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SAN FRANCISCO. PRESENT DAY

A chauffeur.

That's what Jack Fisher was, when you came right down to it. A chauffeur.

He didn't mind, not too much.

When the new administration came in, he read the politics like everybody else. The rules were changing. The lawyers were putting their noses everywhere. Anybody too close to the black stuff might have a tough time. And he'd been close. Very, very close. And things had gotten messy at the end, for sure. But nobody could say they hadn't gotten the goods in the Midnight House.

So be it. Let the big brains weigh what they'd done, the pros and cons, the morality of it. Fisher didn't have an opinion. He wasn't a big brain. He slept fine. No bad dreams. Even if Rachel Callar had tried to give him some of hers. And look what had happened to her. Fisher didn't have much sympathy. As far as he was concerned, she was a coward who'd gotten what she deserved. But, Callar aside, after the freedom they'd had, he wasn't planning to ask some twenty-eight-year-old lawyer "Mother may I?" when he wanted to make a detainee stand up straight. Nope. Not interested.

So Fisher quit, took the deal they were offering, the extra severance and the enhanced pension. A lot of the guys in 673 had reached

the same conclusion. Which was probably how Langley and the Pentagon wanted it.

Even with the pension and the severance, staying retired wasn't an option for Fisher. Not with two ex-wives sucking him dry. He thought about working security for a company like General Electric or Boeing. Would have taken him about two days to get a job. The multinationals couldn't get enough former CIA operatives.

But after twenty years of working for the government, Fisher didn't want to swap one bureaucracy for another. He wanted to work for himself for a change. And live in California, like he always said he would. He'd grown up in backwoods Maine, a crummy little town called Caribou, halfway between Canada and nowhere. Some of his friends liked the winters, hockey and skiing cross-country, but Fisher wasn't one of them. For as long as he could remember, he'd thought of California as the promised land. He printed up some fancy business cards: Jack B. Fisher, Fisher Security Consulting. Moved to Berkeley with wife number three. And rented an office in the Mission, a formerly down-and-out neighborhood in south San Francisco that was now as fat and happy as the rest of the city.

Fisher figured he'd start with freelance work for guys he knew at Kroll and Brinker. Jobs that were too small for them, too messy, that pushed the limits of the legal. He wouldn't mind those jobs. In fact, he'd like them. He took out ads on late-night local cable and posted on Craigslist and waited for the calls to come in. But with the economy lousy, business was slower than he'd expected. After a couple months, he wondered if he might wind up at GE after all.

Then this gig dropped into his lap. He was sitting in his office, trying to think of ways to get his name out, when his cell phone buzzed. He didn't recognize the caller ID. He answered anyway. He always answered. Couldn't afford to piss off any potential customers.

He'd probably work for his exes, if they'd hire him. Ex number one, anyway. Number two was a real piece of work.

"Jack? It's Vince. Heatley."

Fisher had gotten into a small-time poker game, mostly dollar-ante stud, with a bunch of retired FBI agents. Vince Heatley was a regular, former special-agent-in-charge of the San Jose office, now running security for George Lucas. Heatley was a solid guy, tight-assed for Fisher's taste but no worse than the average Fed. He usually lost a little but didn't seem to mind. Which probably meant he had money.

"Free for a drink?" Heatley said.

"If you're buying," Fisher said. And wished he hadn't. He sounded desperate.

"Meet me at the Four Seasons."

OVER A COUPLE OF BEERS, Heatley outlined the deal.

"Ever heard of Rajiv Jyoti?"

Fisher shook his head.

"He's a VC," Vince said.

"He's Vietnamese? Sounds Indian."

"You really are new in town. No, a venture capitalist. You know, they invest in tech companies, start-ups. Rajiv was early in Google. He's worth maybe a billion now, a billion-two. Depends on the day."

"Nice."

"He's looking for a new head of security. And he loves ex-govs. FBI, military. He'd probably get hard just at the idea of a CIA op."

"What happened to the guy who was working for him?"

"Gone to work for Larry Ellison. The CEO of a company called Oracle."

“I’ve heard of it,” Fisher said, though he hadn’t.

“Ellison’s richer than Rajiv. Heck”—only Mormons and FBI agents said heck instead of hell, Fisher thought—“Ellison’s richer than just about everybody. Point is, Rajiv’s friends with George, and he’s been bitching to George about needing a new guy. George asked me if I had any ideas. I thought of you. You seem solid, and I know your business—I mean, I know the economy isn’t great.”

“Personal security.” Not exactly what Fisher had imagined when he quit Langley.

“You might like it. Someone like Lucas, these *Star Wars* fans get freaky about him. He really needs the protection. But Rajiv, outside San Francisco, nobody’s even heard of him. Probably he’s never gotten a threat in his life. He likes the idea of having somebody around, is all.”

The job sounded less and less appealing. “What’s he like?” Fisher said.

