

**JON
LAND**

**THE TENTH
CIRCLE**

A BLAINE MCCRACKEN NOVEL



THE

TENTH CIRCLE

A BLAINE McCracken NOVEL

JON LAND

OPEN  ROAD
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For the men and women of the United States Special Forces

De Oppresso Liber

Then, now, always.

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EPILOGUE: FOUND

A Biography of Jon Land

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We meet again; you, me, Blaine, and Johnny back together for another adventure, thanks to the vision and dedication of the whole team at Open Road Integrated Media. That team is headed by the great Jane Friedman who provided me the ability to work with wonderful professionals like Pete Beatty, Libby Jordan, Rachel Chou, and Nina Lassam. I'm especially grateful to my agent Bob Diforio for bringing us together and, even more, to the one holdover from so many pages like this, my amazing and brilliant editor, Natalia Aponte. I'd hate to think where this or any of my books would be without her pushing me to be better each time out—not always an easy task when a series enters its eleventh book. Before moving on to hopefully greener pastures, Stephanie Gorton really helped bring this one over the finish line and I can't think of anyone I trust more to help push me along the home stretch than Jeff Ayers.

Because here's the thing, the delivery mechanism for books like this might have changed, but one thing hasn't: a great story is a great story no matter how you read it, and I've done my best to deliver just that here. While you're sitting where you are, and I'm sitting where I am, I can picture you turning the page and predict you won't stop reading until the final one is flipped.

Only one way to find out if I'm right or not. (You can let me know at www.jonlandbooks.com!) So I'm going to shut up now so you can get started.

**A hero is no braver than an ordinary man,
but he is braver five minutes longer.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

PROLOGUE:

LOST

“Where could they have gone?” Governor John White asked, his voice quivering as he paced about the abandoned camp in the fetid summer heat. “What could have become of them, in the name of all that is holy?”

White knelt to smooth the land, as if it might yield some clue as to the whereabouts of the entire colony under his command, the ground mist hiding the trembling of his hands. The overcast sky and thick canopy of tree cover had bled the light from the clearing, the grayness of the scene befitting his mood. White’s fear, apprehension, and building grief knew no bounds, since his own daughter and granddaughter had been among the colonists.

Now among the missing.

The fort the colonists had occupied was gone, leaving behind only earth berms and rotted logs where cabins and structures had once stood. As if a vast storm had swept in and swallowed everything in its path, including the men, women, and children who had lived here.

“No trace, no trace at all,” he said out loud to himself, as the others who had accompanied him from the ship watched him wipe the tears from his eyes. They had arrived at dusk, the shadows of the coming night making the overgrown brush look like spectral monsters snapping at the air with their leaf-like teeth. The only other hints of the fort’s existence were some still-standing posts and beams, forming the shell of the exterior wall. The land was overgrown with weeds and dead brush, and a sour, spoiled odor hung in the thick air rich with the hum of black flies and mosquitoes typical of August this far south in the new land. This was actually the second colony to be based on Roanoke Island off the coast of North Carolina, the first having been abandoned due to insufficient supplies and incessant battles with the local native tribes who proved less than hospitable. White had resolved to avoid both of those maladies this time, as evidenced by the fact that his own daughter and son-in-law were included among the colonists. They’d had a child shortly before his ill-timed return to England, a daughter: White’s granddaughter Virginia Dare, a fact that left his insides knotted and gnarled like a bad cramp.

“No sign of any of them, Governor,” noted Thomas Glanville, captain of a privateering expedition who had ferried White here from England for a considerable price.

“My granddaughter,” said White softly, sadly, “the first English child born in the Americas. I left her here along with the other one hundred fourteen colonists three years ago with a promise to return in no more than one. I left them to their deaths. This is my fault.”

“We don’t know they’re dead, sir, not for sure.”

“Today would have been her third birthday,” White said, his expression grim and spine stiff as he lingered over the remnants of the well the colonists had dug to supply them with water. With the camp so close to Albemarle Sound, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, they were able to find water just a dozen feet down. But it must have gone dry or soured, because a replacement well had been dug farther up the rise on a natural earth berm. “We must find what became of her,” he continued. “We must find what became of all of them.”

