



DAVIS BUNN

STRAIT OF HORMUZ



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bunn, T. Davis.

Strait of Hormuz / Davis Bunn.

p. cm.

Summary: "Investigating the funding of Iran's nuclear program, Marc Royce must rely on an old ally to help him uncover the truth—before it's too late"—
Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1145-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1138-6 (pbk)

1. Intelligence service—United States—Fiction. 2. Nuclear weapons—Iran—Fiction. 3. Preemptive attack (Military science)—Israel—Fiction. 4. Hormuz, Strait of—Fiction. 5. Persian Gulf Region—Fiction. 6. Suspense fiction. I. Title. PS3552.U4718S87 2013

813'.54—dc23

2013023254

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Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design
Author photograph by Angel Grey

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This book is dedicated to the next generation of readers.
With appreciation for the enthusiasm
of those who are especially close to me:

Guthrie and Jill
Riley and Diane
Macon



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Chapter One

Marc Royce had never been to Switzerland before. He was there without backup. He was not prepped. He had come because the one person in the world he could not refuse had asked for his help. Urgently. Marc checked his watch, then pressed his phone's automatic dial. The ambassador answered instantly. Marc said, "I'm in place."

"Hold one." Ambassador Walton did not bother to muffle the phone as he asked an unseen associate for an update. He told Marc, "The target is inbound from his residence in Montreux."

"You have monitors in place?"

"We are tracking his cellphone. His GPS now belongs to us."

Which was interesting, given how Walton had refused to involve Swiss intelligence. There was a leak inside U.S. intelligence, of that Walton was absolutely certain. How or where their service had been breached, Walton had no idea. But Marc's target held such vital national importance that Walton had asked him to go in alone and unaided. He had come to Geneva without even alerting his embassy, which was a serious breach of protocol. But Marc was also no longer officially part of any intelligence agency. He had been fired and

dumped on the side of a Washington highway. By the same old man who now coughed into Marc's ear. Which meant his superiors could not be reprimanded, since he didn't have any.

Marc heard a new strain to the ambassador's voice, a hint that age was assaulting even this old warrior. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Focus on staying alive," Ambassador Walton replied. "You are good to go."

Marc left a ten-franc note anchored beneath his coffee saucer and headed across the street to the lakeside promenade. He said into his phone, "Don't you think now is a good time to tell me whose lead I'm following up here?"

Walton suppressed another cough. "An old friend reached out."

Which was all Marc had gotten the last time he had asked. "Must be a good friend for you to give it this much credence."

"He was and he is." The old man hesitated, long enough for Marc to assume he would not get anything more. But Ambassador Walton tended to relax his iron-clad grip on intel when his agents were walking into danger. "He's a British industrialist. A source I've known and trusted for twenty years. We've long suspected he also supplies intel to Mossad."

"Why isn't Mossad checking this out themselves?"

"A question I've been asking ever since he contacted me. Two possibilities come to mind. First, Mossad knows something we don't and want to rope us in. And second, they don't trust the source."

"Meaning he could be the leak?"

"Doubtful. But right now I am not ruling out anyone except us. And I only include you because you don't know enough to be a threat."

Marc did not take the bait. There was no need to look further than WikiLeaks to know how dangerous secrets could easily go public. He approached the gallery. "I'm in position."

"Target is twenty-four minutes out and closing."

Marc was hardly the only person walking along the lakefront with a phone attached to his ear. He was dressed in standard business garb, a dark gray suit and striped shirt and silk tie. He carried a slim leather briefcase slung over his left shoulder. He wished it contained a gun, but Swiss security made that impossible. The city served as a conduit for business from all over the globe. No one gave him a second glance as he walked along the line of tall, bulletproof windows. The interior looked dark, silent. "I see no guard."

"We've been over that. He relies on an electronic alarm system."

"I'm circling the perimeter."

"Roger that."

The side windows overlooked one of Geneva's many piazzas. Marc turned another corner and entered a rear alley. The tight lane was shadowed from the morning sun. A restaurant's trio of rubbish bins smelled of old food and disinfectant. Traffic echoed softly into his enclave.

Then he saw it. "We have trouble."

"What is it?"

"The perimeter has been breached."

"Show me."

Marc tabbed the app that turned his phone into a video camera with a live feed. He slowly panned the camera lens across the rear loading platform and the gallery's rear doors. The steel portals were no longer sealed. He stepped closer and listened carefully.

