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Opening Extract from...

Spartan

Written by Matthew Dunn

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Spartan

Matthew Dunn



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PART I

ONE

'You're sure that I won't be killed today?' The spy rubbed a hand against his smooth face and looked down at the wet Central Park grass beneath him. It was very early in the morning, and beyond the park the sounds of New York life were distant and mellow. He frowned and shook his head slightly. A fine, windless rain fell. 'This whole thing seems odd.'

Will Cochrane observed the man for a while before speaking. 'Soroush, it *is* odd. That's why you'll have three expert men close by to protect you.'

Soroush's frown deepened. He looked up at Will's tall and powerful frame. 'Only three? That's all your masters in British Intelligence could give you?'

Will pushed fingers through his cropped dark hair and then reached out to touch the Iranian's arm. 'Perfectly adequate for what we need to happen.'

The spy chuckled a little. 'I thought I was your most valuable asset.'

'You are.'

Soroush swivelled so that he was fully facing Will. 'But good things always come to an end?'

Will removed his hand and quickly glanced left and right. There were few other people in their vicinity, and certainly none close to them. The British intelligence officer looked back to his companion. 'No, it's not like that. The Iranians called the meeting, not us. If we don't do this, then we'll never know what they want.'

Soroush jammed his hands into his coat pockets. He lowered his head again.

Will felt a surge of doubt and fear for his agent, but he checked these emotions and spoke calmly. 'I found you all those years ago, when you were still working for the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security. I persuaded you to keep working in MOIS and at the same time spy for the British. I got you out of Iran when it looked as if your cover could be compromised. And when it turned out that such a concern was unfounded, I taught you how to continue to spy on your country from the safety of Europe.' He forced a smile. 'Throughout all our time together, I have always protected you, and I will continue to do so today.'

The Iranian said nothing for a moment. He then cleared his throat and shook his head vigorously. 'In my eight years in the UK, I've provided you with intelligence that only a very few current or former members of MOIS would have access to. And I know you have taken action on much of my intelligence, meaning that the Iranians should know they have a breach. A studious officer within the security department of MOIS would be able to narrow down that breach. And then out of the blue a message is passed to me. A message from MOIS saying they want to meet me.' He looked intently at Will. 'Even if you think I was not compromised in the old days, you have to concede there is a strong possibility that I'm now being set up.'

Will did not return his gaze. He had already concluded that the two Iranian intelligence officers who wanted to meet his secret agent today probably had nefarious intentions towards the man. He had also concluded that if this were the case, his agent's cover was blown and Soroush would therefore be of no future use to him. But Will needed the meeting to take place in order to be sure. And regardless, his man was going to be protected.

'Why do you think they chose New York for the meeting?' Soroush's words were hushed and quick.

Will looked around and then back at his agent. The correct answer to this question, he suspected, was that the Iranians knew that Soroush was a Western spy and would not agree to meet in a

non-Western city. 'You're now an entrepreneur who does a lot of business in the States. They're trying to minimise inconvenience to you.'

Soroush's expression seemed to harden. 'I'm not so sure.'

Will checked his watch and smiled. 'Are you prepared to go through with this or not?'

Soroush looked blankly at him for a while but then shrugged. 'You know me too well.'

'I do.'

The two men became silent. The rain hit their faces with increased intensity.

Will drew a deep breath and spoke quietly. 'When you're on Gapstow Bridge at the north end of the pond, you won't be able to see me because I'll be hidden. But if you look directly south across the pond, you'll be looking at my approximate location. I will be one hundred and eighty metres from you and will be monitoring you and your meeting through binoculars.'

Soroush turned back towards Will. He angled his head. 'And your friends?'

'You may see some of them, but they won't look out of place. And if anything happens, they will react with absolute speed, aggression, and precision.'

'British Special Forces?'

'Yes, but men who've been given further specific covert-operations training by my Service.'

The spy nodded. 'And straight back to your hotel after the meeting?'

Will also nodded. 'Exactly as we discussed. I'll meet you there for your debriefing.'

Soroush looked pensive. 'But if they want me to go with them?'

'Under no circumstances. You have your meeting and then part company with them.' Above all else, Will could not allow his man to fall under the control of the Iranians. He had far too many secrets in his head, secrets which, if exposed, could severely damage the West's ability to counter hostile Iranian activity.

'All right.' Soroush seemed happy with Will's response. Soroush then suddenly took one of Will's hands between two of his own. 'We've been through so much together.'

Will looked down at his hand with surprise. He felt a deep pang of uncertainty but did not show the emotion. Instead he said, 'Indeed we have, my friend.'

Soroush smiled, and for a moment Will suspected that the man could read his thoughts. Soroush gripped his hand, exhaled, and released his hold. His smile faded. 'If anything happens, you'll take care of my wife and my kids, yes?'

'Nothing will happen.' Will sighed. 'But *if* the need ever arose, of course I'd make sure your family was supported.' This above all else was true.

Soroush smiled and nodded. He pointed a finger at Will and then gently touched its tip against Will's chest. 'I remember the first time I met you. I remember thinking that I'd never met a man as scary and ruthless as you. But over the years I've come to realise that there is a very different side to you, a side you often try to hide, one that is full of depth and compassion.' A look of sadness replaced the smile. 'But I also know that you tread a very solitary path.'

