

TOM CLANCY

TARGET ACQUIRED

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.

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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.

This hour was not randomly chosen. At this time of year 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. This was important for a number of reasons, chief of which being that 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 while 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, 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 call up some of your cousins and figure this out?"

"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."

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

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

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“That’s funny,” Cary said, panning his SIG Sauer TANGO6T rifle scope 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 started referring to Cary as *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.

They were an anomaly.

And anomalies were what Cary was paid to notice.

Though, to be fair, nothing about the compound 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

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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. Early 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 Mad Max look he'd expected. Traditionally, militia groups paired their vehicles with outsized weapons like DShK anti-aircraft machine guns or M40 recoilless 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.

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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 U.S. 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 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 are our mystery guests?" Cary said.

"Fuck if I know, boss. The guys inside are a cult, right?"

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“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 folks in question weren’t bothering anyone, Cary was a big fan of live and let live. There were already plenty of malcontents the world over actively working to visit hellfire and brimstone on American’s sons and daughters.

No sense creating any new ones.

But based on what Cary had observed, he had to grudgingly admit that the folks inside the compound didn’t much look like they intended to keep to themselves. People who were 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 that they were rarely willing 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.

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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 or not 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 crazies 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, 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 more than 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

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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. 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.

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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 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."

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“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 evac-ed the principal by now. If this had been an ambush, the middle vehicle would already be toast.”

“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 farm-boy 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.”

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 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 do what they could 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 the malicious intent of an African predator, regardless 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

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the afternoon crowd in soothing light. The air was warm without the stickiness of the hot season, while the faint smell of saltwater blowing in from the ocean just blocks away mingled with spicy scents of food cooking 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 button-down shirt in the local style, open at

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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, bird-like 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 man ducked out of the bag 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 Six organization, 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 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

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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 attention he was attracting. When the waiter reached his table, responding to the disturbance by sopping up the rapidly growing spill with a checkered white cloth, the man couldn't have cared less because 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

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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.

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.

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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 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 something past his mom's right shoe. Reaching pudgy fingers into his back pocket, he produced a Captain America figure. Without breaking

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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. 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.”

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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. 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.