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The fate of America lies in the hands of one man

THE LAST OPERATIVE

Jerry B. Jenkins

#1 New York Times best-selling author

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The Last Operative

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*To the memory of my mother,
Bonita Grace Thompson Jenkins*

Author's Note

I URGE YOUNG novelists to resist the temptation to intrude on the fictional construct with extensive front matter. Write a simple dedication, I say, and then get on with your story.

I violate my own rule here under special circumstances. You see, *The Last Operative* is a thorough retelling of my very first stand-alone novel. In its original incarnation more than twenty years ago, it was titled *The Operative*, and it marked what I considered a major step in my writing journey.

My first novels consisted of a thirteen-book series called The Margo Mysteries, and they caught the eye of a veteran Harper & Row editor named Roy Carlisle. Roy was intrigued by those early efforts and encouraged me to keep growing and stretching. I had long secretly dreamed of one day publishing with Harper & Row, so it became my goal to land a contract with them.

Every chance I got in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I pitched Roy on the idea of an international spy thriller. He

listened but urged me to keep learning my chops in series fiction. I still remember the day Roy finally called to offer a contract on *The Operative*. I felt I was graduating to a new level of publishing.

The original novel garnered a loyal cadre of fans, including some on the staff of Tyndale House. I couldn't have been happier last year when they asked me to do a complete rewrite and resurrect the story for today's readers. It became a labor of love to dive back into it and write it the way I would today after twenty-plus years' more experience.

Students of the genre may be intrigued by what I consider a successful experiment in the treatment of dialogue in this novel. Much is made today over how to make dialogue taut and realistic and how best to attribute it to various characters with variations on "he said" or "she said." In the original version—and this one—I took what I considered a thoroughly innovative approach by having no such language, and not one reader told me they were confused about who was speaking.

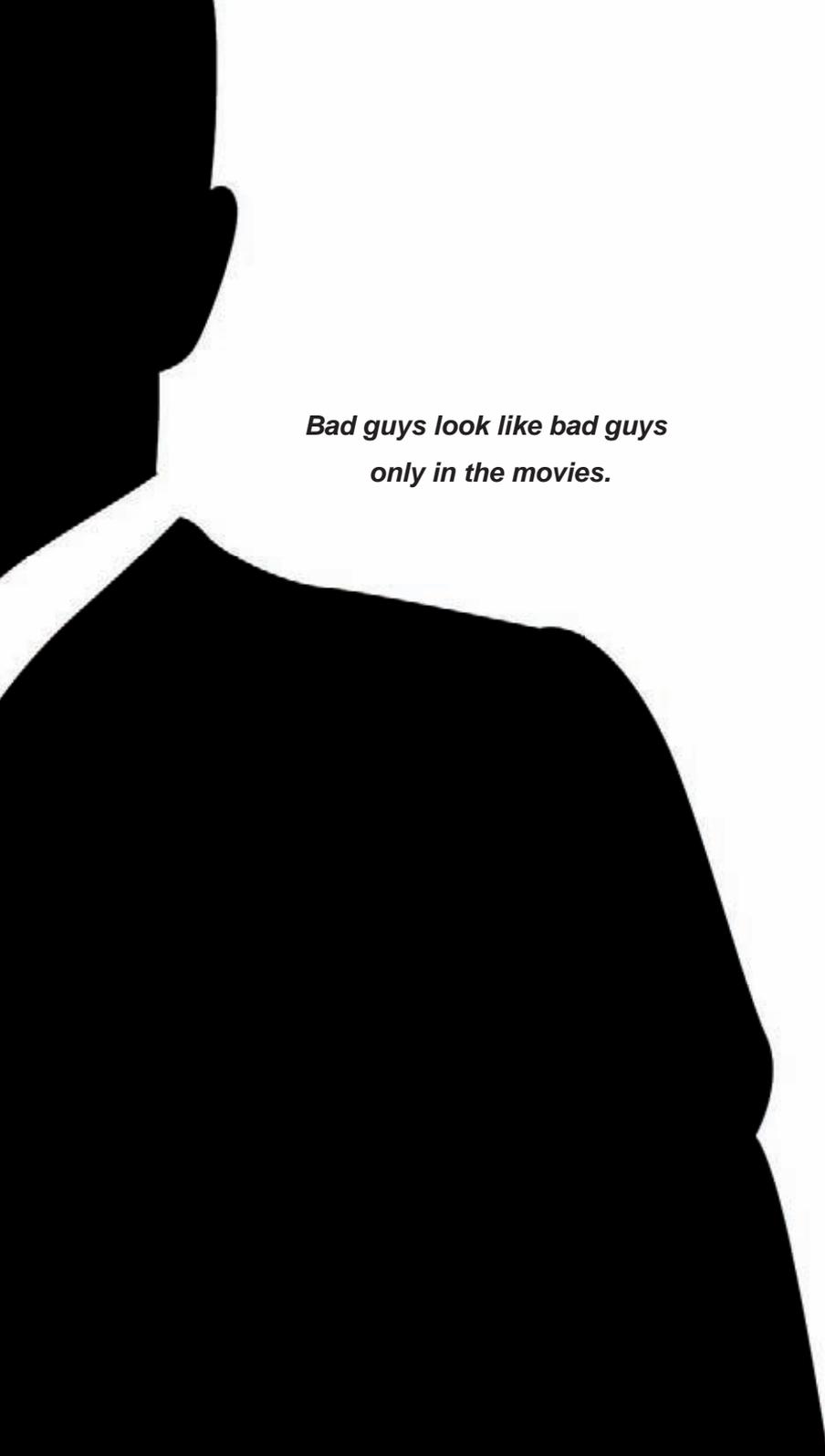
I attempted to make each speaker obvious without attributing any dialogue to anyone. See what you think, and let me know if you agree it works.

