



What is Lost

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Category: Romance, Thriller, Action, Suspense

Description: John Worthy knows a thing or two about loss.

For starters, he's a fiction. A made-up man. A phony with a past spun out of thin air. He's lost his parents, his brother, the place he called home. John isn't even his real name. Before he was John, he was Danny. Before he was Danny, he was just a freaked-out kid with a singular talent: a boy forced to make an impossible choice.

Now, an Army surgeon, he's a loner—until he meets Roni Keller. The daughter of a Marine, Roni is stubborn, determined, a fearless physician. Closer than friends, not quite lovers, they are deployed to assist in the U.S. evacuation from Afghanistan...

Where he makes a single, fatal mistake during an unsanctioned mission which costs Roni her life. Where John loses everything, even Roni's remains which are never found.

Adrift, broken, John has checked into Brighter Days, a rehabilitation ranch for wounded warriors, and remade himself—again. He's ready to leave when, out of the blue, Hank Patterson, a man he's never met, shows up with an offer: return to Afghanistan with Taz Davila on a retrieval mission to recover Captain Keller's remains from the forbidding mountainous terrain of the Wakhan Corridor, far to the northeast of Kabul.

How and why Roni's body ended up hundreds of miles from where she died...no one knows. And just what is in the mountains that's got the Russians—and even the Chinese—so interested?

In a race against time and enemies both known and hidden, John Worthy must confront present dangers and past demons to find redemption—and recover what he has lost.

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PENGUIN

Once upon a time, about a week before Christmas, John and Roni watched a movie during a lull on-call. This wasn't unusual. They'd met at Fort Benning during DCC, the Army's Direct Commission Course designed to teach civilians commissioned in college how to be soldiers (whether they wanted to learn or not). After DCC, both John and Roni were assigned to stay on at Martin Army Hospital. By the time that particular Christmas rolled around, they'd watched a lot of movies and shows together.

John, a complete cinema geek, chose the film. The story revolved around a girl named Susie who was murdered by a neighbor. The story, based on a novel, didn't really dwell on the gruesome how of her death but what happened to the girl's family and the killer afterward. The movie was pretty good in a weepy, three-hanky, good-cry way. What stuck with Roni most, though, was the film's first scene, which revolved around little Susie, her dad, and a penguin.

The penguin lived in a snow globe. Little Susie worried about that because while the snow was pretty, the penguin was all alone in there. Susie's dad told her not to worry, though. The penguin was happy, he said, because the world in which it was trapped was perfect.

Among other things, Roni was a shrink. She recognized that what the father in the movie said was a good, wise dad-thing to say. Like all parents, Susie's dad probably figured his kid had plenty of time to wake up, Little Susie, wake up. After all, the girl was young; her world was circumscribed and insular. Her world was her family. Susie existed in a perfect world, with plenty of food and clean clothes and love—and

so was blissfully unaware of how much things always change. Families. The world. A kid, too, much to her parents' chagrin as they watch their sweet child morph into a narcissistic alien whose myopic worldview is reduced to a pinprick. Where she is center stage, like the ballerina in a perverse kind of music box: someone about whom the rest of the world revolves instead of the other way around.

The penguin was a metaphor for the whole movie, of course. Nothing and no one stands still. That hammer called Reality trembles on an insubstantial thread over a child's perfect world.

Eventually, though...boom. That hammer must fall and the glass shatter and, to mix a metaphor, down comes baby, cradle and all.

Despite what Roni's straining analyst once said, Roni finds dwelling on the past futile.

When she became a shrink—how she got there from emergency medicine is a whole other story—Roni told her patients that life was a bit like a doughnut. Look at the doughnut, she told them, not the hole. The hole is nothing. The only reason the hole exists is because you're standing on the doughnut. Give up the hope of a better past and stay with the doughnut. Stay with what exists. Stay with the Now.

She clings to that belief: that there is a doughnut. A life raft that is her real life to which, one day, she will return, if she can.

Although this will be tough, seeing as how everyone else has gone—and only she is left.

Other than knowing how many days have passed since that disaster at Kabul Airport before the U.S. pulled out for good, she doesn't know much other than in the most general sense. She is very far away from anything remotely resembling civilization. The only reason she knows she's still in-country is because her guards are all Taliban.

From the look of the soaring, snow-covered peaks, though, she thinks she is well north and east and waypast the Korangal Valley. There are many days when the mountains are socked in either with clouds or snow, but, on a clear day, the view is dizzying: a wide plateau far below hemmed by jagged mountains for as far as the eye can see.

It's not as if she never sees another soul. She tends to the injured. She patched up all the boys who survived. An auntie—any of the half dozen or so older women who cook for her jailers and the workers—brings her meals and clean clothes, accompanies her on the noon walks she is allowed along the mountain paths, and even keeps an eye out as she takes her nightly bath, a luxury that, much to her surprise, her captors have not been unwilling to allow.

The Taliban aren't nasty. No one slaps her around. None of the men touch her, though that is more likely something passed on by orders from above because they don't like her. Even if she weren't an American, her presence is like a pebble in a shoe: an irritant. She's a woman but also good at her job. So, they can't afford to lose her.

What this really boils down to is simple. She is a good-luck charm, a get-out-of-jail-free card, and the equivalent of a really well-balanced knife or a trusty Kalashnikov.

And when you have a great tool—or that lucky rabbit's foot—why, you take care of it.

Looking on the bright side, being squirreled away in a lightless cave for fourteen hours out of every twenty-four does give her plenty of time to think and regret.

Which is also driving her kind of crazy.

That is why, when she actually hears something at a time when she should've heard a whole lot of nothing except her memories and the imaginary conversations she

holds—some with Driver, a few with her dad, but many...no, most with John John John John—rattling around her skull like the last few nuts in a jar...she thinks, Oh. My God. I really have gone insane.

Which she keeps on thinking—until the sound comes again.

When, from the darkness, something...squeals.

Oh. She freezes. Her breath hangs in her throat. Her skin tingles. That was?—

Another squeee. Then...pop.

Oh. Her heart stutters. A thrill of fear pebbles her skin with gooseflesh. She knows what this is: the sound of rock under a heavy boot.

Someone is coming.

Can't be food. She's fed twice a day: Afghan bread, yak butter tea, and yogurt in the morning and, for supper, a steaming bowl of ash, more bread, assorted fruits and vegetables in season—peppers and okra and legumes and sweet apricots—which she assumes her captors either buy or steal from the villagers in the valley below. Always a bowl of sweet, creamy chai at the end of the day, too. (My God, she would kill for a cup of coffee, though.)

But she isn't due for a meal for several hours yet. She's only just finished dressing wounds. Not right. She sniffs her hands to be certain, to be sure her mind isn't playing tricks with time—and catches the faint sting of antiseptic. That always fades by the time an auntie arrives with her evening meal. So, it's too soon, way too soon.

Another pop. And now, finally, the dull thud of boots on rock.

A single set, she thinks—and that, too, is wrong, really wrong. An auntie is always accompanied by a guard. Men always come in pairs: one to stand guard as the other fits a key into the manacle around her right ankle. They also are never the same two men for any length of time. The pairs rotate, switch off; a man she sees one day might not return for the next three or four. She can't imagine why except the fear that, perhaps, familiarity might breed a sense of camaraderie or even sympathy. (Or temptation, there is always that.) Whoever is in charge probably worries that the men might even get to like the woman who takes care of their boo-boos the way that, perhaps, their own mother had when they were boys—and liking or feeling any kind of gratitude toward her. Seeing her as a person, won't do.

Her eyes strain to make out something, anything, and then she realizes what else is wrong.

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No bob of a traditional flashlight, no silver beam at all. Only a faint fan of grainy red light, which can mean only thing.

The guy is wearing NVGs. Someone with night-viz can't use a normal flashlight because the light blinds him. The only light which works is a beam shone through a red filter.

Bad news. She can think of only one reason they would send someone down here alone and kitted out like that. No need for two guys if all that's hanging off the end of her manacle is a body.

Which begs the question: after all this time, when she has been MIA for more than two years, why?

Why kill her now?

Every morning, she scratches another line. Every evening, she counts scratches. Up to 962. She's been off the doughnut for almost three years. Long enough for her to understand no one's swooping in to rescue her. For all intents and purposes, she is MIA, something she is sure the U.S. has denied up and down because after Vietnam, you know, appearances.

The other problem with being missing is someone has to know where to start looking.

The only reason the Taliban must have decided to off her now is that someone in command has decided that she will be less dangerous—or more useful—dead. A body is a bargaining chip.

