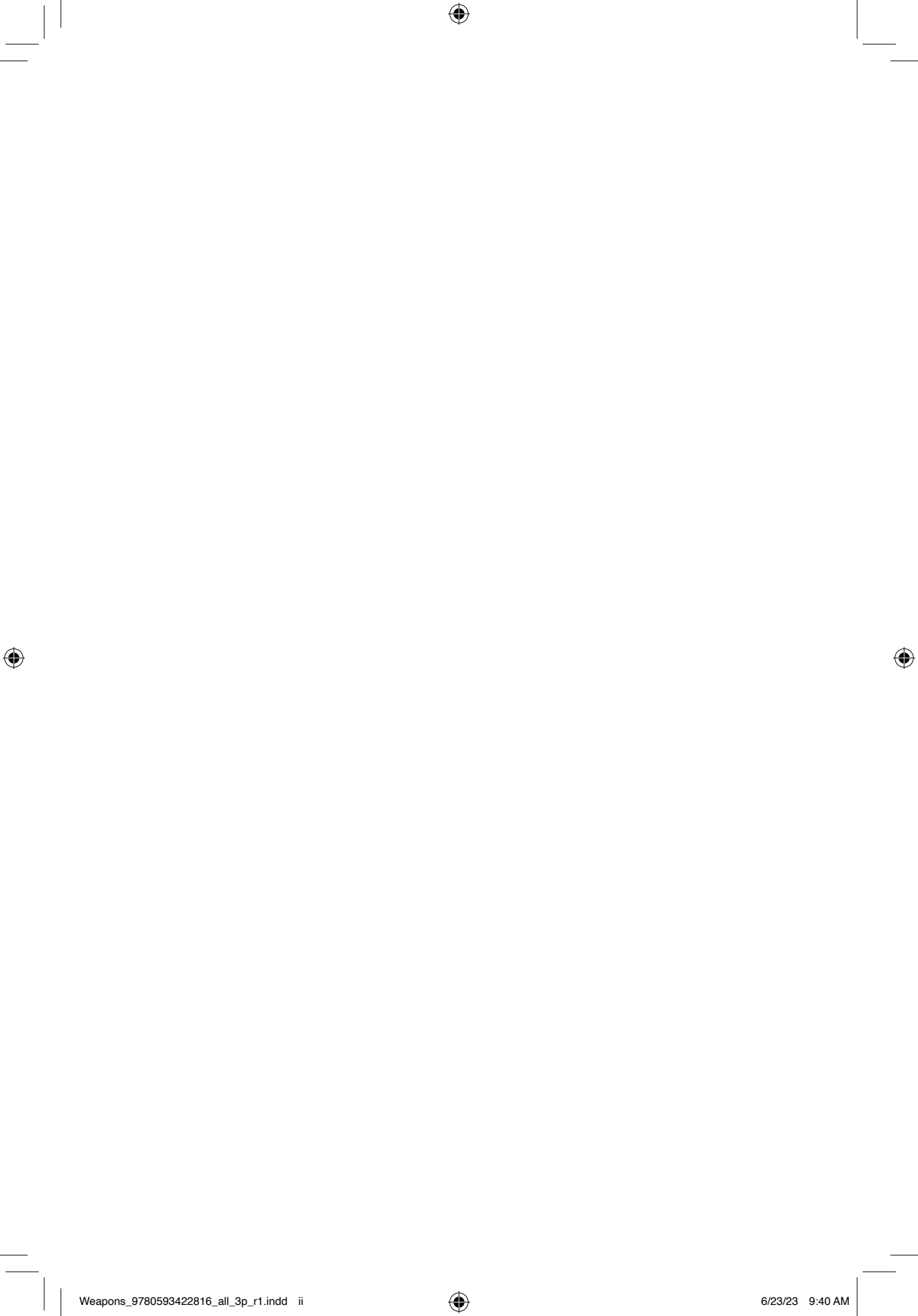



TOM CLANCY  
**WEAPONS  
GRADE**



## ALSO BY TOM CLANCY

*The Hunt for Red October*  
*Red Storm Rising*  
*Patriot Games*  
*The Cardinal of the Kremlin*  
*Clear and Present Danger*  
*The Sum of All Fears*  
*Without Remorse*  
*Debt of Honor*  
*Executive Orders*  
*Rainbow Six*  
*The Bear and the Dragon*  
*Red Rabbit*  
*The Teeth of the Tiger*  
*Dead or Alive* (with Grant Blackwood)  
*Against All Enemies* (with Peter Telep)  
*Locked On* (with Mark Greaney)  
*Threat Vector* (with Mark Greaney)  
*Command Authority* (with Mark Greaney)  
*Tom Clancy Support and Defend* (by Mark Greaney)  
*Tom Clancy Full Force and Effect* (by Mark Greaney)  
*Tom Clancy Under Fire* (by Grant Blackwood)  
*Tom Clancy Commander in Chief* (by Mark Greaney)  
*Tom Clancy Duty and Honor* (by Grant Blackwood)  
*Tom Clancy True Faith and Allegiance* (by Mark Greaney)  
*Tom Clancy Point of Contact* (by Mike Maden)  
*Tom Clancy Power and Empire* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Line of Sight* (by Mike Maden)  
*Tom Clancy Oath of Office* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Enemy Contact* (by Mike Maden)  
*Tom Clancy Code of Honor* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Firing Point* (by Mike Maden)  
*Tom Clancy Shadow of the Dragon* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Target Acquired* (by Don Bentley)  
*Tom Clancy Chain of Command* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Zero Hour* (by Don Bentley)  
*Tom Clancy Red Winter* (by Marc Cameron)  
*Tom Clancy Flash Point* (by Don Bentley)





