

# Back Cover Text

## Against All Odds

(Brainrush 7)

The highly anticipated series finale to the #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestseller *Publishers Weekly* called "a terrifically entertaining thriller!"

In this conclusion to Richard Bard's popular Brainrush series, Jake Bronson's family and friends face their biggest threat ever. The startling challenges revealed in *No Refuge* (book 6) are coming to a head, and the team must gather every resource available to them in hopes of preventing a terror-driven cataclysm unlike anything America has seen.

But the menace from within America's borders pales by comparison to the global threat revealed to 8-year-old Alex Bronson in a series of otherworldly visions. And Alex isn't the only one targeted by the mind-bending revelations.

The stakes are higher than ever. The fates of America and the world hang in the balance, and Jake Bronson's family and friends must risk everything to tip the scales against evil.

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Author's Note

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# Dedication

For my grandchildren, Quinn, Zach, and Skylar

# **Against All Odds**

Brainrush 7

Richard Bard

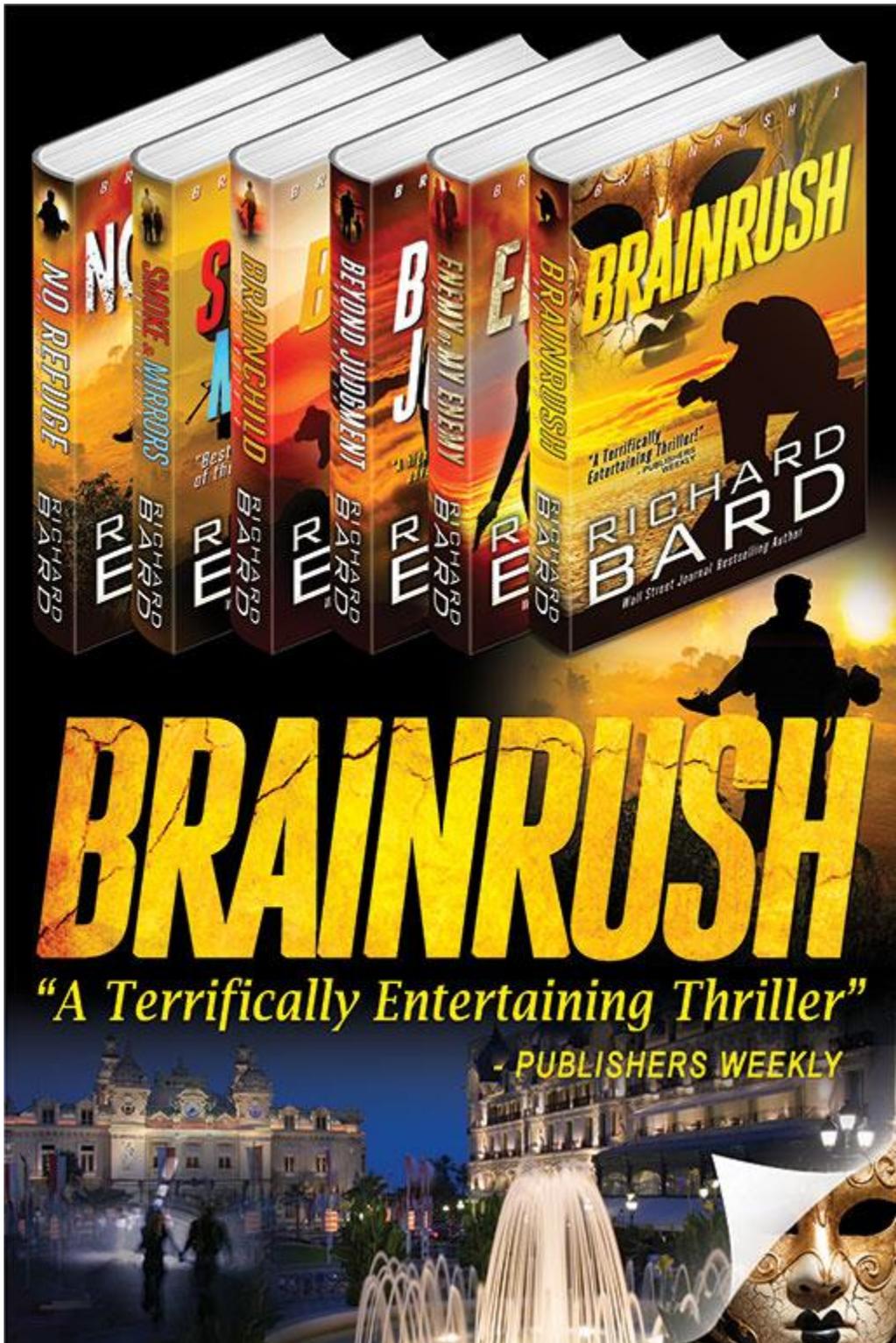
## The Brainrush Series

*Brainrush* is a story about second chances, and embracing every day as though it's your last. Called "a terrifically entertaining thriller" by *Publishers Weekly*, Book 1 of the series was named *The Wall Street Journal's* #1 bestselling action/adventure in its "Guide to Self-Published Big Sellers," while Book 2 stayed in the top 10 of Amazon's top-rated mystery/thriller list for fifty-three straight weeks.

This set the stage for the blockbuster release of the third book in the series, which was heralded by *Suspense Magazine* as "part science fiction, part thriller, part suspense, part love story, and part mystery. It's got it all and that's what makes this novel one of the best."

Books 4 & 5 were released in 2014, and met with rave reviews that outpaced even those from the first three books. *Smoke & Mirrors* (book 5) was named one of the best books of the year by IndieReader.com.

The final two books in the series, *No Refuge* and *Against All Odds*, promise to keep you on the edge of your seat in a fashion that lives up to what the series is all about. It's a thought-provoking, soulful, and satisfying rush that will keep you gasping long after the final page.



