going to come down,” the lanky operative replied cryptically. “And everyone here, in the heart of hearts, realizes it.”

Rinehart knew the city topography well—he knew which stores connected two streets, which alleys backed onto others that led to yet other streets. “So what did you think of Richard Lugner after your brief encounter?”

The traitor’s pitted face of malign impassivity returned to him like a ghostly afterimage. “Evil,” Belknap said shortly, surprising himself. It was a word he seldom used. But no other would do. The twin boreholes of the shotgun were etched in his mind, as were the malevolent eyes of Lugner himself.

“What a concept,” the taller man said with a nod. “Unfashionable these days, but indispensable all the same. We somehow think that we’re too sophisticated to talk about evil. Everything is supposed to be analyzed as a product of social or psychological or historical forces. And once you do that, well, evil drops out of the picture, doesn’t it?” Rinehart led the younger man into an underground plaza that connected a square that had been split by a motorway. “We like to pretend that we don’t speak of evil because we’ve outgrown the concept. I wonder. I suspect the motivation is itself deeply primitive. Like some tribal fetish worshippers of ancient times, we imagine that by not speaking the name, the thing to which it refers will vanish.”

“It’s that face,” Belknap grunted.

“A face only Helen Keller could love.” Rinehart mimed the motion of Braille-reading fingertips.

“The way he looks at you, I mean.”

“*Looked*, anyway,” Rinehart replied, stressing the past tense. “I’ve had my own encounters with the man. He was pretty formidable. And as you say—evil. Yet not all evil has a face. The Ministry of State Security in this country feeds off people like Lugner. That’s a form of evil, too. Monumental and faceless.” Rinehart maintained a level tone, but he did not hide the passion in his voice. The man was cool—maybe the coolest Belknap had ever known—but he was not a cynic. After a while, Belknap realized something else, too: The other man’s conversational flow wasn’t simply a matter of self-expression; it was an attempt to distract and calm a young operative whose nerves had just been severely jarred. His very chatter was a kindness.

Twenty minutes later, the two of them—workmen from all appearances—were approaching the embassy building, a Schinkel-style marble building now sooted by pollution. Large raindrops were falling intermittently. A familiar loamy smell arose from the pavement. Belknap envied Rinehart his cap. Three G.D.R. policemen eyed the embassy from their post across the street, adjusting their nylon parkas, trying to keep their cigarettes dry.

As the two Americans approached the embassy, Rinehart pulled up a Velcro tab on his coveralls and revealed a small blue coded nameplate to one of the American guards standing at a side entrance. A quick nod, and the two found themselves on the inner side of the consulate fence. Belknap felt a few more drops of rain, landing heavily, darkening the tarmac with black splotches. The heavy steel gate clanged shut. A short while before, death had seemed certain. Now safety was assured. “I just realize that I never answered the first question you asked me,” he said to his lanky companion.

“Whether you were friend or foe?”

Belknap nodded. “Well, let’s agree we’re friends,” he said in a sudden rush of gratitude and warmth. “Because I could use more friends like you.”

The tall operative gave him a look that was both affectionate and appraising. “One might be

enough," he replied, smiling.

~~Later—years later—Belknap would have reason to reflect on how a brief encounter could set the~~ course of a man's life. A watershed moment splits life into a before and an after. Yet it was impossible, except in retrospect, to recognize the moment for what it was. At the time, Belknap's mind was filled with the ardent yet banal thought *Someone saved my life today*—as if the act had merely restored normality, as if there could now be a going back, a return to the way things were. He did not know—he could not know—that his life had changed irreversibly. Its trajectory, in ways both imperceptible and dramatic, had shifted.

By the time the two men stepped under the olive-drab awning that extended from the side of the consulate, its plasticized fabric was thrumming with rain, water sliding off it in sheets. The downpour had begun.

Part One

Chapter One

Rome

Tradition holds that Rome was built on seven hills. The Janiculum, higher than any of them, is the eighth. In ancient times, it was given over to the cult of Janus—the god of exits and entrances; the god of two faces. Todd Belknap would need them both. On the third floor of the villa on the via Angelo Masina, a looming neoclassical structure with facades of yellow ochre stucco and white pilasters, the operative checked his watch for the fifth time in ten minutes.

This is what you do, he silently assured himself.