---

TOM CLANCY

# WEAPONS GRADE

---

**DON BENTLEY**

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

**PUTNAM**  
— EST. 1838 —

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
*Publishers Since 1838*

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2023 by The Estate of Thomas L. Clancy, Jr.; Rubicon, Inc.;  
Jack Ryan Enterprises, Ltd.; and Jack Ryan Limited Partnership  
Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages  
diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for  
buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws  
by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without  
permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House  
to continue to publish books for every reader.

Hardcover ISBN: 9780593422816  
Ebook ISBN: 9780593422823

Printed in the United States of America  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Title page photograph by BoJack/Shutterstock

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the  
product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance  
to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales  
is entirely coincidental.

# PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

## UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

**JACK RYAN:** President of the United States

**MARY PAT FOLEY:** Director of national intelligence

**ARNOLD "ARNIE" VAN DAMM:** White House chief of staff

## THE CAMPUS

**JOHN CLARK:** Director of operations

**DOMINGO "DING" CHAVEZ:** Assistant director of operations

**GAVIN BIERY:** Director of information technology

**JACK RYAN, JR.:** Operations officer / senior analyst

**LISANNE ROBERTSON:** Former director of transportation

**MASTER SERGEANT CARY MARKS**

**SERGEANT FIRST CLASS JAD MUSTAFA**

## ISRAELI DEFENSE FORCES SPECIAL OPERATIONS TEAM

**ELAD MORAG:** Team leader

**NIMROD DISKIN:** Second-in-command

**DAVID MILLER:** Drone operator

**YOSSI COHN:** Sniper

**BENNY KOKIA:** Communications expert

## **UNITED STATES MILITARY**

**GENERAL CLYDE WOLTMAN:** Chairman of the Joint Chiefs  
of Staff

**COLONEL BOB "LORENZO" BEHLER:** SR-71 pilot

**CHARLIE:** SR-71 sensor operator

**SHANNON KENT:** Air Force Special Projects Office

## **IN TEXAS**

**LEON KRUGER:** Mercenary leader

**HENDRICKS:** Mercenary

**OFFICER BRADSHAW:** Detective with Briar Wood PD

**BRIAN:** Patrolman with Briar Wood PD

**AMANDA:** An eyewitness

**BELLA:** Her daughter

**ISAAC BLACK:** Former Third Special Forces Group Green Beret

**KYLE HOGAN:** Former Army Black Hawk helicopter pilot



# PROLOGUE

## PALMDALE, CALIFORNIA

### LEON KRUGER'S HAND BURNED WITH AN UNHOLY FIRE.

The pain shot up his muscular forearm in pulses, each one stronger than the one before. The sensation felt like a cramp that originated in the palm of his left hand and radiated along his forearm. Leon grimaced as he rotated his wrist. He desperately wanted to jab the scarred knuckles of his right hand into the fleshy section of his left, but he couldn't.

Because his left hand didn't exist.

Leon eyed the flesh-colored prosthesis that peeked from his long-sleeved shirt.

Though the fingers were made of plastic and rubber instead of flesh and bone, the appendage looked real, and he could do a respectable job controlling the fake digits thanks to the biometric sensors arrayed across his forearm muscles. Twenty years of combat paired with exponential advances in body armor technology and trauma medicine had produced some unforeseen offspring. Horrific injuries that would have ended their recipients' lives even a decade earlier were now survivable, which meant the prosthesis business was booming. His computer-augmented

## DON BENTLEY

prosthesis was quite literally the best money could buy, but it wasn't real.

A fact that his central nervous system never stopped reminding him of.

The phantom pain seemed to correlate with Leon's emotions, particularly stress. The greater his worries, the more frequent the phantom pain episodes and the greater the discomfort.

At the moment, Leon had stress in spades.

A car turned in to the gravel driveway, raising a cloud of dust as the vehicle transitioned from pavement to rock.

Leon was a native of South Africa, and he loved his homeland's breathtaking coastlines and near-perfect weather. That said, even he found it hard not to like California. Most non-California natives thought of the Pacific's cold waters or miles of sparkling beaches as being unparalleled, but he considered South Africa to be the equal to the Golden State in these areas. However, the beauty currently surrounding him was like nothing he'd ever seen.

The sky was a special shade of blue. A cobalt pastel mixed with just a hint of cerulean at the point where sky touched earth. The shade steadily deepened to a dark azure the higher Leon's eye tracked above the horizon.

The terrain itself was a study in contrasts.