## Preface

*Against All Odds* (Brainrush 7) continues the story line that began in *No Refuge* (book 6), which must be read first to fully enjoy this book.

In this conclusion to Richard Bard's popular Brainrush series, Jake Bronson's family and friends face their biggest threat ever. The startling challenges revealed in *No Refuge* are coming to a head, and the team must gather every resource available to them in hopes of preventing a terror-driven cataclysm unlike anything America has seen.

But the menace from within America's borders pales by comparison to the global threat revealed to eight-year-old Alex Bronson in a series of otherworldly visions. And Alex isn't the only one targeted by those mind-bending revelations.

The stakes are higher than ever. The fates of America and the world hang in the balance, and Jake Bronson's family and friends must risk everything to tip the scales against evil.

# Chapter 1

## *Foothills of Mt. Wilson, California*

AHMED WAS GOING STIR CRAZY. Dad had left the night before, and Ahmed was still stinging over the fact he hadn't been allowed to go with him. A part of him understood why, especially since even Uncle Tony hadn't been permitted to go. But the way Dad had brushed off Ahmed's plea to help was all the confirmation he needed that Dad still viewed him as a child.

Mom and the others weren't much different, and that irked him as well. Uncle Tony at least was beginning to come around, but he'd still had to think twice before even allowing Ahmed to leave the lodge to get some air. "Keep your head on a swivel out there," Uncle Tony had said.

Yeah, right. As if the woods were teeming with threats.

Their location was well enough outside the light pollution cast by the L.A. basin that stars could be seen filling the night sky. The evening breeze was pleasant, the air smelled of pine needles, and a half moon illuminated the scenery. It was beautiful, but right now he hated it. It was a prison. The world believed the lies spread by the doctored videos, and not Dad, or Uncle Tony, or Doc, or even Marshall with all his smarts could figure out a way to backpedal from the spot they were in. So they were stuck here.

Ahmed's stomach twisted into knots. He picked up a rock and hurled it as hard as he could at a tree. It missed the target by a wide margin and that made him even angrier.

