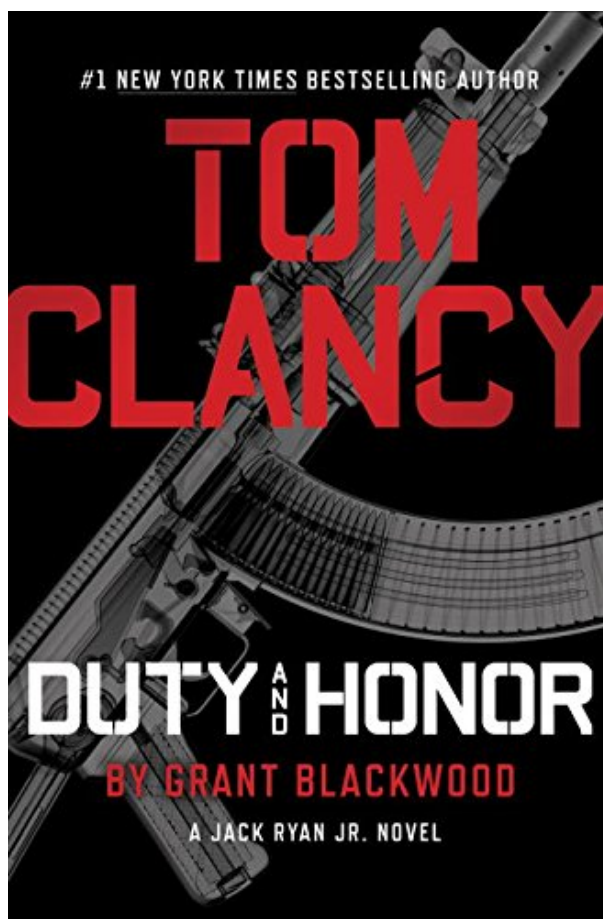
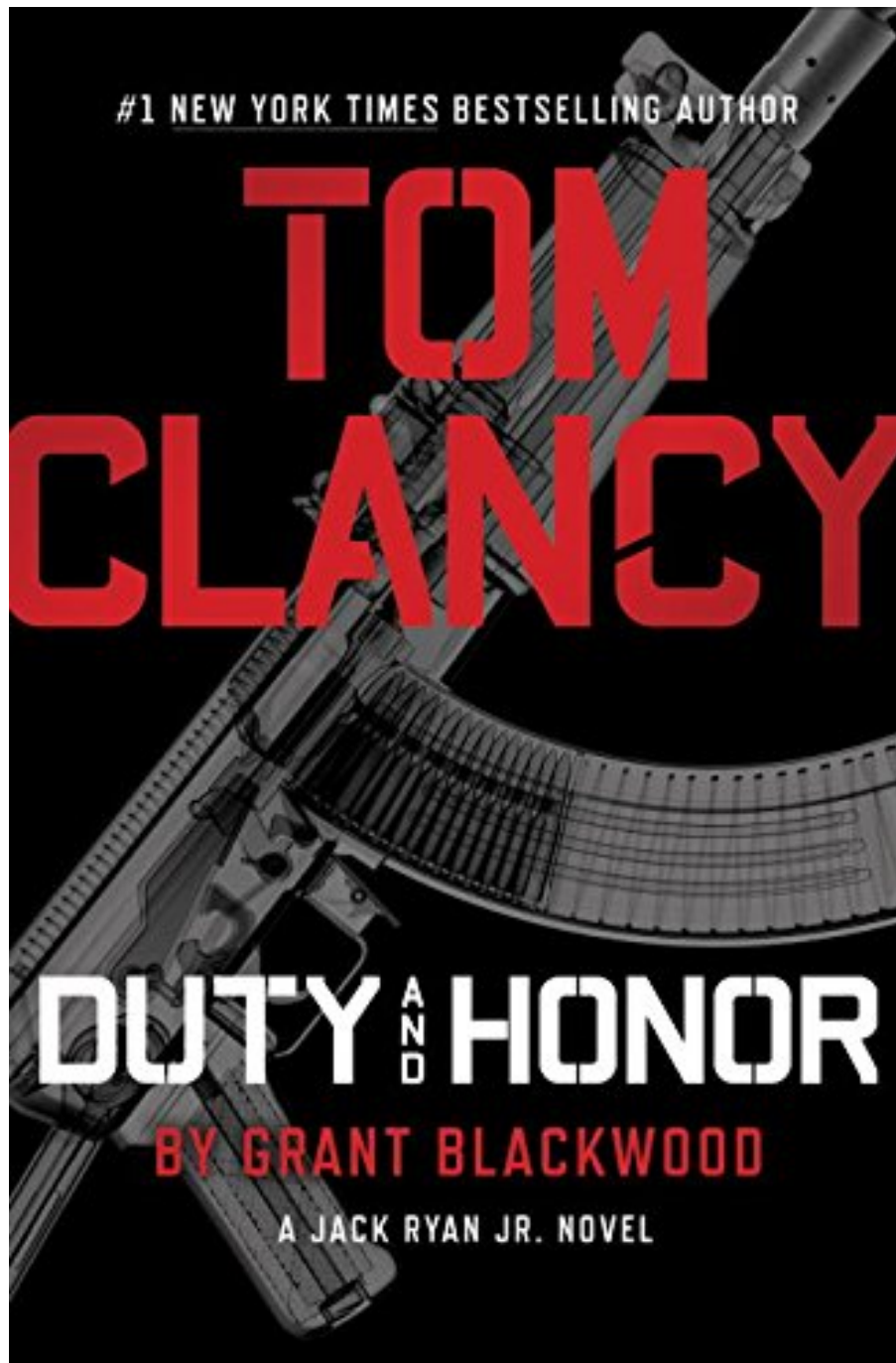