But this was not the way he had planned it. It was not the way anybody had planned it. He moved quietly through the hallway—a surface, blessedly, of solidly mortared tile: no squeaking floorboards. The renovation had removed the rotting woodwork of a previous renovation...and how many such renovations had there been since the original construction in the eighteenth century? The villa, built upon an aqueduct of Trajan, had an illustrious past. In 1848, in the great days of the Risorgimento, Garibaldi used it as his headquarters; the basement, supposedly, had been enlarged to serve as a backup armory. These days, the villa once again had a military purpose, if more nefarious in nature. It belonged to Khalil Ansari, a Yemeni arms dealer. Not just any arms dealer, either. As shadowy as his operations were, Cons Ops analysts had established that he was a significant supplier not only in South Asia but also in Africa. What set him apart was how elusive he was: how carefully he had concealed his movements, his location, his identity. Until now.

Belknap's timing could not have been better—or worse. In the two decades he had spent as a field agent, he had come to dread the stroke of luck that arrives almost too late. It had happened near the beginning of his career, in East Berlin. It had happened seven years ago, in Bogotá. It was happening again here in Rome. Good things come in threes, as his good friend Jared Rinehart wryly insisted.

Ansari, it was known, was on the verge of a major arms deal, one that would involve a series of simultaneous exchanges among several parties. It was, from all indications, a deal of enormous complexity and enormous magnitude—something that perhaps only Khalil Ansari would be capable of orchestrating. According to humint sources, the final settlement would be arranged this very evening via an intercontinental conference call of some sort. Yet the use of sterile lines and sophisticated encryption ruled out the standard sigint solutions. Belknap's discovery had changed all that. If Belknap was able to plant a bug in the right place, Consular Operations would gain invaluable information about how the Ansari network functioned. With any luck, the rogue network could be exposed—and a multibillion-dollar merchant of death brought to justice.

That was the good news. The bad news was that Belknap had identified Ansari only hours before. No time for a coordinated operation. No time for backup, for HQ-approved plans. He had no other choice but to go in alone. The opportunity could not be allowed to pass.

The photo ID clipped to his knitted cotton shirt read "Sam Norton," and identified him as one of the site architects involved in the latest round of renovations, an employee of the British architectural firm in charge of the project. It got him in the house, but it could not explain what he was doing on the third floor. In particular, it could not justify his presence in Ansari's personal study. If he were found here, it was over. Likewise if anyone were to discover the guard he had knocked out with a tiny

Carfentanil dart and stowed in a cleaning closet down the hall. The operation would be terminated. *H* would be terminated.

Belknap recognized these facts dully, dispassionately, like the rules of the road. Inspecting the arms dealer's study, he felt a kind of operational numbness; he saw himself from the perspective of a disembodied observer far above him. The ceramic element of the contact microphone could be hidden—where? A vase on the desk, containing an orchid. The vase would serve as a natural amplifier. It would also be routinely inspected by the Yemeni's debugging team, but that would not be until the morning. A keystroke logger—he had a recent model—would record messages typed on Ansari's desktop computer. A faint chirp sounded in Belknap's earpiece, a response to radio pulse emitted by tiny motion detector that Belknap had secreted in the hallway outside.

Was someone about to enter the room? Not good. Not good at all. It was an appalling irony. He had spent the better part of a year trying to locate Khalil Ansari. Now the danger was that Khalil Ansari would locate him.

Dammit! Ansari was not supposed to be back so soon. Belknap looked helplessly around the Moroccan-tiled room. There were few places for concealment, aside from a closet with a slatted door at the corner near the desk. Far from ideal. Belknap stepped quickly inside and hunched down, squatting on the floor. The closet was unpleasantly warm, filled with racks of humming computer routers. He counted the seconds. The miniaturized motion detector he had placed in the hall outside could have been set off by a roach or rodent. Surely it was a false alarm.

It was not. Someone was entering the room. Belknap peered through the slats until he could make out the figure. Khalil Ansari: a man tending everywhere toward roundness. A body made of ovals, like an art-class exercise. Even his close-trimmed beard was a thing of round edges. His lips, his ears, his chin, his cheeks, were full, soft, round, cushioned. He wore a white silk caftan, Belknap saw, which draped loosely around his bulk as the man padded toward his desk with a distracted air. Only the Yemeni's eyes were sharp, scanning the room like a samurai's rotating sword. Had Belknap been seen? He had counted on the darkness of the closet to provide concealment. He had counted on many things. Another miscalculation, and he would be counted *out*.