And the dedication should come as no surprise.

Jerry B. Jenkins

COLORADO SPRINGS

JUNE 2010

A high-contrast, black and white graphic. On the left side, there is a solid black silhouette of a person's head and shoulder, facing right. The rest of the image is plain white. Centered in the white space is a short paragraph of text in an italicized, sans-serif font.

*Bad guys look like bad guys
only in the movies.*

1

JORDAN KIRKWOOD COULDN'T push the ghastly secret from his mind. Nothing in more than twenty years as an international operative for the National Security Agency had prepared him for this. What would he tell his wife, due to arrive soon from the States? Nothing. How could he? He could tell no one yet, even inside the NSA.

Heathrow didn't slow to a crawl late at night the way the world's other least-favorite airport (Chicago O'Hare) did. Though the evening peak was past, several international flights were scheduled to arrive around the same time, and crowds were beginning to build again.

Closed-circuit monitors told Jordan that Rosemary's

flight would arrive at midnight in Terminal Two, which surprised him. Terminal Two was limited almost entirely to European traffic. One of his decoy flights from Frankfurt had arrived there.

Rosemary had been extraordinarily patient for two decades, given that Jordan had been largely an absentee husband and father. Why did this have to arise on the cusp of an overdue vacation? He had promised to set work aside for ten late-October days.

Jordan could hardly believe he had borne such awful news for just more than twenty-four hours. It seemed a career ago. That assignment in Frankfurt—though it had called for a disguise—consisted of mere information gathering. A walk in the park.

But, oh, the information that came later.

Jordan should have suspected something. Why would the NSA take a senior operative out of Washington just days before his vacation and assign him an essentially menial task in Germany? When the assignment was over and he had asked an executive assistant at Joint Operations Support Activity Frankfurt (JOSAF) to book his flight to London, she had stalled. “Chief Stuart would like to see you first, sir.”

“*Stu’s* here?”

Stanley Stuart was a jowly man Jordan hadn’t seen in more than fifteen years. They bear-hugged, but there was

no small talk, no bringing Jordan up to date. Stuart clearly had something on his mind.

“Sorry to bring you all the way over here on a trivial assignment, but the man I trust most in the agency once told me you were honest to a fault.”

Jordan shrugged. His Midwestern upbringing—including a whipping for lying at age eight—contributed to an overdeveloped conscience.

Stuart scowled. “True or not, Kirkwood? Chuck Wallington told me you wouldn’t so much as tell a white lie outside the line of duty.”

Jordan cocked his head. “It’s true, sir.” He was sure he didn’t want to know—just before his vacation—where this was leading.

“Jordan, I’m sixty-six years old. I retire this year.”

“I hope you’re not looking for a successor, because I—”

Stuart glared. “C’mon, you know we don’t pick our own replacements. And I certainly wouldn’t wish *this* job on anyone, least of all you. I just need to know: can I trust you?”

Was Jordan still idealistic? No. Did he still serve his country for the same reasons as when he started? No. Had he become cynical? Sure. But had his integrity been compromised?

“I’m as jaded as anyone who’s been in this business this long, but if I was worthy of that comment from Chuck years ago, it still holds.”