Life had proved so harsh here that the colonists had convinced White to journey to England to plead for them to be able to come home. His long-delayed return sprang from a winding journey full of false

starts and aborted voyages that had waylaid his plans to make it back sooner. He had dreaded giving his people the unfortunate news that their request had been turned down, and now he dreaded something much worse.

“No sign of the signal you described, sir,” a sailor whose name White had forgotten reported, returning after a careful survey of the area. White noted that the man had trimmed off the sleeves of his thin canvas shirt and rolled up the legs of his woolen britches to his knees. The other three sailors who accompanied White and Glanville to the colony had done the same, perhaps regretting it since the exposed flesh sent the buzzing insects into a feeding frenzy.

“Signal?” asked Glanville.

“If anything befell the colonists,” White told him, “my instructions were to leave a Maltese cross on a tree. The fact that there’s none can only mean ...” He let the remainder of his thought dangle in the air amid the hot, misty breath trailing each word from his mouth. “Whatever happened here,” he finished finally, “must have happened very fast.”

“Well, I did find something else, sir,” the sailor resumed, leading White toward the southwest corner of the camp.

While the other sailors continued their check of the perimeter, White found himself before a still standing post of the fort with the word *Croatoan* carved into its surface.

“What is it?” Glanville wondered.

“An island nearby.”

“Could it be that the colonists sought refuge there, Governor?”

“Possibly,” White said, feeling a flicker of hope rise in him, “but it could also be a reference to the local native tribe known to be friendlier than the others.”

White ran his fingers over the etching, hoping the depth and condition might yield some clue as to how long ago it had been carved. He had known natives of this new land who could discern such things, but for him it was just conjecture further complicated by the sky darkening ahead in promise of a storm, a big one judging by the feel of the air.

The governor turned his gaze that way, addressing Glanville as he did. “How bad a blow are we looking at, Captain?”

“Bad, sir.” Glanville seemed to sniff the air. “Very bad.”

White nodded, his expression turning even grimmer as the color washed from his face. “Then we have little time to continue the search, to—”

He stopped suddenly, something about the ground between this tree and the replacement wall grabbing his attention. White retraced their path, stopping over a slightly raised mound. He knelt and smoothed his hand over the earth.

“We must go,” he said, rising stiffly. “Our decision is made. No more lives can be placed at risk.”

“You paid me to do a job, Governor,” Glanville started. “I’d prefer to see it done.”

“It is done, Captain. The colony is lost. Hope was lost long ago. They’re dead, each and every one of them, my family included.”

“You don’t know—”

“Yes, I do.” White inhaled deeply and blew out more breath caked with steaming mist. “Now we must be gone from here. And fast.”

“You speak as if we’re in danger, sir.”

“Because we are. Whatever killed my people is still about, Captain, still hungry for more death. I feel that in my bones too.”

The sky rumbled with the first hint of thunder. The wind shifted to the northeast, blowing in a swatch

of fog from the nearby sound.

“Feel ~~what~~, Governor? I’ve never backed down from a fight and those natives you mention will give more of a battle from my men than any fifty you left behind.”

“It wasn’t natives, Captain. The fate that befell my people was the work of no man.”

“What then?”

White looked away, swinging about in the rain that had begun to dapple the air. “It will all be in my report, along with a warning to Sir Walter Raleigh and the crown itself.”

“Governor?”

“That no Englishman ever set foot on this cursed land again. And we must get back to your ship before we join the colonists in the same fate.”

Glanville held White’s stare as best he could through the thickening fog that stole from him sight of the sailors still patrolling through the weeds and overgrowth.

“What is it you see, sir?”

“Not what I see, Captain, so much as what I don’t.”

That’s when the first gurgling scream sounded, followed by a second, and a third. Then gasps from the sailors lost to the fog at the camp’s outer perimeter.

Then nothing.

Glanville went for his sword, but White jammed a hand down on the hilt.

“It won’t help. Trust me. We must run.”

