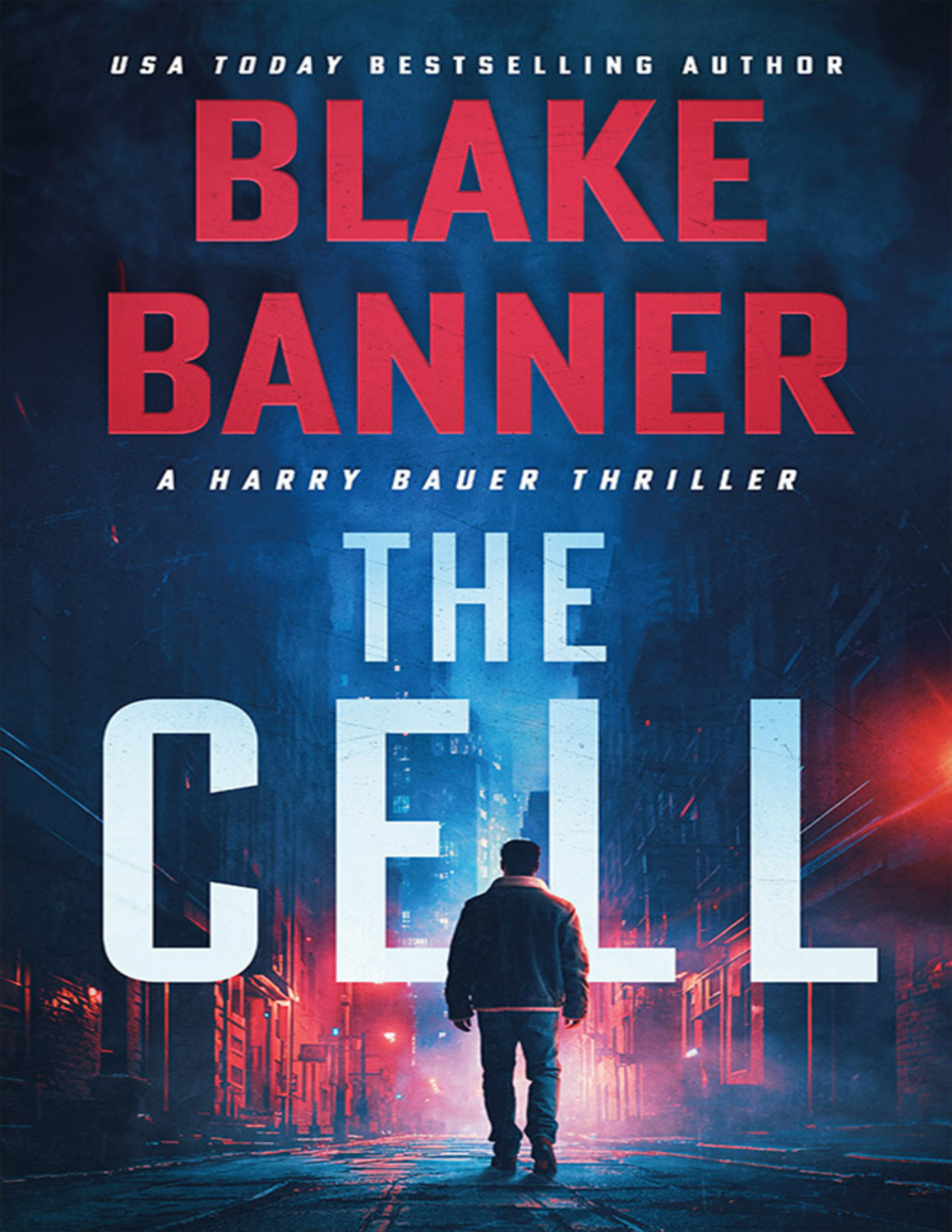


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# BLAKE BANNER

A HARRY BAUER THRILLER

# THE CELL

A man in a dark jacket and pants is walking away from the viewer down a dark, wet city street at night. The street is illuminated by vibrant red and blue neon lights, creating a moody, noir atmosphere. In the background, a bright light source, possibly a building or a distant light, creates a strong glow and lens flare. The overall scene is cinematic and mysterious.