Marc said into the phone, "There is no alarm."

"Maybe it's a simple fault."

"Negative. This place is otherwise as tight as a vault. And it's wired. There are cameras in both corners."

"So security will have a record of your presence."

"The cameras have been on me since I crossed the street. That isn't the point. You send me over, and the morning I arrive there is a break-in. They knew I was coming. Your own intel is breached."

"Withdraw."

"No. I'm here, I'm seen. I'm going in."

"Marc, wait—"

He cut the connection, turned off his phone, and slipped it into his pocket. Any experienced operative knew the brass in their safe little bunkers responded to uncertainty by applying the brakes. Sometimes the guy in the field had to go with his gut. A successful operative was one whose hunches proved correct. They were the ones who made it home.

Kitra Korban had never felt so totally uncertain or out of place. Not even when she had been kidnapped and held in the poisoned plains of western Kenya while just up the road a volcano cleared its throat. She had secretly yearned for the chance, just once, to walk along a pristine lane in a beautiful European city, elegantly dressed and drawing stares from people who did not carry the weight of a thousand lives on their hearts and shoulders.

The air of Geneva was so different from the plains of Galilee. May was the first full month of the Israeli dry season. This year the rains had ended early. There was talk of a severe drought. Two of the kibbutz's wells had already gone dry.

Kitra's kibbutz was an island of green in a hot and dusty land. There were problems with the new factory's refining process. The shipments of rare earth arrived from Kenya faster than they could process them. Their potential customers were upset, the factory managers defensive and edgy. Everyone was exhausted, Kitra included. Other than the Sabbaths, she had not had a day off in seven months. They were working around the clock.

Adding further to the uncertainty and turmoil, Marc had broken off their long-distance relationship. She had sensed this was coming for months. Marc was a member of the American intelligence community. He was a patriot. He was, in fact, a hero. For most of the past year, Kitra had hoped he would become *her* hero. But his decision was hardly a surprise.

If only it did not hurt so much. Especially now.

Recently she had pinned a postcard from her parents to her office wall. After a mild heart attack, her father had decided to take his first holiday in nine years. Her brother was gradually becoming accustomed to his new position as acting head of the kibbutz. Kitra had always assumed she would run their community, and someday that might still happen. But just then, her days and nights were taken with bringing the factory up to speed. The postcard had been of a Paris café. Kitra often stared at it, yearning for the freedom to enjoy an idle hour. Europe might as well have been on the other side of the moon. Until, that is, she had been asked to make this trip.

The waters of Lake Lemman sparkled across the way, blue as sapphires. In the far distance, the Alps gathered a morning crop of clouds. She passed a pair of lovers seated at a café. Being here in Geneva only amplified her longing for Marc.

The precise clocks of this pristine city chose that moment to chime the hour. Kitra increased her pace, excited over seeing Marc again and dreading the encounter in equal measure.

Marc tensed as the city's clocks began their hourly clamor. The Swiss attention to detail could be infuriating. Then he returned to his inspection of the gallery's rear doors. The steel had been punched by two blasts, probably from a shotgun holding solid rounds. Despite weighing over half a ton, the doors swung in with fluid ease. He stepped inside.

The gallery's chamber was a concrete cube, windowless and neat and precisely lit. Shelves held a wide variety of treasure and art. In the stockroom's center, three easels supported a massive canvas. Lights on tripods were positioned like a Hollywood film set readying for a close-up. An artist's table contained a variety of brushes and bottles. A magnifying glass was positioned above the center of the painting. The chamber smelled of cleaning fluid.

Marc clicked on his phone and hit the speed dial. When the ambassador answered, he asked quietly, "Where's the target?"

Walton's anger lowered his voice an octave. But the man was a pro. He had sent an operative into Indian country. Now was not the time for futile arguments. "Nine minutes out, maybe ten."

"Rate of speed?"

"Hold one." Walton returned swiftly with, "Holding steady at one-ten clicks."

A hundred and ten kilometers per hour was about seventy mph and ten clicks under the limit. "If the gallery's alarm had gone off, the company's owner would be pushing harder to arrive."

Walton hesitated, then said, “You have six minutes to complete your mission.”

Kitra stood across the street from the gallery and searched the area for Marc. The morning rush-hour traffic competed with the continued ringing of all the city’s clock towers. She felt both exposed and confused. Even so, she remained where she was. A man’s life hung in the balance.

