

Jake Grafton was in his office at Langley when his executive assistant, Robin, brought him a cassette tape. “They just brought this upstairs. Said you would want to listen to it as soon as possible.”

“Thanks.”

When the door closed behind her, he got out his old tape player and slipped the cassette in. This player had some miles on it, but it still worked pretty well. Even the earphones. He put them on and pushed the play button.

“—ed to chat. I thought we might meet for drinks tomorrow evening.” A man’s voice, one Grafton recognized.

“Solzhenitsyn’s, perhaps. On H Street. Do you know it?” Another man’s voice, with a pronounced accent, yet easily understandable.

“Perfect. The usual time?”

“Right.”

The connection was severed.

Grafton listened to the conversation two more times, then picked up the telephone and called a colleague in the FBI, Myron Emerick.

After the social preliminaries, Emerick asked, “So what can we do for you today, Admiral?”

“I want a restaurant bugged under that National Security John Doe warrant we got last week. Solzhenitsyn’s on H Street.”

“When?”

“Just as fast as you can get it done. Meet may be tomorrow night, `at the usual time`. That could mean this evening, tomorrow, Friday, Saturday, Sunday noon, whatever.”

“You don’t want to wait until they close tonight?”

“No. Invent an excuse to close them when you get there. Leaking gas next door, whatever.”

“What if ‘the usual time’ means someplace else?”

“Then they’re just too clever for us old Fudds.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“I’m a phone call away. If the bugs pick up that voice, call me immediately.”

“I know the drill.”

“Thanks, Myron.”

After Jake hung up, he sat staring at the cassette. The conversation on this cassette had been picked up by a computer that sampled tens of thousands of telephone calls an hour, listening for particular voices. The voices were actually compared by voiceprints, no two of which were exactly alike. When the computer found a voiceprint it recognized, it began recording the conversation.

A similar, although smaller, computer would monitor the bugs the FBI agents were secreting all over the Solzhenitsyn Restaurant. No conversations would be recorded, protecting the privacy of the diners, until the computer recognized that voice. And the agent monitoring the computer would alert Grafton, who had to be nearby. He would need a hotel room in the neighborhood.

He called Robin in and together they examined a map of downtown Washington.

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The hotel nearest to the restaurant turned out to be right above it. Solzhenitsyn’s was in the basement. Robin reserved three rooms, one for Jake and two for the FBI. Jake went home, packed clothes and managed to get to the hotel by four that afternoon. A light rain was falling from a low gray sky.

A gas company truck was parked in front of the restaurant and the door sported a “closed” sign. The hotel seemed to be doing business as usual, though. He left his car with the valet, gave his bag to the bellman, and went inside.

The hotel was in a building that had been a bank. The lobby was huge, three stories high, and a round open safe door formed part of one wall. Patrons went through the safe door into a cocktail lounge. The check-in counter had obviously once been a teller window. The counters and floor were marble.

As Jake signed in, he asked, “I notice there is a gas company truck parked right outside. Is there a problem?”

“Routine maintenance, sir.”

“Fine.”

His room was on the fifth floor. He had a view of a side street and an apartment building across the street. After a few minutes of standing at the window watching Washington in the rain, he rigged up his computer, arranged his cell and encrypted satellite phone on either side, took off his shoes and sagged into the padded easy chair. Callie had given him a copy of the Post and Wall Street Journal, so he settled in with them. By seven, after sunset, he was disgusted with the state of the nation and the planet. He turned on the television, found a baseball game, and ordered dinner from room service.

At nine his wife called. “Any fish yet?”

“No.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“I’m taking my pulse every quarter hour to ensure I’m still alive.”

“Sooo... I don’t have anything scheduled for tomorrow morning. Mind if I join you in your little love-nest?”

“Take off your wedding ring, sneak in, and don’t let anyone see your face. Room five-oh-seven. Seriously, take a taxi and use the side entrance. The elevators are in a hallway off the lobby. Don’t go into or through the lobby.”

Callie chuckled. “See you in about an hour.”

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They were still awake at midnight, lying in bed watching raindrops on the window. A light shining on the side of the hotel made every drop visible on the glass. Apropos of nothing, Jake said, “I’ve had a good life, you know.”

“It isn’t over yet.”

“I know. I’m just commenting.”

“We are very lucky,” she told him. “We’ve had each other all these years, Amy, good health, interesting jobs... This fish you are waiting for—has he anything to do with Iran?”

“Yes.”

“You are going to have to go there one of these days, aren’t you?”

“One of these days,” he said, and kissed her before she could say any more.

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The Graftons ate breakfast in the hotel dining room on the top floor. The satellite phone was in its case at this feet and his cell phone was in his pocket. Afterwards, Callie headed off for her ten o’clock class at the university. Jake took a complimentary newspaper back to his room and settled in. Robin called him from the office on the encrypted phone, and three long conversations took up most of his morning.

The afternoon passed slowly when he wasn’t on the telephone. Fortunately telephone conversations took up about half his time.

Still, he looked at his watch at least every five minutes, so he took it off and put it in his pocket. The clock on the television control panel said it was a few minutes after six when he hung up for the last time.

He ordered dinner again from room service. He had finished eating and was watching the Discovery Channel when his cell phone rang. He grabbed it.

Myron Emerick. “Our guy is in the restaurant. He’s got the table in the back left corner as you stand at the door. One man having a drink with him.”

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

Jake put his shoes on, his sports coat, turned off the television and the satellite phone and his coat. He walked out the front entrance of the hotel and looked around.

A gas company van was parked across the street, which was wet and glistened in the lights. Everything was wet from the rain. Grafton walked to the van and tapped on the rear door.

Emerick opened it. Emerick and two other men, technicians, were packed between two banks of equipment. There was almost no free space left, but Grafton squeezed himself in and pulled the door shut behind him. He got a cardboard box to sit on. Emerick handed him a set of headphones.

The admiral found himself listening to two men relaxing over drinks, one the voice Jake knew, the other he didn’t. Obviously these two knew each other well. They talked like old friends, sure of how their comments would be received, sure of the values and experiences they shared. And they talked in Farsi. As Jake listened to the raw audio in his left ear, an off-site translator was giving him the English translation in his right.

“Who is this guy?” Jake murmured.

Someone had already managed to photograph the two men with a small digital camera. That photo was on the computer monitor behind Jake’s right shoulder. Emerick nodded toward it.

“We’re trying to find out,” he said. One of the two techs in the truck was working the keyboard, accessing various databases.

Soon the two in the restaurant were discussing the Iranian political situation, inflation, unemployment, the scandal du jour, the removal from office of one of Ahmadinejad’s lieutenants by Parliament, which was getting restless. Then they moved on to the political situation in the entire Middle East.

They had finished with the main course and were noodling about dessert when the strange man said, “What have you heard about this Carmellini?”

“He wants Rostam’s help.”

Emerick caught Jake’s eye. Jake nodded, and Emerick got out of the van.

The conversation continued, and after some thought, the stranger said, “Tell her No to both requests.”

“I have already instructed her not to help him into any forbidden place. She will obey.”

“What it is, precisely, this Carmellini wants?”

“Proof that we are making nuclear weapons, and our plan for using them when they are operational.”

The man snorted, then said, “There is no plan. He is looking for something that doesn’t exist.”

Jake took off the headset and handed it to the technician who was recording all this. The man running the other computer handed him a written note. On it was an Iranian name, and the notation, “trade secretary at the UN mission.” This was the identity of the stranger.