# **THE CELL**

A HARRY BAUER THRILLER

**BLAKE BANNER**



RIGHTHOUSE

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“Thor, Baldacci, Flynn, Hamburg. Get ready as Banner fits right in!”

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AMAZON REVIEW

“Great stuff. Exciting and fast paced. On par with Flynn & Thor.”

AMAZON REVIEW

“The writing was superior, the story line was compelling and the action was top-notch. Sorry I could only give this one a five star rating!”

AMAZON REVIEW

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# ONE

I HAVE LIVED HAUNTED by the vision of a child's eyes.

I am not a religious man. I believe in reality. Maybe there is a greater truth back of that reality, underlying it. I don't know. I don't think anybody does. But one thing I am sure of is that the path to that truth, if it exists, does not involve hating and sentencing to death all those who stray from your idea of what is right.

That child could not have been more than four or five years old. She was pretty with very black hair and dark eyes. She was one of the people massacred at Al-Landy, where, in the name of God, in the name of what was right according to their religion, every man, woman, and child was murdered after being tortured, raped, or both. Their crime had been a crime against God. Their crime was wanting to buy a TV for the village café, and that constituted blasphemy, a denial of God.

I was there with my patrol, hidden in the sand dunes above the village, and I watched it happen. I watched them through the scope on my C8 Carbine. I watched them drive in in their trucks with their guns. I watched them round up the village. Somehow my eyes had locked on to that little girl's eyes, and her fear and grief was burned into my mind. I never knew her name. I never knew her parents or her family. All I knew was her terror, her

pain, and her deep sadness. They became a part of me, a part of what I had become.

A killer.

I don't do therapy. I don't think there are many people in this world who would know how to heal the massacre at Al-Landy. But a few months back, I ran into an old friend, Sam Jorgensen, who had spent several years with Delta Force and had seen his fair share of the darkness human beings are capable of creating. When he retired, he'd devoted his life to studying the human mind and got doctorates in psychology and philosophy. We'd gotten drunk together, and I'd told him about Al-Landy and the fact that I had hunted down the man responsible for the massacre, Mohammed Ben Amini, and I had killed him. But the little girl's eyes still haunted me.

He had told me to bury her. To find a place that was peaceful and quiet, undisturbed by human madness, to take something that represented her and bury it in that place and give her peace. A place where her soul could be at peace.

It took me seven months to build up the courage, but I'd finally decided to get the rifle and the scope through which I had watched the massacre, take them up to the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming, as high as I could climb, to those places where, when you look down, you feel your soul could take off and fly, and there bury that child, give her soul peace and, if there is a God of Love and Forgiveness, commit her soul to that god's care.

I had wrapped my C8 Carbine and scope in black silk and placed them in a wooden box. Then I had climbed into my Grenadier truck outside my old brownstone on James Baldwin Place and driven the two thousand plus miles to Pinedale. It took me all of thirty-four hours because I stopped on the way at a motel for a few hours' sleep.

Once in Pinedale, I stopped again, briefly, at my house on Pole Creek Road. There I showered, had coffee, and grabbed a bottle of whiskey. Then I drove to the Sacred Rim trailhead. From there, I walked for a couple of hours into the mountains, carrying the boxed C8 Carbine and scope on my back, past Photographer's Point to a place where Freemont Creek tumbles out of

the Winds into a deep canyon on its journey toward Freemont Lake. The view from there cannot be described with words, but it always seems to me to defy gravity and makes you believe that perhaps, after all, we have a soul, and that soul can rise above the hell that is this world and fly.

It was while I sat there with these rare thoughts, mourning a child I never had, whose name I did not even know, mourning the childhood she might have had, the happiness she might have had, and the existence I myself might have had—devoted to life instead of death—it was while I was mourning that child and preparing to lay her to rest that my phone rang.