Or, perhaps, the operation is pulling up stakes, and they figure she's not worth the bother. Prisoners always try to escape. She was lucky they didn't cut off her head the first time she bolted. Touch and go there, for a bit. She remembers Sarbaz's dark eyes measuring her worth. She hadn't bolstered her case by burying a blade in a guy's throat, but, oh, that had been so satisfying. Of course, it would've been better if she'd actually been able to make it more than halfway down the mountain—but, details.)

So, why now?

Two possibilities. The first is that someone who hasn't been read in and doesn't even know she's here, is coming down that tunnel.

Or the second possibility: word's reached Sarbaz that someone has come looking and is getting too close. If that someone makes it to this camp, the Taliban have to ensure she isn't here to be found.

But who's looking for her after all this time? How does anyone even know where to look? And what about the boys? The kids all know about the American lady doctor. Which means, if she dies, they'll be killed. Sarbaz won't want any slip-ups. Everyone knows what a well-aimed drone strike will accomplish.

You have to think.

The only upside about being held in a cave like this is there are many rocks to choose from and she's had time and patience. She's ground and tested rocks against other rocks day after day in the hopes of making a reasonable approximation of a stone knife. She honestly doesn't expect one to do her much good. After all, they have guns and real combat knives. Dagar, their appointed executioner, sports a wicked foot-long blade. There's a guy who takes pride in his work. A lot of heads have rolled. Oh, and hands. Don't forget those. A worker steals food only once. She's tended to a lot of those stumps, too.

She feels her way to her weapons stash, quicklyfinger-walks the stones then scoops up a nearly spherical stone about the size of a baseball. God, she wishes John was here. He'd been a pitcher. She bets he could bean anyone, first try.

If she is lucky, she'll have one chance and the advantage of surprise.

So, make it count.Weapon in hand, she carefully lifts the chain attached to the manacle around her left ankle. Taking care that the metal doesn't clank or scrape against the cave floor, she shuffles to her left as quickly as possible. She's measured the chain's length and knows she has about six feet to play with.

She also knows her cave very well. Could find her way blindfolded, ha-ha. After about four feet, her nose wrinkles at the tang of urine and feces steaming from the bucket they allow her to empty twice a day, morning and evening. The stink is a great marker.

Because here is what she bets none of those guys have considered, quite possibly because none have suffered through ninth-grade geometry.

A straight line drawn from a fixed point from left to right—or vice versa, take your choice—does not inscribe a straight line.

It inscribes an arc.

She's betting these guys thinks in straight lines. Up, down, left, right, forward, back. She is now to the left of the entrance. Which means that if thisguy moves in a straight line toward where he thinks she usually is, he will step into that arc of attack.

Go low, go fast.She cups the rock in her right hand. Put her weight into her swing and clobber his face good and hard. If she's lucky, she might smash his nose, his eye sockets.And when he doubles over, smash his windpipe.Or she's got the chain. Do a

Princess Leia. No air means no ability to call for help. That the guy suffocates...well, life sometimes really sucks.

Have to take him down fast, too. Grab a piece of him—an arm, part of his tunic—and haul him in. No matter what, as soon as he's down, get his knife. All the men tote one. That way, if the rock isn't enough, finish him off with the knife then grab his other weapons. He's sure to have an AK, a weapon she could handle in her sleep, and a Makarov for a sidearm?—

The thought stutters at the sharp crack of a stone. Her lungs squeeze down. The steady thump of booted feet on stone and earth continue. One person. She's sure of it.

And then, pulsing in the darkness, she sees, again, that faint red glow.

Good. That glow's a marker. She'll know exactly where he is. Moving with exquisite care, she bends at the knees and lays her small spool of chain on the rocky floor. She stays down, too. Even with NVGs and the red flashlight affixed to his AK, he'll need maybe two, three seconds to both find and then shoot.

Nerves tingling, she keeps her gaze fixed on that bobbing red glow...which goes out.

What? Why did he do that? Playing games? Trying to freak her out? Her pulse drums. She stares so hard into the dark well of the entrance her eyes feel as if they'll pop from their sockets. She strains to hear something, anything over the wild knock of her heart?—

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Another crack makes her jump and nearly cry out. This is followed by a short rasp of a boot scraping rock?—

And then the air shifts. The darkness thickens, feels almost crowded.

He's here. He's just inside the entrance. To my left.

She is blind...but she feels him. Smell him: an unctuous reek of unwashed flesh, the fug of old sweat, the sting of gunpowder. The rusty tang of dried blood.

Plus, this guy has made a mistake. He's turned off the flashlight. NVGs are not magic. NVGs only amplify existing light. Anything in a pitch-black room—or the depths of a cave where no natural light penetrates—is invisible.

Unless he's got thermal imaging, this guy has just made her invisible, something he'll figure out in about three seconds.

As soon as he turns on the flashlight...you go. Her skin tingles. She gathers herself. Go high. She's a soldier, a Marine's daughter, and there is no way she'll cower, piss scared out of?—

And that's when she gets another idea.

MISSION: IMPROBABLE

OCTOBER 2023

“I’m not your guy,” John Worthy said. His tone was a razor, edgy and sharp. How many more times and different ways could he say it? He wasn’t in the Army anymore, and Hank Patterson wasn’t his CO. “That guy is gone. Even if he wasn’t and I was still that guy? I don’t have the training or the inclination. Why do you think I’m here?” He swept his arm in an all-encompassing gesture that took in the lake, the mountains, his horse tied to a nearby tree. “I came to Brighter Days to get away from all that. I mean, for God’s sake, I still have nightmares.”

“Join the club.” Plucking a blade of feathery wild grass from a tuft at the lake’s edge, Patterson stuck the tough stem in a corner of his mouth. Outfitted in chambray, worn jeans, dusty cowboy hat, and scuffed boots, Patterson looked like a harmless, middle-aged poke in need of company and a good jaw. A guy who’d just happened to seek out the same mountain lake at the same time. At least Patterson had done him the favor of not playing all sheepish and surprised and going all folksy with some story like, Whoa, didn’t know anyone was up here, bucko. Sure is a purty day, though, ain’t it? Say, mind if I rest mah dogs and set a spell? Well, all right, Patterson had said set a spell.

“We all have memories we can’t shake, John.” Patterson shrugged. “This is a chance for you to put some of that to rest.”

“By going back to Afghanistan?” Of all the harebrained, half-baked... “I’m leaving Brighter Days next week and putting all this in my rear-view.”

“Perfect timing then, isn’t it? To pick up the threads of your life again?”

“We’re not talking about mending a sweater, Patterson. You’re talking about a mission. About me becoming one of your... whatchamacallits.”

“Brotherhood Protectors.”

“Yeah,them. Except you’re not asking me to protect anyone. You’re asking me to potentially takeoutsomeone.”

“To protect others. To save lives.” Patterson paused. “I hear you’re an excellent shot. In fact, from the scuttlebutt, I’m surprised you never competed for the Wimbledon Cup.”

John opened his mouth to reply then closed it. He knew the competition. The Wimbledon Cupwas awarded annually forreallylong-range rifle shooting, as in a thousand yards. Probably the most famous guy to win that award was the same make-believe ex-Army guy from the thriller novels Roni’s dad loved so much. John wondered if her father had seen the TV series based on the same novels. Because talk about muscle-bound. The actor was like the Incredible Hulk, only better looking and not green.

How did Patterson haveanyinformation on what John could do with a rifle? Yeah, yeah, there was his time at DCC, but he couldn’t believe Patterson would canvas every shooting range around Fort Benning...well, Fort Moore now.

The only other possibility was that Patterson knew about what had happened when he was fourteen—and in the blink of an eye, he was there, again, huddling with the other kids as his teacher whispered, frantically,Everyone, stay calm. Everyone be still. Be quiet, kids. Sshh, sshh. Don’t let him hear...Then, the rattle of the knob as whoever was out there tried the door. And then that horrible moment when the thumb lock failed—athumblock to keep out a killer, because no one could have imagined such a thing like this could happen. This happened to other kids in other places, not?—

“You okay there, John?”

“Yes.” He ground out the word. “I’m fine.”

Patterson didn't know. The records were sealed. Even his therapist at Brighter Days didn't know. The boy John had been no longer existed. The man he was—the guy named John Worthy who stared from the mirror every morning—wasn't on anyone's radar, much less their memory. There was no link. Do a search for what had happened back then now, and you'd have to look really, really, really hard.

Still, he'd been so paranoid, he didn't believe when Stan, the federal marshal assigned to his case, said Uncle Sam would take care of the military and med school. Don't you worry about any of that, Stan once had said. Lean and lanky, Stan had a soft, easy drawl that was more Kentucky than Texas. John always wondered if the other marshals in the Wisconsin office maybe joshed Stan about channeling Timothy Olyphant.

You did the only thing you could, Stan had said. There was no one to help, no one to call. You had to act, and you did. Uncle Sam's got your back, kid. Depend on it.

