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ASSASSINS CODE

A Joe Ledger Novel

By

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DEDICATION

This one is for the mothers of all nations and for the three hikers unfairly and illegally arrested by the Iranian government: Shane Bauer, Josh Fattal and Sara Shourd.

Our children are not weapons of war or politics.

To the memory of John B. Maberry, who earned the Congressional Medal of Honor at the Battle of Gettysburg

And, as always, for Sara Jo.

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PART ONE

ACTS OF WAR

June 15 to ____

“Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics
do not know what religion is.”

Mohandas Gandhi

Chapter One

Starbox Coffee

Tehran, Iran

June 15, 7:23 am

She said, "Look down at your chest."

I held the cell phone to my ear as I bent my head. Two red dots, quivering slightly, danced right over my heart.

"You are one second away from death," said the caller.

Chapter Two

Starbox, Coffee

Tehran, Iran

June 15, 7:25 am

I didn't know the voice. She was a stranger. I didn't know her name. Didn't know anything except that she had my cell number. Ten seconds ago I was about to go into Starbox – yes, they really call it that in Iran-- for a cup of bold and a couple of pastries. The street outside was empty.

I looked up. The shooters had to be in the building across the street, maybe the fifth floor. Didn't really matter, the range was a hundred yards and even a sloppy marksman could punch my ticket at that distance. I doubted these guys were sloppy. And there were two of them. I was also pretty sure I knew why they were after me.

“Okay,” I said.

“I need you to confirm your name,” she said in Persian. She had a very sexy voice for a psycho killer. Low and smoky.

“Why?”

“Because I have to be certain.”

“Geez, sister,” I said, “if this is how you I.D. your targets then I don't think you're going to get that Contract Killer merit badge.”

The joke didn't translate well but she made a sound. It might have been a laugh. Glad she was amused. Sweat was pouring down my spine. The two little laser sights gave me no chance at all to run.

"If this was simply a matter of killing you," she said, "then we'd have done it and taken your wallet for identification." She had a European accent but she was hiding it by trying to speak Persian like a native. Kind of weird. Not the weirdest thing going on at the moment.

"Um...thanks?" I said.

"Tell me your name," she said again.

There had to be three of them. Two shooters and her. Was she the spotter? If not, there could have been one or two others, spotting for the gunmen. Or it might have been the three of them.

"Ebenezer Scrooge," I said.

"No games," she warned. "Your name."

"Joe."

"Full name."

"Joseph."

One of the laser sights drifted down from my chest and settled on my crotch.

"Once more?" she coaxed.

"Joseph Edwin Ledger." No screwing around this time.

"Rank?"

"Why?"

"Rank?"

“Captain. Want my shoe size?”

There was a pause. “I was warned about you. You think you’re funny.”

“Everyone thinks I’m funny.”

“I doubt that’s true. How often do you make Mr. Church laugh out loud?”

“Never heard of him,” I lied.

Now I was confused. Up till now I thought she was part of a team looking to take me down for the little bit of nastiness I got into last night. Echo Team and I went into a high security facility and liberated three twenty-somethings who had been arrested a year ago while hiking in the mountains. The *Iraqi* mountains. An Iranian patrol crossed the border, nabbed the hikers and started making noise in the media that it had the three hikers who had illegally trespassed and therefore they were spies. They weren’t. One was a former Peace Corps team leader who was there with his animal behaviorist girlfriend who wanted to take photos of a kind of rare tiger to help her with her masters’ thesis. *Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*. Asiatic cheetah. Also known as the Iranian cheetah. No, I’m not making this up.

The hikers had been used as pawns in Iran’s ongoing policy of stalling and disinformation regarding their nuclear program. Normally we’d let the State Department and world opinion exert pressure on the Iranian government...but the third member of the hiking party was the only son of one of America’s most important senators. The real twist is that the senator was a key player on several committees crucial to the U.S. war effort. Everyone with a spoonful of brains knew that the Iranians staged the whole thing to be able to turn dials on Senator McHale.

And it was starting to work. So, the President asked Church to make the problem go away. We were Church’s response.

“So, who gets to slap the cuffs on me?” I asked.

This time she did laugh.

“No, Captain Ledger,” she said, “here’s how it’s going to work. As soon as I am done speaking you will turn off your cell phone and remove the battery and the sim card. Put the sim card and phone into different pockets. Walk to the curb and drop the battery into the culvert. Then I want you to go into the café. Order a coffee, sit in the corner. Do not reassemble your phone. Do not use the store’s phone. Write no notes to the staff or other customers. Sit and enjoy your coffee. Read the newspaper. Ahmadinejad is insisting that the dramatics at the prison last night were the result of a boiler explosion. You should find that amusing. Do not make any calls. Maybe have a second cup of coffee.”

“Do you work for Starbox? If so, I can’t say I dig your new marketing strategy.”

She ignored me. Her resistance to my wit was almost as disconcerting as the laser sights on my junk. Almost.

She said, “In a few minutes a person will enter the café. A man. He will recognize you and will join you. The two of you will have a conversation and then he will leave. Once he has left, you will wait another ten minutes before you reassemble your phone. You are on your own to find a new battery. You are supposed to be resourceful, so I imagine you will solve that problem without my advice.”

“Then what do I do?”

“Then,” she said, “you will do whatever you judge best.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“When do I meet you?”

“You don't.”

“I'd like to.”

“No,” she said with another little laugh, “you would not.”

“Tell me something, Miss, why go to these lengths? This could have been arranged with a lot less drama.”

“No it could not. If you are smarter than you appear, then you'll understand why in a few minutes.”

“These laser sights going to be on me the whole time? It's a lousy fashion statement and people *will* talk.”

There was a moment's silence on the other end and then both sights vanished. I had to control myself from collapsing against the wall. I was pretty sure it would be two or three weeks before my nuts felt safe enough to climb down out of my chest cavity. My heart was beating like a jazz drum solo—loud, fast and with no discernable rhythm.

“The clock is now ticking, Captain Ledger. Once I disconnect, please follow the instructions you have been given.”

“Wait--” I said, but the line went dead.

I held the phone in my hand and looked across the street to the office building. Even without the sights I knew they could take me any time they wanted.

There were no real options left. Just because the laser sights weren't on me didn't mean that I was safe. I think they'd used them for effect. It was broad daylight they certainly had scopes. So I did as I was told. I dismantled my phone and put the sim card in my left coat pocket

and the empty phone casing in my jeans. With great reluctance I walked to the edge of the pavement and stared for a moment down into the black hole of the culvert. ^^^^^^^

“Crap,” I said, and dropped the battery, which vanished without a trace. All I heard was a dull *plop* as it landed in the subterranean muck.

Before I turned to go into the store I scratched the tip of my nose with my forefinger. I was sure they'd see that, too.