There is no signal at that height in the Wind River Mountains. Phones don't work up there. Which meant the call could have come from just one person.

I closed my eyes, swore as one is not supposed to swear at a funeral, decided firmly not to answer it, and put it to my ear.

"Sir?"

The brigadier's clipped English voice answered. "Harry, are you in New York?"

"No."

"How soon can you get back? It's urgent."

I sighed quietly. "I'll leave my truck here and get a plane. Give me maybe six or seven hours."

There was a frown in his voice. "Where are you?"

I hesitated a fraction of a second. "Pinedale."

"Oh. Claire?"

"No. I'm up in the mountains."

"I see. I'm sorry to interrupt. It's important. You'll see when you get here. What's your nearest airport? Ralph Wenz, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"That's a little less than two thousand miles. I'll send the company plane. Give him three or four hours. I'll call you when he's about to touch down."

"You're sending the plane? It's that important?"

"Yes. That important."

“OK, I’m on my way.”

I said it without enthusiasm, hung up, sighed deeply, and looked up into the vast blue dome of the sky. I spoke across time to someplace outside of space where I wanted to believe she could hear me.

“I’ll come back,” I said. “I’ll set you free.” And as I spoke, a name came to me. A name that made me smile. I shrugged, and after a moment I added, “Miriam.” She’d looked like a Miriam, I decided.

I made my way back through the pinewoods to the trailhead. There I packed the stuff carefully in the truck, and on the drive back to my house on Pole Creek Road, as the sun blazed across the western horizon, I wondered what was so important that the brigadier would send Cobra’s specially adapted long haul Gulfstream to get me back to New York in the shortest time modern technology would allow. Israel, Iran, Syria, Ukraine, and North Korea all passed through my mind, but they were not my department. There were other agencies that took care of international crises of that sort. I was strictly a hit man—and a semi-retired one at that. I’d be fully retired, I told myself as I pulled up outside my house, if they’d let me.

---

I SLEPT through the flight and touched down in Teterboro just after midnight. There was a Grand Cherokee waiting for me with a driver in a blue suit who might have been an android with limited artificial intelligence. He asked me if I was me, and when I told him I was, he carried my bag to the Jeep and drove me, through the sleeping darkness of suburban street lamps, to the Cobra headquarters one and a half miles north of Pleasantville.

There, after going through the elaborate security of facial recognition and voice recognition, I was led across a checkerboard floor to the library, where I found the brigadier seated in his chesterfield in front of the fire. He stood as I was shown in and approached me with both hands outstretched.

“Harry, good of you to come at such short notice. Have you eaten? Will you have a drink?”

I told him I was fine, but he ignored me and poured us a whiskey each anyway. He sat as he handed me my drink and sighed.

“This is a unique situation, Harry. I am aware you are in need of time to think about your future and whether you want to continue as an operative with Cobra or not, and I would not, under any other circumstances, have troubled you.”

I sipped my drink and set it down on the table beside me.

“You don’t normally talk around a subject either, sir. I’m here. What’s it about?”

He took another deep breath. “Cobra is not officially sanctioned, as you know. However, within that, we operate under tight rules, and we are very careful about how we select our targets, and we have very strict criteria.”

“Crimes against humanity.”

“Quite, and that is strictly defined. As you know, we are very careful to avoid a culture of just picking off anyone who gets on some Western leader’s nerves. The risk is there and constant, and we guard against it.”

I nodded, smiled, and spread my hands. “So...?”

“There is an exception to every rule, and that exception has cropped up with a vengeance, if you will forgive the expression.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “An exception? What kind of an exception?”

“Before I tell you, let me just say this. You will be briefed, and if you decide you don’t want to do the job, you will be flown back to Pinedale, or wherever you want to go, and the case will be closed and shelved. You understand that? You are the only operative I know of to whom I would entrust this job.”

“I’m flattered. What is the job?”

“You have heard of Jeff Cook.”