“I can’t leave my men! I can’t—”

But White grasped his exposed forearm and yanked Glanville into motion, away from where the screams had come.

“Now, Captain, now! Before it’s too late, before there’s no one left to tell the tale!”

Glanville gave up on his sword and fell into stride alongside White. Lightning bursts cut through the fog, illuminating their path as branches and brambles scratched at their faces and tore at their clothes. The Roanoke Colony lost behind them.

Bay of Gibraltar, Atlantic Ocean: 1872

“I know that ship,” said Captain John Moorehouse, his voice stiff with concern, as he lowered the spyglass from his eye and turned to his mate. “She’s the *Mary Celeste*.”

The *Dei Gratia*’s second-in-command, Abner Devereaux, joined Moorehouse at the foredeck under a crystal-clear sky and calm winds. They’d never sailed together before, Devereaux having joined the crew as a last-minute replacement for the regular mate who’d fallen ill suddenly. Devereaux had heavy-lidded, hooded eyes and, during the voyage across the Atlantic from New York, had been prone to keeping to himself, in contrast with the gregarious Moorehouse’s penchant for staying close to his men.

“Her captain, Benjamin Spooner Briggs, and I had dinner the night before we both set sail from New York,” Moorehouse continued, having first spotted the *Mary Celeste* yawing. Now he watched her come into the wind and then fall off, the currents having steered her into the Bay of Gibraltar between Portugal and the Azores. “She’s floundering, out of control.”

“Where’s she bound?” Devereaux asked.

“Genoa with seventeen hundred barrels of American alcohol in her holds,” Moorehouse told him, comparing that to the *Dei Gratia*’s cargo of an almost identical number of barrels filled with petroleum.

“I see no distress signal,” said Devereaux, squinting and shielding his eyes from the bright afternoon sunlight.

“What say we see if she responds to our call?”

“Aye, sir,” the mate said, and grabbed a silver hailing trumpet, heavy and large at eighteen inches in length, from a nearby hook. Reflexively, he wiped its mouthpiece prior to raising the instrument to his lips and blew hard three times to blast a signal. Devereaux waited for a response and when none came he tried again with the same result.

“What say we board her,” said Moorehouse, “and see what we can see?”

“She’s abandoned for sure,” Devereaux reported after supervising a search below deck of the three hundred-ton brigantine’s cabins. “No sign anywhere of the captain and crew.”

Standing on the deck of the ghostship, Moorehouse stiffened. “Benjamin Briggs had his wife and little girl with him. His mate, Albert Richardson, is as good a seaman as I’ve known.”

“Well, they left in a hurry, sir. Fast enough to leave their oil-skin boots and pipes beyond.”

“Pirates, then,” Moorehouse groused.

“I think not. Her holds are intact, the cargo undisturbed. I did find this.”

Devereaux handed Moorehouse a tattered, leather-encased ledger.

“The captain’s log,” Moorehouse noted. “This should tell us something anyway.”

“You said she was bound for Genoa.”

“I did.”

“Strange then that the course the captain had laid out was bound for England, a port not far from Chislehurst.”

“That makes no sense,” from Moorehouse, his discomfort worn in something between a scowl and frown, the hot sun carving fresh fissures in his already-leathery skin.

Moorehouse gazed about the abandoned deck of the ghostship, eerie in its desolation, every yaw and creak exaggerated by the silence.

“Mutiny perhaps,” suggested Devereaux.

“You find any trace of liquor on board?”

“None, besides what leaked out of a cracked barrel in one of the holds I checked.”

“Because Briggs forbade it, a God-fearing man who never touched the drink and chose his crews from among men of a like mind. I’ve never known a mutiny not fueled by the spirits.”

“What then, Captain?”

“Rig the ship for tow. We’ll string her to port with us.”

“There’s something you’re not saying, sir.”

Moorehouse had hoped his mate wouldn’t see the new sense of hopelessness he felt flashing in his gaze. “No captain would leave his logbook behind upon abandoning ship. I believe he and the others were taken or ...”

“Or *what*, in the name of Christ?”

