

Georgetown, Guyana

March 1, 0930

The chill of the air-conditioning at Georgetown's Marriott Hotel was long forgotten by the time Jack Ryan, Jr., finished walking his first block. He had five more to go before he made it to his destination, the Guyanese Parliament building, and already he could feel sweat sliding down his armpits, back, and knees. He did his best to ignore it, for he had other things on his mind.

With a suit jacket slung over one shoulder and a messenger bag on the other, Jack strode down Water Street along the banks of the muddy, fast-flowing Demerara River. The mocha-colored water was narrow and deep, carrying so much silt from the inland jungles that it colored Georgetown's entire bay.

Below Jack, on the contrastingly green banks, he watched men cast lines, hoping to hook a peacock bass. Out in the river's center, where the current was strong, the occasional broken tree swirled by in a gurgle of tan bubbles. Often the logs were huge and sturdy, broken hulks from the thick rainforests upriver, caught in the slipstream, where they'd finish their fates as Atlantic driftwood. Each time one went by, Jack was amazed at how fast they traveled.

After a quarter mile, Water Street turned inland, pointing Jack to Georgetown's interior. He joined a family of pedestrians at a stoplight, waiting to cross the road. Here, farther from the river, the scant breeze had stopped. Jack flicked his thumb across his forehead, sluicing sweat away like a windshield wiper.

A woman smiled at him, her big teeth glowing white against her dark face. She had a light bonnet wrapped over her head to guard against the sun. Beside her, three young boys in school uniforms-white shirts over blue shorts-clung to her print dress.

"You need a hat," the largest of the boys said to Jack, peering up at him. Though only about ten, Jack noticed the boy already spoke with the faintly Caribbean-British accent he'd come to enjoy in Georgetown.

"You're probably right," Jack replied, shading his eyes.

The woman glanced at him. "You really should wear one. Your neck is already pink." She rested her hand on her youngest boy's shoulder. "We always keep an eye out for visitors here, don't we, boys?" Each nodded solemnly at her.

"I'm leaving today," Jack declared. "But thank you." He went back to watching the long line of traffic, still waiting for the light to change.

The woman regarded Jack curiously. "Where are you leaving for?"

"Washington, D.C."

"So you're going to the government buildings, then. Is that right?"

"Yes. That's right."

"And you walked all the way from the big American hotel?"

Jack could feel the boys' blinking eyes on him as they waited for him to answer. "Yes, I did. I happen to think it's good to get out and see a place," he said. "And I like Georgetown."

"May I ask what you like about it?"

The mother's eyes lingered on Jack as he stared straight ahead, groping for an answer. In the few seconds of this chance encounter at an intersection, it seemed to him there was precious little time to express the thoughts running through his mind.

When he said he liked Georgetown, he didn't mean the weather, muddy river, or lashing rains that came over the sugarcane fields. Rather, he liked the people, the plucky attitude, the outright promise of the place unfolding before his eyes.

During a ten-day business trip, Jack had formed the view that Georgetown was that rare frontier settlement where something amazing was about to happen, where the rest of the world was about to come rushing in, like San Francisco before the gold rush. The charm lay in its innocence, the way its citizens didn't realize their coming significance, like a beautiful adolescent girl who had no time for mirrors. But he couldn't figure out how to say all of that to this young mother and her three boys.

The light turned green. One of the boys rummaged through his knapsack and produced a small white handkerchief. He held it out to Jack as he was about to cross the street. "For your head, sir," he said earnestly.

Jack knelt. Accepting it with dignity, he thanked the boy with a clap on the shoulder.

Before long, Jack found himself walking in a tightly packed grid of colonial buildings. Ahead of schedule, he slowed to watch a cricket match with players in their teens. The nearby school had

mowed an oval in a vacant lot dotted with bowing palm trees.

Jack found a patch of shade with a mild Atlantic breeze and tried to make sense of the game, until he heard the church bells clanging from the belfry atop the whitewashed, Victorian St. George's Cathedral. That made it ten o'clock, time for his meeting.

He stood alone on the boulevard between the church and the parliament building, again waiting for the traffic to clear. Then, stepping onto the pavement, he nearly got himself killed. As in all former British colonies, the Guyanese drove on the left side of the road. Distracted by the cricket match, Jack had looked the wrong way.