Toffee-colored rolling mountains were interspersed with pines, oaks, and cedars. Knee-high wild grass gave way to clumps of shrubbery. The vista gave the impression of something wild but not intimidating. A strip of nature that could be explored and enjoyed by rugged outdoorsmen and weekend hikers alike. Were it not for the Tesla slowly rolling toward Leon's rental car, he might just lose himself in the undulating terrain for an hour or two in an effort to release the stress-induced ache lodged between his pectoral muscles. But he couldn't afford to lose focus.

## WEAPONS GRADE

The sleek sedan concealed a particularly reprehensible human being.

Leon was something of an expert when it came to reprehensible human beings.

He was waiting among the stubby trees that lined the granite path winding up the hillside. Though not officially part of Ritter Ranch Park, the pull-off granted access to the four thousand-plus acres of beauty through what had once been a homestead. A sign planted next to the turnoff proclaimed the spot as the future home of a Baptist church, but if the rusted, corrugated steel siding and sagging roof on the standalone garage were any indication, it had been years since this stretch of land had been inhabited.

It would have been easier and quicker to meet the Tesla's driver in the gravel lot, but Leon had no intention of doing so. Though he'd lost his hand, he'd managed to keep his head, which was more than some of his fellow captives could say. This was because—contrary to the public persona often cultivated by those in his chosen profession—he was a cautious man and this caution extended to the plethora of cameras that littered the Tesla's body.

Leon was also old, and in his profession, age either came with wisdom or not at all.

The vehicle eased to a stop. The driver exited, closed his door, and then opened the gull-wing passenger door.

Over the course of his five-plus decades of life, Leon had cultivated expertise in a very narrow skill set and he would freely admit that this knowledge did not extend to luxury cars. Even so, he couldn't help wondering about the extravagance of gull-wing doors. He thought that this was an exercise in vanity more than a utility.

A sign that the driver wanted to be noticed.

## DON BENTLEY

While Leon couldn't say whether this observation was true of all Tesla owners, the analysis certainly fit the bill for the man rummaging around the backseat. Upon their first meeting, Leon's initial impression was the man could have been a human Ken doll. He was six feet tall with an athletic frame, sun-bleached blond hair, tan skin, and blue eyes that popped from his handsome face. His hair, while neat, had a shaggy feel. As if he were deliberately challenging the stereotypical stodgy norms assigned to men in his chosen vocation.

Today, the man was dressed California casual in a short-sleeve untucked white shirt, brown chinos, and loafers. Not exactly hiking attire, but Leon didn't care if the short walk was uncomfortable for his visitor. Though Leon's world was populated by degenerates, the Tesla's driver was in a class all his own.

The gull-wing door eased closed on silent hinges. The man pulled on the windbreaker he'd removed from the backseat, but he didn't leave the Tesla. It was as if he sensed that he was on the edge of a precipice. Or perhaps he just didn't want to get his sockless ankles dusty. The man was called Daniel, but unlike the biblical prophet for whom he was named, he did not possess the intestinal fortitude to brave the lion's den.

This was not to say that Daniel was free of convictions.

He wasn't.

He just lacked courage of any sort.

Leon gave Daniel a wave. The man acknowledged the gesture with a short bob of his head before starting toward Leon.

Daniel's blond hair fell in curls across his forehead, perfect ringlets worthy of a hair product advertisement. Daniel had it all—money, looks, and charisma. Men wanted to be him and women wanted to be with him. In no scenario should he have been meeting Leon in an abandoned pull-off in a remote park.

## WEAPONS GRADE

But Daniel was here all the same.

The Tesla's driver was the living example of the truism to never judge a person by their outward appearance. Daniel might look like the definition of American success, but his soul was a corrupted, soiled husk.

Leon knew this firsthand.

"Why all this cloak-and-dagger bullshit?" Daniel said, stopping a few feet away. "Traffic heading back into Santa Clarita is going to be a bitch."

Leon took perverse pleasure at the thin layer of dust coating Daniel's moccasins. The supple leather was probably hand-tooled lambskin. Now, bits of debris and dirt clung to the moccasins' shiny surface, fouling the sheen and crusting across Daniel's tan ankles.

Leon ignored the question just as he ignored Daniel's aggressive posturing.

The early thirties software engineer was a good two decades younger than Leon. His frame reflected the toned muscles that came from a tailored diet coupled with an expensive personal trainer. Any excess calories not expunged during gym sessions were undoubtedly burned away during his thrice-weekly jiu-jitsu practice. In a bar fight against another cubicle dweller, Daniel would be a formidable opponent.

This would not be a bar fight, and Leon was not a cubicle dweller.

Hopefully this was not a truth Daniel would have to be taught the hard way.

"Change of plans," Leon said with a smile.

Leon had spent the majority of his life in Southern Africa. In addition to English, he spoke French, Swahili, and Afrikaans. His exposure to such diverse languages had given Leon a natural ear

## DON BENTLEY

for pronunciation and dialect. Knowing that he'd be working in the United States, Leon had spent several weeks watching American television and films, repeating each line of dialogue until he could mimic the speaker.

As a result, his South African accent had softened, the vowels and consonants losing their hard edges. He wasn't going to pass for a midwestern newscaster anytime soon, but neither would he be remembered for his speech.