He lifted his shirt and pulled out the SIG he'd hidden under his belt. He widened his stance, gripped the pistol with both hands like Tony had shown him, and aimed at the tree. He knew better than to squeeze the trigger. They were likely too remote for the shot to alert anyone to their presence, but there was no sense in risking it. The act of holding the weapon calmed him

somewhat. It gave him a sense of control. He aimed the weapon at another tree, imagining how easy it would be to pull the trigger if someone who wanted to harm his family was in his sights. He held the position until he sensed his rapid heartbeats quiet. Then he tucked the SIG under his shirt and walked on.

At the far end of the property was a horse barn he'd noticed when they first arrived. It had seen better days. The red paint was faded, the sagging wooden fencing separating the four pens on either side was worm-holed, and the second-story loft leaned to one side. By contrast, the padlock on the front sliding door looked fairly new, and that made him wonder what was inside.

He flicked on his flashlight and headed over to scout it. There were no windows, and when he checked the individual stall doors, he found they were latched from within. But the trodden ground around the doors was uneven, and one area had been gouged out enough by rainwater from a broken downspout that he was able to squeeze underneath. Inside, the air was stale and dead silent. When a pounding sounded from the stall door behind him, he nearly jumped out of his shoes.

"What are you doing in there, you weirdo?" his sister shouted.

He exhaled, glad she hadn't witnessed his frightened reaction. "Leave me alone. I need some space."

"You need space so you sneak into an old barn? Give me a break. Open the door."

He spotted the latch on the stall door. There was no padlock. "Sorry, it's locked."

"You're lying."

"You'll have to crawl under if you want in. Like I did."

"They don't put locks on the inside, Ahmed. So just open the door. I'll crawl under if I have to, and you can explain to Mom why my clothes are filthy."

He bit his tongue, and when he didn't respond Sarafina softened her tone. "I'm your younger sister, aren't I? Aren't you supposed to protect me?"

He sighed. She always knew what buttons to push with him. He turned the latch and pulled open the door. The rusty track resisted, but eventually he got it open enough for her to step inside. She placed her hands on her hips. "For a guy who's supposed to have his *head on a swivel*, I'd say you missed the mark. I've been following you the entire time. Nice shot with that stone by the way. You missed the tree by a mile."

"Shut up."

She punched his shoulder. He smiled, and panned the beam of his flashlight around the barn. The space was empty except for a large object between the stalls, covered by a dusty tarp.

“A tractor?” she asked.

“Who knows? Come on. Let’s check it out. Flip that light switch over there.”

Sarafina complied, and a flickering fluorescent bulb cast enough light to allow them a better look. They peeled the tarp back to reveal an early model Italian sports car. The two-seater was fig green, and the polished chrome trim shone under the lights. The convertible top had been removed and the black leather interior looked new.

“Fully restored,” Ahmed said.

“How old is it?”

“Hang on.” He walked to the back and inspected the tail light. “They used to imprint the year on the...yep, there it is.” He rose and checked the emblem on the front fender. “You’re looking at a 1962 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider Veloce.”

“*Veloce*,” Sarafina repeated with an Italian flair. “Which means fast.”

Ahmed grinned. “It looks like it.”

Sarafina opened the passenger door and slid into the seat. “It’s cool. Talk about retro.”

Ahmed jumped into the driver’s seat and ran his hands around the oversized steering wheel. “I’ll bet they used it in a movie up here.”

“But why leave it behind?”

“Who cares?”

“Do you think it still runs?”

“Why not?” He tapped the fuel gauge and the needle shifted slightly. “There’s still half a tank of gas.”

“Let’s find the keys.” They checked the floorboards, the backseats, and then moved on to the rest of the barn. No luck.

“They’re probably still in the house,” Ahmed said.

“Cool. We’ll check there. Maybe Marshall or Tony already know where they are.”

Ahmed scratched the stubble on his chin. His Middle Eastern heritage had provided him with a dark beard, which was thick after a week of not shaving. “Maybe. But if so, you can bet they’ll tell us to leave it alone. How about we keep it a secret? Find the keys on our own and have a little fun.”

She grinned. “Sure.”

They left together and Ahmed felt lighter. His sister always had that effect on him. “Let’s take the long way back.”