“So, how come?” Patterson asked.

“How come what?” Relaxing his fists, he saw the ruby crescents where his nails had scored flesh. He had to think. “You mean, how come I never competed for the Cup? You know what they say. Doctors shoot about as well as they can march.” Patterson opened his mouth to respond, but John bulled on. “Back to your main point, Patterson, I'm just not interested in a mission. Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt. And I don't need any brothers, blood or otherwise. I'm fine on my own.”

“Uh-huh. You were doing real fine, John.” Patterson slid him a sidelong glance. “So fine you ended up at Brighter Days.”

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“That,” he said, “was pretty damned low. I’m not the first vet to have problems.” Patterson was trying to get his fingernails under his skin was all, trying to find a magic formula that would get John to agree. He couldn’t possibly know what had happened when John walked into a crowded grocery store four months back. Just thinking about it made John’s skin go pebbly with gooseflesh. There’d been a lot of people in the store that Thursday when he’d elbowed his way over to pick up a melon. But then the walls closed in, the gabble of voices got loud, and then John couldn’t breathe, felt boxed in, and heard a panicky voice from his past: Sssh, sshh, don’t cry, kids, please, be quiet, please, please, please, he’ll find us...

That was when he started picking out targets. Decided who he’d have to kill first then second then third to make it back to the exit.

Old lady in red at ten o’clock. Guy with the beer gut at noon. Mom with the kid in the cart, left of the cashier...pop-pop-pop.

As soon as he was out, he’d sprint to his car, dive into the front seat, grab the Glock from the holster he’d attached with Velcro to the underside of the dash because Glocks didn’t have safeties, which meant all he had to do was point and shoot?—

Right then and there, still clutching a ripe cantaloupe so hard it should’ve burst the way the bullet from an AR-15 obliterates a man’s skull, John had decided: Brighter Days, or wind up as a statistic, a one-minute segment on the evening news about yet another veteran who’d decided he liked the taste of gunmetal more than living.

When he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to throttle Patterson, he said, “I came here because I had to.”

“You could’ve chosen a different path. Eaten your gun, run your car off a cliff, put your head in a noose.”

This clown was Captain Obvious. “Yeah but think of the mess.”

“What I mean is, coming here was brave. Working through pain takes guts because you’ve got to tear yourself down and build yourself up until you become a person you can believe in again. Someone who knows that no matter what the world throws at him, he can take it.”

“Is this when we go allmano a mano, roll up our sleeves for a nice friendly arm-wrestle and then pop a beer? Or do we just compare muscles? I got to tell ya, when it comes to abs, I’m about four cansshy of a six-pack. Save the he-man psychobabble for someone else, Patterson. You’ve known me for exactly—” John gave his watch a pointed look. “Twenty minutes. Which, in my book, is about nineteen minutes and thirty seconds too long.”

“I know enough.” Patterson paused. “And I’ve seenallyour files.”

Crap.John’s gut iced. The way Patterson said that...He knows. No matter what Stan said, Patterson...He had to calm down.Breathe, be cool. Just breathe.He wasn’t fourteen anymore. John Worthy knew how to handle questions and innuendo.

“And?” he said. “So?”

“So, I’ve talked to some people. They all agree you’re the man for the job. In fact,theyrequested you.”

“Who’sthey?”

“I’m not at liberty to divulge that information before you agree. Do that, and then I’ll

read you in as much as I'm able."

Which, John figured, translated into no promises.

"I don't care who requested me." He pushed to his feet. "I'd say it's been a pleasure, but it hasn't. It's getting on three, and dark comes early in Montana at this time of year. I don't want to be caught on the trail. No good for me. Not good for my horse. We're done here."

"Really?" Patterson didn't move, just kept chewing his damn grass as John headed for his horse. "You're done with Afghanistan?"

"Yup." John yanked on a thief knot to free his horse's reins. "Especially there."

"I see." Patterson waited until John slotted his left foot into a stirrup then said, "Does that mean you're done with Captain Keller?"

What? John froze. His hands fisted in his horse's mane, but he'd be damned if he turned around. He dragged his voice up from the pit of a gut gone suddenly icy. "What does that mean, Patterson?"

"Exactly what I said."

"Which is a lot of nothing." Now, he did turn. "Roni's dead."

Patterson fired off an imaginary bullet with a forefinger. "And that's the nub, right there."

"Nub," John echoed. "You mean the nub of a problem?"

"About what you're being asked to do. When it comes to a soldier we've been forced

to leave behind, there's rescue, there's extraction."

"None of which we got. No one even mounted so much as a simple recon to try and locate much less get her back."

"I don't suppose it does any good to remind you that this happened during the Kabul evac and that your mission, as it were, wasn't sanctioned."

Did he detect a note of criticism? Sarcasm in the emphasis on mission? "I believe what you meant to say was that it was covert, maybe black ops, maybe CIA, but who's keeping score—and not a military operation. Either way, what difference would that make? We're not supposed to leave anyone behind."

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“And yet, we did.”

“So, what do you want me to do about that?”

“Like I said, there’s rescue. There are times we extract a team or soldier in trouble.” Slotting a palm into either hip pocket, Patterson cleared his throat. “And there’s retrieval.”

A beat. Then two—and John’s brain finally caught up. “Oh my God.” His knees wobbled, and he had to grab onto his mare’s saddle. “You found...” He forced the words past a hard knuckle in his throat. “You’re talking about Roni’s remains.”

“Yes, John,” Patterson said. “And Captain Keller needs you to bring her home.”

WHEN JOHNNY MET RONI

JULY 2020

They were butter bars, which is slang for second lieutenants, and in the same class in the Direct Commission Course at Fort Benning. The course is designed to train officers entering the Army straight out of college or, in their case, medical residency programs: general surgery for John, ER medicine and then psychiatry for Roni.

The moment John spied this small, athletic woman, zingwent the strings of his heart. Roni was broad across the shoulders with a torso that tapered to a trim waist, narrow hips, and strong, muscular thighs. When she passed by, the scent of something delicate and yet mysterious trailed behind: a whiff of jasmine on a moonlit night.

Roni could also be a real pill—or just a little nutty, but then again, she was a shrink. She enjoyed “testing limits,” which was a fancy-shmancy psychiatric way of saying she didn’t follow orders well. Like...she’d sit in a back corner and do needlepoint during class. No one told her to put anything away, although eventually an instructor challenged her to repeat what he’d just said. She did, verbatim, though minus the bad jokes. After that, instructors left her alone.

The other thing she had going for her with the instructors: she never moaned and bitched like the rest of them on the obstacle course or the team-building exercises. Some were downright terrifying. For example, shinnying up a rope then making like Tarzan which meant swinging from one perch to another fifty feet in the air, without crapping your pants. She never once griped during twelve-mile marches fully geared up, even though Benning broiled in a summer with way more red flag days than not. Big guys got damn near close to heat stroke and fell out of formation on a march...but Roni just never quit.

He thought that was on account of her dad being a Marine instructor at Mountain Warfare. John knew movies, which were—let’s face it—so much better than real life. He figured The Great Santini contained a kernel of truth and, as for Full Metal Jacket...some Marines were maniacs. Still, you wanted these guys, locked and loaded, on your side. Being a Marine’s kid probably toughened up Ronnie enough that nothing these instructors could throw at her made a dent. Eventually, the instructors decided they couldn’t break her and quit bothering her. Besides, the Army needed ER docs as much as it required shrinks, so Roni was golden.

Until the day their team lowered the flag.

All the docs were assigned to a team: Red, Blue, Yellow, and so on. Roni and John were on Blue Team, which, like all the others, was expected to perform various drills. Mind numbingly dumb-ass drills, but no one asked for John’s opinion.

The evening Blue Team lowered the flag, the guy who'd drawn the short straw for inspection was a wiry, dyspeptic captain named Driver. Rumor was Driver had been a hotshot pilot before a ruptured eardrum put the kibosh on his flying days. That might make anyone irritable, but mostly they pegged Driver as a mean cuss who probably kicked dogs.

He was also on the short side, a bantam-rooster kind of guy. Which was a nice way of saying he was a shrimp. (This was something no one ever pointed out in *Top Gun* or *Maverick*. No fighter pilot was a body-builder type. They were tiny guys because there just isn't enough room in the cockpit for an Arnold Schwarzenegger wannabe. Plus, the amount of oxygen big guys suck down is huge. John figured Old Arnold would never last a single mission.)

Anyway, Driver moved slowly down the line until he came to Roni. In contrast to the rest of her team, Roni was a cool-cucumber type; if she was sweating, John didn't see it. She just stood there, staring into the middle distance, until finally Driver moved in a little closer and said, "Lieutenant Keller, your name plate is crooked."