“These guys all have egos, but from what I see he’s low-key, better than average. You wouldn’t have to live at his house, anything like that.”

Fisher sipped his beer. “I’ll think about it.”

“Before you say no, the money’s great. Rajiv told George he was paying his old guy two and a quarter a year. Now he figures he’s got to up that. I think for you, if he likes you, he might go to two-seven-five.”

“Two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars.” The rent on Fisher’s office was five grand a month, every month. And the electricity, and the insurance, and the phone. And the alimony. Never forget the alimony. His exes sure didn’t. Suddenly, working for a venture capitalist didn’t seem so bad. “You think he’ll like me?”

Heatley coughed into his hand. “Before I called you, I checked in with a couple guys I know at your shop.”

“You backgrounded me? Guess I’m not surprised.”

“Anyway, I don’t think you should have any problems. So? Interested?”

“Maybe,” Fisher said. “Long as I don’t have to walk the dog.”

AND HE DIDN’T. Jyoti was all right. Not exactly a bundle of laughs but quiet and even-tempered. He spent most of his time tapping away on his iPhone. Plus, the job came with a few perks. Billionaires hung together. Fisher went to a party on Ellison’s yacht, *The Rising Sun*. Yacht wasn’t even the right word. The thing was a cruise ship. Five hundred feet long. He met Arnold Schwarzenegger at a fund-raiser and sat with Mark Cuban at a Warriors game. Jyoti even leased him a car, a beautiful silver Lexus LX600h sport-utility, by far the nicest vehicle that Fisher had ever driven.

The work wasn’t tough, either. So far, Jyoti had called Fisher at home only twice. Once on Halloween, when kids egged the gate of his mansion in Sea Cliff. The second time after his wife’s poodle escaped. No kidnapping, no extortion, not even any stealing by the housekeepers.

Fisher’s biggest complaint was that the job was too easy. He hated being bored. He figured he’d work for Jyoti another year or two, until he’d saved a couple hundred grand and the economy turned up, then go back out on his own. Or maybe work for Halliburton someplace like Nigeria, for a couple of years. Though his wife would have a fit. Not that it mattered. He’d never been too good at listening to women.

But Jyoti did have some quirks. The most annoying was his insistence that Fisher come to Sea Cliff every morning to pick him up for the drive to his office in Atherton, in Silicon Valley, twenty miles

south of San Francisco. Jyoti said he liked the certainty of knowing that Fisher would be outside his house every morning. He said the drive would give them a chance to talk over the day's security arrangements. Fisher knew the truth. The truth was that Jyoti liked having a former CIA agent drive him to work.

So Fisher was a chauffeur. And that didn't bother him.

Okay, maybe it did. A bit. But for two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars a year, plus medical and dental and a one-hundred-thousand-dollar hybrid, he would suck it up.

Sometimes he wondered what the guys from 673—his old unit—would make of his new gig. They knew he was in San Francisco. He'd even told a couple of them he was working for a billionaire, though he'd made the job more interesting than it really was, hinting he had gotten into high-stakes corporate espionage.

And here he was, at 7:05, parked outside Jyoti's front gate. Ten minutes early. Jyoti was precise. If he said 7:15, he meant 7:15. He expected the people who worked for him to be precise as well. Fisher didn't mind. He'd never needed much sleep. He got up at 5:15 and was out of the house by 6:00 to head over the Bay Bridge and into San Francisco. Assuming he didn't hit any accidents, he usually had time to stop for a smoothie and a coffee—no bacon and eggs for him, not anymore.

Of course, by the time he reached the mansion, the smoothie and the coffee had to be gone. Jyoti didn't like food in the car, especially not in the morning. He liked what he called a "sterile environment." No crumbs, no newspapers, no radio except NPR on low. Nothing except a bottle of chilled Fiji water in the center console. After eight months with the guy, Fisher had reached the considered opinion that Jyoti was kind of a puss. Still. Two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars.

IN FRONT OF THE GATE of Jyoti's mansion, Fisher cut the engine. "Global warming, Jack," Jyoti had said. "We must conserve where we can." Fisher had restrained himself from pointing out that Jyoti could save even more gas by trading in the six-thousand-pound Lexus for a smaller ride to work. Billionaires didn't appreciate backtalk.

Jyoti had one other quirk. He insisted that Fisher be armed. So Fisher dusted off his old Glock and got himself a concealed-weapons permit. Even Berkeley could hardly deny that a former CIA agent might have a legitimate need for protection.

Jyoti's mansion sat on two acres in Sea Cliff, probably the most exclusive neighborhood in San Francisco. It didn't look like much from the front, flat and wide and two stories high. But the property opened onto a priceless view of the Pacific and the Golden Gate Bridge. Though maybe priceless wasn't the right word. Fisher had checked the property records, found that the place was assessed for 21.5 million dollars. It had a squash court and a pool. The rooms were stuffed with high-end Indian art, bronze Buddhas and paintings of fierce-looking gods. Jyoti knew how to live, Fisher gave him that much. He knew how to stay married, too. His wife wasn't much of a looker, but he seemed devoted to her, never even checked out other women. Fisher would have to ask him the secret sometime.