At least that's what Leon hoped.

"What do you mean?" Daniel said, a frown splitting his handsome features.

"I mean that the request for information has changed."

"This meeting is over," Daniel said. "I told you before—I'm willing to provide you with boardroom insight, but not anything that can be traced back to me. This is nonnegotiable."

Leon kept his face carefully blank even though he desperately wanted to belly laugh. He'd been grooming Daniel for weeks. Their first contact had been in the guise of a corporate recruiter inquiring about the engineer's employment strategy via a direct message on LinkedIn.

As a software engineer, Daniel was in high demand. In Silicon Valley, people with his skill set bounced back and forth between the tech giants every couple of years, usually earning hefty raises in the process, though Daniel worked for a defense contractor instead of a cash-heavy social media behemoth. People with his qualifications were relentlessly pursued—even though the engineer's LinkedIn profile didn't suggest that Daniel was looking for work, profiles like his received a steady stream of messages from recruiters.

The one Leon had sent appeared no different.

But it was.

"Everything is negotiable, my friend," Leon said, this time

## WEAPONS GRADE

allowing his smile to peek through. “But I always feel that it’s easier to close a deal once both sides understand the stakes.”

Leon removed an iPhone from his pocket, scrolled through the photo reel until he found the one he wanted, and then selected the image.

“Remember her?” Leon said, angling the screen so that Daniel could see it.

The software engineer eyed the device as if unsure whether to come closer.

Leon remained still.

This was a key moment in Daniel’s recruitment. An inflection point for the would-be asset. Two paths branched away from this encounter.

One led back to Daniel’s Tesla and his old life.

For a pitch to be successful, the asset had to believe that he was in charge of his destiny. This was why Leon waited patiently, holding the phone at eye level like a lure dangled in front of a hungry trout.

For a long moment Daniel resisted the iPhone’s siren call.

Then, he bit.

Bridging the distance between them with a single stride, Daniel took the phone and peered at the image.

The change in the engineer was instantaneous.

A moment before, Daniel had been the master of his destiny. As the lead engineer for his company’s most lucrative project, he was someone of importance and he acted the part. He drove a luxury car, lived in a ritzy townhouse, and ate at the right restaurants. Independent headhunters openly pursued him while his current company’s corporate rivals extended feelers in the form of congratulatory emails and random encounters at trade shows that weren’t so random.

With his good looks and apparent wealth, Daniel had no

## DON BENTLEY

shortage of options when it came to female companionship. But in this regard, Daniel was as picky as he was with his mode of transportation or footwear. While he indulged in the occasional office romance and frequented the local watering holes from time to time, Daniel needed a very specific kind of woman.

A woman like the one staring back from Leon's iPhone.

"Who is this?" Daniel said.

Leon was impressed.

The engineer's tone conveyed just the right amount of skepticism. If he ever decided to give up writing code, Daniel might have a future in espionage. Assuming of course he learned to master his physical reaction in the same manner in which he controlled his voice. Leon had been intently watching the engineer, genuinely curious to see Daniel's reaction.

Leon hadn't been disappointed.

It was almost as if he could see the exact instant awareness hit Daniel's brain. In a fraction of a second, the healthy color drained from the engineer's face, leaving his skin a chalky hue. His posture stooped, and the charisma and confidence that seemed to ooze from Daniel's pores leached away like air from a punctured balloon.

Daniel looked deflated.

Which was exactly how Leon wanted him.

"Come now," Leon said with a chiding tone, "let's not play games. I told you from the beginning that I represented a serious client with serious resources. You were being offered a director position and sizeable stock options that would immediately vest. We found this as part of our due diligence."

"Found what?" Daniel said, handing back the phone. "A picture of a pretty girl?"

"Fine," Leon said with a sigh. "Just remember you chose this



## WEAPONS GRADE

bit of unpleasantness, not me. The picture isn't just a pretty girl. Maria Gonzalez is a fourteen-year-old citizen of the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. She and her mother left with a convoy of twenty-five others for the arduous trip to America. Her mother did not survive the journey. Unfortunately for Maria, the coyotes facilitating her cross-border transfer were not the most noble of men. After arriving in El Paso, Maria was handed off to a particularly nasty man who runs several brothels staffed almost exclusively by underage girls. These brothels cater to a certain clientele. A clientele consisting almost exclusively of men like you."

Leon's words hit Daniel like physical blows. The engineer's shoulders tensed, and his fists tightened. He stepped closer, encroaching into Leon's personal space. Leon had anticipated a fight-or-flight reaction, but not one this pronounced. Rather than wilt, the engineer looked ready to go to fisticuffs.

This prospect didn't particularly concern Leon.

After surviving machete-wielding Boko Haram Islamists, Leon feared no man who walked the earth. Even so, Leon was grateful for California's restrictive handgun laws. Frightened men did stupid things and Daniel was frightened.

This was why Leon had chosen the California wilderness rather than the Four Seasons bar, the site of their previous meeting, to confront Daniel.

"This is ridiculous," Daniel shouted, his voice echoing across the craggy hills. "She told me she was eighteen. You can ask her!"

"Actually, I can't," Leon said as he thumbed to another image.