None the worse for wear, a minute later he stood before an impressive wrought-iron fence, wiping his forehead with the handkerchief the boy had given him.

The Guyanese parliament building before him was yet another reminder of the country's colonial roots and hidden charm. Though hardly the Palace of Westminster, Jack found its double rows of arches and soaring dome a reasonable representation of Victorian grandeur.

While approaching the heavy gates, he tightened his tie, shrugged into his jacket, and folded the boy's handkerchief into a neat, breast pocket square. Conscious of the two government guards who watched him, he smoothed his hair and buttoned his jacket. He then retrieved his passport from his trouser pocket and held it as he approached, making sure they knew he wasn't a threat.

The guards, two parade-ready officers of the Guyanese National Police Force, eyed him carefully. They wore spit-shined boots, jaunty black berets, and stubby MP5 machine guns slung over their shoulders.

"Good morning," Jack began, offering the passport. "I have an appointment with Dr. Quintero, the minister of the interior. We're supposed to meet here at ten o'clock."

The two guards twitched their eyes over Jack like a pair of Dobermans. One of them took the passport and stuck it to a clipboard, while the other ran a handheld metal detector over Jack's body.

"What is the name of your company?" Clipboard asked, while the other guard searched Jack's bag.

Jack tugged one of the freshly printed business cards from his wallet. "I'm the chief executive officer of Athena Global Shipping Lines," he declared. "I've been here a time or two before." Though he didn't want to insult the guard, he'd been here four times in the prior ten days. Each time they went through the same rigmarole.

Clipboard studied the card carefully, just as he had during the previous instances. "It's an oil shipping company," the guard said.

Since Jack and the guard had graduated to a conversational level, he ventured a little more detail. "Ships for liquified natural gas, technically. Shallow draft bulk carriers designed for the Orinoco Basin. Three of them, to be exact."

Just as he had on Jack's previous visits, the guard made a note on the clipboard with a stubby golf pencil. His eyes lingered a little longer on the business card. "It says here your company is in San Juan, Puerto Rico."

"That's correct."

He handed Jack's passport back and lowered the clipboard to the table. "But you're an American."

"So are the Puerto Ricans. Feel free to keep the card."

Without another word, the guard pressed a buzzer and the heavy iron gate swung open. Jack stepped through it and strode the length of the curved driveway to the front door.

"Jack boy!" boomed the deep baritone of the Guyanese minister of the interior, Dr. Alberto Quintero.

"Good morning, Professor. Nice to see you again." Jack offered his hand.

Quintero, a big man of African Caribbean descent, shook it with an iron grip. At fifty-eight his tightly curled hair had gone gray. His advanced chemical engineering degree from the University of Chicago and subsequent tenure at a Guyanese university earned him the nickname Professor. "Where are your bags?" he asked, noting Jack's absence of luggage.

"With the bellhop at the hotel."

"You look hot. You didn't walk all the way here, did you?"

"I did."

The minister laughed. "Always with the walking." He then shook his gray head while his tone turned serious. "I'm sorry for getting you back so late last night. You probably didn't get much sleep."

"Oh, sure I did. I slept fine."

"You weren't . . . hungry?"

"No. I went to the lobby bar and got a burger. Please don't tell Amancia."

A grin creased Quintero's ebony face.

The previous evening, the Guyanese interior minister had hosted Jack at his country home, an organic farm twenty miles into the rainforest, where his wife hosted ecotours and expounded on the wonders of naturally grown foods. Quintero had explained on the long drive out there that the core complaint of every guest was that the raw foods were more akin to basic jungle survival than a hotel meal.

"What about you, Professor?" Jack asked, unable to keep a straight face. "Did you go to bed hungry?"

Partial to untucked, military-style khaki shirts, Quintero seized his belly with both hands. "Do I look like I only eat her cooking? I have a whole cupboard in the barn out by the llama pasture. Don't tell anyone."

"I won't," Jack agreed with a full-fledged grin. "Promise."

The minister led him to a staircase with a polished mahogany railing, speaking over his shoulder. "I won't keep you long. Your export license should be ready. Come on. Let's get to my office."