“Something made them vanish, chief mate, vanish into thin air.”

Chislehurst, England: 1872

Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, better known as Napoléon III, was bedridden when his dour-faced visitor Henri Jaubert, arrived. Since being released from a German prison in the wake of France’s disastrous defeat in the war with Prussia, his health had deteriorated sharply. That war had been waged at his urging and under his command. So its miserable failure had not only branded him first a prisoner of war and then an exile, but had also marked the end of the Second French Empire. A new republic had not replaced it, adding to Napoléon III’s misery, further exacerbated by a chronic lung infection and a knifing pain riddling his extremities for which doctors had yet to find the proper treatment. He

alternated between terrible bouts of sweating and equally racking chills, and was given to fits of delirium that left him lost in the illusion he still ruled his beloved France. But that condition now threatened to forestall his plans to seize back the crown with the help of the actual cargo of a ship that was now two weeks late in arriving at port here.

A cargo that could change the balance of power in the world and, more importantly, France's place in it.

"Is there any news of the ship?" Napoléon III asked Jaubert, who stood at the foot of his bed, his leg frame still enough to block the sun pouring in through the window. In contrast to Jaubert's woolen tailored suit that was shiny enough to look wet, Napoléon wore a nightshirt that stank of rot and spoilage, the odors rising from his own flesh worsening more and more as the days went on.

"There is, but not good. Things did not go as planned. I'm afraid unforeseen circumstances intervened."

With considerable effort, Napoléon III forced himself upright in bed. "Just tell me the barrels are still intact. Tell me that much."

Jaubert cleared his throat. "Intact, yes, but they ended up in Gibraltar."

"Gibraltar?"

"It seems we may have outsmarted ourselves. They'd been off-loaded before my contacts arrived in the port, Your Excellence. My men were unable to trace what became of them. But given time—"

"Time? There is no time. Not for me, not for France."

"We must find another way, Your Excellence."

"Another way to take my throne back? Another means with the power of those barrels' true contents? Don't be a fool, Henri. Our British friends put this opportunity before us for a considerable sum we no risk squandering. There can never be another opportunity like it."

"But if what you say is true ..."

Napoléon III stifled a fresh cough. "Someone will open those barrels, Henri. Someone will open them and unleash something they won't comprehend and cannot control."

Henri Jaubert crossed himself. "May God have mercy on their souls."

"And what of our souls, what of France's soul?" This time Napoléon III was overcome by a coughing spasm that left him gasping for air, his face purpled with blood vessels leaking red onto the whites of his eyes. "Your men are still in Gibraltar?"

"Of course, Your Excellence."

"Get word to them. Have them retrieve those barrels at all costs, while there's still hope."

"And if it's too late?"

A wet, wheezy sloshing sound heaved from Napoléon III's lungs. "Then may God have mercy on our souls too."

PART ONE:

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

CHAPTER 1

The Negev Desert, Israel: The present

“We have incoming, General! Anti-missile batteries are responding!”

General Yitzak Berman focused his gaze on the desperate scenario unfolding in amazingly realistic animation on the huge screen before him. Eight missiles fired from Iran sped toward all major population centers of Israel in a perfect geometric pattern, about to give the nation’s anti-missile system Arrow, its greatest test yet.

“Sir,” reported the head of the analysts squeezed into the underground bunker from which Israel maintained command and control, “initial specs indicate the size, weight, and sourcing of the missile ...”

“Proceed,” the general said when the analyst stopped to swallow hard.

“They’re nuclear, sir, in the fifty-kiloton range.”

“Targets?”

Another young man picked up from there. “Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, the Mediterranean coast, the Sinai, our primary airfields ...” He looked back toward Berman. “And *here*, sir.”

“Anti-missile batteries are launching!” a new voice blared through the strangely dim lighting that seemed to flutter as the missiles drew closer.

And Berman watched the animated simulation of dozens and dozens of Israeli Arrow rockets, along with larger American Patriots, shooting upward in line with the incoming missiles. Four hits were scored in the maelstrom of animated smoke bursts, more rockets launched to chase down the remaining four nukes that had survived the first salvo.