In that situation, any sane person would just say, "Yes sir, sorry, sir. Won't happen again, sir. Thank you, sir." But this was Roni Keller. Sanity need not apply.

There was a millisecond's pause before Roni said, very calmly, "With all due respect, sir, no, it's not."

"What was that, Lieutenant?" Driver's chin took on a hard jut. "What did you say?"

"I said, all due respect, sir, no, it's?—"

"I heard you the first time!" For a short guy, Driver could really bellow. "Are you questioning me, Lieutenant?"

“Not at all, sir. I am only saying that you are wrong, sir.”

John had to admire her calm. On the other hand, maybe this was par for the course for a Marine’s kid. Or maybe shrinks were just used to being screamed at by maniacs.

“Wrong.” Driver blinked then turned that into a question. “Wrong?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And how is that, Lieutenant?”

“Because I measured, sir.”

Driver stared. A beat passed then two. Finally, Driver said, “You. Measured.”

“Yes, sir. As per D-A Pam seventy-six dash one, specifically twenty-one dash?—”

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“Stop!” Driver hacked off the rest with a savage cut of his right hand. “I know the regs, Lieutenant. And so, you measured?” Driver was toe to toe with her. Spit flecked his lips. His features were ruddy and choked. “Then why is that nameplate crooked, Lieutenant?”

“Because of what’s underneath it, sir.”

Oh, crap. John’s heart skipped a beat. He knew Roni and where this was headed, what she meant. No, Roni, don’t do it.

“Underneath?” Driver’s brows knitted. “What are you talking about, Lieutenant? What do you mean, what’s underneath?”

“I mean what’s underneath my nameplate, sir.”

“And what’s that?”

“Why, sir,” Roni said with just the slightest inflection of well-duh, “a breast?”

Half the class decided she was suicidal. The other half thought she wanted to be kicked out and probably would be since Driver would send her to the base commandant for a reprimand, maybe even a dishonorable discharge. The Army couldn’t be that hard up.

“Seriously,” Horner, an orthopedist, blustered, “she’s not even really a doctor, is she? I mean, she’s a shrink.”

“She’s got MD after her name,” John said. “She did an ER residency.”

“Yeah, that’s the point. She switched. I bet I can guess why, too.” Horner’s wolfish grin gave way to a broad, self-satisfied smile that showed all his teeth. “Because she couldn’t cut it. That’s why shrinks go into psychiatry in the first place: because a shrink hospital’s the one place where the nuts feed the squirrels. If they have to bringmeinto an ER, I sure wouldn’t wanthto be the only doc in the hospital.”

There was some general shuffling of feet from the others, a few coughs, but no one rushed in to defend Roni, and John gave up. Why was he even arguing with this moron? Horner was nothing more than a glorified bone carpenter. Everyone knew orthopedists were strong as bulls and twice as smart.

When an hour and a half passed and still no Roni—Horner opined that maybe Driver had sentfor a firing squad—the others drifted off to chow. John stayed behind and fretted. If Roni were booted, that would be bad. On the other hand, John had only known her for, what, a month? Heck, they’d probably get assigned to different bases right off the bat and he’d never see her again. Except the idea of Roni being booted out left him feeling as if someone had taken a melon baller and scooped out his guts...

That thought derailed as the barracks door squealed. He looked over in time to see Roni motoring for the stairs.

“Hey.” Popping off the couch, he took the distance to the foyer in three strides. “Hey, Roni, wait!”

Of all thepeople who might’ve hung around—most were ghouls, anyway, eager to feed off her misfortune and distress—she never expected John Worthy. She’d noticed him noticing her, of course. Even thought about him...thatway. Not that she ever encouraged him because she’d already decided: no entanglements. DCC was only six weeks long. Sure, that was enough time for some people to make like jackrabbits and

hop from one bed to the next. She had plenty of other ways to work off steam and, in fact, she'd already decided what she would do next: get her rental, grab herself a rifle, and...

So, she could've kept going. She hadn't gotten this far by caving in to anyone for anything. Yet she stopped and turned—though she kept one foot on the bottom step just in case she was wrong, and John turned out to be a turd.

“Yeah?” That was all she could think to say.

“Are you...” A flurry of emotions chased over his features too quickly for her to read, but was that indecision? Shyness? “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Wow, she had to be blowing him away with her clever repartee, so she added, “I’m fine.”

“What happened?” But then, before she could answer, he held up both hands like a traffic cop. “I’m sorry. That was wrong. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay.” Which was the truth, so she lied, but only a little. “We didn’t talk about much.” There, how was that for vague?

“Talked.” He goggled. “You and Driver? About what?”

“Just...” Reaching behind her head, she tugged an elastic band from the end of her braid. Her hair was, a stylist once said (and not without a trace of envy), a really luscious shade of chestnut mingled with auburn highlights and completely her own. When she started her ER residency, she’d debated about cutting her hair because she worried the guys in the program wouldn’t take her seriously. When she switched to psychiatry, an analyst told her that her hair might inspire fantasies in her male patients. She decided the analyst was simply a dirty old man hiding behind a Freud-

style goatee and disregarded the advice. Anyway, her hair was just long enough to brush the wings of her scapulae. “Stuff,” she said, finger-combing out kinks. “We just talked about stuff.

“Stuff,” he echoed.

“Yeah.” She felt a smile flirt with her mouth. “Stuff.”

“Uh-huh. So, are you stillhere? Did you get kicked out?”

“Kicked out?” Her fingers stilled. “No. I mean, he wasangry.”

“Seeing as how you were kind of a wise ass?”

“Ow.” She gave him a mock scowl. “Whose side are you on?”Wait, are you flirting?

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“Yours. I mean...” He gave a pointed look right and then left at the empty barracks. “I’m still here, right?”

He’d waited for her. He’s not the enemy. “We just talked.” She paused then added, “It was private.”

“Oh.” The look of expectation slid from his face to be replaced by something close to embarrassment. “Okay.” His mouth wobbled into a sheepish grin. “Okay,” he repeated as he backed away. “Just wanted to be sure you were all right.”

“I am. Thanks.” Then she thought, How often have you run into a nice guy who probably would never comment on how your ass wiggles when you use a Gigli saw?

So, despite all her resolutions and best intentions, she said, “Lieutenant Worthy, just what do you do for fun?”

“Fun? Me? Here?”

“They’re not oxymorons.”

The right corner of his mouth quirked. “I read and work out. I watch movies. I hang at the airfield a lot.”

“The airfield.”

“Yeah.” A little defensively. “I like to watch the planes come and go.”

“Come and go.”

“Yeah. The hand signals are interesting.”

“Interesting.”

“So weird.” He cocked his head. “Do you hear an echo?”

Okaaay. A guy with a sense of humor. She also didn't think his hesitancy, the stumbling and fumbling, was an act.

“How about this?” she said. “We both change into civvies then blow this Crackerjack joint and go have somerealfun?”

“Oh?” he said. “Such as?”

ANNIE OAKLEY

JULY 2020

“Fun,” John said, as Roni nosed her rental up to a long building at the end of a rutted county road in Alabama, a half hour away from base across the Chattahoochee. Two yellow lozenges of light shone on either side of a darkened front door. He counted four roof-mounted cameras. He squinted at a stenciled sign over the doorway.

“A gun club,” he said then repeated, “A gunclub?”

“Yeah.” Roni threw the rental into and killed the engine. “I like target shooting. Makes me feel better.”

“Okay.” Seriously? On the other hand, he could sort of see it. All the gun ranges around

his family's place in Texas had been packed the day the Twin Towers came down and for a solid week afterward: hordes of angry, scared people banging away, hoping all those bullets somehow made up for their inability to go after an enemy whose face they didn't even know. "So, you come to a gun club in Alabama? Why not shoot on the base range?"

"Because there aren't many weapons to choose from, and it's too..." She searched for the word. "Public. Everybody knows you. I don't want to give guys like Horner any reason to make stupid jokes about shrinks going postal, especially after today."

John almost said that Horner would never do that but then reconsidered. The guy was a jerk. The truth also was that he and Roni were, hands down, the best shots in their class. What with her dad being an instructor at Mountain Warfare, Roni came by guns honestly. As for John, deer hunting was practically a religion in Wisconsin.

Plus, he'd had some additional instruction from his uncle who'd been a Ranger and a sniper in Vietnam. He saw no reason, though, to talk about a detail that belonged to another boy's past anyway.

"But I don't have a weapon," he said.

"I called ahead. We're all set." She killed the engine. "The owner's a nice guy."

"But it's dark. Roni, you got to have some other way of working off steam."

"I do." Pulling the ignition key, she pushed out of the rental, pocketed the fob, and said, "But this is better than throwing knives or axes."