The Yemeni eased his avoirdupois upon the leather chair at his desk, cracked his knuckles, and typed in a rapid sequence—a password, no doubt. As Belknap continued to squat uncomfortably in the recessed bay, his knees started to protest. Now in his mid-forties, he had lost the limberness of his youth. But he could not afford to move; the sound of a cracking joint would instantly betray his presence. If only he had arrived a few minutes earlier, or Ansari a few minutes later: Then he would have had the keystroke logger in place, electronically capturing the pulses emitted by the keyboard. His first priority was just to stay alive, to endure the debacle. There would be time for postmortems and after-action reports later.

The arms dealer shifted in his seat and intently keyed in another sequence of instructions. Messages were being e-mailed. Ansari drummed his fingers and pressed a button inset in a rosewood veneered box. Perhaps he was setting up the conference call via Internet telephony. Perhaps the entire conference would be conducted in encrypted text, chatroom style. There was so much that could have been learned, if only...It was too late for regrets, but they churned through Belknap all the same.

He remembered his exhilaration, not long before, when he had at last tracked his quarry to earth. It was Jared Rinehart who had first dubbed him "the Hound," and the well-earned honorific had stuck. Though Belknap did have a peculiar gift for finding people who wished to stay lost, much of his success—he could never persuade people of it, but he knew it to be true—was a matter of sheer perseverance.

Certainly that was how he had finally tracked down Khalil Ansari after entire task forces had returned empty-handed. The bureaucrats would dig, their shovels would bang against bedrock, and

they would give it up as futile. That was not Belknap's way. Each search was different; each involved a mixture of logic and caprice, because human beings were a mixture of logic and caprice. Neither ever sufficed by itself. The computers at headquarters were capable of scanning vast databases, inspecting records from border control authorities, Interpol, and other such agencies, but they needed to be told what to look for. Machines could be programmed with pattern-recognition software—but first they had to be told what pattern to recognize. And they could never get into the mind of the target. A hound could scent out a fox, in part, because it could think like a fox.

A knock at the door, and a young woman—dark hair, olive skin, but Italian rather than Levantine—Belknap judged—let herself in. The severity of her black-and-white uniform did not disguise the young woman's beauty: the budding sensuality of someone who had only recently come into her full physical endowments. She was carrying a silver tray with a pot and a small cup. Mint tea, Belknap knew at once from the aroma. The merchant of death had sent for it. Yemenis seldom did business without a carafe of mint tea, or *shay*, as they called it, and Khalil, on the verge of concluding a vast chain of trades, proved true to form. Belknap almost smiled.

It was always details like those that helped Belknap track down his most elusive subjects. A recent one was Garson Williams, the rogue scientist at Los Alamos who sold nuclear secrets to the North Koreans and then disappeared. The FBI spent four years searching for him. Belknap, when he was finally assigned to the task, found him in two months. Williams, he learned from a domestic inventory, had a pronounced weakness for Marmite, the salty, yeast-based spread popular among Britons of a certain age as well as former subjects of the British Empire. Williams had developed a taste for it during a graduate fellowship at Oxford. In a list of the contents of the physicist's house, Belknap noticed that he had three jars of it in the pantry. The FBI demonstrated its thoroughness by X-raying all the objects in the household and determining that no microfiche had been hidden anywhere. But its agents didn't think the way Belknap did. The physicist would have retreated to a less-developed part of the world, where record-keeping was slipshod: It was the logical thing to do, since the North Koreans would have lacked the resources to provide him with identity papers of a quality that would pass in the information-age West. So Belknap scrutinized the places where the man went on vacation, looking for a pattern, a semi-submerged preference. His own tripwires were of a peculiar sort, triggered by the conjuncture of certain locations and certain distinctive consumer preferences. A shipment of a specialty foodstuff was made to an out-of-the-way hotel; a phone call—ostensibly from a chatty "customer satisfaction" representative—revealed that the request had originated not with a guest but with a local. The evidence, if one could even call it that, was absurdly weak; Belknap's hunch was not. When Belknap finally caught up with him, at a seaside fishing town in eastern Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka, he came alone. He was taking a flyer—he couldn't justify dispatching a team based on the fact that an American had special-ordered Marmite from a small hotel in the neighborhood. It was too insubstantial for official action. But it was substantial enough for him. When he finally confronted Williams, the physicist seemed almost grateful to have been found. His dearly bought tropical paradise had turned out the way they usually did: a fugue of tedium, of stultifying ennui.