"Why not?" Daniel said.

"Because she's dead."

Leon again offered the phone to Daniel.

## DON BENTLEY

The engineer's fingers shook as he took it.

If seeing the first image of Maria had deflated Daniel, this image crushed him. The phone showed an obviously dead girl with vacant eyes staring heavenward with a dime-sized hole just above the bridge of her nose.

"You can swipe left for a profile shot if you'd like," Leon said helpfully. "I think there's also a picture of the exit wound, but I wouldn't recommend it on a full stomach. Hollow points really make a mess of things."

"I had nothing to do with this," Daniel said, dropping the phone in the dirt. "Nothing."

"Of course you didn't," Leon said as he retrieved the device. "But I doubt the police would share your opinion. My understanding is that you don't much care for condoms, which means your DNA was all over poor Maria's body."

"What is this?" Daniel said, backing away. "Who are you?"

"You already know the answer to that," Leon said. "I am a partner in an executive search firm. I told you that our firm was different. We protect our client's investments. In this case, that investment is you, which is why Maria's body was completely sanitized and then disposed of. In the unlikely event that some forensic piece of a fourteen-year-old girl from Zacatecas is ever discovered, there will be nothing that connects her to you. Not a thing."

Leon watched as hope warred with disbelief on Daniel's face. Like a drowning man who'd just been tossed a lifeline, the engineer wanted to latch on to what Leon was offering.

But he wasn't stupid.

"What do you want?" Daniel said.

"Want?" Leon said with a laugh. "You misunderstand things. I don't want anything from you. I'm here to give you something."

## WEAPONS GRADE

“Give me what?”

“A signing bonus,” Leon said. “My firm’s client chose us for a number of reasons. One, we have a reputation for procuring the industry’s top talent. Two, we are discreet. My client neither knows nor cares what happened to a random Mexican girl in Middle of Nowhere, Texas. They are only concerned with your acceptance of their employment terms. If you agree to them, you will be paid a signing bonus of one hundred thousand dollars.”

Daniel stared at Leon in silence. No doubt his agile mind was running through a million permutations as he viewed what was unfolding from a thousand different angles. For a long moment his features were wrinkled with confusion.

Then he understood.

Or at least he thought that he did.

“What will your discretion cost?” Daniel said.

“Nothing,” Leon said. “I don’t get paid unless you take the job.”

“Then why did you say the request for information has changed?” Daniel said.

“My client wants you to start work immediately.”

“Why?” Daniel said, the look of suspicion returning.

Leon made a show of considering Daniel’s request before replying.

“I told you,” Leon said, parsing out the words one by one, “my client must remain anonymous until you leave your current employer. Even so, I’m sure you’re smart enough to guess who I represent. Let’s just say that the media’s legal analysts believe that a certain appeal is going well and that a ruling that will reverse the government’s initial shortsighted decision will be issued imminently.”

Leon didn’t specify which appeal.

He didn’t have to.

## DON BENTLEY

For Daniel and his coworkers, there was only one appeal. Daniel's current employer had just been awarded a contract in excess of two billion dollars on the strength of their prototype's performance. A sole-source contract. Understandably, their chief competitor and rival for the contract was less than pleased.

While working in the defense space could be extremely lucrative, it was not a business for the squeamish. Competition was fierce and there was only one customer—the United States government. Consequently, when a contract of substance was awarded to a single defense contractor, the losing company almost always appealed the decision. Though the government tried to discourage these lengthy and costly legal battles by assigning the losing party monetary penalties, a million-dollar adverse judgment was pennies compared to a multibillion-dollar contract.

And in this case, the losing corporation's appeal seemed to have merit. For reasons that only made sense to the in-house counsel charged with interpreting the government's bizarre and often contradictory acquisition regulations, the lucrative sole-source contract might have been awarded on improper grounds.

This was a topic that Daniel would be closely following.

"So your client is gearing up in anticipation of a split award?" Daniel said.

"I'm not in a position to violate my nondisclosure clause," Leon said with a smile, "but I can't prevent you from drawing your own conclusions. Now, if you're ready to formally come on board, I'm prepared to transfer your signing bonus to the bank account of your choice. Immediately."

Daniel made another show of thinking over the offer, but

## WEAPONS GRADE

Leon wasn't fooled. Daniel had taken the bait and now the hook was firmly lodged in the engineer's jaw.

"Okay," Daniel said. "Where do I sign?"

"No signature required," Leon said. "This is a sensitive situation. My client does not want to be accused of poaching rival engineers. We need to keep your hiring completely aboveboard in case the government audits my client's hiring records. This is why your payment will come from my firm rather than your new employer. Instead of signing a letter of intent, my client is requesting a show of goodwill."

"No," Daniel said, shaking his head. "I told you. I won't commit industrial espionage."

"Nor would my client expect you to," Leon said. "What they want could be obtained through open-source research, but that would take both time and considerable effort. They want you to save them the trouble by providing it yourself."

"What?"

"A list of the program's vendors," Leon said. "My client needs to be ready to execute the moment the appeal is decided in their favor. Obviously, they have a robust supply chain, but as you may know, the program's technical milestones are . . . aggressive. My client would very much like to have a repository of potential secondary choices should their primary vendors face difficulties scaling their production quickly enough to meet the government's timeline."