“Axes?”

The gun club was bare bones: a concrete floor with display racks of long guns, boxes of ammunition on shelves, handguns in glass cases, and display hooks in pegboard with slings, holsters, suppressors, magazines, and other gun-related paraphernalia. The place smelled of gun oil, cleaning solvent, dust, and worn leather floating atop a base layer of dried sweat.

An older man with a pot belly, a big nose, a bushy metal-gray beard, long white hair pulled back in a tail, and a MAGA cap on his head perched on a stool in back of the long glass counter. He was reading a paperback but looked up as they came through the front door.

“Hiya, Roni,” he said, putting the paperback, *The Collected Letters of Seneca*, face down on the counter. He wore stained jeans, a faded green T-shirt stretched over his gut, and a pair of scuffed Red Wing work boots. Levering himself off his stool, he came around, tilted his head back to look John in the eye, and stuck out a calloused hand. “You must be John. I’m Emery. Roni says you’re a hell of a good shot.”

“I’m okay, sir.” The stool had given Emery the illusion of height; he was a small guy, no taller than Roni. Emery’s grip was strong, though. There was a Vietnam-era POW-MIA tattoo and the words *You Are Not Forgotten* done in black ink on his right arm. On his left, he sported an odd tattoo: a leaf outlined in red, with a lightning bolt jagging down the center. *25th* was in red ink to the right of the leaf and *Div.* was on the left. “Thanks for letting us in after-hours.”

“Wouldn’t do it if I hadn’t seen her shoot. That, and”—Emery gave a conspiratorial

wink—"I knowed of her daddy. He was after my time in 'Nam but give my grandson a what-for last summer at Mountain Warfare. Anyway, Roni, gotcha the gear you asked for and those Glock 19s you like."

"Glocks, not Sigs?" John asked Roni. Sig-Sauers were standard Army issue. "That's almost unpatriotic."

"Sigs." Emery made a rude noise with his lips. "What's the Army know?"

"Sigs are ugly," Roni said. "It's the color. I don't like camo brown. It's not elegant."

"A shooter with fashion sense." Emery grinned. "Unless you want, maybe, a S&W M&P, son? Or I got a Walther PP if you want or scrounge up a couple raceguns."

"No, the Glock is fine, sir," John said.

"Okay, then." Pulling a flashlight from a back pocket, Emery nodded toward a side door. "Come on out."

The side doorleading from Emery's office opened onto the walkway covered by a ballistic canopy that sheltered ten shooting stations. Each station consisted of a simple but hefty wood table large enough to rest a long gun on a tripod.

Earl talked as he walked. "Gotchyer berm at three hunnert and twenty-five yards, targets set up at a hunnert and a hunnert and fifty. Ground in-between is just packed dirt. No stray brass. Impact berm's thirty feet high, but you'll see that when you light 'er up." He stopped at two stations midway down the line and used his flashlight to pick out items on the near table. "Ear and eye protection. Weapons are identical, and lasers already zeroed in, so all you gotta decide is who's right and who's left."

There were two weapons at each station. One was the Glock 19 Emery promised,

equipped with a combination IR laser and illumination set mounted beneath the barrel. Next to each Glock was an M4 outfitted with an FWS-I, which stood for Family of Weapons Sights-Individual. (In John's experience, the military never met an acronym it didn't like.) The unit fed thermal images via Bluetooth to an imaging monocle, the ENVG-III, which was, in turn, meant to be attached to a helmet. Anything the camera saw, the soldier could, too.

"This is some fancy gear, Emery," he said. "But where'd you get it? Far as I know, this is military-issue only."

"Don't ask, don't tell," Roni said.

"Let's just say I got friends." Emery offered a thin smile that showed no teeth and changed the subject. "You ever practice with one of these units, son?" When John shook his head, the older man said, "You just put on that monocle and then whatever the gun sees, you do, too."

"The setup's thermally based," Roni put in. "Whatever the camera sees is fed to the ENVG. That way, you don't have to shoulder your weapon for a peek the way you would if you were looking through a scope. All you have to do is slide the barrel out at a right angle to a wall and see what's going on. Saves getting your head blown off."

"Yeah, as long as that fancy Bluetooth connection doesn't drop," Emery said, dryly. His tone made it obvious what he thought of all that high-falutin' gear, too.

"Cool," he said. "But we're just not going to be in those kinds of situations."

Roni cocked her head. "Never say never again." And then at his narrow look: "What? I thought you'd be impressed with my knowledge of James Bond movies."

He rolled his eyes. “Get real, Roni. We’re doctors. If we go anywhere, it’ll be Germany or Qatar and even that’s a big maybe. They’re notgoing to send us into a combat situation. Something would have to go seriously FUBAR for us to be deployed anywhere dangerous.”

“You’re in the Army, son,” Emery said. “Something’s always a whisker away from going FUBAR.”

They started with the Glocks.

After his first half-dozen shots, Roni studied his target. “You’re whacking the gun.” She pointed to a scatter of shots so wide they might as well have been in another time zone. “It’s because you’re trying to do it as fast as I am.”

“She’s right.” Emery sucked on his lower teeth. “You want, I could go get my Viper. Slide’s like butter. You’ll cycle through right quick.”

“No.” He was annoyed but not for the reasons they thought. The reality was...he knew exactly how quickly he’d popped off shots, but his speed had nothing to do with being competitive. What he worried about was being as good as he knew he was.

It was one thing to show competence on the rifle range in front of his classmates. Everyone knew he hunted. Handguns were different, though. Do it right in front of people who knew what they were looking at and a person might get questions he didn’t want to answer.

Except...missing on purpose was killing him. Like telling an elite tennis player to, say, stop returning the ball so often.

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“Thanks for the offer,” he said to Emery. “I just have to slow down.”

“What you need is to stop trying to beat her,” Emery said.

“Heh.” Clearly in a much better mood, Roni favored him with a cocky grin. “Too late.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Though he liked that she was smiling. “Less talk,” he said, pulling his earmuffs on again. “More shooting.”

After that, he allowed himself to pull dead even with but not outshoot Roni. “Good shooting,” Emery said, comparing targets, though, again, he slipped John that sidelong glance. “Noticed you took some care there.”

What had the older man seen? That he tried very hard not to shoot through his own holes? “Ah,” he said. “You know, just lucky.”

“Uh-huh,” Emery said after a short silence that stretched for one beat too many. “Lucky.” Then: “Y’all ever done an Annie Oakley?”

“I’m sorry?” Roni asked. “A who?”

“Not a who,” said Emery. “A what. An Annie Oakley is where you shoot the flame from a candle without hitting the candle.”

“Seriously?” He gave what he thought was a very convincing, very bewildered laugh for a guy who knew exactly what an Annie Oakley was. “That’s impossible.”

“Not for Annie Oakley. She could do it with a lever-action rifle at thirty-five yards. I had an old buddy could do it with a High Standard competition pistol.”

“Wow,” he said, injecting just as much disbelief into his tone as he thought prudent. “So, how far with a modern weapon, like an M4?” Like he didn’t already know the answer.

“A good sniper at night and without a spotter?” Emery sucked his teeth, considering. “Probably two hundred yards, two-fifty. Either of you up for a try?”

“I’m game,” Roni said.

“Sure,” he said, though he thought he was just a half-beat too slow. “Can’t hurt to try.”

“The way it works is you each get three shots.” Pushing up from the dirt where he’d set up a Remington M2010 on a bipod, Emery dusted himself off. “Cutting the candle in two is no good. You got to snuff the wick, and that’s it.”

“How many yards again?” Her head swiveled toward a solitary flicker downrange, so far away as to be only bright and no color at all. “That looks awfully far.”

“Three fifty,” Emery said. “Right up against the berm.”

She goggled. “Seriously?” At the same moment John protested, “I thought you said two-fifty with a spotter.”

“I figured you two might be up for a challenge.”

“Can you hit that?” she asked.

“Me?” Emery made a raspberry sound. “Not in a million years.”

Annoyed, she planted her fists on her hips. “Then how fair is that?”

“Don’t sweat it. All it means is we’ll be in good company when we miss.” John made a half-bow. “Ladies first.”

“Uh-huh.” She huffed out her cheeks. “I know what you’re doing: taking notes.”

“You want me to go first?”

“No, no.” She was annoyed, though couldn’t put her finger on exactly why. “I’ll do it.”

“Then, go,” Emery said. “More you think about it, worse it will get. Take your shots before that thing burns down.”

She did everythingalmostright. She lay on her stomach. She spread her legs. But she couldn’t get comfortable with the gun.What’s wrong with you?She fidgeted, snuggling and then adjusting the butt of the Remington into her right shoulder as the men watched.