The older man seemed to study him, then leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. “You know Altstadt, Jordan?”

“Old Town? Sure. Bordering the river.”

Stuart nodded. “In the medieval section with the craftsmen’s shops is one called Jurgen Glaswerks. Meet me there tonight at eight.”

Now in London, eager to rendezvous with Rosemary, Jordan wished he’d told Stanley Stuart he was not a candidate for whatever the man wanted to tell him. Now it all lay on his shoulders, and he’d had to come to the airport in disguise: dyed hair, hat, glasses over dark contact lenses, phony name, documents, the whole bit. He even carried a wooden pistol that had slipped through the security scan. Tonight, as in Germany the day before, Jordan was P. Gaston Blanc, a Frenchman.

On his way to Terminal Two, Jordan noticed a Scotland Yard antiterrorist commander he’d worked with three years before on an al-Qaeda plot. He and Huck Williamsby knew each other well. To test himself, he stepped up to the freckly, red-haired detective.

“*S’il vous plaît*, why would American flight arrive in Terminal Two?”

“Security, I suspect. Wouldn’t make too much of it.”

“*Merci.*”

Williamsby had manifested not the slightest suspicion. Jordan felt a tingle at the base of his spine. There were

days when he enjoyed doing his job well. But not tonight. Maybe never again. Not since Frankfurt.

Finding the Jurgen Glaswerks the night before had been easy. Jordan was greeted in broken English by the owner, who thrust out his hand. "Jurgen Hasse! You are welcome, Mr. Blanc."

With barely a moment to notice the beautiful blown-glass objects gracing the shelves, Jordan followed Herr Hasse to the back. There his host left him with Stanley Stuart. Stuart sat stiffly with his hands deep in his pockets, hat still on. The room was cold, despite a few remaining glowing coals from the central furnace, where the craftsmen plied their trade by day. Jordan kept his coat on too, hat in his hands.

Stuart nodded toward the departing Hasse. "An old, trusted friend. I wish he had your gifts. Okay, listen. The place is not bugged. Hasse has never seen or heard of either of us." He rose wearily and dragged a heavy, wood chair next to Jordan's. "Wife died four years back."

"I heard. Sorry."

Stuart waved. "Lost the drive after that. Never gave her enough time. Never loved her as much as the agency, she always said. But when she was gone, I knew I'd been showing off for her all those years. The change in my performance showed, Jordan, and quick. I was reassigned here so fast, it took me two years to get over the jet lag."

At least Rosemary had never leveled such a charge at Jordan. She had, however, challenged him about letting her raise the kids, in essence alone.

“I lost track of you, Stu. Didn’t even know you were here.”

The older man stared deep into Jordan’s eyes, as if searching for whether he was doing the right thing. His voice came thick. “I can’t even tell Chuck this, Jordan. And there’s no one else I trust.”

“Why can’t you tell Chuck, Stu? You know you can trust him.”

“He trusts you. That’ll have to be good enough for me.”

“But it’s not. I can tell. Why don’t you tell Chuck and let him bring me into it if he wants?” Jordan knew the JOSAF chief had brought him to Germany for this conversation alone. “It’s not that I’m not willing.”

Stuart glowered. “Wallington is no longer in a position to do any good. And this is big, Jordan, bigger than anything I’ve been involved with. Ever. I’ve been offered money.”

“From whom? For what?”

Stuart leaned and looked to the front of the shop, then over his shoulder to the dark alley. He pulled from his breast pocket a fat manila envelope folded vertically and carefully pressed it flat against his thigh.

From it he produced three eight-by-ten photographs.

The first showed a rolling hillside with a huge dark opening cut into one end. Stuart pointed with his thumb. “That’s maybe two hundred feet across.”

The second showed two corrugated metal doors recessed beneath the earthen overhang of the hill, set in about thirty feet.

“What’s that look like to you, Jordan?”

“A Quonset hut.”

“Bigger. Remember the relative size of all this.”

“A hangar.”

“Exactly.”

The third photo had been taken inside the hangar. Jordan pursed his lips. “MiGs?”

Stuart nodded.

Jordan held the photograph up to the dim light. “Russian MiG-23s, but no markings. I don’t get it.”

Stuart reached for the picture and placed it gently atop the others, as if he had been perusing family photos.

“Pure white. The naked eye can hardly find them in the sky on a clear day. And this shows only a handful. Actually, there are nearly two dozen in that one double hangar built into the hillside.”

“Cuba?”