It wasn’t a question, but I said, “Yes, of course. The founder of the Clearwater Corporation. He’s a tech giant, defense contractor...” I frowned, unaware of his involvement in any kind of crime against humanity. “Is he the target?”

“No. I am not sure if you are aware of it, but his wife was killed in a traffic accident a couple of years ago. They had one daughter, Beverly. She was twelve at the time of her mother’s death. She and her father live together at Clearlake, about an hour’s drive north of San Francisco. As you can imagine, after the mother’s death, she and her father became very close. She is home schooled...” He trailed off, making circular ‘on and on’ motions with his hand that somehow suggested she and her dad hung out together a lot. I hazarded a guess.

“Jeff Cook is a friend of yours.”

“Yes. We have been friends for some time.”

He watched me. I drew breath and picked up my drink. “You said this is a job you would only entrust to me, and you’ve made a point of mentioning his daughter. She is what, fourteen now?”

“Yes.”

“I am guessing this involves the child, and that is why you want me to do the job.”

“She has been abducted.”

“Do we know who by?”

The brigadier gave a kind of wince. “Yes and no. Jeff received a video which I’ll show you later. The man who sent it calls himself Hussein-i Sabbah.”

“Wasn’t that the name of the Persian head of the Hashishim?”

“Hassan-i Sabbah, founder of the Nizari Ismai’li sect, otherwise known as the Hashishim. Precisely. And you are quite right; Hussein is the diminutive of Hassan. The thing is, we have no record of this man. Neither have Central Intelligence or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I have spoken to ODIN—”

“Odin? The Norse god?” I smiled. “I didn’t realize you were so well connected, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes, and his mouth twitched like he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or not. “They are unofficial, like us. They don’t really exist, but they manage and coordinate the flow of intelligence from the Five Eyes.”

“I thought the NSA did that.”

“They wish. However, the point is ODIN hasn’t heard of him either.”

“So he’s a rogue operator.”

“That was the initial view, but there are indications he may have wider and deeper connections. He makes reference to things that only a well-connected operator would have knowledge of.”

“Like?”

“Training camps and bases in Iran, events in East Africa no one would know about unless they were well connected. I’ll acquaint you with all of this in a moment. But first let me make this clear: Cobra cannot employ you to find this girl. That is not our brief. We are exclusively concerned with eliminating a particular class of international criminal, as you know. On the other hand, we don’t have the kind of information that would allow us to classify this Hussein-i Sabbah as one of that class of criminal—as having committed crimes against humanity, and thus have a justified reason to send you after him.”

I frowned. “So what am I doing here?”

He smiled. “You are not here. You are up in the Wind River Mountains. What I have suggested to Jeff is that he employ you, privately, to recover his daughter—”

I interrupted him. “Sir, I am a soldier, not a detective. That is a job for the feds. They have the skills and the resources.”

He shook his head. “In the first place, between us, Cobra and the Clearwater Corporation have technological resources that the FBI can only dream about. In the second place, working directly for Jeff, you have unlimited access to a hundred billion dollars in financial resources. In addition to that, he cannot *brief* the Bureau. He cannot give them a task—a mission—and tell them how he wants it done. If he reported it to the Bureau, their protocols would kick in, and the machine would take over. As a result, they would investigate, Beverly would get killed, or worse, and Hussein would disappear. But if he briefs *you*, secretly, with no press coverage or leaky officials involved, they will not be expecting you. And you will have a

very precise brief, a brief the FBI could never have: Bring Beverly safely home and kill Hussein-i Sabbah.”

## TWO

HE REACHED down to the table by his side and pressed a remote control. The lights dimmed, and a TV screen emerged from the cabinet against the wall. It remained black for a moment. Then suddenly there was a young girl. She was about fourteen or fifteen but still childlike. Her face showed she was terrified, her cheeks glistened with tears, her eyes were puffy and red, and her mouth was pulled down in an expression of grief and fear. I felt a hot coal of rage in my belly.