TOM CLANCY DUTY AND HONOR (A JACK RYAN JR. NOVEL) BY GRANT BLACKWOOD



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Review

Praise for the bestselling novels of Tom Clancy

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“BRILLIANT.”—Newsweek

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“[CLANCY] EXCITES, ILLUMINATES...A REAL PAGE-TURNER.”—Los Angeles Daily News

About the Author

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The New York Times–bestselling author of the Briggs Tanner series, GRANT BLACKWOOD is also the coauthor of the #1 New York Times bestseller *Dead or Alive*, with Tom Clancy, and *The Kill Switch*, with James Rollins. Blackwood is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Tom Clancy Under Fire*. A U.S. Navy Veteran, Grant spent three years aboard a guided missile frigate as an Operations Specialist and a Pilot Rescue Swimmer.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Alexandria, Virginia

Jack Ryan, Jr., would later wonder what exactly had saved his life that night. One thing was certain: It hadn't been skill. Maybe the heft of the bok choy had bought him a split second, maybe the mud, but not skill. Dumb luck. Survival instinct.

The Supermercado was neither in his neighborhood nor near his frequent errand stops, but it did have the best selection of fruits and vegetables in Alexandria—so Ding Chavez had told him eight months ago, but it had been only recently, since his forced leave of absence from The Campus, that he'd become a believer. Being unemployed had given him a lot to think about and plenty of time to broaden his horizons. The one frontier he'd so far refused to explore despite his sister Sally's exhortations was binge-watching *Girls* on HBO. That was his Rubicon. No crossing the river for the Roman legions, no chick TV for Jack Ryan. Soon, though, he'd have to make a decision about his loose-ends lifestyle. Another couple weeks and his probation would be over. Gerry Hendley would want an answer: Was he coming back to The Campus, or were they parting company permanently?

And do what? Jack thought.

He'd spent most of his adult life working at The Campus, aka Hendley Associates, first as an analyst and then as an operations officer—a field spook. The off-the-books counterterror organization had been created by his father, President Jack Ryan, and had since its inception been overseen by former senator Gerry Hendley. So far they'd had a lot of success going after some of the world's "big bads" while still managing to make a decent profit not only for their clients, all of whom knew Hendley only as a financial arbitrage company, but also for The Campus's covert operational budget.

"Seventeen fifty," the cashier told him.

Jack handed her a twenty, took his change, then collected his brown-paper sack from the glum teenage bagger and headed for the door. It was just past eight p.m. and the store was almost deserted. Through the broad front windows he could see rain glittering in the glow of the parking lot's sodium-vapor lights. Accompanied by a cold front, rain had been falling in Alexandria for three straight days. Creeks were swollen and the DIY stores nearest the Potomac were seeing a jump in sandbag sales. Perfect weather for homemade slow-cooker chili. He'd just put in a solid eight miles on his gym's indoor track, followed by a twenty-minute -circuit of push-ups, pull-ups, and planks, and he hoped to turn his bag full of ground beef, beans, peppers, onions, tomatoes, and bok choy—his mom's most recent superfood recommendation—into a reward for all his sweat. The chili wouldn't be ready until tomorrow; tonight, Chinese-takeout leftovers.