They stayed within the trees and circled the clearing toward the front of the lodge. They were halfway around when the beam of his flashlight reflected off a metallic object on the path—a small hobby drone. It was upside down, and from the gouges in the ground and the spread of pine needles around it, he guessed it had bounced and skittered before running out of juice. Two of the props were broken.

“Those things are everywhere these days,” Sarafina said.

Ahmed picked it up. He’d seen plenty of drones at Walmart and Target, especially around Christmas time, but this one seemed to be much better built than those toys. Plus, the shiny black dome on its belly was unlike anything he’d seen. “I’ll bet this was expensive.”

“You think whoever lost it will come snooping around?”

His eyes widened. “Let’s get back.”

They quickened their pace and entered the lodge.

“What’s that?” Tony asked.

“Somebody lost a drone. Found it in the woods.” He set it on the equipment table. Marshall interrupted what he was doing to take a closer look.

Tony moved to a window and kept an eye on the dirt driveway.

“Interesting model,” Marshall said. “Never seen one quite like it.” He turned it over and examined the frame. “No manufacturer placard, so I guess it’s a garage model. Enthusiasts are building them like crazy, though I have to admit this one is finely made. Drones are here to stay, that’s for sure. Pretty soon the skies will be filled with ’em, and most of the folks buying them don’t have a clue how to control them. If the government doesn’t get their act together with regulation and enforcement, we’ll have to start carrying heavy-duty umbrellas to keep from getting conked in the head when we go outside.”

“What’s that dome thing on the bottom?” Ahmed asked.

“Probably a gimbaled camera. A pretty sophisticated one from the looks of it. I’d have to open her up to be sure, but no time for that now.” He set the drone aside and went back to work on his laptop.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to keep my sanity.”

“Huh?”

“I’d go nuts sitting around here doing nothing.” He motioned out the window. “You walk in the forest when you get antsy. I like to get lost in my work.”

“You’re still searching for hits on Dad and Alex?”

“I’ve got an automated search algorithm working on that, but your dad’s name is all over the internet these days, so it’s a complicated process filtering out the noise to come up with anything worth looking at. I just added the darknet to the search and it’s indexing as we speak. When the algo’s correlated the new parameters into the program, it’ll ping when it comes across anything interesting.” He tabbed to a Google Maps satellite view of Bogota, where an icon blinked in the center of town. “Still tracking your dad through the phone I gave him. He’s still in Bogota. But no mention of Alex yet.”

“And no return phone calls,” Mom muttered. She was sitting with Lacey on the couch. Her face was drawn and her eyes were puffy. Ahmed tried to meet her gaze, but she looked away.

Marshall tabbed back to the page he’d been working on. It was filled with line after line of computer code, which Marshall was modifying at incredible speed. The entire page looked like gibberish to Ahmed. “What are you working on?”

“A new rat,” Marshall said, his fingers flying across the keyboard.

“A rat?” Sarafina asked.

“R-A-T. Remote Access Trojan. It’s a malware program that provides backdoor access to a computer network. It’s the kind of thing you find in random emails that lure you with prizes and encourage you to click the link. One click and the program is invisibly downloaded into your system, and everything on your computer and the network it’s attached to are compromised.”

She frowned. “So you’re building one? Why do you want to break into somebody’s computer?”

Marshall stopped typing. “Come on. You know me better than that. It’s not for me personally. It’s what I do.” Marshall had put his considerable hacking skills to good use by founding a small but highly regarded cyber consulting business. “The project I’m working on is for the government. Oh, and by the way, it’s highly classified, so if either of you understood code I’d have to turn you in for even asking about it.” He shrugged. “But since everyone in this room is pretty much clueless—”

“Watch it,” Lacey said with a fake scowl.