Daniel scratched his five o'clock shadow as he weighed Leon's request. Obtaining another company's list of second-tier suppliers certainly fell into a gray area. While it was nowhere near as sensitive as design specs or testing data, vendors were closely held information. Oftentimes a manufacturer would insist that their subcontractors sign nondisclosures to prevent poaching by

## DON BENTLEY

competitors. That said, as Leon had intimated, it was possible to ferret out a company's vendor list. The prime contractor had to disclose their subcontractors to the government, and as a result, it was publicly available information if someone wanted to go through the headache of filing the appropriate paperwork.

Most people did not.

"I could provide you with my functional area's vendors," Daniel said, "but I don't have access to the program-wide database."

"I understand," Leon said, reaching into his pocket, "but there's a workaround."

"Explain," Daniel said, his eyes narrowing.

"The automated maintenance reporting feature," Leon said, handing Daniel a metallic business card holder. "Have this in your pocket when you do the next firmware update. When the prototype accesses the internet, this will record the data dump."

"And the list of vendors," Daniel said.

"Exactly," Leon said.

Daniel turned the innocuous-looking box over in his hand.

"I just carry this with me when I do today's update? That's it?"

"That's it," Leon said.

"And then I get paid?"

"No," Leon said. "Your signing bonus is based on your verbal commitment to resign from your current position and join my client as the director of engineering. Say the words and the money drops into your account."

"If you pay me now, how do you know I'll follow through?" Daniel said.

Leon shrugged.

"You're about to become a member of my client's C-suite. If the executive team didn't think they could trust you, the inter-

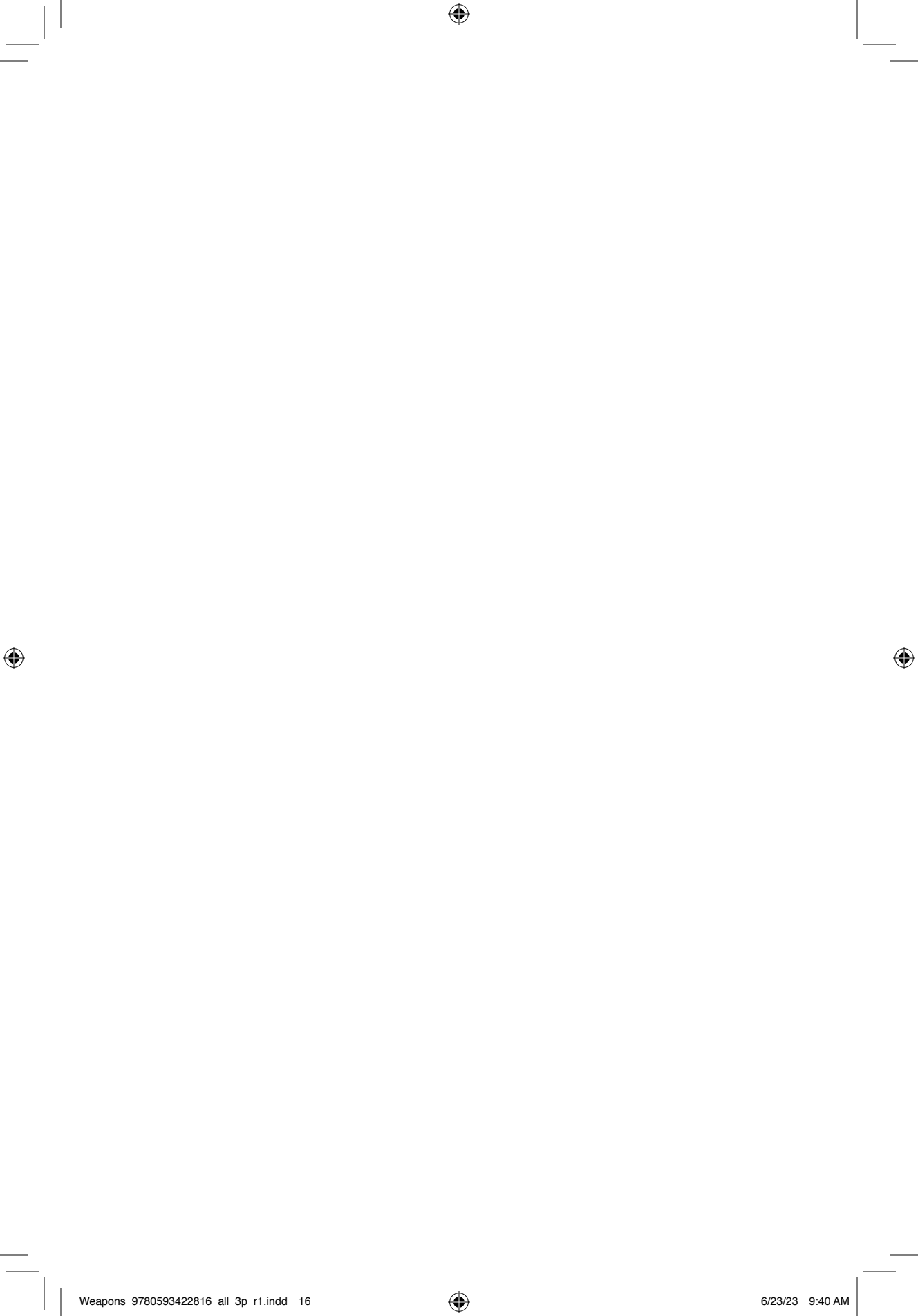
## WEAPONS GRADE

view process would have ended long before now. Remember, I don't get paid unless you get paid, and I intend to get paid."