The automatic door slid open and Jack used his free hand to pull his sweatshirt's hood over his head. It was a short walk to his car—a black Chrysler 300 and the first sedan he'd owned in a long time—and then a fifteen-minute drive back to his condo at the Oronoco. The parking lot's surface was new and its fresh coat of asphalt shimmered black under the slick of rain. Moving at a half-jog, feeling the chilled rain running down his chin and into his shirt, Jack covered the thirty yards to his car, which he'd parked trunk-first against the guardrail. Old habits, he thought. Be ready to leave quickly; know your closest exits and highways. Months of "civilian" life and still a lot of the fieldcraft rules John Clark and the rest had taught him hadn't faded. Did this tell Jack something? Was this just a shadow of a habit, or inclination?

As he neared his car, he saw a sheet of white paper stuck under his windshield wiper. A flyer—food drive, garage sale, voting reminder . . . Whatever it was, Jack wasn't in the mood. He leaned sideways and reached for the flyer. Sodden, it tore free in a clump, leaving a narrow strip trapped beneath the wiper blade.

“Shit,” Jack muttered.

From behind, a voice: “Hey, man, give it up!”

Even before he turned, the tone of the man’s voice combined with the time of night and location had touched off Jack’s warning bells. The Supermercado wasn’t in the best of neighborhoods, with its fair share of crack-driven homelessness and petty crime.

Jack turned on his heel while taking two steps backward, hoping to buy time and room to maneuver. The man was tall, nearly six and a half feet, and gangly, his head covered in a dark hood, and he came from Jack’s left at a fast walking pace.

Overhead, lightning flashed, casting the man’s face in stark shadow.

Break his pattern, Jack thought. Having targeted his prey and committed himself to the attack, the man—a crackhead or tweaker, Jack guessed—was laser-focused, confident this roll would go like all the others. Jack needed to change that.

He took a step toward the man and pointed. “Fuck off! Go away!”

Junkie muggers rarely saw this kind of victim aggression. Wolves prefer weak sheep.

But Jack’s belligerence had no effect. The man’s pace and his locked-on gaze at Jack didn’t waver. His right hand, hanging beside his thigh, rose up to his waist, palm away from Jack. He’s got a knife. If his attacker was carrying a gun he would have already brandished it. With a gun you could put the fear of God in someone at a distance; with a knife you needed to get close enough to put the blade against your victim’s face or neck. And the palm-away knife grip told Jack something else: The man wasn’t interested in scaring him into submission. It was easier to strip valuables from a dead body.

Jack’s heart was pounding now, his breathing going shallow. He swept his right hand to his hip, lifted the hem of his sweatshirt with his thumb, his palm touching . . . nothing. Goddamn it. He wasn’t armed; he had a CCW permit but had stopped carrying his Glock the day he left The Campus. Keys. His car keys were in his pocket, not where they should have been—in his hand, as a backup weapon. Lazy, Jack.

His attacker hadn’t missed seeing Jack’s flash of hesitation. He sprinted forward, right hand sweeping up and out in preparation for a cross-hand neck slash. As though passing a basketball, Jack heaved his grocery bag at the man. It bounced off his chest, the contents scattering across the wet asphalt. This broke both his pattern and his stride, but for only a moment, and did not leave enough time to create an opening for Jack’s own attack. Retreat, then. Live to fight another day. There was no point getting in a knife fight if he had a choice.

He turned, sprinted for the guardrail, vaulted it, and landed in mush. Below him, a slope with patchy grass and cedar ground cover met a line of concrete Jersey barrier along the highway.

Behind him, Jack vaguely registered the man’s footsteps picking up speed on the pavement. He started shuffle--sliding down the embankment, using the scrub brush for footholds.

His attacker was fast. A hand clutched Jack’s hood and wrenched his head backward, exposing his throat. Jack didn’t fight it, but rather spun hard to his right, into the man and toward what he guessed would be the descending knife blade. And it was there, arcing toward his face. Jack lifted his left arm and drove his

forearm down, diverting the blade and trapping the man's arm in his own armpit.

With his right hand Jack reached up, fingers clawing at the man's eyes and pushing his head sideways. Together they fell back, Jack on top. They began sliding down, churning up mud and grinding over cedar stumps as they went.

The man was flailing, but with purpose, Jack realized. Trying to free his knife arm from Jack's armpit, the man reached across with his left hand, grabbed Jack's chin, and wrenched his head sideways. Pain flashed in Jack's neck. One of the man's fingers slipped into his mouth, and Jack bit down hard, heard a muffled crunch. The man screamed.