“Don’t get ahead of me.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s just that now that I’ve shown you these, I have to tell you, and you have to believe me. I’m not a crazy old

man, though you'll be tempted to think so. Your job, your life, will never be the same."

It had been too late to opt out. And now Jordan owned the information as he found himself among the first at the thick, Plexiglas window that separated the waiting from the arriving at Heathrow's Terminal Two. The customs desks had been hastily assembled, as if the arrival here was a late change. The glass partition, however, was permanent.

As midnight neared, Jordan felt the heat of the murmuring crowd stacked several deep behind him. The long line of more than four hundred that began emerging from the Boeing 747 was being divided into rows, and the tedious customs process began.

Jordan felt a nagging in the pit of his stomach. Was it only coincidence that he had run into Williamsby, that the overseas flight was arriving at Terminal Two, and that the customs officers had apparently been instructed to search all hand luggage?

The process would take more than an hour, and it simply wasn't standard. As he watched for Rosemary, he steeled himself against giving anything away. He would have to explain the disguise, of course, and she would be disappointed. But he couldn't tell her the truth, regardless of how much he wanted to. He wished he could tell her the whole story, how Stan Stuart looked when he slowly rose and paced that cold room.

The last ember had died, and the only light came from a couple of weak bulbs. “The hangar is not in Cuba, Jordan, though the planes came from there, yes. Actually, they came from Russia first, of course.”

Jordan squinted at him. “Stu, we both know Russia is no longer our enemy. We’ve known of Russian MiGs in Cuba for years. If we found these in Iraq or Iran—”

Stuart held up a hand. “These are not *in* Cuba, and I didn’t say I thought the Russians knew where they’d wind up when they sold them or traded them. This hangar is set back into the earth, invisible from the sky, but it lies in the middle of four other hangars that hold crop-dusting planes. Radar or aerial photography merely confirms the existence of crop dusters and a landing strip in the middle of thousands of acres of farm country.”

Jordan was afraid to ask where.

Stuart continued. “You’re aware, of course, of the radar gap along the southern border of the U.S.”

Jordan nodded. “Biggest headache is drug traffic.”

“Until now. These MiGs were shipped from Cuba to Central America, trucked north into Mexico, and then flown—get this, *flown*—into the United States, either between El Paso and Laredo, Texas, or through the Yucatán Channel via the Gulf of Mexico.”

Jordan felt the blood drain from his face. “You’re telling me Russian MiGs are hangared in the States?”

“Alabama.”

After about twenty minutes, Rosemary appeared in the line about forty feet away and directly in front of Jordan.

Her queue moved particularly slowly, but she appeared in good spirits, youthful and radiant. Jordan more than ever regretted the necessity of his charade. If only he could pop out the lenses and take off the hat and wave at Rosemary, smiling in a way she would recognize.

But she had apparently already studied the crowd behind the glass and decided he wasn't there yet. She struck up a conversation with the passenger behind her, a well-dressed man of average height and blond hair. Jordan watched as they seemed to notice the lightning from the north windows. The man's eyes widened, and she laughed. From her huge shoulder bag, Rosemary dug out a pair of rubber boots and her cell phone.

The man extended his hand to help her balance on one foot as she put them on. Then she studied the crowd behind the glass again, speaking to the man. Jordan assumed she was talking about him.

Opening lines ran through his mind as he fixed his eyes on her. If she recognized him before he spoke, good for her. But as her line slowly advanced, Rosemary looked at him, behind him, next to him, and at him again. He made no attempt to hide or look away. She looked through him as if he weren't there.

As excited as Jordan was to welcome the love of his life

to London, the previous night's conversation reverberated in his mind.

Jordan had stood in the Glaswerks. "I don't believe it."

"You'll believe it if they launch a nuclear attack from within our own borders."

"These are warhead equipped?"

"That's the next step."

"How did you get this, Stu? Who else knows?"

"The one who wants to pay me to help him mislead the agency and to let him know if anyone outside his circle catches wind of this."

"Who?"

"Jordan! If I knew that, I wouldn't be talking to you. But the source is highly placed at headquarters."

"*Our* headquarters? How do you know that?"

"How long have I been around? I can tell from what he knows."

"Is he al-Qaeda counterintelligence?"

"Nah. He's new to them, I'm sure. In it for the dough."

"And how does he contact you?"

"Through a local mouthpiece. I've been sitting on this, Jordan, trying to decide whom to tell."

"Stu! This can't wait!"