It had started with a phone call from her father thirty-one hours earlier. He had used the same voice as when he took on the Israeli government, keeping his community intact and alive. He had told his only daughter, a man is coming to see you. Do whatever he says.

Before Kitra could recover enough to ask what her father was talking about, he had hung up.

A few moments later, the man had knocked on her open office door. He had refused to give his name. Instead he simply told her that the next morning, at precisely three minutes past the hour, Marc Royce would enter Geneva’s most exclusive art gallery, and die.

Just like that, her life had flown into an entirely different orbit. Bringing her to this point. Standing on Geneva’s fashionable shopping street, desperate to save Marc Royce. The very same man she had recently told she never wanted to speak with again.

Marc slowly pushed through the leather swinging doors and entered the gallery.

The rooms were high-ceilinged and impossibly elegant. The art on the walls was powerful and distinctive and expensive. Three chambers opened into one another, each framed

by a mock passage and a single stair of polished granite. The middle room was dominated by a crystal dais, upon which was poised a bronze Rodin ballerina.

Marc gave the dancer a single glance before his attention was caught by the corpse.

The desk was positioned in the central room, so that the gallery owner could watch the doors and survey all three chambers. In the tight space between the filigreed legs and the window lay the body.

The man wore a pinstriped suit and highly polished shoes. His impeccable shirt and tie were stained by the blood that spilled from the wound to his chest.

Marc lifted his phone. "The target is not in the car."

"Repeat."

"Sylvan Gollet is here. And he's dead."

"Show me."

Marc hit the camera app and started around the desk. Then the light flashed, and he knew he was a breath away from a death all his own.

The light was a laser trigger, mounted to a compact charge. The package was fitted into the corner of the room and pointed straight down. Aimed precisely at where he now stood.

When the city's clocks finally went silent and Marc had not appeared, Kitra decided she had no choice. She crossed the street and pushed on the gallery door. To her astonishment, it was unlocked. She was surprised because the man who had come for her had described the situation in precise detail. The gallery would not open for another hour. Marc intended to break in and retrieve data from the gallery's computer. He was in Switzerland on false papers. He would not answer his

phone or check his regular email account. He was operating outside normal intelligence channels. He would view anyone who approached him as an adversary. But the man asked her to travel so as to warn Marc that his enemies knew all this and were waiting for him. If Kitra did not reach him in person and in time, he would die.

Only there was no Marc. And the door opened easily.

Kitra remained where she was, halfway through the entrance, and called out, “Marc?”

He saw the front door swing open, and he heard the most beautiful voice in the world call, “Marc?”

He had already taken two steps before the trigger clicked. He then heard a further two clicks, meaning three charges were now primed.

He saw Kitra’s lovely features grow tight with shock. It was impossible that Kitra was here, yet he knew also that he had no time for thought. Not if they had any chance of survival.

He gripped her by the waist and hefted her just as the first bomb blew. The compressed air hammered them through the front door. Marc allowed the second blast to shove them across the street, weaving through traffic that might as well have been frozen in space and time.

He then did the only thing that guaranteed Kitra’s safety. He dropped her into the lake.

And then he turned to face the danger he was certain lurked out there.

If only he had a gun.

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Chapter Two

Rhana Mandana pulled up in front of her Lugano business and waited. The Bentley's clock showed precisely a quarter to ten. The city's central shopping street remained relatively quiet. The second hand clicked through twenty-nine seconds, then the night guard stepped out. Rhana rose from the car and said in Swiss German, "Good morning, Arnold."

"Madame Mandana."

"Everything satisfactory?"

"Perfectly, ma'am."

"You may go."

"Thank you." He waited as she passed through the bullet-proof doors. Then the guard locked the gallery's outer doors, slipped behind the Bentley's wheel, and drove her car to the underground parking garage.

Rhana let the gallery's inner doors click shut and surveyed her domain. Her establishment was one of the finest art galleries in the entire world. The item on the front room's central display stand was promised to the Getty Museum. Another had been reserved by husband-and-wife collectors who had a room named in their honor at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

She was halfway across the room when the phone on the

rosewood desk rang. Her assistant was not due in for another fifteen minutes. Rhana Mandana specifically ordered her staff not to arrive before ten. No doubt they were gathered in their customary café half a block up the Via Castiglione. She normally did not answer the phone. But she also knew one client who hated having the answering machine pick up. And this client never called once the shop had opened. She walked over and checked the readout. The caller ID had been blocked. Never a good sign.