Daniel looked from the device to Leon and back again.

"Okay," Daniel said, "I'll do it."

Of this, Leon had no doubt.





# 1

## BRIAR WOOD, TEXAS

**THE MUSTANG'S HEADLIGHTS CUT THROUGH THE NIGHT AS JACK RYAN, JR., DROPPED** the six-speed manual transmission into fourth, accelerating through the winding turn. Between the roaring 450-horsepower V8, the wind in his face, and the mild Texas weather, he didn't even try to temper his broad smile. In fact, the only thing making this night drive less than perfect was the empty passenger seat beside him.

As if on cue, his phone rang.

Jack eyed the caller ID on the console, and though he wouldn't have thought it possible a moment ago, his grin somehow grew even wider. Where the caller's contact information had once been a first and last name, the personal details now bore just a single word in all capital letters.

FIANCÉE

Jack liked the sound of that.

"Hey, baby," he said, answering the call as he eased off the gas, allowing the throaty engine noise to drop to a low rumble. Renting a muscle car convertible was a fine way to tool through the Lone Star State, but the ambient noise was hell on phone conversations.

## DON BENTLEY

“Hey yourself. I’m lonely. Know anyone who’d want to keep me company?”

Lisanne Robertson’s husky voice sent shivers down Jack’s spine. His right foot wanted to nudge the accelerator at the thought of the raven-haired beauty sitting alone in their Rainey Street hotel room. But as much as he wanted to free the horses lurking beneath the Mustang’s hood, he resisted the urge. Flooring the pedal might get him back to Austin a couple of minutes sooner, but that would be at the expense of listening to his future bride tell him how much she missed him.

Not a trade Jack was willing to make.

“Lisanne Robertson,” he said, catching the slight slur in his fiancée’s words, “are you tipsy?”

“Get your cute self back here and find out.”

This time it wasn’t just the engine’s RPMs Lisanne’s words set racing.

Looking at the Mustang’s dashboard clock, Jack did some quick math. He was currently heading west along Highway 79, somewhere in the no-man’s land between the tiny towns of Rockdale and Thorndale. While the scenic ranches and farmers’ fields had been quite beautiful when he’d made the drive to College Station earlier today, there wasn’t much to see this time of the night.

That said, each of the little towns along this stretch of two-lane highway functioned as a de facto speed trap. While Jack could legally do seventy miles an hour on the meandering back road, the speed limit dropped to thirty-five within each city’s incorporation limits. Texas cops were both professional and polite, but they were also quite happy to capitalize on the municipal payday offered by lawbreaking out-of-towners. Still, the longer he listened to the raspy words coming from the other end

## WEAPONS GRADE

of the line, the more a speeding ticket seemed like a fair bargain if the money meant seeing his future wife that much sooner.

“You told me you weren’t drinking tonight,” Jack said.

“That was the plan, but Dawn & Hawkes were playing at Karlie’s favorite bar, so we went to see them. Karlie may have told the bartender that I’d just gotten engaged, so he tried to buy me shots. I passed.”

“But?” Jack said.

“But some college kids tried to pick us up,” Lisanne said. “Somehow they didn’t see my shiny new ring.”

As a former college kid, Jack thought Lisanne might have been giving her would-be suitors far too much credit, but he was enjoying the sound of her voice way too much to interrupt.

“What happened next?” Jack said.

“I told those frat boys that I was waiting for my *fiancé*.”

“How’d that work?” he asked.

“Not well,” she said. “They started buying drinks for Karlie instead.”

He smiled as he touched the brakes.

Karlie was Karlie Dill—Lisanne’s college roommate and still one of her closest friends. After she’d shared the happy news with her parents, Lisanne had called Karlie. Never one to miss an opportunity, Karlie had suggested that Lisanne bring her fiancé to Austin so that she could meet the lucky boy.

While Jack loved traveling, he hadn’t been so keen on accompanying Lisanne to a girls’ weekend until his future bride had uttered the magic words—*Texas A&M football*. The Fightin’ Aggies were at Kyle Field, and better yet, tickets were still available.

In a quick fit of negotiations that Jack thought boded well for their future nuptials, he and Lisanne had hammered out an

## DON BENTLEY

agreement. They would fly from D.C. to Austin Sunday morning and rent a room at the famous Van Zandt near Rainey Street. Jack would drive over to College Station for the football game while Lisanne spent Sunday afternoon and evening catching up with Karlie. Jack would return after the night game ended, and they would meet Karlie for lunch on Monday and then grab the evening flight back to D.C.

Simple.

Or maybe not.

“Still haven’t heard the part about you getting tipsy,” Jack said.

