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# THE PERSIAN GAMBLE







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*The Persian Gamble*

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After miraculously surviving their Gulfstream IV being shot out of the air by Russian forces, Marcus Ryker, Oleg Kraskin, and CIA operative Jenny Morris scramble through the frozen terrain of western Russia to evade being captured for the assassination of President Luganov and Federal Security Chief Dmitri Nimkov, whose murders have left Russian leaders in a swirl of political pandemonium with no clear successor to step into the gap.

*THE KARELIAN ISTHMUS, RUSSIA*

It wasn't just one set of headlights approaching.

It was a convoy.

Marcus backtracked, moving deeper into the protective darkness of the forest. Slinging the Kalashnikov over his back, he hoisted the sniper rifle and peered through the scope. He counted four sets of headlights, then a fifth, and finally a sixth. It was not a column of military vehicles.

Rather, these were heavyweight trucks, each painted orange, mounted with large plow blades on the front and industrial salt spreaders on the back. A bar of rotating yellowish-orange lights flashed from atop each cab, and the vehicles slowed to a halt as they approached the downed tree.

Marcus had been anticipating a single plow, not a half dozen moving as a team, and this complicated his plan. More drivers. More eyes. More chances to be spotted. Still, this might be their only chance, so he had to act fast.

Arcing farther into the forest to reduce the chance his movements could be spotted, he raced through the deepening snow until he'd reached the end of the convoy and the last of the trucks. Using the scope of the sniper rifle again, he could see the drivers exiting their cabs. Soon, six rather burly men had converged around the felled pine, no doubt discussing what they were going to do to clear it away and get moving again.

Fortunately, they hadn't thought to trudge over to the tree's stump. If they had, they'd have known immediately the tree had not been felled by the winds but had been chopped down, and recently. That would put them all on alert. Marcus was certain they each had two-way radios in their cabs and probably mobile phones as well. He had no way of knowing whether state workers or the general public had been alerted to Lukanov's death and the hunt for his killers. But if these men grew suspicious and radioed back with news of something odd in the forest, how long would it take for the dispatcher to contact local authorities and for someone to make the connection?

Marcus watched as two men grabbed chain saws from compartments on the sides of their trucks and fired them up.

The piercing buzz of the two-stroke combustion engines suddenly made it impossible to hear anything else.

This was the break they needed. Marcus raced back to his colleagues and to his relief found that Oleg had done exactly what he'd asked of him and more. Not only was Jenny on the parachute, ready

to be transported, but Oleg had packed up the rest of their supplies—including the two remaining bottles of oxygen—and was ready to move out.

Without saying a word, Marcus motioned for Oleg to follow him. Then he grabbed the lines connected to his parachute and began pulling the injured CIA chief through the snow.

They moved south, away from the men and their work, until they were parallel to the last snowplow in the line. This was the tricky part. From this distance, and with the saws running, there was no way they could be heard by the drivers.

But if they were seen . . .

“Now,” Marcus said.

He slapped Oleg on the back, and the Russian bolted across the clearing. When he reached the rear of the last truck, he pressed himself against the salt spreader. A safety light was flashing above his head. Marcus peered through the reticle of the sniper rifle at the men making quick work of the felled tree. None were looking in their direction. Those who weren’t using the chain saws were passing around a bottle of vodka. One was trying to light a cigarette, though in the blowing and drifting snow, he was not having any luck.

Marcus signaled for Oleg to keep watch. Oleg complied, peering around the right side of the truck. When he nodded, Marcus shouldered the rifle, grabbed the lines of the parachute canopy, and sprinted to the rear of the truck, pulling Jenny behind him.

“All clear,” Oleg said breathlessly when Marcus arrived.

“Good, now follow me,” Marcus replied.

He glanced around the left side of the truck. The way the other trucks were angled, they created a barrier that prevented any of the drivers working up front to see them on this side. With their movements shielded from the men, Marcus easily advanced to the driver’s-side door of the rear truck, pulling Jenny across the snow. Oleg was right behind, making sure no one surprised them by coming around the back.



At Marcus's signal, Oleg opened the door and climbed into the driver's seat. Marcus hoisted Jenny over his shoulder and handed her up to Oleg. The Russian carefully eased her onto the middle of the bench seat as he backed over to the passenger side, careful to remain crouched down and out of sight.

The truck's engine was running. So were the windshield wipers and the defroster. Marcus turned these off, wanting snow and ice to build up on the windows to further obscure their movements. Then he slid the rifle and AK-47 along the floor of the cab and stuffed their three rucksacks in a sliver of storage space behind the bench seat.