She lifted the receiver and said, “Mandana.”

“My people are out back.”

“You are not expected until next . . .” But the client had already hung up.

Her shop was laid out like the formal rooms of a grand home. The front doors opened into a long gallery. The walls were pale teak, the floors granite and marble, the chandeliers Bohemian crystal. A room fashioned as a formal parlor opened to her left, and to her right was a mock study. Her assistant’s desk was positioned just inside the parlor door so she could survey the chamber, the hall, and the entryway. Her own desk was located at the back of the study. The position meant that her aide could lead a recalcitrant buyer along walls holding almost a hundred million dollars’ worth of art before finally arriving at Rhana’s throne.

She coded in the security number that only she and her aide and the night guard knew, and entered the massive rear warehouse. The concrete and steel chamber covered almost a third of the shop’s total floor space. Few people were aware that over a quarter of her treasures never saw the light of day. One of the few who shared this secret waited for her now.

Rhana waited for the gallery doors to click shut. She stood

just to the left of the doors, the one spot in the entire shop that was not swept by any camera. She had specifically designed the cameras to miss this point. On the wall beside her head was a fake light switch. Rhana placed her thumb on the fingerprint reader hidden behind the switch plate. There was a soft click, and all the security cameras shifted to a computerized loop, showing an empty chamber.

Rhana crossed the warehouse, punched in the security code, and the rear door drew up. Outside, a refrigerator truck rumbled softly. A swarthy man in blue coveralls jumped down from the truck's passenger door. The truck began reversing as the worker signaled, maneuvering the truck around until it was inches from the door.

Rhana complained, "I had nothing down for delivery today."

"We knew nothing until four hours ago." He handed her a clipboard bearing the correct code. When Rhana motioned him to continue, he opened the truck and flipped back the first set of covers. It was always this way. Same truck, same two men. "Thirty-seven items."

Normally this particular client brought her one or two items, three at the most. She resisted the desire to ask what was going on. If this man knew, he would not say. "Put them in the cage."

Rhana walked to a security box beside a door painted the same color as the concrete walls. The door cranked back on a pneumatic lift. Only when it was open could one see that the door's thickness was six inches of solid steel. She stood watching as the men carted one item after another into her treasure room.

As always, the driver handed Rhana his cellphone. She

turned from the two men and demanded softly, “Why a delivery today, and why so much?”

“Emergency,” the man replied.

“I dislike being involved in—”

“I must receive one hundred million dollars.”

She swallowed her protest. This client was not interested in histrionics. “Say again.”

“One hundred million. Cash.”

“When?”

“I will let you know. Two days.”

“Impossible.”

“Necessary. Have the money ready when I call.”

“Even if I could get my hands on that much, you know perfectly well that large a sum would alert Interpol.”

“You are buying an item. You know the drill.”

“But a hundred million. I will need to notify the authorities—”

“That is out of the question. Do what is required. Be ready.”

She expected him to hang up. He never spoke for very long. Rhana started to ask him what more he could require of her, what other impossible demands did he intend to foist upon her, when she saw the final item the workers carried inside. “I know that piece. Sylvan Gollet displayed it in his Geneva gallery.”

“Officially, he still does. Parts of it, anyway.”

“You are giving me a fake?”

“No. This item is the original.”

Rhana raised a hand. The workers obligingly set down the sculpture. Rhana inspected it carefully. She had traveled to Geneva the day before Sylvan put it on display, to spend a few moments alone with this treasure. She knew it intimately.

She did not have her loupe. She did not need it. She knew she was inspecting Rodin's ballet dancer.

Rhana waved the men on, turned her back to them, and hissed, "It has been rumored that Sylvan started dealing in counterfeit items that he produced."

"The rumors were correct. The matter has been resolved. Permanently."

"What have you done?"

"Sylvan's gallery was destroyed this morning."

The only sound she could manage was a gasp.

The man went on, "His shop was demolished by a bomb."

Rhana understood then why the man had remained on the phone. His message was not how close she herself was to such destruction. She had known that since the first day the man had entered her world. No. The message for her was, the man took pleasure in such acts of annihilation. She forced herself to say, "I understand."

"I must have one hundred million in cash. You have forty-eight hours. Be ready for my call."