“I’m getting there,” Lisanne said. “After Karlie sent the UT kids packing, we were about to call it a night. But the bartender said he was working on a new drink, and he really wanted some feedback. He begged me to try it, Jack.”

Jack just bet he had.

Lisanne Robertson had inherited her olive complexion, thick black hair, and deep chocolate eyes from her Lebanese mother. Her American father had bestowed upon her a desire to serve that took the form of a couple of years as an active-duty Marine followed by a stint in law enforcement before coming to the attention of an organization named The Campus. Lisanne’s lean, athletic frame reflected her vocation.

So did the fact that she was missing one arm below the elbow.

The bullet that had taken her arm had nearly ended her life. For Lisanne, like Jack, physical fitness was a job requirement, not a hobby.

When he’d left for the football game, Lisanne had been wearing a fitted Longhorns T-shirt and tight jeans that showcased miles of legs. That outfit, coupled with her smile, had been enough to cause Jack to reconsider his sojourn to College Station. Knowing his fiancée, Lisanne had significantly upgraded her wardrobe before hitting the concert with Karlie. Pretty girls

## WEAPONS GRADE

certainly weren't scarce in the legion of bars that called Sixth Street home, but Jack thought that Austin wasn't altogether ready for the phenomenon that was Lisanne Robertson.

He sure wasn't.

"What did he make you?" Jack said.

"He called it the McConaughey. It was like a margarita, but spicy. It was *so good*."

The emphasis Lisanne put on her last two words made Jack chuckle as he wisely refrained from asking just how many of the concoctions she'd sampled before rendering her verdict.

A drink named after Austin's favorite son had to be good.

"Is that why you called?" Jack said. "To rub it in?"

"No," Lisanne said. "I called because I miss you *and* I'm tipsy. Are you here yet?"

Jack very much wished he was *here yet* for more reasons than one. If he was being honest, he would have to admit that their weekend of fun was born of more than just a trip to see Karlie. He and Lisanne had come to a relational fork in the road. A fork that led down two very different paths. The weekend in Austin was meant to give them time together to think, and while he was no closer to solving their impasse, he did know one thing—life was much better in Lisanne Robertson's arms.

Unfortunately, the laws of physics cared neither for slightly intoxicated fiancées nor the rumbling of Detroit's finest engine. As much as he wished otherwise, Jack still had a good fifty minutes before he'd be handing the Mustang's keys over to the Van Zandt's valet. If experience was any guide, Lisanne would be fast asleep by then.

He opened his mouth to tell the woman he loved as much, when everything changed.

The crash happened so quickly that Jack almost missed it.

Though he was less than fifty yards from the colliding vehi-

## DON BENTLEY

cles, the violence was still hard to follow. The impact quickly morphed into a tangle of metal and a cloud of debris. Like dancers joined at the hip, the two sedans spun from the winding Texas road into the surrounding brush. One moment, the stretch of blacktop had been the scene of crushing metal, skidding tires, and flashing headlights. The next, the two-lane highway was clear, all signs of violence erased from the double yellow lines as if an artist had wiped the entire scene from his slate. Unexpected violence and the chaos accompanying it had a way of confusing the senses and jarring the observer's sense of time.

Especially if the person witnessing it was unaccustomed to such things.

Jack Ryan, Jr., was not such a person.

Even so, it still took a moment or two for his OODA loop to run its course. For his brain to move from one stage to the next. And while Jack was not in a fighter jet's cockpit like the cycle's originator, he was in the driver's seat of a Ford Mustang GT. The car's snarling engine propelled him toward the accident at eighty-eight feet per second. Meaning in the time it took the average person to inhale, he had to process what had just happened and decide on a course of action. Under these harsh time constraints, Jack could have been forgiven for continuing past the wreck as his brain turned sensory inputs into thoughts.

Jack did not continue.

Though he was no more race car driver than fighter pilot, he was a member of a cadre of men and women who were arguably even more elect. This was not the first time Jack's mind had been required to analyze the unexpected and render a series of life-or-death decisions.

Nor would this probably be the last.

But Jack did not dwell on the oddities of his chosen profession

## WEAPONS GRADE

any more than he considered what the crash's implications might mean for his already compressed schedule.

Instead, he acted.

Jack downshifted, transforming the engine's growl into a full-fledged roar even as he activated his hazard lights and angled the Mustang toward the shoulder.

"Hey, baby," Jack said, "I've got to go. I just saw a wreck."

"Watch yourself," Lisanne said.

Her previously flirty tone was a thing of the past.

There was a reason for the change.

Like Lisanne, Jack was an operative for an off-the-books intelligence organization known as The Campus. While he and Lisanne were in Austin purely for recreation, The Campus's long and distinguished list of adversaries weren't much for vacations.

"Always do," Jack said.

"Give me a call once you're back on the road," Lisanne said, her voice clear and her diction precise. "I love you."

"Love you too," Jack said.

As he hung up with his future bride, Jack had two thoughts. One, Lisanne wasn't anywhere near as intoxicated as she'd pretended to be. Two, a random car crash on a moonlit highway was not cause for concern for a normal person.

John Patrick Ryan, Jr., was not a normal person.