Will frowned. 'Perhaps *you* know *me* too well.'

Soroush shook his head. 'I would have to live to a very old age to fully understand you. And I'm not convinced that I'll ever reach such an age.' Soroush waved slightly, then turned abruptly and walked off in the direction of Central Park's Gapstow Bridge.

Will watched him for a moment, pondering the other man's words. Then he sighed and pushed aside all thoughts besides those he needed to focus on the meeting. He reached into his overcoat pocket and pulled out a mobile phone and a Bluetooth earpiece, which he fixed into position. He pressed one number on the phone handset and spoke. 'Soroush is on his way. He should be at the location in ten minutes.'

Then he took off at a run. He darted into a cluster of trees and brought himself to an abrupt stop before swivelling around and dropping down to a crouch. He brought his binoculars up to his eyes and then reached for his phone again.

'Okay, I've got the bridge. What do you see?'

A second passed before three voices came back at him in rapid sequence.

'Alpha. Nothing.'

'Bravo. Nothing.'

'Charlie. Have him. Nearly there.'

Will dropped even lower to the ground and scanned left and right of the bridge. He saw Soroush walking on the East Drive path and a jogger trotting close behind him. The jogger would be Charlie. The spy turned onto the Gapstow Bridge, but the jogger didn't follow him.

Will pressed the number three on his mobile phone. 'I see you.'

A voice came back immediately. 'I know. I'm going three hundred metres north and will then set my position. Our man should now be covered by Bravo.'

Will raised a hand and unnecessarily pressed the Bluetooth device harder against his ear. It seemed longer, but in seven seconds Will heard another voice.

'Bravo. Yes, I see him. Walking across the thing. No. Now stationary in the centre of the bridge. He's in position and waiting.'

Will raised his binoculars and looked. Bravo was right. Will's agent was standing on Gapstow Bridge. He knew that the foot crossing was approximately twenty-five metres long, and Soroush had followed his instructions by stopping in the centre of the bridge facing the pond to the south.

'Where are you, Bravo?' Will continued to scan either side of the bridge.

'Where I should be. One hundred metres northwest of the bridge. This is where I stay put.'

'Alpha?'

'Sixty metres from our man, by Wollman Rink.'

Will looked at his watch and exhaled. Everything was in place. His team had now set a perimeter around his spy by positioning themselves to the north, the northwest, and the northeast of Central Park's Gapstow Bridge. From his own position near the southern tip of the

pond, he looked towards Soroush. He could easily see the man's face. Soroush looked calm and still.

Will eased himself up a little and spoke into the Bluetooth as he did so. 'Okay, one minute and counting.'

Will examined Soroush again. The man was leaning on the bridge, obviously pretending to watch the rain on the water beneath him. There was a slight smile on his face. Will checked the time again and then spoke into his phone.

'All right, men. Any moment now.'

He forced himself to breathe and ignored the pain in his eyes from pressing the binoculars too hard against them. He kept scanning the bridge and its surroundings. 'Anything?'

A few seconds passed before each of his team members replied with the same word: 'Nothing.'

Within his peripheral vision, he spotted movement and turned slightly to see an elderly woman walking a dog on an adjacent path. He instinctively moved back into heavier cover, even though he knew that the woman could not see him. The dog walker moved past, and Will continued his surveillance. Soroush was no longer leaning and was now casually looking in either direction along the bridge.

'Charlie. I'm in position three hundred metres to the northeast of the pond. I might have something.'

Will immediately swung his binoculars towards Charlie's location. He widened his eyes and focused his mind on the Bluetooth earpiece.

Charlie spoke again, and his words were rapid but controlled. 'Yes, something. Two men.'

Will waited, not daring to speak. A screech of bird calls suddenly rose from the water before him, and he silently cursed the interruption to his focus. He looked quickly at Soroush, but the man was still alone on the bridge. Will turned back to look in Charlie's direction.

'They're at a stop.' Charlie's voice was slower this time. 'Fifty metres north of me, meaning three hundred and fifty metres from the bridge.'

Will instantly responded. 'Your assessment?'

'It's them.' Charlie went quiet for a moment. 'I'm sure it's them. But they're waiting, and that's bad.'

Will lowered his binoculars. He felt his pulse rate increase, but he ignored the natural reaction to the adrenaline release within his body. He put the binoculars up to his eyes again and this time looked to the northwest. 'Alpha? Bravo?'

Alpha spoke first. 'Four hostiles moving across my vision.'

Bravo then came onto the phone line. His voice was hushed. 'Another five coming straight at me.'

'Damn it.' Will thought rapidly. Such a large number of hostiles suggested that they were a snatch squad, which meant that most likely they had a driver and vehicle waiting somewhere nearby.

Alpha spoke. 'Mine have stopped.'

'So have mine,' added Bravo.

Will frowned. 'Can they see either of you yet?'

'Don't think so.'

'No.'

Will was about to speak, but Bravo beat him to it. 'Two of mine are peeling off and heading southwest. The remaining three are still static.'