Still entwined, they slammed to a stop against one of the Jersey barriers bordering the highway. Jack heard a sick--sounding thud, followed by an umph. Through squinted eyes Jack saw the flash of headlights, heard the hiss of tires on the wet pavement.

The man was rolling sideways, crawling on his hands and knees. Lightning flashed again and Jack could make out a bloody divot in the side of his skull; a flap of scalp drooped over his ear.

Skull fracture. A bad one.

Jack was crawling also, but in the opposite direction toward the embankment. He got to his feet and turned. The man was already up and lumbering toward him. Like a drunk trying to walk a line, the man crossed his feet and staggered, gathering momentum until he plunged face-first into the mud. Swaying, he pushed himself to his knees. He reached up to touch the side of his skull, then stared at his bloody hand.

"What is . . . ?" the man growled, his speech slurred. "I need a . . . need the . . ."

He scanned the ground as though he'd lost something.

Looking for his knife.

Jack spotted it a few feet to the man's left front. Too late. The man pushed himself to his feet and shuffled toward it. Jack charged, feet slipping in the mud as he tried to close the distance. The man bent over for the knife, almost tipping forward as he did so. Jack pushed off with his back foot, drove his knee upward. It slammed into the man's face, vaulting him backward into the barricade. Jack's feet slipped out from under him and he toppled backward into the mud. His head bounced against the ground. His vision sparkled.

Move . . . do something, he thought. He's coming. An image of himself flashed in his mind—flat on his back in the mud, throat slashed open, rain peppering his open eyes, the flash of a coroner's camera—

No, no way.

Jack rolled onto his side.

Ten feet away his attacker sat half sprawled against the concrete barricade. His head lolled to one side. The gray concrete behind him was smeared with blood. The man was white, pale, in his mid-thirties, with close-cropped light hair. Jack glimpsed what looked like white skull through his lacerated scalp.

"Stay there, man!" Jack shouted. "Don't move."

Blinking as though confused, the man focused on Jack for a second, then rolled sideways and began working with his knees like a toddler trying to crawl on a tile floor. He managed to climb to his feet.

Tough son of a bitch.

Jack spotted the glint of the knife a few feet away, half buried in the muck. He crawled to it, grabbed it. It was a locking folder, almost eight inches long, and hefty.

“Just stop!” Jack shouted, panting. He tasted blood in his mouth. He spit it out. His, or the mugger’s? he wondered. “The cops are coming!”

He doubted this, but maybe it would be enough to either drive the man off or make him sit back down and accept his fate. And a free trip to the ER. Chances were, in the darkness and the rain, no one knew what was happening, didn’t know that Jack Ryan, Jr., America’s First Son and unemployed special operator, was fighting for his life with a crackhead mugger in the mud beside a highway.

Christ Almighty.

The man was moving now, but not toward Jack. With his left hand braced against the top of the concrete barricade, he shuffled forward, stopped, kept going. A car swept past him, honking, covering him in a sheet of water. The man didn’t react.

Brain injury, Jack thought. Despite himself, he felt a pang of . . . what? Of sympathy for a junkie who’d just tried to kill him? Come on, Jack. Still, he couldn’t let the guy wander off, sit down in some doorway, and die of a brain bleed. Ah, hell . . .

“Just stop!” Jack shouted. “Come back—”

The man reached a gap between the Jersey barriers and his guiding hand dropped into free space. He stopped walking, looked down at his feet.

A few feet away a car swept past, horn honking.

The man turned left and stumbled forward onto the highway.

“Hey, don’t—”

Jack saw the headlights and heard the roar of the diesel engine a second before the eighteen-wheeler emerged from under the overpass. The truck’s horn started blaring.

Jack sprinted.

The truck plowed squarely into the man.

Jack stood rooted, staring, only half hearing the truck’s air brakes wheeze and sputter.

Did that just happen?

Do something. Move.

He turned and ran back toward the embankment.

He stopped.

Above, standing at the guardrail, a man was backlit by car headlights.

“Hey,” Jack called. “Call nine-one-one!”

The figure didn’t move.

Jack cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted again.

The figure turned and disappeared. A few moments later the headlights retreated into the darkness.

Adrenaline was a hell of a thing, Jack thought. As was shock. He’d seen a lot of stuff, but something about this . . . The man hadn’t even glanced at the truck bearing down on him.

Jack stood in the shower, eyes closed, forehead pressed against the tile wall, as hot water rushed over his head. His hands were still shaking, pulsing in time with his heartbeat.