He was about to climb into the driver's seat when both of the chain saw motors stopped. A moment later, Marcus heard a nasty, phlegmy cough, and a pair of thick hands grabbed him hard from behind. Instinctively Marcus snapped around and head-butted his attacker. The husky, bearded driver slumped down in the snow, motionless.

Marcus drew a pistol and pivoted toward the front of the truck, ready to fire. But no one was there. He moved to the back edge of the truck. No one else was coming. He ducked under the salt spreader and came to another of the truck's corners. He took a quick peek. No one was approaching, but he could see that the tree had been cleared from the road and the rest of the drivers were returning to their cabs and preparing to roll.

By the time Marcus returned to the driver's-side door, Oleg was in a panic. "They keep calling for this guy Misha over the radio, asking him if he's ready," Oleg said. "What do we do?"

"Say yes," Marcus said calmly.

The Raven looked surprised but finally took the microphone of the CB radio, pressed the button, and said, "*Da*" in as gruff a tone as he could muster.

Next, to Oleg's visible shock, Marcus bent down, grabbed the unconscious driver, and hoisted him up. With some difficulty, he shoved the man onto the seat beside Jenny. He fished their medical kit from Jenny's pack, pulled out a syringe, loaded it up with a heavy



narcotic, and jabbed the driver in the neck. He wouldn't be bothering them for several hours, at least.

Oleg said nothing. His face said it all.

The convoy began to move. Marcus pushed everyone over to the right—not that they had much room to spare—and climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. Then he flipped on the windshield wipers and the defroster again and handed his pistol to Oleg.

"Just in case," he said as he took the wheel and pressed the accelerator.



*MOSCOW*

The Russian Defense Ministry was less than a mile from the Kremlin.

It took Petrovsky's motorcade just minutes to get there, but he received two calls during the ride. By the time he was finished with the second call, his driver was being waved through the main gates. The armor-plated SUV roared up to a pale-yellow eighteenth-century building shaped like an enormous isosceles triangle. The building had been known for centuries as the Senate, but in modern times these were the offices of the Russian president and his administration.

Petrovsky's security detail, triple its usual number given the events of the last two hours, rushed him through a side door and up a back elevator to the conference room on the third floor where nearly the entire cabinet had assembled. It was strange to see Luganov's chair at the head of the table unoccupied. But Petrovsky refused to show any emotion. He took his usual seat, to the right of the president's and across from three chairs also conspicuously empty that morning.

One belonged to Prime Minister Maxim Grigarin.

The second, to Dmitri Nimkov.

The third, to Oleg Kraskin.

Aside from these, the room was packed, not only with cabinet members but with their chief deputies, sitting behind their bosses in an outer ring of wooden chairs. But all eyes were on Petrovsky, in part

because he was the last man to enter, and in part because they knew that it was he—not the president or the prime minister—who had called this emergency meeting.

The defense minister rose and called the meeting to order.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid this is a tragic day, one that will become known in the annals of Russian history as Black Monday,” he began.

No one made a sound, and as he scanned the eyes of the men gathered around the room, he suddenly realized how closely the secret had been held. No one in this room knew what he was about to say—not all of it, anyway. Not even Nikolay Kropatkin, the deputy director of the FSB, knew everything that had transpired. They all knew something terrible had happened. Many of them had heard rumors of a shoot-out at one of Moscow’s international airports and the closure of all Russian airspace to traffic of any kind. But none of them knew the whole truth.

“There is no easy way to say this, so I will be direct,” Petrovsky continued. “I regret to inform you that early this morning, our beloved president, Aleksandr Ivanovich Luganov, was assassinated, along with FSB chief Dmitri Nimkov.”

There were audible gasps around the room, and Petrovsky paused before continuing.

“Adding to this tragedy is the fact that a foreign conspirator is not to blame. Both men were murdered in cold blood by one of our own—Oleg Stefanovich Kraskin.”

More gasps, now accompanied by angry looks.

“They were shot at point-blank range by the president’s son-in-law, in the president’s private study, in the palace at the Novo-Ogaryovo estate. Kraskin used a handgun fitted with a silencer.”

Several cabinet members stood as Russia’s most senior leaders tried to process the magnitude of the crimes and their disbelief at who had committed them.