Seven ten. Another cool San Francisco morning, fifty-five degrees with a touch of fog. By mid-afternoon the city would be in the low seventies, the Valley a bit warmer. Perfect for a hike or a mountain bike ride—Fisher had seen the first biker of the day go by just a couple of minutes before, headed up the hill toward Golden Gate Park, then turning out of sight.

Fisher took a quick check of the Lexus, making sure it was clean,

no papers or receipts in sight, the leather in the front passenger seat showroom-new. Jyoti liked to sit up front with him, his nod to Fisher's equality. Fisher appreciated the gesture. He would have appreciated even more not driving the guy to work.

HIS CELL PHONE RANG. A blocked number. He looked at it, decided not to answer. He didn't want to be on the phone when Jyoti showed up. He sent the call to voice mail and tucked the phone away.

A few seconds later, it rang again.

Blocked again. Strange. He flipped the phone open. "Hello."

"Jack." The voice was unfamiliar, eerily high-pitched. Fisher wondered if they had a lousy connection or if the guy was disguising his voice. "Jack Fisher."

"Who's this?"

Silence.

Fisher hung up. He looked at his phone irritably, as though it were a misbehaving dog.

For the third time, the phone rang.

"Jack Fisher?"

Again the unnatural voice. Fisher reflexively slid his hand toward his shoulder holster, then realized he couldn't hold the phone and grab the pistol. He stayed with the phone.

"Who am I speaking with?"

"Look to your right. At the house."

Fisher leaned right, looked out the passenger-side window. Nothing. Suddenly he knew he was in trouble. *Gun. Now.*

He dropped the phone on the passenger seat. He reached his right hand across his body, trying for his shoulder holster—

And a tap on the driver's-side window twisted him back.

No.

A pistol. With a silencer screwed to the barrel. A gloved hand held the gun and—

He'd fallen for it. Look right. He should have looked left, why hadn't he looked left—he couldn't die like this, it was impossible, not now, not as a goddamn *chauffeur*—

He didn't hear the bullet, and he didn't see it, of course. But he felt it, a rush of fire in his lungs. His training told him he had to go for his pistol. The pistol was his only hope. But the pain was too much, especially when a second bullet joined the first, this one on the left side of his chest, tearing a hole in his aorta. Suddenly Fisher felt an agony he could never have imagined, his heart clutching helplessly, unable to pump, crying its bitterness with each half-finished beat.

Fisher screamed but found that the sound he made wasn't a scream at all, merely a whimper from high in his throat. His head flopped forward. His tongue lolled out. The world in front of the windshield raced away from him as if he'd somehow put the car—no, himself—in reverse at a million miles an hour.

The door to the Lexus was pulled open. Fisher sagged sideways in the seat. Already the pain in his chest was fading. But he wasn't dying quickly enough for whoever was holding the gun. Fisher felt the touch of the silencer against his temple. He turned his head, tried to pull it away, but the pistol followed him.

He knew now he would die. He wasn't even afraid, too far gone for that. In the fading twilight of his consciousness, he understood he was being mocked. The shooter wanted him to know he was dying as helplessly as a lobster boiling in a too-small pot. Even so, Fisher wished he could understand why death had found him this way, wished someone would tell him. And so he opened his mouth and asked, or tried to ask, or imagined asking—

The third shot tore open his skull and scattered his brains over the Lexus's smooth leather. The shooter looked down, making sure that Fisher was dead. Unscrewed the silencer and tucked away the pistol. Looked up and down the empty street. Noticed the phone on the passenger seat and, the only unplanned moment in the whole operation, reached across Fisher's body and grabbed it. Switched it off so it couldn't be traced. Closed the door of the Lexus and smoothly walked away, to the mountain bike propped against a utility pole a half block down. Start to finish, including all three phone calls, the murder took barely a minute.

AT 7:15 PRECISELY, Rajiv Jyoti walked out of his front gate, tapping away on his iPhone. He reached for the door. Then he looked at Fisher. And screamed and dropped his phone and trotted shakily around the Lexus. He opened the door carefully, even in his distress wanting to be sure that none of Fisher's blood wound up on his six-hundred-dollar hand-tailored pants.

Jyoti wasn't a doctor, but he could see that Fisher was beyond help. He looked at the body and up and down the empty street, wondering why no one had heard the shots, wondering if whoever had killed Fisher would be coming back for him, wondering if he had been the real target. The seconds stretched on and still Jyoti stood motionless, until the drip of blood on the pavement shocked him to life. He ran back into his front yard, slammed the gate shut, and ran into the house.

Then, finally, he dialed 911.