She knew what bothered her. The tiniest fingerof disquiet poked the nape of her neck. John was...there wasn’t something quite right about him.Like he’s holding himself back.But why would he do that?

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What also hit her then was just how much she didn't know about him. She could say the same of the others, but with John, once she relaxed and they talked...there'd been this palpable tug of attraction. With him so close, she'd had this sudden, crazy urge to pull over, throw the car into park, and then throw herself all over him. She ached to taste the salt of his neck then run her tongue to the angle of his jaw and down to circle his nipples. She would work her way back up to his mouth, his gorgeous lips, while her fingers worked the snap over the bulge in his jeans and then reach in and slide her hand around his?—

“You okay down there?” Emery asked.

“Fine.” Focus. Wrenching her mind away from fantasies of sweaty limbs and sighs and moans, she worked her neck then embraced the rifle the way her dad had taught and let her breathing settle down.

After her third shot, Roni pushed to her feet and brushed off her pants and shirt. Downrange, the flame still flickered, a tiny bright speck seen through a pinprick in black fabric. “This is impossible,” she grumped.

“But you tried,” John said.

“Yeah, yeah, dare you to do any better, hotshot.”

“Easy there, Roni,” Emery said, his tone mild. “I think you were just distracted is all. It happens.”

“Want to go again?” John said. “I don't mind.”

“No.” Then, as his smile faltered as if that single word were a lash, she said, with effort, “I mean, thanks, but we should stick to the rules.” She waited a beat then continued, “I just don’t like to lose.”

“Yeah? You know, come to think of it, neither did Captain Kirk.”

That broke the tension. “Do tell.” Her mouth quirked into a lopsided grin and then she laughed outright. “And why was that?”

“Are you kidding? Always ready to fire phasers and take names?” John showed a dazzling smile, playful and somehow very intimate. “Kinda no guts, no glory. Totally my kind of guy.”

“Uh-huh.” A loud, phlegmy cough from Emery. “If you space cadets are finished?—”

My God, she’d forgotten the man was there. And when had she moved closer to John?

“Yeah,” she and John said at the same time and then John went on, “I’m good, sir.”

“Okay, Captain Kirk, then let’s see what you got.” Emery cocked a thumb at the Remington. “Go on, Doc. Go for glory.”

DEPLOYMENT

AUGUST 2021

About fourteen hours after the Marines were mobilized in early May, John, Roni, and about seven hundred other soldiers in their Army battalion shouldered packs and shambled onto no-frills, private charter Boeings. Their orders were hurry-up last-minute: fly to a staging base in Germany, refuel, and then immediately move on to

Qatar where they would board a troop transport for the final leg into Afghanistan.

No one cared where anyone sat on the private charters. Being captains by then, John and Roni were near the front of the line, though the majors and a couple of lieutenant colonels beat them to the exit rows. That was when the trouble started.

“Come on.” He jerked his head toward the rear. “Back here.”

“What?” Roni frowned. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s near the bathrooms.”

“So?”

“So, I don’t like the smell.”

“Yeah, but we’re more likely to survive a crash if we sit in the back near a bulkhead. We’ll be much closer to a decent exit, too.”

“Who said anything about crashing?”

“I’m just thinking ahead,” he said. “Being prepared.”

Roni rolled her eyes. “You’re in the Army now, not the Boy Scouts.”

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“Same diff, except we have nicer guns.” In a perfect world, as doctors, they shouldn’t. Except, modern combat being what it was, doctors and medics were often targeted first. (Dogs were a close second, which John thought totally sucked.)

The Geneva Convention said that if a doctor popped off a shot, even in defense of a patient, the doc forfeited the right not to get shot. Which was a losing proposition in John’s book. Honestly, having a weapon was way better than waving a Geneva Convention card. That thing was only in English anyway.

“True.” Narrowing her deep, jade-green eyes, Roni cocked an eyebrow, Spock-style, which she did exceedingly well. (Roni had become a sucker for anything Star Trek.) After DCC, she’d shed her long hair for a very hot Sharon Stone pixie. With those eyes and that smooth tapered oval of a face, she often looked like a sexy elf with attitude. “Tell me something, Doctor,” Roni drawled, dropping her voice an octave, that eyebrow still arched. “Are you afraid of flying?”

“What? Me? No,” he lied. Flying drove him nuts, a reason he never considered the Air Force as a way of paying for medical school. (Though he looked terrific in navy blue.) Boats sank, so the Navy was out. Which left the Army, a service that he thought principally kept its soldiers on the ground. So, ending up in an airborne division was some kind of cosmic joke. Right this very moment, the universe was laughing behind his back. “I don’t like taking risks, that’s all.”

“You’re a soldier.”

“No, I’m a doctor.”

“Going to a war zone.”

“Yeah, but not really. We’re evacuating people. Like almost right away.”

“Won’t be done until the end of August.”

“That’s still leaving.”

“Yes, but from a war zone.”

“You keep saying that.” Next, she would say they might get shot in the back. “I just like playing it safe.”

“By joining the Army?”

This was an excellent point. He was sure he’d have dredged up some snappy reply, but a staff sergeant at the cabin door called, “If you two are done picking out the curtains, the rest of us would like to board. I’ve aged about ten years here.”

Embarrassing. But that was the two of them then: John Worthy and Roni Keller. John...and his beloved.

If he’d only had the courage, he even might have said that out loud.

After all the windup, the flight was spectacularly normal. Nice-enough stewardesses. Plenty of water and soda and peanuts and pretzels. Indifferent sandwiches for lunch. Screwing in noise-canceling AirPods, John listened to a jazz mix—Coltrane, Mingus, Cyrus Chestnut—while Roni worked on a new needlepoint for her brother’s fiancée. (The guy had apparently proposed as the couple hiked the Himalayas. After the proposal, they went down the Indian side into a village and picked out rings from a local bazaar. 22K gold, Roni said, letting out a long sigh. I think it’s very

romantic. John didn't point out that oxygen deprivation might have impaired the guy's judgment.)

Things on their flight were going pretty okay until John looked out the window, saw they were over the Atlantic, and thought, Uh-oh.

Because everyone knows, if a plane has to ditch in water, bend over and kiss your ass goodbye.

They survived the flight to Ramstein. Refueling took two hours, which was just long enough for everyone to disembark and wash up a bit before piling back onboard for the flight to Qatar.

At the last minute, four bearded, rough jocks in civvies hustled onboard and took seats in the center and a row up from him and Roni. From the puzzled looks, no one in the battalion knew who they were, and the jocks didn't bother introducing themselves around. Once in the air, though, he caught Roni eye-checking the group. "Problem?"

"No, it's nothing." She worked another few stitches: spikes of purple monkshood, smaller daisy-lookalikes with bright yellow centers, and other flowers native to the Himalayas. "It's nothing."

"Baloney." Anyone who had to reiterate twice was telling you: that nothing was something. He snatched a quick peek at the guys and was surprised to find a tall muscular dude with a flop of black hair and equally dark eyes in an aisle seat studying them. Or, more likely, eyeing Roni. "You know that guy? The one on the aisle?"

"I..." She flashed a quick look then dodged her eyes away. "No."

“You know, for a shrink, you are a terrible liar.”

“Thanks, I’ll take that up with my psychoanalyst.” She stabbed the canvas. “It’s nothing.”

Threenothings. “You’re torturing an innocent flower there.”

“Funny.”

“Not to the flower.”

“That guy,” she murmured, slipping John a sidelong glance. “He’s...familiar.”

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“From?”

“That’s just it. I can’t place him. Might have seen him around Mountain Warfare, but that bunch looks paramilitary. If I were putting down money...” She thought about it. “I’d say CIA.”

“Seriously? What could the CIA be doing at this point? The war’s over. We’re evacuating.”

“Yeah, but I bet they have assets and paramilitary in-country to evacuate.”

“Ah.” The CIA had tried this same kind of “third option” many times before in places like Vietnam, Tibet, Nicaragua, Somalia; in Pakistan with the Mujaheddin which had given birth to Bin Laden...the list just went on and on. John never could figure how the CIA kept getting funding considering how many of their covert armies never worked out to anyone’s benefit. “What are they calling them this time around?” he asked. “The CIA’s Afghan paramilitary guys?”

“Zeroes.”

“As in zero-probability of success?”

“Very funny.” She nibbled her lower lip. “I’ve heard that some units have been a problem.”

Oh, what he would give to be that lip. “Settling scores, you mean. Tribe against tribe.”

She nodded. “Weird that these guys are on our transport. CIA and paramilitaries usually have their own.”

“Go say hi and get the lowdown. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“It’s the wrong guy or itissomeone I’ve met, but he doesn’t tell me anything. That would be awkward.”