“We have two more confirmed downed!” yet another young voice rang out.

But the bunker fell silent as the sophisticated animation continued to follow two surviving Iranian missiles as they streaked toward Tel Aviv and Haifa.

“*Schmai Israel, hallileh hoseh,*” one of the young voices began, reciting the prayer softly as the missile arcs turned downward, on direct courses to their targets with nothing left to stop their flight.

“Order our fighters holding at their fail-safe positions to launch their attacks,” instructed Berman. “Destroy Iran.”

He’d barely finished when two flashes burst out from the animated screen, bright enough to force several of those squeezed into the bunker to shield their eyes. As those flashes faded amid the stunned silence and odor of stale perspiration hanging in the air, the bunker’s regular lighting snapped back on.

“*This concludes the simulation,*” a mechanical voice droned. “*Repeat, this concludes the simulation.*”

With that, a bevy of Israeli officials, both civilian and military, emerged from the rear-most corner of the bunker, all wearing dour expressions.

Israel’s female defense minister stepped forward ahead of the others. “Your point is made, General,” she said to Berman. “Not that we needed any further convincing.”

“I’m glad we all agree that the Iranian nuclear threat can no longer be tolerated,” Berman, the highest ranking member of the Israeli military left alive who’d fought in the Six-Day War, told them. “We’ve been over all this before. The difference is we’re now certain our defenses cannot withstand an Iranian”

attack, leaving us with casualty estimates of up to a million dead and two million wounded, many of them gravely. Fifty simulations, all with results similar to the ones you have just witnessed.” He hesitated, eyes hardened through two generations of war boring into the defense minister’s. “I want your formal authorization.”

“For what?”

“To destroy the Iranian nuclear complex at Natanz.”

Israel’s defense minister started to smile, then simply shook her head. “We’ve been over this before, a hundred times. Our army can’t do it, our air force can’t do it, our commandos can’t do it, and the Americans are saying the very same thing from their end. You want my authorization to do the impossible? You’ve got it. Just don’t expect any backup, extraction, or political cover.”

Yitzak Berman returned his gaze to the wall-sized screen where the animated versions of Tel Aviv and Haifa had turned dark. “The man I have in mind won’t need of any of that.”

“Did you say *man*?”

CHAPTER 2

Natanz, Iran

“We are descending through a million tons of solid rock,” the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Minister of Energy, Ali Akbar Hosseini, told the filmmaker squeezed in the elevator with both his equipment and the trio of Revolutionary Guardsmen. “A technological achievement in its own right. You understand the great task you’ve been entrusted to perform.”

“Just as you must understand I’m the best at my job, just like your scientists are at theirs,” said the bearded, award-winning filmmaker Hosseini knew as Hakeem Najjar. Najjar’s appearance was exactly as depicted in photographs, save for the scar through his left eyebrow the minister did not recall. He was dressed casually in dark cargo pants and a long-sleeve cotton shirt rolled up at the sleeves, bulky clothing that hid what was clearly a V-shaped, well-muscled frame beneath. “I was told I’d be given total access to the facility.”

“And you will, at least those parts deemed appropriate by me.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal. It never is with my work.”

“This is a different kind of opportunity.”

The elevator started to slow.

“Then you should have gotten a filmmaker more adept at wedding videos,” Najjar snapped. “Perhaps we’ve both made a mistake.”

“You are about to see what few men ever have,” Hosseini continued, wearing a fashionable suit instead of a military uniform. “And it will be your blessed privilege to chronicle it for the world to see when the time is right. You call that a mistake?”

“You chose me because I’m the best. I ask only that you treat me that way.”

“I could have retained a simple videographer for this assignment,” Hosseini said, his shoulders stiffening. “I chose you because I wanted something that would stand the test of history. This will be my legacy, my contribution to our glorious Republic, and I want it to be celebrated, not just appreciated, a century from now. I want anyone who watches to see not just a place, but a point in history that changed the world forever. An awesome responsibility I’m entrusting you with.”

“I look forward to exceeding your expectations.”