Will cursed again. 'They must have a vehicle ready for them near Central Park South or Fifth Avenue. The two men heading southwest around the pond are moving into position to secure the team and the target's extraction point.' He put his binoculars into a coat pocket and inhaled deeply. 'These are my instructions. Alpha and Bravo: put warning shots down against your hostiles and then move back to the west end of the bridge. Under no circumstances must either of you let them get onto the bridge. Charlie: eliminate your two men, then move directly to Soroush. Get him off the bridge and head east with him out of the park. I'll take care of the two hostiles heading my way.' He checked his watch. 'And, gentlemen, we have a maximum of two minutes to get this done before this place is swarming with local law enforcement officers. Time starts now.'

Will turned in the direction of his two oncoming targets. His route to them would be under continuous tree cover, and he estimated that

they would be nearly three hundred metres away from him. From his right overcoat pocket he withdrew a Heckler & Koch Mark 23 handgun. He walked quickly ahead, scrutinising each gap between trees while at the same time focusing on anything that might come through his mobile phone's earpiece. Within a hundred and forty metres he came to the westernmost point of the pond and then turned to face north. His targets would now be very close.

Will heard four or five rapid bangs from across the pond and then a voice in his ear. 'Charlie. Done. I'll be at the bridge in sixty seconds.' Charlie had successfully taken out the two Iranian intelligence officers.

More shots then, coming from the north. Alpha and Bravo had also begun their controlled withdrawal to the bridge. Will bent his knees slightly and moved forward with his gun now clasped in both hands. He saw them. Two hostiles were running but seemed oblivious to the fact that they might be heading towards danger. When one of them finally spotted Will, he stopped and shouted. Will shot him in the head and then immediately adjusted his angle and fired twice into the other man's torso. He sprinted up to the prone bodies and fired again into each man's skull.

'Am on the bridge waiting for Bravo.' This was Alpha.

Will spoke loudly. 'Bravo, get on that bridge.' He heard no response. 'Bravo?' He ran onwards and heard almost continuous gunfire ahead of him.

'Charlie. I'm also on bridge and moving to get –' For a second the line went quiet. Then Charlie came back on the air. He was shouting. 'Alpha's down! Multiples ahead! Have to engage!'

'Shit, no! Get Soroush out!' Will yelled, in a full sprint to the fight. Gunfire continued, becoming louder, and within seconds Will saw the bridge. And then he saw Charlie collapse. Four Iranians were about to step unopposed onto the bridge.

Will could easily see Soroush now. And Soroush could plainly see him. The man stared at him for what seemed like minutes but it was probably only a second. He shook his head very slightly.

Save yourself. I am lost to you now.

Will fired at the hostiles. One of them fell to the ground, and the others immediately swung towards Will and returned fire. He sprinted forward, ignoring the bullets that struck the ground on either side of him while continuing to fire. Two more men fell. He reached the bridge and saw the sole remaining Iranian quickly turn away from him. A gunshot rang out, and then the man turned back to face him. The man smiled. Will shot him in the head.

Soroush was now lying on the ground clutching his chest, breathing heavily. Will ran to him, crouched down, and cradled the man's head.

Soroush looked up and smiled through clenched teeth. 'Good things do come to an end.'

Will looked at Soroush's chest. 'Not yet. You're still alive.'

Soroush shook his head. 'You've got to leave me here. They're all dead, but you're too important to be caught up in this mess.'

'Never.' As soon as Will spoke the word, he felt a strong blow on his back, followed by immense pain in his stomach. He fell forward onto Soroush and then forced himself up to look at the source of his pain. There was a large exit wound in his abdomen. He looked up and saw eight new Iranian men walking towards the bridge. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw another four men coming towards the other side of the bridge. As he turned forward again, two more bullets struck him in the stomach. He doubled over in pain and placed a hand against his wounds. The men were approximately sixty metres away from Will and Soroush. Will looked at his gun and shook his head. He knew he had only five bullets left in the Mark 23 pistol. And he knew he did not have the time to drag his body over to one of the discarded Iranian weapons. He silently cursed and glanced at Soroush. The man was looking at him and shaking his head while gripping Will's arm. Will breathed deeply and mustered all his remaining strength and focus. He fired four of his bullets at the men before him and watched four of them fall dead. He then ignored everything else and turned fully to his spy.

Soroush smiled again and said softly, 'They must not take me alive. We both understand that. You know what has to be done.'

What Will knew was that he was losing consciousness, and he blinked hard to try to retain focus. He heard police sirens, but they were too far away. He shook his head. 'I can still save you.'

Soroush kept his smile. 'Not this time, my comrade.'

Will exhaled deeply and moved closer to Soroush. His pain was quickly being replaced by numbness, and he knew he had only a few remaining seconds of consciousness. He dragged his body up behind Soroush and pulled the man close to him so that they were both seated. The Iranian men were now only twenty metres away.

Will lifted his gun and placed its nozzle against Soroush's temple. He closed his eyes and whispered, 'Good-bye, old friend.'

Then he pulled the trigger and shot Soroush dead.