“Or you make a new friend. Or you guys catch up.” When she didn’t move, he said, “So, you’re just going to toss not-so-surreptitious glances all the way to Qatar.”

“I guess so.”

“Maybe I’ll wander over when we land.” When he looked again, the guy seemed absorbed in a thick paperback, though he couldn’t read the title. “Chat him up. See what’s what.”

“Well, John, you do that, and he has to kill you afterward,” she said, working another stitch, “don’t blame me.”

He didn’t talkto the guy.

Instead, he sweated the flight to Qatar and braced for disaster on approach. But the wings stayed on, the pilot didn’t have a heart attack, and none of the engines exploded. Once the Boeing taxied to a stop, the jocks were motioned off first. They went without a word or backward glance. The last John saw of them there, the men were crossing the tarmac and heading for a group of similarly outfitted buff guys. As they shook hands all around, a Humvee rolled up, came to a halt, and another man—thinner, a bit weedy, clean-shaven, kitted out in NATO cammies—unfolded from the passenger seat and waded into the middle of the group.

“Ten to one that office-type is chief of station,” Roni said as, after a brief exchange, the thin guy waved the group toward the Humvee.

“Still thinking CIA?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said as the dark-haired jock she’d scoped out climbed into the vehicle. “I just wish I knew who that guy was. I feel like I should know him.”

“Maybe we’ll see him again in Kabul,” he said, standing and grabbing his gear from the overhead. “If they’re getting assets out like you say.”

“I sincerely hope not.” Tugging out her own gear, she joined him in the aisle. “If you believe my dad, CIA almost always means trouble. Me, I like soldiers who operate in daylight.”

“They’re not vampires.”

“Maybe,” she said as they headed for cabin door. “At least with a vampire, you know what it’s after.”

They were on the ground just long enough to pee before the battalion boarded a C-17 for their final leg from Qatar into Afghanistan.

During his time in the Army, John discovered soldiers had a nickname for the C-17 Globemaster: Moose. Why? Because, during refueling, when pressure relief vents opened to expel air, the sound was like a moose’s bellow. Never having hunted or run away from a moose, he took all that on faith.

There is also absolutely nothing glamorous about a Moose. A C-17 has no windows or exit rows. Packs and other cargo are loaded onto pallets secured to the deck under cargo nets to the rear of the plane. There is one full bathroom at the front and a urinal

behind a curtain at the rear which the loadmaster normally uses. If the bathroom is out of order, there are always buckets.

In other words, they were flying into Afghanistan in the equivalent of an airborne metal tube. This meant that anything could be happening outside, anything...and John would never see it coming. There would be no time to prepare, sort options, decide on next steps.

They were so doomed.

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Right before takeoff, a member of the flight crew came around, doling out foam earplugs held together on a single string. Roni waved the corporal away then frowned when John accepted a pair. “Where are your buds?” Then she saw his face. “Oh, John, you didn’t. You lost them?”

“I just put them down for a second.” Actually, more like thirty seconds. Okay, two minutes, but he wasn’t going to quibble. He’d gone to the men’s room and, before entering a stall, put the earbuds down on a shelf over a sink. Habit, something he did in his apartment because wear those suckers when you were taking a leak and then look into the bowl—because all guys looked, it’s just what they did—and all of a sudden, you were flushing your buds before you realized what you’d done. (He was speaking from experience here.) Anyway, he’d hurried to get out of the john and back to the plane and so forgot all about the earbuds until it was too late to go back. That was also assuming no one had already pocketed them. “I’ll be okay.”

“Except those foam things are useless.”

“Don’t mince words, Doctor. Tell me what you really think.” Had their instructors ever gone over this stuff in DCC? Was there a specific section in the manual: Bring noise-canceling earbuds because Army kit is crap? “How do you know they’re useless?”

“My dad. He reads a lot of books, and he’ll pitch the ones that aren’t accurate.”

“And he read about earplugs?”

“I guess so. His favorites are thrillers about this ex-Army guy who wanders the

country and makes like Simon Templar.” At his blank look: “The Saint? A character in novels by a British writer? I forget his name, but there was a TV series.”

“Did we ever see it?” When they were both on-call, they booted up an old show or movie to watch while he practiced one-handed surgical knots and Roni knitted or embroidered. He frankly didn’t care what they watched. Any time stolen with Roni was well-spent. “Don’t remember that show,” he said.

“Because we never watched it. Roger Moore starred.”

“Wasn’t he one of the Bonds?”

“Yup, but before that he was Simon Templar. Nice suit, debonaire. Ran around helping people, taking care of bad guys. Anyway, the Army guy in the books my dad likes is the American equivalent only with muscles and jeans. Tom Cruise played the character in a couple movies, but he’s too short. Not my kind of guy.”

“Oh.” Was he taller than Tom Cruise? He thought so. They had never talked about her kind of guy. Yeah, they kidded around—and he sensed a sizzle, something hot and steamy, a flame that needed only a tiny bit of coaxing. One night she’d dozed off in the on-call lounge and, before he knew it, her head rested on his chest, just below his collarbone. One hand cupping the back of her head, he’d gently slid his free arm around her waist. They stayed like that for the rest of the movie. Bogart and Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*, as he remembered, and when Bacall drew back from that second, steamy kiss, he mouthed the line: *It’s even better when you help.* The temptation to kiss Roni awake—nuzzle her neck, that perfect shell of her right ear—was so strong, it was almost a relief when his pager shrilled, and she startled awake. Although she did say he looked a little pained as he got up from the couch. He couldn’t tell her that it was very hard to walk with a hard-on.

Now, he said, “Books any good?”

“If you like that kind of thriller. I once heard an interview where someone asked the writer how he knew all about our military, even the classified stuff, because he’s British, right? He said whatever he doesn’t know, he makes up.”

“Seriously?”

She nodded. “He claims that if you want people to believe you, write with enough authority, and they will.”

“You mean, bluff.”

“Or outright lie. That’s what novelists do for a living. They make stuff up.”

If he was any good, this writer could probably make the Joint Chiefs, no sweat. Maybe even the presidency. “I’ll have to read him,” he said, trying to squish a foam plug into his right ear. A hopeless task, like trying to ram in a Nerf ball.

Dragging on a wool watch cap, Roni watched him struggle. “We can share.”

“No use us both going deaf in one ear. It’s fine.” It wasn’t, but he didn’t want to feel more foolish than he already did because he’d also forgotten his watch cap. He even knew where it was: right next to his bug-out bag where he would be sure not to forget it. If the rumors were true about just how cold the transport was going to get, he’d be cryo-preserved by the time they landed.

Roni cocked her left eyebrow. “Uh-huh.”

“One might suggest you lack faith in my abilities.”

She arched the opposite eyebrow. “Color me skeptical.”

“You know, you’re very good at that eyebrow thing.”

“I practice a lot when I’m alone.”

“Wait,” he said, as the C-17’s engines spluttered to life. “That’s a line from Love and Death. You know something I don’t?”

She grinned then leaned in as the engine noise swelled. “Seriously, John, we really can share earbuds and trade off. I don’t mind.”

“No, it’s fine!” he bellowed over the transport’s shudder and shake. His teeth were vibrating. “Besides, I don’t think you want us sharing precious bodily fluids!”

Which was a total lie. Doing precisely this with Roni was something about which he often daydreamed.

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“Eww.” When she wrinkled her nose, her features took on a puckish look: an elf with attitude. Leaning in so closely that her lips brushed his ear, she said, “Although I might be up for that, Dr. Strangelove.”

What,what? A small thrill finger-walked the knobs of his spine. Was this an invitation? Couldn't be. She was nervous, that was all. They were soldiers heading off into the unknown. This was about fear, not desire, not his need to cup her face in his hands and let his lips drift down her neck and over the notch of her collarbone as he slid a hand under her blouse and then her bra until his fingers found the hard nub of her nipple and gave that a playful?—

What are you doing?Crossing his legs, he pinned down his erection with his thighs.You have to work together.

“John?” Her voice somehow penetrated both the growl of engines and the roar of blood in his ears. “Are you okay?”

“Who? Me? What?” He flashed back to that night on call. Now, as then, it was very difficult to look casual when a guy's hard-on was, well,hard. “No, I'm good. Really. Seriously. Good, I'm good.”

“Awful lot of goodness there,” she said, waggling an earbud. “Not too late.”

“Naw.” He flapped a hand. “Saving you from your own worst impulses.”And mine.

At that, something flitted over her features, there and gone: a swift sparrow of emotion too fleeting to be read.

“Maybe I don’t want saving,” she said.

Famous last words.

ON THE ROAD WITH CHILD AND KING

OCTOBER 2023

So, Patterson’s plan was simple...and not so simple.