Hosseini’s eyes fell on the bulky equipment lying at the filmmaker’s feet: a camera, portable lights, and a quartet of shoe box-sized rechargeable batteries to supply power. “Others I’ve worked with have turned to much smaller cameras for video, even ones that look like they only take pictures.”

“And how did their work turn out?” asked the filmmaker, his tone still biting.

“Acceptable, but not impressive. This assignment clearly required something more, a case I had to make to the Council’s finance board to justify your fee.”

“If you aren’t satisfied with what I produce for you, you owe nothing. I’ll return my fee to the Council personally.”

“Both of us know that will not be necessary. Both of us know you will produce something that will stand the test of time through the ages and serve both of us well,” Hosseini said to the man he had personally selected for the job.

“I value your regard and the confidence you have in me,” Najjar said more humbly in Farsi.

~~Then he slung the camera over his shoulder and scooped up the batteries and portable lights in his~~
grasp, beckoning the minister to exit ahead of him.

“After you,” said Blaine McCracken.

CHAPTER 3

Washington, DC: Two months earlier

“You’re kidding, right?” Blaine McCracken said after the Israeli he knew only as “David” finished.

“You come highly recommended, Mr. McCracken. Back home you’re considered a legend.”

“Another word for *dinosaur*.”

“But far from extinct. And my American friends tell me you’re the only one they believe can get this done.”

“Meaning I’d have to succeed where two governments have failed.”

David shrugged, the gesture further exaggerating the size of his neck, which seemed a stubby extension of his shoulders and trapezius muscles. He wasn’t a tall man but was unnaturally broad through the upper body. McCracken couldn’t make out his eyes well in the darkness, but imagined them to be furtive and noncommittal.

They’d met at the Observation Deck of the Washington Monument. It was closed to the public for repairs indefinitely, but still accessible by workmen, though not at night, always McCracken’s favorite time to view Washington. He liked imagining what was going on in offices where lights still burned, what plans were being hatched and fates determined. There was so much about the city he hated, but plenty from which he couldn’t detach himself. In the vast majority of those offices, officials were trying to do good; at least, they believed they were.

McCracken found himself wondering which of those offices David had come here from; it would have been State or Defense in the old days, across the river in Langley just as often. These days it was Homeland Security, the catchall and watchword that got people nodding in silence; with its offices spread out all over the city proper, it was responsible for an untold number of the lights that still burned.

A few work lamps provided the only illumination inside the gutted Observation Deck, riddled with a musty basement-like smell of old, stale concrete and wood rot mixed with the fresh lumber and sawdust that covered the exposed floor like a floating rug. David had sneezed a few times upon first entering, passing it off as allergies.

“It’s not that we’ve failed,” David told him, “it’s that all the plans we’ve considered have been rejected out of hand. We’ve come to you for something nontraditional, something no one expects.”

“You’ve got a lot of faith in me.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you. Otherwise, we will have no choice but to try something that is doomed to fail and perhaps even make things worse. But our hands are tied. With Iran so close to getting the bomb, the choice is gone.”

“Your name’s not really David, is it?” McCracken asked the Israeli.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because the last few times I’ve worked with your country, my contacts were named David too. No reference to David and Goliath maybe?”

A flicker of a smile crossed the Israeli’s lips. “I’m told you had a plan.”

“No, what I’ve got is an *idea*. It’s risky, dangerous, and I haven’t even broached it to the powers at the top here.”

“Because you don’t think they’d be interested?”

“~~Because they haven’t asked.~~” McCracken looked out through the window at the twinkling office lights again, already fewer of them than just a few minutes before, imagining the kind of things being discussed after office hours had concluded. “The only time my phone rings these days is when the SEALs or Delta have already passed on the mission, with good reason this time.”

“We’re asking you,” said David, “not them. And we’ll provide you with the right resources, *and* the resources you require.”

McCracken gave David a longer look, the younger man’s thick nest of curly hair making him seem vulnerable and innocent at the same time though neither was true. “Tell me you’re ready to fight fire with fire. Tell me that’s what you meant about making the right *resources* available.”