“There are many questions to which I have no answers at the moment. Why would Oleg Stefanovich perpetrate such a crime against the motherland? How did he get the weapon? How did he smuggle it

into the palace? Why were no bodyguards in the room at the time? This was an unspeakable breach of security protocol, and we must get to the bottom of how it could have occurred. But as troubling as any other question is this: How did Oleg Stefanovich manage to slip away from the palace and get to the airport before his crimes were even noticed? We know this much—he had help. A driver was waiting for him on the tarmac when he arrived at the airport. A pilot was waiting with a plane, a Gulfstream IV business jet, fueled and ready for departure.”

Near pandemonium broke out in the cabinet room. The rage and the bloodlust for revenge was palpable, but Petrovsky held up his hand to call for order. When that was not forthcoming, he rapped on the table, again demanding the ministers’ attention.

“Who was helping Oleg Stefanovich?” he asked. “This we do not yet know, but I can inform you that less than thirty minutes ago, the Russian Air Force identified the plane he was using and upon my command shot the plane down outside of St. Petersburg. It is reasonable to believe Kraskin and the criminals assisting him were killed in the explosion, but we are not taking any chances. I have ordered a massive search of the area until the bodies are recovered and positively identified.”

Petrovsky paused again to let his words sink in.

“Now, as incomprehensible as all of this is,” he finally continued, “I’m afraid there is more bad news.”

The room quieted.

“Just minutes ago, on my way here to meet with you, I was informed that our highly esteemed prime minister—indeed, one of my dearest comrades and colleagues—Maxim Grigarin, was found murdered in his bedroom.”

The shock in the eyes of every man around the table was profound.

“We are working under the assumption that Oleg Stefanovich is responsible in some way for this crime, as well, but I assure you a full and intensive investigation is under way.” Petrovsky took a sip of water from a glass on the table in front of him. “Gentlemen, I know you are

all devastated at this horrific news. As am I. I know you are grieving, as one must when a nation loses such heroic and irreplaceable leaders—three in one day. But I don't need to remind you that this body has been entrusted with sober responsibilities by our constitution that we must carry out faithfully for the good of the people and the security of our state."

Heads around the table nodded in agreement.

"Our chief of state has been murdered, as has his immediate successor. And as we all know, the speaker of the Duma had a stroke several weeks ago and for now has been tragically incapacitated. So, amid our searing loss and wrenching pain, we face a constitutional crisis unparalleled in the history of the Russian Federation. The painful fact is that we have no leader and no clear process for choosing one, and we are just hours away from going to war with the United States and the NATO alliance."



*HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D.C.*

"Please tell me it's not possible," Senator Dayton said.

Pete Hwang started to answer, then realized the senator wasn't talking to him.

"What exactly isn't possible?" Annie Stewart asked.

"Tell me Marcus Ryker isn't involved in this thing."

"Of course not, sir," Stewart said, clicking a pen open and closed again and again and shaking her head.

"You're absolutely certain?" Dayton pressed.

"Sir, he saved your life and mine," Stewart said. "How can you even think that?"

"That was a long time ago."

"You think he's changed?"

"People do."

"Not Marcus. He saved the president's life and the lives of so many



others just a few years ago. You yourself hired him to keep us all safe on our trip to Europe. That was just last week.”

“I know all that, Annie, but I—”

“Sir, please, you know Marcus Ryker. We both do. We’ve known him for years. He’s not an assassin. He’s a patriot, sir. What’s more, he’s a committed Christian. I’m not sure I’ve ever met someone who loves this country more or is more committed to protecting her and her leaders. But don’t ask me. Ask Pete. He knows him best.”

The senator turned to his new domestic policy advisor. A physician by training—and one of the most sought-after cardiologists in the country—Peter Hwang had only been on the team for a few months. Technically, he worked for Dayton’s political action committee, not the government. But he had known both the senator and Annie Stewart a long time. They’d first met in Afghanistan years before, when Hwang and Ryker were part of a security detail that had come to the rescue after the military helicopters transporting the senator and his entourage were shot down near Kandahar and came under withering fire by Taliban jihadists. Since then, Dayton had made a point of staying in touch with the Marines in that unit, calling or writing each man every year on the anniversary of the rescue to say thank you and catch up on their lives and families.

When the senator had started planning his presidential run and needed an expert to come on board to help him develop a new health care plan, Stewart had suggested Hwang. The senator had loved the idea. So had Hwang. He was going through a nasty divorce and practically jumped at the chance to get out of his routine and change everything else about his life, even for a significant pay cut. In the short time they’d all worked together, Hwang knew, both the senator and Stewart had come to appreciate his counsel, his judgment, and his wit. It was Hwang who had brought Marcus Ryker back into their orbit, an idea Dayton had thought inspired days before.