He’d left. With the man’s knife. He’d had the presence of mind to make sure he hadn’t lost anything traceable—phone, keys, wallet, receipt, the larger items from his grocery bag—but ninety seconds after the truck struck the man, Jack was pulling out of the Supermercado parking lot. It wasn’t until he was halfway back to the Oronoco that he heard sirens.

Was it the shock of it? Maybe, or maybe he just didn’t want to deal with the ten thousand questions the cops and media would start asking not just of him but of his father, his mother, his sisters, his brother, and his colleagues at Hendley. Tabloids and A-list media outlets alike would interview his ex-girlfriends and elementary school friends. The headlines would be salacious. Anyone gunning for his father on Capitol Hill would milk the story for all it was worth. All that aside, he was the victim; it was cut-and-dried. There was a witness, or at least a possible witness. Why had the man left?

Jack hadn’t escaped the assault unscathed. Despite having trapped the man’s knife arm, the blade had gotten him—three shallow stabs right below his shoulder blade, none deeper than a half-inch, but enough to leave his shoulder burning and partially numb. Jack wondered, Were the wounds collateral to the struggle, or had his attacker been trying to drive the blade home?

His slide down the cedar bushes had scratched and abraded his lower back and belly so badly it looked like someone had taken to him with a belt sander. Another worry: Had he swallowed some of the man’s blood? If so, he had to start thinking about hep C or something worse.

Guy tried to kill me, Jack thought. Why? Because he hadn’t gotten his high for a couple hours? For the twenty-two dollars and change Jack had in his pocket? For his car? This wasn’t the first time someone had tried to take his life, but this felt different.

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Even though he's on forced leave from the clandestine intelligence group known as The Campus, Jack Ryan, Jr., still finds himself caught in the crosshairs after an attempt on his life is thwarted when he turns the tables on his would-be dispatcher. Convinced that the attack is linked to his recent covert actions with the convalescing Iranian national Ysabel Kashini, Jack sets out to find out who wants him dead, and why.

Using clues found on the now dead assassin, Jack pursues the investigation, following a growing trail of corpses to the European Union's premier private security firm, Rostock Security Group, and its founder, Jürgen Rostock—a former general in the German Special Forces Command. Rostock is world-renowned as a philanthropist and human rights advocate. But Jack knows him from a Campus mission revolving around a company linked to RSG—a mission that has put him on Rostock's lethal radar.

Without any Campus resources, Jack launches his own shadow campaign to uncover the truth about Rostock and a long-running false-flag war of terror that has claimed thousands of lives. Yet all of that bloodshed is but a precursor to a coming catastrophic event that will solidify Rostock's place among the global powers. An event that Jack must stop at any cost.

From the Hardcover edition.

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1

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And do what? Jack thought.

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beans, peppers, onions, tomatoes, and bok choy—his mom’s most recent superfood recommendation—into a reward for all his sweat. The chili wouldn’t be ready until tomorrow; tonight, Chinese-takeout leftovers.

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“Shit,” Jack muttered.

From behind, a voice: “Hey, man, give it up!”

Even before he turned, the tone of the man’s voice combined with the time of night and location had touched off Jack’s warning bells. The Supermercado wasn’t in the best of neighborhoods, with its fair share of crack-driven homelessness and petty crime.

Jack turned on his heel while taking two steps backward, hoping to buy time and room to maneuver. The man was tall, nearly six and a half feet, and gangly, his head covered in a dark hood, and he came from Jack’s left at a fast walking pace.

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Break his pattern, Jack thought. Having targeted his prey and committed himself to the attack, the man—a crackhead or tweaker, Jack guessed—was laser-focused, confident this roll would go like all the others. Jack needed to change that.

He took a step toward the man and pointed. “Fuck off! Go away!”

Junkie muggers rarely saw this kind of victim aggression. Wolves prefer weak sheep.

But Jack’s belligerence had no effect. The man’s pace and his locked-on gaze at Jack didn’t waver. His right hand, hanging beside his thigh, rose up to his waist, palm away from Jack. He’s got a knife. If his attacker was carrying a gun he would have already brandished it. With a gun you could put the fear of God in someone at a distance; with a knife you needed to get close enough to put the blade against your victim’s face or neck. And the palm-away knife grip told Jack something else: The man wasn’t interested in scaring him into submission. It was easier to strip valuables from a dead body.

Jack’s heart was pounding now, his breathing going shallow. He swept his right hand to his hip, lifted the hem of his sweatshirt with his thumb, his palm touching . . . nothing. Goddamn it. He wasn’t armed; he had a CCW permit but had stopped carrying his Glock the day he left The Campus. Keys. His car keys were in his pocket, not where they should have been—in his hand, as a backup weapon. Lazy, Jack.