A man appeared from off-screen and sat next to her. He was in a white robe and had a white turban wound around his head, but his face was obscured by a black scarf. Behind them, there was a window, but it had been smeared over with black paint, and only a couple of glimmers of light shone through at the edges. There were faint, dim noises which were hard to distinguish. The girl's sobbing was clearly audible. The man spoke suddenly. His voice was slightly muffled by the scarf.

"Good morning, Mr. Cook. How does it feel to be the richest man in the world today?" He had a very slight accent, but his English was that of a man who had been through an elite English education—Eton or Harrow and then Oxford. "How does the value of all that wealth stack up against the loss of your daughter? Do you feel rich and privileged right now?"

He stopped talking and looked down at the floor.

“I’ll tell you what I think, Mr. Cook. I think that right now”—he raised his head to look at the camera again—“you are the poorest man on the planet. Because you have lost the only truly valuable thing you had, and your world is now a world of pain.” He shook his head. “It does not get any better. It only gets worse and more painful. I will tell you what comes next. I will marry your daughter, and she will become my possession, my chattel. We will live together in Sartakht. I will beat her often to keep her in submission. She will bear me children, and she will raise them to be great warriors and heroes. You will see them born, and you will see their birthdays. You will see them graduate to Rafsanjan, and you will see your daughter raise them, like the cow, like the breeding beast that she is. And one day, Mr. Cook, your daughter will be raped by my men. I will accuse her of adultery, and she will be executed, buried up to her neck in sand, and stoned to death. I will film the whole thing for you so that you can have a record of your daughter’s useful life and death.”

He spread his hands. “Can you stop this from happening? Of course. Obedience and subjugation will always bring God’s favor. But I do not have to tell you exactly what to do. Your own conscience will guide you. We will talk, Mr. Cook. You can crawl to me on your knees, and you can tell me what steps you have taken to bring God’s favor upon you.”

He turned to Beverly. “You want to say some words to your father?”

She nodded and spoke through her sobs. “I love you, Daddy, and tell Aunt Bella Aurora I love her and miss her. And please, follow the path of subjugation to God.”

Hussein leaned forward toward the camera, and it went black. The lights came up. I said, “Who is Aunt Bella Aurora?”

“We have no idea, and Jeff has no idea either. We are trying to work it out.”

“What about the noises and the patches of light through the pane on the window?”

“We have forensic specialists working on both, but so far, we have very little to go on.”

I nodded. Something was nagging at the back of my mind. While I let the back of my mind work at it, I said, “Sartakht and Rafsanjan, what are these places?”

He gave a single nod and took a pull on his drink. As he set it down, he said, “It’s what I mentioned to you earlier. There are very few people that know about either of those places. The fact that he knows about both says a lot. Sartakht is a training camp deep in the Zagros mountain range. It specializes in very particular kinds of terrorism, from cyber terrorism to mental conditioning and esoteric stuff like that. Rafsanjan is a research center, part of a network that specializes in weapons of mass destruction. Both have close ties with a number of terrorist organizations. Not just jihadist ones, either. They are working increasingly closely with Russia and North Korea.”

“So where do I start?”

“You’ll do it?”

“Of course. But I’m not real clear yet what *it* is. How did the abduction happen? Were there any witnesses? Do we have any forensics, fingerprints, DNA...?” He drew breath to answer, but I interrupted him. “Why is Cook not here to tell me himself?”

He shook his head. “There can be no personal contact between you and Cook. He must have absolute deniability, not just plausible but indisputable. Besides, I can take you through the whole thing, probably better than he can.”

“You were there?” I tried to keep the irony out of my voice but didn’t do a great job.

“No, and neither was he. But where he is emotionally distraught, I am not. So I can be more objective. Shall I walk you through what we know?”

“Yeah.”

He pulled an old-fashioned rope hanging from the ceiling beside his chair, and a moment later, a man in a white jacket with white gloves stepped in. The brigadier said, “We’ll need some sandwiches—cheese, ham, pickles, you know the sort of thing.”