Now the senator took his feet off the credenza and leaned forward

in his chair. His face was pale. Hwang had never seen him like this. The man looked like he was about to have a stroke.

“Annie’s right, Pete. You’ve known him the best and the longest. Could the Marcus you know be involved in taking out not just one but three Russian leaders?”

Hwang could see the anxiety in the senator’s eyes. He knew what the man hoped he would say. But as much as Hwang wanted to say it was impossible, he found himself hesitating.

Marcus was not a cold-blooded murderer. That was for certain. And Annie Stewart was right when she said Marcus was a man of deep faith and strong convictions. Yes, he was willing to kill, but only to protect lives. Even after the murders of his wife and son, Marcus had let the police do their job. He’d never set out on his own to hunt down and arrest, much less kill, those responsible. Marcus Ryker was a law-and-order man, pure and simple.

Still, Hwang couldn’t discount the bizarre chain of events that had unfolded in Moscow. It was, after all, Marcus who had suddenly made an unscheduled visit back to the U.S. Embassy early in the morning after they had met with Luganov and his son-in-law, Oleg Kraskin. In the hours that followed, Dayton, Stewart, and Hwang had learned that a senior-level Russian official had made contact with Marcus in the middle of the night. Apparently the mole had passed him highly classified information, including detailed war plans for Russia to invade the Baltics. Why Marcus? That still wasn’t clear to Hwang, but the intel had been cabled back to the CIA and the White House and had proven both accurate and timely.

From there, Hwang remembered, things got stranger still. Senator Dayton had been asked by the U.S. ambassador to Russia to race back to D.C. to brief President Clarke on his meeting with Luganov. Marcus and the entire security detail he had assembled had been with them on the private jet as they’d flown out of Moscow. But rather than fly directly to Washington, they had made an unscheduled stop in Berlin. Why? Because Marcus said he had to get off there. Hwang had pressed

his friend to explain. They didn't need to refuel. They were racing against the clock for the meeting at the White House. Yet Marcus had been evasive. He'd apologized to the team and explained that he needed to get off and attend to urgent business in the German capital. Hwang had even asked if Marcus wanted him to stay in Germany with him, but Marcus had brushed him off, saying it was something he had to take care of alone. Twenty minutes later, they had taken off without him.

Hwang remembered Stewart coming to sit next to him once they were over the Atlantic. She'd asked him what kind of business Marcus had in Germany. Hwang hadn't been able to give her an answer. Why wasn't Marcus flying back to Washington to brief CIA director Stephens, the president, and the National Security Council himself? she'd pressed. Wouldn't they want to talk to him, of all people, directly? How else could they adequately assess the reliability of the source?

Again, Hwang had no answers.



*RESIDENCE OF THE SUPREME LEADER, TEHRAN, IRAN*

Alireza al-Zanjani was late.

Bolting out of the armor-plated sedan that had whisked him from his office across the Iranian capital, the deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and his senior intelligence advisor cleared through security and rushed up the marble staircase. They were greeted at the top by the chief of protocol and led down multiple corridors and through numerous checkpoints until they reached the private office of Iran's octogenarian spiritual guide.

"Principals only," the protocol czar whispered.

The intel officer didn't object. He knew his place. He had never entered the office before, nor would he today. He handed his boss a briefing book and took a seat in a lounge area where a half-dozen other aides were already milling about, drinking coffee, and talking in hushed tones about the political earthquake under way in Moscow.

Al-Zanjani was no longer wearing one of his expensive European

suits. Rather, he was dressed in his standard attire of green combat fatigues and combat boots. He took a deep breath, then nodded to the security guards, who proceeded to open a massive vault door. Stepping forward into a spacious vestibule, he waited for the door to shut and lock behind him. Two well-built bodyguards—part of the ayatollah’s personal detail—double-checked his credentials, though they both knew him well. A moment later, they unlocked and opened a steel door vaguely reminiscent of a submarine hatch and signaled for their guest to enter.

While al-Zanjani had met or briefed the Supreme Leader a number of times in his career, this was his first time to the cleric’s inner sanctum. It was not a traditional office by any Western sensibility. There were no desks or chairs, nor any radios or televisions. Rather, the concave walls were lined with exquisite blue-and-green tile work. The floor was covered with a thick Persian carpet. A few small lamps provided only dim light. There were several lit candles on a low wooden table in the center of the room and a swirling fan hanging from the ceiling.