His attacker hadn't missed seeing Jack's flash of hesitation. He sprinted forward, right hand sweeping up and out in preparation for a cross-hand neck slash. As though passing a basketball, Jack heaved his grocery bag at the man. It bounced off his chest, the contents scattering across the wet asphalt. This broke both his pattern and his stride, but for only a moment, and did not leave enough time to create an opening for Jack's own attack. Retreat, then. Live to fight another day. There was no point getting in a knife fight if he had a choice.

He turned, sprinted for the guardrail, vaulted it, and landed in a mush. Below him, a slope with patchy grass and cedar ground cover met a line of concrete Jersey barrier along the highway.

Behind him, Jack vaguely registered the man's footsteps picking up speed on the pavement. He started shuffle--sliding down the embankment, using the scrub brush for footholds.

His attacker was fast. A hand clutched Jack's hood and wrenched his head backward, exposing his throat. Jack didn't fight it, but rather spun hard to his right, into the man and toward what he guessed would be the descending knife blade. And it was there, arcing toward his face. Jack lifted his left arm and drove his forearm down, diverting the blade and trapping the man's arm in his own armpit.

With his right hand Jack reached up, fingers clawing at the man's eyes and pushing his head sideways. Together they fell back, Jack on top. They began sliding down, churning up mud and grinding over cedar stumps as they went.

The man was flailing, but with purpose, Jack realized. Trying to free his knife arm from Jack's armpit, the man reached across with his left hand, grabbed Jack's chin, and wrenched his head sideways. Pain flashed in Jack's neck. One of the man's fingers slipped into his mouth, and Jack bit down hard, heard a muffled crunch. The man screamed.

Still entwined, they slammed to a stop against one of the Jersey barriers bordering the highway. Jack heard a sick--sounding thud, followed by an umph. Through squinted eyes Jack saw the flash of headlights, heard the hiss of tires on the wet pavement.

The man was rolling sideways, crawling on his hands and knees. Lightning flashed again and Jack could make out a bloody divot in the side of his skull; a flap of scalp drooped over his ear.

Skull fracture. A bad one.

Jack was crawling also, but in the opposite direction toward the embankment. He got to his feet and turned. The man was already up and lumbering toward him. Like a drunk trying to walk a line, the man crossed his feet and staggered, gathering momentum until he plunged face-first into the mud. Swaying, he pushed himself to his knees. He reached up to touch the side of his skull, then stared at his bloody hand.

"What is . . . ?" the man growled, his speech slurred. "I need a . . . need the . . ."

He scanned the ground as though he'd lost something.

Looking for his knife.

Jack spotted it a few feet to the man's left front. Too late. The man pushed himself to his feet and shuffled toward it. Jack charged, feet slipping in the mud as he tried to close the distance. The man bent over for the knife, almost tipping forward as he did so. Jack pushed off with his back foot, drove his knee upward. It

slammed into the man's face, vaulting him backward into the barricade. Jack's feet slipped out from under him and he toppled backward into the mud. His head bounced against the ground. His vision sparkled.

Move . . . do something, he thought. He's coming. An image of himself flashed in his mind—flat on his back in the mud, throat slashed open, rain peppering his open eyes, the flash of a coroner's camera—

No, no way.

Jack rolled onto his side.

Ten feet away his attacker sat half sprawled against the concrete barricade. His head lolled to one side. The gray concrete behind him was smeared with blood. The man was white, pale, in his mid-thirties, with close-cropped light hair. Jack glimpsed what looked like white skull through his lacerated scalp.

“Stay there, man!” Jack shouted. “Don't move.”

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Tough son of a bitch.

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Praise for the bestselling novels of Tom Clancy

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“BRILLIANT.”—Newsweek

“HIGHLY ENTERTAINING.”—The Wall Street Journal

“[CLANCY] EXCITES, ILLUMINATES...A REAL PAGE-TURNER.”—Los Angeles Daily News

About the Author

TOM CLANCY was the #1 New York Times–bestselling author of more than eighteen books. He died in October 2013.

The New York Times–bestselling author of the Briggs Tanner series, GRANT BLACKWOOD is also the coauthor of the #1 New York Times bestseller *Dead or Alive*, with Tom Clancy, and *The Kill Switch*, with James Rollins. Blackwood is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Tom Clancy Under Fire*. A U.S. Navy Veteran, Grant spent three years aboard a guided missile frigate as an Operations Specialist and a Pilot Rescue Swimmer.