The floor was white marble bordered by black. It was an airy place, filled with the echoes of clicking feet and distant voices common to government halls the world over. Jack walked quickly, an eagerness in his step. As much as he liked the people of Guyana, he missed his fiancée, Lisanne, and looked forward to his business-class flight home that afternoon-so long as he had that export license in his bag.

"Are you still expecting your first ship to show up tomorrow?" Quintero asked after settling behind his capacious desk.

"I am," Jack answered with pride. "I checked in with San Juan this morning. The Helena is halfway here."

The Helena was Athena's best-maintained liquified natural gas transport ship. Jack had acquired the shipping company ninety days earlier as a new venture for Hendley Associates, the private

equity firm for which he worked as an investment manager.

Athena's small fleet happened to be the only one in the world that could make it to the gas and oil platforms off the coast of Georgetown without dredging up the sensitive coral reefs-a firm requirement of the interior minister.

Jack's company, Hendley Associates, was not a typical private equity firm motivated purely by profit. While its capitalist "white-side" business was wholly legitimate, it served a dual purpose as a funding source and cover for a "black-side" covert organization: The Campus.

Similar to its like-minded brothers in the CIA's Special Activities Division, The Campus took direction from the President in national security direct-action missions that prized speed, discretion, and deniability above all else. But unlike the CIA, only the President, the director of national intelligence, and a handful of operators on Hendley's black side knew The Campus existed.

Jack was in Guyana on a profit-seeking business trip. His white-side boss, Howard Brennan, the firm's chief investment officer, didn't know of Jack's occasional black-side missions. And for Jack's dealings with Athena, Guyana, and Interior Minister Quintero, that was just fine.

"And what's the plan to mate it up to Marlin?" Quintero asked.

Marlin, the offshore drilling platform, had been built with public money from the Guyanese Treasury and private funds from American energy companies. Jack had spotted the opportunity to off-load to score the first export license when he heard that those American energy companies were dependent on pipelines to get the product into major oil ports-since the waters around the platforms were otherwise too shallow for tankers.

"It will just be a test," Jack explained. "The Helena will pull up alongside Marlin with empty LNG tanks, fill them up about halfway, and off-load them up in Houston at an Optimum facility." Optimum was the joint Guyanese-American consortium that had built the three offshore platforms Marlin, Mako, and Mackerel.

"Then I'd better get you that license," the minister said, swiveling to thumb the pages of a notebook.

While Quintero hunched over his credenza, Jack took note of the various pictures and memorabilia arranged to either side of him. There were the pictures of his wife, Amancia, and his daughter, Tallulah. Amancia was an American whom the professor had met in the circles of academia. Tallulah, Jack recalled, was a student at UC Berkeley, back home in Guyana for a final research project.

Beyond the family photos, Quintero's office wall was decked out with various awards and citations. One was a replica hard hat from ExxonMobil mounted to a plaque declaring Quintero an honorary roughneck. Another was a miniature golden pickax from British Petroleum naming him the world's foremost geologist. On the top right, Jack saw the large EIIR crest on an award from Queen Elizabeth, given before she passed. It recognized Quintero's natural conservation initiatives for the British Commonwealth.

The interior minister shifted from his notebook and studied his computer screen. "That license should be along any minute now," he extolled. He looked over his reading glasses at Jack and raised a graying eyebrow. "While we wait . . . I must say, Amancia was most impressed with your speech about preserving the coral reefs, Mr. Ryan."

Jack cocked his head. "Well, I wouldn't call it a speech. But-was she? Really?"

"Oh yes. She thinks you're the only man in this industry willing to respect our ecology and undersea diversity."

"Maybe not the only one," Jack said pridefully. "But there sure aren't many of us."

While he planned to exit the business in the next few months when he sold Athena Global Shipping Lines along with its newly acquired export license, Jack's lasting contribution to the enterprise would always be that he'd found a way for LNG carriers to get to the GOPLATs without touching the seafloor, respecting the interior minister's requirements. The big oil companies certainly had the wherewithal to do that, too, but they would rather use the scale of the large tankers they already had rather than invest in a niche business like shallow-water shipping. With the work Jack had done, he had made sure Guyana preserved its natural environment while allowing it to grow its wealth.