As al-Zanjani stepped over the threshold into what could be better described as a small prayer room than an office, he found the hastily called meeting already under way. Sitting to his left against the wall on a pile of large cushions was Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ansari, Iran’s eighty-four-year-old Supreme Leader. He was dressed in a thick, flowing brown robe and black turban. He sported wire-rimmed glasses whose lenses seemed smudged with fingerprints and needed a good cleaning, and he stroked his neatly trimmed gray beard as he listened intently to the briefing. He was covered with a blanket and had a sizable stack of ancient religious texts beside him.

To the Supreme Leader’s left, directly in front of al-Zanjani, was Yadollah Afshar. The sixty-one-year-old president of the Islamic Republic of Iran was also sitting on a pile of cushions, though he was not covered with a blanket. He wore a modest three-piece gray suit, more likely purchased in Moscow or one of the former Soviet republics than anywhere in Iran, and was taking frequent sips from a large



water bottle due to the chronic problems he had with his one functional kidney.

The president turned to al-Zanjani.

“Commander, I understand you have news from Pyongyang.”

“Yes, Your Excellency. I just got off the phone with my counterpart there,” al-Zanjani answered. “He informs me that after several days of consideration, the Dear Leader is prepared to sell us five of the newest Russian nuclear warheads in their arsenal.”

“Only five? You were supposed to request fifteen.”

“And I did, Your Excellency.”

“I was under the impression that President Luganov had personally intervened with the Dear Leader on our behalf and specifically for fifteen warheads.”

“That was my understanding, as well, sir.”

“Then what went wrong?”

Al-Zanjani paused for a moment.

“Permission to speak freely, Your Excellency?”

“Of course.”

“President Luganov is gone. My assessment is that the Dear Leader has concluded he is free from any specific obligation he may have made to the late president. Still, he is ready to sell us five Russian nuclear warheads. And I would remind this august body that these are far more powerful than the weapons we were previously negotiating for with Pakistan—each has a yield of 750 kilotons.”

There were nods around the room, except for the Supreme Leader, who kept his counsel to himself.

“And have our friends agreed to the price we discussed?” President Afshar asked.

“Not exactly,” al-Zanjani said, glancing at the cleric for whom he held such reverence and then back to President Afshar. “I assure you that I did everything I could to get the North Koreans to agree to our price, but I’m afraid the final deal took more.”

“How much more?” the president finally asked.

Al-Zanjani reached into his briefing book. He pulled out copies of the deal for everyone present. It took several minutes for each man to read and internalize both the price and the terms, but one by one they looked back to the IRGC's deputy commander.

No one looked happy. It wasn't that they didn't have the money. They did. The Americans and Europeans had given it to them on a silver platter. But even \$150 billion only went so far. They couldn't spend it all on buying operational nuclear warheads, even ones as large and powerful as these. They needed to reserve part of the JCPOA funds to improve and finalize their long-range missile program. They had to be able to use North Korea's test data to significantly improve their range and accuracy. The Supreme Leader's mandate had been clear. Their missiles had to be able to reach far beyond Tel Aviv, Paris, and London. They had to reach Washington and New York.

The Supreme Leader looked around the room. "Does anyone have a different assessment?" he asked.

No one did.

"Do we all agree that we must move quickly to secure these five warheads—more powerful than anything we've been able to develop thus far—even at this price?"

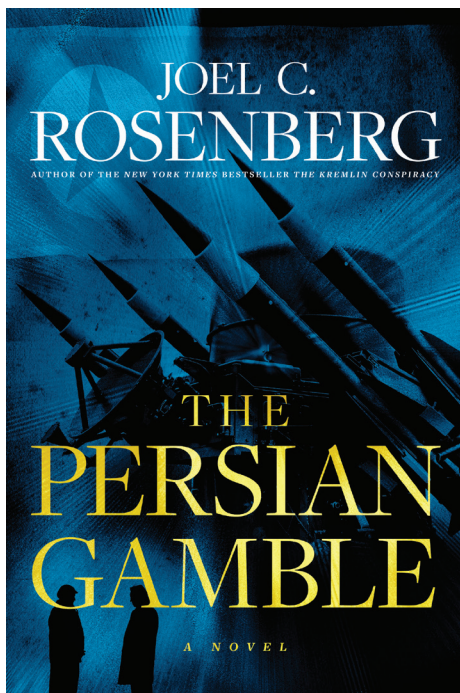
It took several moments in which each man looked to every other. But in the end, they all nodded.

"Very well," said the Supreme Leader, looking back at the deputy commander with a renewed fire in his dimming eyes. "We must not waste another minute. Make the deal."

We hope you enjoyed your  
exclusive sneak peek of

*The Persian Gamble*

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