From the Hardcover edition.

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1

Alexandria, Virginia

Jack Ryan, Jr., would later wonder what exactly had saved his life that night. One thing was certain: It hadn't been skill. Maybe the heft of the bok choy had bought him a split second, maybe the mud, but not skill. Dumb luck. Survival instinct.

The Supermercado was neither in his neighborhood nor near his frequent errand stops, but it did have the best selection of fruits and vegetables in Alexandria—so Ding Chavez had told him eight months ago, but it had been only recently, since his forced leave of absence from The Campus, that he'd become a believer. Being unemployed had given him a lot to think about and plenty of time to broaden his horizons. The one frontier he'd so far refused to explore despite his sister Sally's exhortations was binge-watching *Girls* on HBO. That was his Rubicon. No crossing the river for the Roman legions, no chick TV for Jack Ryan. Soon, though, he'd have to make a decision about his loose-ends lifestyle. Another couple weeks and his probation would be over. Gerry Hendley would want an answer: Was he coming back to The Campus, or were they parting company permanently?

And do what? Jack thought.

He'd spent most of his adult life working at The Campus, aka Hendley Associates, first as an analyst and then as an operations officer—a field spook. The off-the-books counterterrorism organization had been created by his father, President Jack Ryan, and had since its inception been overseen by former senator Gerry Hendley. So far they'd had a lot of success going after some of the world's "big bads" while still managing to make a decent profit not only for their clients, all of whom knew Hendley only as a financial arbitrage company, but also for The Campus's covert operational budget.

"Seventeen fifty," the cashier told him.

Jack handed her a twenty, took his change, then collected his brown-paper sack from the glum teenage bagger and headed for the door. It was just past eight p.m. and the store was almost deserted. Through the broad front windows he could see rain glittering in the glow of the parking lot's sodium-vapor lights. Accompanied by a cold front, rain had been falling in Alexandria for three straight days. Creeks were swollen and the DIY stores nearest the Potomac were seeing a jump in sandbag sales. Perfect weather for homemade slow-cooker chili. He'd just put in a solid eight miles on his gym's indoor track, followed by a twenty-minute -circuit of push-ups, pull-ups, and planks, and he hoped to turn his bag full of ground beef, beans, peppers, onions, tomatoes, and bok choy—his mom's most recent superfood recommendation—into a reward for all his sweat. The chili wouldn't be ready until tomorrow; tonight, Chinese-takeout leftovers.

The automatic door slid open and Jack used his free hand to pull his sweatshirt's hood over his head. It was a short walk to his car—a black Chrysler 300 and the first sedan he'd owned in a long time—and then a fifteen-minute drive back to his condo at the Oronoco. The parking lot's surface was new and its fresh coat of asphalt shimmered black under the slick of rain. Moving at a half-jog, feeling the chilled rain running down his chin and into his shirt, Jack covered the thirty yards to his car, which he'd parked trunk-first against the guardrail. Old habits, he thought. Be ready to leave quickly; know your closest exits and highways. Months of "civilian" life and still a lot of the fieldcraft rules John Clark and the rest had taught him hadn't faded. Did this tell Jack something? Was this just a shadow of a habit, or inclination?

As he neared his car, he saw a sheet of white paper stuck under his windshield wiper. A flyer—food drive, garage sale, voting reminder . . . Whatever it was, Jack wasn't in the mood. He leaned sideways and reached for the flyer. Sodden, it tore free in a clump, leaving a narrow strip trapped beneath the wiper blade.

"Shit," Jack muttered.

From behind, a voice: "Hey, man, give it up!"

Even before he turned, the tone of the man's voice combined with the time of night and location had touched

off Jack's warning bells. The Supermercado wasn't in the best of neighborhoods, with its fair share of crack-driven homelessness and petty crime.

Jack turned on his heel while taking two steps backward, hoping to buy time and room to maneuver. The man was tall, nearly six and a half feet, and gangly, his head covered in a dark hood, and he came from Jack's left at a fast walking pace.

Overhead, lightning flashed, casting the man's face in stark shadow.

Break his pattern, Jack thought. Having targeted his prey and committed himself to the attack, the man—a crackhead or tweaker, Jack guessed—was laser-focused, confident this roll would go like all the others. Jack needed to change that.

He took a step toward the man and pointed. “Fuck off! Go away!”

Junkie muggers rarely saw this kind of victim aggression. Wolves prefer weak sheep.