Marshall rolled his eyes. “That is, clueless *when it comes to computer code*. Hackers are constantly coming up with ways to get into someone else’s data, and counter-cyber experts keep coming up with ways to stop them. It’s a never-ending cycle.” He lifted a thumb drive from the scatter of equipment around his laptop. “Corporate and government cyber espionage used to be as simple as *accidentally* dropping a USB thumb drive in a parking garage or employee cafeteria with a RAT hidden on it. An employee notices the drive, plugs it into his computer, and the

hacker's in. When the world wised up to those kinds of tricks, hackers moved on to email phishing scams and other electronic-based network attacks to accomplish the same thing. But then more sophisticated firewalls were created to stop them. It's back and forth, and it seems as if the hackers are always one step ahead. But sometimes the best defense is a good offense, and that's where I come in. It's my job to come up with creative new ways to infiltrate systems, and I'm pretty good at it. My client—the good old US of A—then uses my prototypes to develop defenses ahead of time.”

Tony said. “But not without using the tech first for their nefarious needs.”

“I can't comment on that.”

Tony grunted.

“So what makes this new RAT of yours so special?” Ahmed asked. “Do you have one here?”

Marshall's brow furrowed as if he was considering how much to reveal. Finally he shrugged and said, “It's right in front of you.” He pointed to a black box the size of a cigarette pack connected to his laptop with a USB cord.

“That thing's huge compared to a thumb drive. What good is that?”

Marshall grinned. “Watch.” He brushed the pad of his middle finger up and down his shirtsleeve, as if wiping off any residue or oil. Then he gently pressed his fingertip on the small box, and when he lifted his hand, a thin, postage stamp-sized piece of film was stuck to his finger. Ahmed and Sarafina leaned in for a closer look. It was transparent, and Ahmed could barely make out the lines of circuitry embedded within.

“It's tiny,” Sarafina said.

“Good things come in small packages.”

“But it needs to be attached to the box to work, right?” Ahmed asked.

“Nope. That's the beauty of it. It will self-adhere to metal or plastic, and once attached, it's practically invisible. Stick it on a computer case, external hard drive, or even the back of a monitor, and the next time the user logs in, it'll automatically create the back door and send the key over the internet. It draws a trickle charge from the surface static electricity of the device it's attached to. That's enough to keep it alive while it's waiting for log-in, but when activated, it's designed to generate a burst transmission that will send the key. That's the part I'm tweaking now.” He appraised the tiny chip like a proud father. “But the real beauty of this little RAT is its relative invisibility, because even if the user identifies the breach and backstops it with new protocols and passwords, unless they notice the chip itself and remove it, the RAT will simply reactivate the next time the user logs in.” He placed the chip back on the black box.

Sarafina shook her head in amazement. “You rock, Uncle Marshall.”

Marshall beamed. “I love this stuff. Now skedaddle. I need to—”

The computer chirped. Marshall clicked a glowing icon at the bottom of the screen. “Got a hit on the darknet.” The home page of an auction site popped up. Mom and the others crowded around while Marshall flew through a complicated registration process. “The site requires confirmation of funds up front. Serious money. All in bitcoins.” Ahmed had trouble keeping up as Marshall switched from one screen to another, his fingers dancing to music only he could hear. The best Ahmed could tell, Marshall was creating a false account using a darknet banking site he appeared to be familiar with. A minute later he was back at the auction site entering data. A popup window indicated his registration was accepted and assigned him the username BIDDER1539.

*Dad’s image appeared on the screen.*

## Chapter 2

“WE’VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!” Francesca said, staring at the laptop screen. Jake was zip-tied to a chair, his wrists bleeding from his efforts to break free. The bidding for his head had climbed to nearly 3 million dollars. She couldn’t believe what was happening. He’d returned from the dead, only to be killed again?

Marshall quick-tabbed back to the map view of Bogota. The locator in Jake’s phone was still blinking. He captured a screen shot and tabbed back to Jake’s streaming video image. “I know exactly where he is. I’ll send his location to the local authorities.” He reached for his smartphone and opened a web browser.

“Look,” Lacey said, as Jake’s attention on the screen snapped to something happening off camera.

Francesca leaned in. Jake’s countenance had changed. Was that hope she saw on her husband’s face?

“He looks like he’s about to pounce,” Tony said, confirming her suspicions.