More clicking from the Yemeni's keyboard. Ansari picked up a cellular telephone—undoubtedly a model with chip-enabled auto-encryption—and spoke in Arabic. His voice was at once unhurried and unmistakably urgent. A long pause, and then Ansari switched into German.

Now Ansari looked up briefly as the servant girl set down his cup of tea and she smiled, displaying perfectly even white teeth. As Ansari turned back to his work, her smile disappeared like a pebble dropped into a pond. She made her exit noiselessly, the perfectly unobtrusive servitor.

How much longer?

Ansari raised the small teacup to his mouth and took a savoring sip. He spoke again into the phone, this time in French. *Yes, yes, all was on schedule.* Words of reassurance, but lacking all

specificity. They knew what they were talking about; they did not have to spell it out. The black marketeer clicked off the telephone and typed another message. He took another sip of the tea, placed the cup down, and—it happened suddenly, like a small seizure—he shivered briefly. Moments later, he sprawled forward, his head falling on his keyboard, motionless, evidently insensate. Dead?

It couldn't be.

It was.

The door to the study opened again; the servant girl. Would she panic, raise the alarm, when she made the shocking discovery?

In fact, she showed no surprise of any sort. She moved briskly, furtively, stepping over to the man and placing her fingers at his throat, feeling for a pulse, obviously detecting none. Then she pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves and repositioned him in his chair so that he seemed to be leaning back, at rest. Next she moved to the keyboard, typed a hurried message of her own. Finally, she removed the teacup and carafe, placing them on her tray, and left the study. Removing, thus, the instruments of his death.

Khalil Ansari, one of the most powerful arms dealers in the world, had just been murdered—in front of his eyes. Poisoned, in fact. By...a young Italian servant girl.

With no little discomfort, Belknap rose from his squatting position, his mind buzzing like a radio tuned midway between two stations. It wasn't supposed to go down this way.

Then he heard a quiet electronic hooting sound. It came from an intercom on Ansari's desk.

And when Ansari did not respond?

Dammit to hell! Soon the alarm really would be raised. Once that happened, there would be no way out.

Beirut, Lebanon

"The Paris of the Middle East," the city had once been called, as Saigon was once heralded as the Paris of Indochina and conflict-roiled Abidjan the Paris of Africa: the designation more of a curse than an honor. Those who remained there had proven themselves survivors of one sort or another.

The bulletproof Daimler limousine smoothly negotiated the mid-evening traffic on rue Maarad in the troubled city's downtown, known as Beirut Central District. Streetlights cast a hard glow on the dusty streets, as if laying down a glaze. The Daimler navigated through the Place de l'Etoile—once hopefully modeled on the Parisian center, now merely a traffic-snarled roundabout—and glided along streets where restored buildings from the Ottoman and French Mandate eras stood alongside modern office blocks. The building before which the limousine finally stopped was perfectly unremarkable: a dun-colored seven-story structure, like half a dozen in the neighborhood. To an experienced eye, the wide external frames around the limousine's windows gave away the fact that it was armored, but there was nothing remarkable about that, either. This was, after all, Beirut. Nor was there anything unusual about the sight of the two heavysset bodyguards—both wearing taupe poplin suits, in the loose fit preferred by those whose usual getup required a holster as well as a tie—who piled out of the car as soon as it came to a stop. Again, this was Beirut.

And what of the passenger they were guarding? An observer would have known at once that the passenger—tall, corn-fed, attired in an expensive but boxy gray suit—was not Lebanese. His national origin was unmistakable; the man could just as well have been waving the Stars and Stripes.

As the driver held the door open for him, the American looked around uneasily. Fiftyish and straight-backed, he exuded the bred-in-the-bone privilege of an interloper from the planet's most powerful nation—and, at the same time, the unease of a stranger in a strange city. The hard-sided

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