David seemed to grasp his meaning immediately. “And if we are?”

Blaine smiled.

CHAPTER 4

Natanz, Iran: The present

McCracken lugged the equipment from the elevator, careful to show strain and exertion on his features to avoid raising any suspicions in Hosseini. The hall before them was brightly lit, as clean and sterile as hospitals. The air smelled of nothing—not antiseptic, not solvent, not fresh tile. Nothing. The lighting looked unbalanced, harsh in some places and dull in others.

The new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani's successor, had made no secret of his desire to chronicle Iran's greatest technological achievement ever. When the time was right, he wanted the world to see the true scope of his country's accomplishment, so long hidden behind innuendo and subterfuge.

The true Hakeem Najjar, the award-winning Iranian filmmaker chosen for that task, was virtually the same height and weight as McCracken and the two men bore more than a passing resemblance to each other, right up to the scruffiness of their tightly trimmed beards. Of course, the plan was not without its flaws. Most notably, McCracken had no idea when Najjar would be summoned to capture the Natanz facility in all its glory. Based on the current timetable for the Iranians' ability to generate enough fissionable material from the refuse of their vast centrifuges, though, he guessed no more than six months.

It turned out to be only two.

The filmmaker Najjar was already under twenty-four-hour surveillance by Israeli Mossad agents long entrenched within Iranian society. Barely an hour after the filmmaker was contacted by Minister Hosseini's office on extremely short notice, McCracken boarded a private jet with a makeup specialist on board to finish the job of matching his appearance as closely as possible to Najjar's. The result, after a laborious process that took much of the flight, exceeded even his expectations. The lone oversight had been not to disguise the scar through McCracken's left eyebrow from a wayward bullet decades before. Although Minister Hosseini had clearly noticed it, he seemed unbothered by its presence.

While Najjar waited in his apartment for his government car to arrive, a fresh Mossad team, just in from the country, entered his apartment by using a key fit to the specifications of his lock based on the serial number. The filmmaker, who was still packing, was unconscious in seconds, with McCracken ready in his stead, equipment in hand, as soon as the car arrived for the first leg of his journey.

Once out of the elevator, McCracken knew he was about to encounter plenty not mentioned in David's reports on the structure and its schematics. Israel's intelligence on the Natanz facility was an amalgamation of satellite reconnaissance; prisoner and defector interrogations; and four separately brilliantly crafted infiltrations. Each of these had provided the particulars of at least a section of the facility, but even taken in sum, they didn't offer a thorough rendering of all of it.

The assembled intelligence did reveal a sprawling single-level underground facility. The original plan had called for multiple levels, but this had proven too onerous from both construction and security standpoints. Natanz had been chosen for the site of the plant specifically because of the heavy layers of limestone and shale beneath which it would be contained, along with an underlayer of nearly impenetrable volcanic rock formed in prehistoric times. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the nuclear generating plant that sat at ground level was not positioned directly over the underground facility at a

rather, it served as effective camouflage for the vast tunneling efforts that had forged Natanz from the side instead of from above. The facility was laid out roughly in a square, the size of six football fields placed next to one another, and featured the sophisticated technology required to enrich uranium along with the centrifuges responsible for generating it, a process that undoubtedly included the massive pumps and water systems required for cooling.

But the very features that made Natanz impenetrable to an attack from above made it vulnerable to what McCracken was planning from within.

David versus Goliath indeed.

“One more thing before we get started,” Hosseini said, opening a door McCracken hadn’t noticed before. “If you’d join me inside here ...”

It was a locker room, more or less, each open cubicle featuring an orange radiation suit and wrist monitor hanging from a hook inside.

“Standard procedure,” the minister explained. “The lightest weight suit manufactured anywhere. You slip it on right over your clothes,” he continued, starting to do just that himself.

McCracken followed in step. Modern, sophisticated nuclear plants like this were hardly prone to leaks, so the donning of such protective material could only mean Hosseini meant what he said about assembling a complete picture of one of the world’s most secret facilities.

“Come,” the minister beckoned, “let us witness the means by which we will destroy Israel.”

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