“Got it,” Marshall said, tapping his phone to initiate a phone call. “Bogota National Police Department. It’s ringing.”

“You sure they can’t trace the call?” Tony asked.

Marshall nodded.

Francesca ignored them. She couldn’t take her eyes from the screen. Sarafina and Lacey were right there with her, and she felt Ahmed place a hand on her back as if to give her strength. It was an unusual act for her touch-sensitive son, and she appreciated it.

“Come on Dad,” Ahmed muttered. “You can do it.”

The video froze, and bold letters across the image announced: AUCTION PAUSED. STAY TUNED.

“What happened?” Sarafina asked.

“Get it back,” Francesca said.

Marshall spoke into the phone, “Uh, yes hello. *Un momento por favor.*” He pressed his thumb over the mouthpiece to mute it. “Should I give them the location?”

“My gut says no,” Tony said. “Whatever’s happening, it’s gonna come to a head any second. I’ve seen that look in Jake’s eyes too many times not to recognize it. He’s gotta plan. We need to let it unfold without our interference.”

Marshall disconnected the call. Everyone stared at the frozen image of Jake’s defiant expression. Francesca’s heart pounded in her chest, and the only sound in the room was the tap of Ahmed’s shoes as he paced behind her. A cascade of angry comments scrolled in a window at the bottom of the screen. Bidders demanded the auction to proceed as promised, and several registered their fury at the possibility that Jake’s execution was being conducted off camera. Francesca’s stomach reeled at their bloodlust.

They waited a minute, then two. Francesca felt like her insides would explode. Suddenly the video image returned, except the camera had fallen to the ground. She had to turn her head sideways to view the cockeyed scene—and could barely believe her eyes. Jake pushed to his feet among a tangle of broken chair parts and rushed off camera. The view that remained was limited to the splinters of wood scattered on the plastic sheeting, and the wall behind it.

“Daddy!” Sarafina shouted.

“Get ’em!” Ahmed spat.

Tony and Marshall high-fived. Lacey whispered to Francesca, “If anybody could get out of that mess, it’s Jake.”

“But is he out?” Marshall asked. “Damn, I wish there was sound.”

Tony answered, “Trust me. He’s kicking ass. Nothing’s gonna stop him from getting free.”

“But what about Alex?” Francesca asked. “How’s he involved in all this? Has Jake found him yet?”

No one answered.

“Hang on,” Lacey said. “Can you scroll back on those comments?”

“Sure.” Marshall split the screen horizontally and brought up the comments section.

“There!” Lacey said, pointing at the screen. Marshall stopped scrolling.

The comment read: WHAT ABOUT THE BOY? DO YOU HAVE HIM OR NOT?

Francesca’s mouth went dry.

“That’s gotta be about Alex,” Marshall said.

The next comment read: YEAH, WHAT ABOUT HIS KID?

“Nooo!” Sarafina said.

Tony placed a hand on her shoulder. “Actually, that’s good news. If the bidders know about Alex, then so does Jake.” Francesca looked up at him. What he said made sense. And if Jake was free, he wouldn’t stop until he had their son in hand.

They watched and waited, and after an unbearable minute or two of inactivity on the video stream, Marshall tabbed back to the satellite map. “He’s moved!” The blinking icon had shifted to a tree-studded area across the street from the building.

“He got away,” Ahmed gasped.

Lacey said, “Which means Alex must be with him.”

“It’s moving,” Sarafina said. “Across the park. Fast.”

Tony clapped once. “Too fast to be running. He grabbed a vehicle.”

The icon moved onto the streets at the other end of the park, and as it sped toward the outskirts of town, Francesca allowed herself to breathe again. The icon stopped at the fenced edge of an airport, and then proceeded at a much slower pace onto the grounds behind a line of hangars.

“He’s going to steal an airplane,” Marshall said.

“Of course he is,” Lacey said.

Sarafina squeezed her mother’s hand. “They’re safe. Coming home.”

Ten minutes later the icon increased speed down the runway, and Francesca knew everything was going to be all right.

“Wait a second,” Marshall said. “He’s heading the wrong way.”

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End of excerpt