But Jack's belligerence had no effect. The man's pace and his locked-on gaze at Jack didn't waver. His right hand, hanging beside his thigh, rose up to his waist, palm away from Jack. He's got a knife. If his attacker was carrying a gun he would have already brandished it. With a gun you could put the fear of God in someone at a distance; with a knife you needed to get close enough to put the blade against your victim's face or neck. And the palm-away knife grip told Jack something else: The man wasn't interested in scaring him into submission. It was easier to strip valuables from a dead body.

Jack's heart was pounding now, his breathing going shallow. He swept his right hand to his hip, lifted the hem of his sweatshirt with his thumb, his palm touching . . . nothing. Goddamn it. He wasn't armed; he had a CCW permit but had stopped carrying his Glock the day he left The Campus. Keys. His car keys were in his pocket, not where they should have been—in his hand, as a backup weapon. Lazy, Jack.

His attacker hadn't missed seeing Jack's flash of hesitation. He sprinted forward, right hand sweeping up and out in preparation for a cross-hand neck slash. As though passing a basketball, Jack heaved his grocery bag at the man. It bounced off his chest, the contents scattering across the wet asphalt. This broke both his pattern and his stride, but for only a moment, and did not leave enough time to create an opening for Jack's own attack. Retreat, then. Live to fight another day. There was no point getting in a knife fight if he had a choice.

He turned, sprinted for the guardrail, vaulted it, and landed in mush. Below him, a slope with patchy grass and cedar ground cover met a line of concrete Jersey barrier along the highway.

Behind him, Jack vaguely registered the man's footsteps picking up speed on the pavement. He started shuffle--sliding down the embankment, using the scrub brush for footholds.

His attacker was fast. A hand clutched Jack's hood and wrenched his head backward, exposing his throat. Jack didn't fight it, but rather spun hard to his right, into the man and toward what he guessed would be the descending knife blade. And it was there, arcing toward his face. Jack lifted his left arm and drove his forearm down, diverting the blade and trapping the man's arm in his own armpit.

With his right hand Jack reached up, fingers clawing at the man's eyes and pushing his head sideways. Together they fell back, Jack on top. They began sliding down, churning up mud and grinding over cedar stumps as they went.

The man was flailing, but with purpose, Jack realized. Trying to free his knife arm from Jack's armpit, the man reached across with his left hand, grabbed Jack's chin, and wrenched his head sideways. Pain flashed in Jack's neck. One of the man's fingers slipped into his mouth, and Jack bit down hard, heard a muffled crunch. The man screamed.

Still entwined, they slammed to a stop against one of the Jersey barriers bordering the highway. Jack heard a sick--sounding thud, followed by an umph. Through squinted eyes Jack saw the flash of headlights, heard the hiss of tires on the wet pavement.

The man was rolling sideways, crawling on his hands and knees. Lightning flashed again and Jack could make out a bloody divot in the side of his skull; a flap of scalp drooped over his ear.

Skull fracture. A bad one.

Jack was crawling also, but in the opposite direction toward the embankment. He got to his feet and turned. The man was already up and lumbering toward him. Like a drunk trying to walk a line, the man crossed his feet and staggered, gathering momentum until he plunged face-first into the mud. Swaying, he pushed himself to his knees. He reached up to touch the side of his skull, then stared at his bloody hand.

"What is . . . ?" the man growled, his speech slurred. "I need a . . . need the . . ."

He scanned the ground as though he'd lost something.

Looking for his knife.

Jack spotted it a few feet to the man's left front. Too late. The man pushed himself to his feet and shuffled toward it. Jack charged, feet slipping in the mud as he tried to close the distance. The man bent over for the knife, almost tipping forward as he did so. Jack pushed off with his back foot, drove his knee upward. It slammed into the man's face, vaulting him backward into the barricade. Jack's feet slipped out from under him and he toppled backward into the mud. His head bounced against the ground. His vision sparkled.

Move . . . do something, he thought. He's coming. An image of himself flashed in his mind—flat on his back in the mud, throat slashed open, rain peppering his open eyes, the flash of a coroner's camera—

No, no way.

Jack rolled onto his side.

Ten feet away his attacker sat half sprawled against the concrete barricade. His head lolled to one side. The gray concrete behind him was smeared with blood. The man was white, pale, in his mid-thirties, with close-cropped light hair. Jack glimpsed what looked like white skull through his lacerated scalp.

"Stay there, man!" Jack shouted. "Don't move."

Blinking as though confused, the man focused on Jack for a second, then rolled sideways and began working with his knees like a toddler trying to crawl on a tile floor. He managed to climb to his feet.

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