"You think I don't know that? Who was I supposed to tell? I could go to the top, but what if it's him?"

"Don't be silly."

“Silly! Whoever this is knows all about me, Jordan. Things no one but an insider would know. I had to tell somebody who can check it out before making any moves. I’m not sure Chuck can do that anymore.”

“So, your deal is what?”

“If I help, big dollars. If I don’t, I’m dead.”

Jordan closed his eyes. “You’ve been threatened before, Stu. We all have.”

“The message goes like this: I’ve got what, fifteen, twenty more years on this earth? So what’s it matter who’s making threats or carrying out attacks if I’m taken care of, and handsomely?”

“Like you’d be for sale.”

“It makes me sick, Jordan, and don’t even imply otherwise.”

“But why you?”

“Why not me? This guy says he knows I have to hate the agency for reassigning me after my wife’s death. I don’t, but if that’s what he wants to think . . . I’m just glad he started with me instead of somebody who might have been tempted.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m doing it, Jordan. I’m telling you. Somebody big is helping al-Qaeda put planes in our backyard. And if I forget that at least one of our own people is involved and just send the Defense Department in shooting, how do I know that won’t make things worse? We could be talking World War III here.”

Rosemary looked troubled that she had been unable to spot Jordan, so he pulled out his cell and called her.

“Hey, babe, I’m here but in disguise. Tell you why later.”

“Oh, Jordan!”

“Sorry.”

“Listen, my seatmate reminded me so much of you. He and his wife live in—”

Suddenly, from just above Jordan’s head and to his right came rapid-fire explosions that drove everyone to the floor. Even as he went down, Jordan’s trained ear told him that the weapon tearing into the Plexiglas—weakening it, cracking it, shattering it, then cutting down the passengers as they scattered, screaming—was an American-made M16.

Jordan turned to get a look at the gunman. But a thick, middle-aged woman had tumbled onto his legs and an infant had been dropped on his back. As the others behind the now-fragmented glass moaned and wailed and hid their faces, Jordan knew the attacker was long gone. He drew himself up to his knees, carefully reaching back to set the baby on the floor.

Jordan studied the damage. The M16 carried a thirty-shot magazine the shooter had apparently spent in a single burst of nearly two and a half seconds. The first dozen shots had obliterated the Plexiglas except for a three-foot mountain-shaped shard that could now be pushed over with a finger.

Once the glass barrier had been eliminated, the next twenty or so rounds had been sprayed over a fifteen-foot area, leveling customs agents, disintegrating their wood partitions, and dropping passengers forty feet away with 5.56-millimeter ammunition that had kill power from five hundred yards.

Uniformed police and military personnel appeared from all directions, shouting instructions, securing doors and corridors. Plainclothesmen, including Huck Williamsby, arrived seconds later, producing badges and displaying them from breast pockets.

Passengers who had miraculously survived huddled behind their baggage, plainly terrified of the weapons they saw in several hands. Directly in front of Jordan, a customs agent bled from the head and neck. He crawled toward Jordan, expressionless, eyes vacant, but his nervous system soon surrendered, his elbows quit, and his forehead thudded on the floor. Beyond him and his splintered workstation, Jordan saw the central target of the shooting, the line in which his wife had been standing, bantering with a stranger who had the misfortune to look like her husband.

The man had taken at least four rounds and had flipped backward, his metal attaché case sent sliding. Rosemary's shoulder bag had been ripped from her by the fusillade, dropping in front of her to provide a macabre cushion for her petite body after she had spun, ankles crossing and tripping her.

She had landed with her back on the bag, her head hanging over it, facing Jordan. Not sixty seconds had passed since the deafening *brack* of gunfire, and now Jordan cursed himself for his disguise. Bile rose in his throat, and he fought emotion that threatened the levelheadedness he had always possessed in the face of carnage.

He whipped off his hat and glasses and squinted hard as he pressed fingers to the sides of his eyelids, popping out the dark lenses. He stared into Rosemary's unblinking eyes, willing her to see him, to recognize him despite the dark hair, brows, and lashes, showing her his teeth in a half-sobbing smile, praying she would recognize him.

Jordan knelt transfixed before the image of her there. As officials scurried among the dead and the dying, he caught and lost and caught again a view of her face. No expression. No response. He would learn later that a bullet had entered her neck from the left, nicked a jugular vein, destroyed a carotid artery, pierced a parathyroid gland, and severed her spinal cord on its way toward the heart of the man behind her.

Rosemary Kirkwood had been dead before she hit the floor.