Two days after Patterson made his elevator pitch—and only an hour before John was supposed to pick up a rental for the drive to Boise—the guy surprised him with an add-on, a not-so-very minor detail he claimed had slipped his mind. Which, John figured, was horse doo-doo. There were two possibilities: Patterson either had second thoughts about this ability or stability or both...or the guy worried that if he’d leveled, John would walk.

He almost, almost did. The only thing that kept him in the game was his certainty that Roni had died because of him. Bringing what was left of her home was the least he could do.

So, he sucked it up. What choice did he really have? Unless he succumbed to the temptation to find out how gunmetal tasted, he’d be looking at that guy in the mirror for a long, long time to come.

The simple part was travel—Boise to Chicago to Istanbul. Once there, catch yet a third flight to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan—and a meet.

That’s also where things stopped being so simple. Because there was the not-so-insignificant problem of the add-on.

Three hours out of Boise, John turned to the guy behind the wheel and said, “Let me get this straight. Patterson says that once we’re in Dushanbe, we’ll be ‘met’ at the airport.” He added air-quotes. “What’s that even mean? Met by whom? With what name? Man? Woman? Vegetable? How many syllables?”

Taz Davila lifted a shoulder and let it fall—and this was Davila being expressive. “Hank didn’t say.”

“Meaning he either can’t or won’t.” John paused. “Or doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t that sort of fall under the category of can’t?”

From Davila, this counted as witty repartee. Although he was Hannah Kendricks’ husband, John knew diddly about the guy. Davila wasn’t really involved in Brighter Days, which catered to ex-military: the broken, the scarred. The haunted. That wasn’t Davila, so far as John knew. Hannah’s man was in and out, sometimes there, sometimes gone for a week or more at a time from the rehab ranch. John could count the number of times in the past four months where he’d laid eyes on the guy on one hand and still have fingers left over.

Which was to say that what John knew of the guy amounted to just about nothing, other than he was one of Patterson’s Brotherhood Support Group. (Yeah, yeah, yeah, he knew the group’s real name. Sue him.)

Davila was also ex-Ranger. Looked it, too. Biceps, six-pack, the Sunday morning football scruff. The whole package put John in mind of the men who’d joined that transport from Germany to Doha. Men both he and Roni assumed worked for the CIA and whom they also figured they’d never see again.

As with so many other things surrounding the evacuation, that was also so very wrong.

He pressed Davila. “What if Patterson hasn’t been read in either?”

“Doubt it.”

“Meaning you don’t know.”

“Meaning you need to start looking at the doughnut, not the hole.”

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“Yeah,” he said, dryly, thinking of the night he and Roni had watched *The Lovely Bones*. She’d said the doughnut thing, too. When his therapist first spouted the same thing at *Brighter Days*, it was all John could do not to sock the guy in the mouth. “I believe I’ve heard that one.”

“What I’m saying is that Hank’s not going to throw us into a lion’s den.”

“Let’s hope not. A mob of very angry, very large cats is nothing to trifle with, my friend.”

Davila didn’t laugh. “Our cover story is we’re your average thrill-seekers from Australia looking for a good hike in the Pamir Mountains.”

“Uh-huh.” He had done his homework. Even in August, daytime temps never got much higher than sixty degrees. Waking up to frost wasn’t uncommon. “And just how are we going to sell that? Say things like *mate and shrimp on the barbie* lot?” When he saw the corner of Davila’s mouth quirk, John said, “Ah, the Sphinx has a sense of humor.”

Davila rearranged his face. “Don’t push your luck.”

“Too late. I can’t unsee that almost-smirk.” He paused. “So why are we hiking the Pamirs in October? I’ll be lucky not to freeze off highly personal and important parts of my anatomy.”

“Yeah, but it’s spring in Australia. We just got our seasons confused.”

“That’s like saying I came to Casablanca for the waters, but I was misinformed.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” John chewed his lower lip. “What do we do once we land in Tajikistan?”

“Look for someone holding up a sign with the right names.”

Which were Child and King. John got the references. You couldn’t even get out of a grocery store without seeing those guys’ books in a display rack. “What if the operation’s been compromised?”

“Hank trusts the people running operational security.”

“Who are nameless.” He didn’t like it; this sounded like code for spooks. “What about the Russians? They used to own Tajikistan.”

“Yes, but they’re not in control anymore.”

This was partially true. John had done his homework. As soon as the Russians left, the various Tajik tribes went after each other. Everything eventually calmed down, but only after ten really bad years. Russian was still one of the country’s two official languages, and vodka was both easy to get and probably safer than the water.

“The Russians might not be calling the shots,” he said, “but they still maintain a presence at the border with Afghanistan.”

“True, but they’re not going to be a factor. We’ll be met at the airport where we get visas, an ID, gear, and a fair amount of cash in both Tajik somonis and Afghan afghanis.”

“Why the cash?”

“I don’t think we’re going to find too many places that are gonna take a credit card.”

“Good point. But that sounds like an awful lot of walking-around money.”

“We need money to get across the various borders.”

“Bribes?” When Davila nodded, John asked, “And after that?”

“To be determined.”

“Meaning...?”

“Meaning we will be met by persons who remain nameless, and they know where we need to go.”

“Which is a fancy way of saying, gee, I don’t know.”

John watched Davila think about that a second. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“You’re killing me here,” John said. “You really don’t know who we’re meeting and how we’re getting to Kabul?”

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“Yeah, I really don’t know who. But I do know we’re not going to Kabul.”

He was startled. “What? Why not? Roni was killed at the airport.”

“All indications are that our...for lack of a better word...objective is in the Wakhan.”

“The Corridor? Seriously?”

“You know where that is?” Davila actually sounded impressed. “I had to look it up.”

“Well, I know about it.” He was puzzled. This just did not compute. In a country where most villages could be legitimately said to be in the middle of nowhere, the Wakhan Corridor might as well be on another planet. The region was a narrow, sparsely inhabited, two-hundred-mile-long panhandle bordered by Tajikistan’s Pamir Mountains on the north, Pakistan and the Hindu Kush to the south, and the gigantic mountains of Xinjiang, China at the panhandle’s eastern tip.

“What are Roni’s...” His throat tried to close, and he had to force out the rest. “What are Captain Keller’s remains doing in the Wakhan?”

“I don’t know, but let me pose a counterfactual,” Davila said. “Did you see it happen?”

“The explosion? Yes, of course, I was there.” Although explosion wasn’t technically what he’d seen. He’d heard a monstrous roar, seen the look of shock given way to terror on Roni’s face, and known she was reading the same on his. The irony was the explosion wasn’t the worst part but only the beginning of something far more terrible.

Because there had been only one avenue of escape, and he had been closer to that than she.

“Yes, but did you see herbody?”

“Did I...” The words dried up on his tongue. He stared at the other man for a long moment then said, finally, “No. No, I didn’t. I was...I turned back in time to...” He tried again. “I was too far away, already inside the gate, and then I couldn’t leave.” It would have been more accurate to say that he hadn’t been allowed to leave—had to be restrained, in point of fact, and even so, he’d been close to shooting anyone in his way—but he wasn’t getting into that. How much did Davila know about that disastrous evac anyway? “What are you saying?”

“Nothing.” Davila slid him a sidelong glance. “Only that her remains aren’t in Kabul.”

Which raised another possibility Davila didn’t voice. Either Roni had been badly wounded and later died elsewhere—or she had been captured and died later. Or captured and killed. But really, it boiled down to six of one, half-dozen of the other. Dead was dead.

Hard to see anything but the hole of the doughnut for that one.

An hour outside Boise.

“What about weapons?” Having told Patterson exactly what he wanted in-country, John assumed his guns would be delivered with this vehicle, but the trunk was empty. When he mentioned this to Patterson, the man had only shrugged and said weapons were en-route. Which John assumed meant weapons would be procured at another stop, probably Chicago.

“Whataboutweapons?” Davila asked.

“We picking them up for the flight from O’Hare?” When Davila shook his head, John gaped. “You’re joking. Everyone and his mother has a gun in those parts. What are we supposed to do, hurl abusive language?”

Davila laughed. “Youarenervous.”

This, John thought, only proved his eminent good sense. “And you’re not?”

“Some? But there’s a time to fret and a time to relax andthis...” He tapped the dashboard. “This is one of those times. Driving along, beautiful country, nice mountains, clean air...”

“No one shooting at us.”

“That’s the spirit. Doughnut and hole, my man, doughnut and hole. We’ll get weapons. We just can’t bring them with us.”

“Okay.” Which was a lie. He was not okay. Something just didn’t feel right here, but what was it? He turned his gaze to his window. To his right, Boise spread out in a valley. Above, a bright yellow plane buzzed east.

“Smokejumpers.” He looked back to see Davila eye-checking the plane. “They’re always practicing around here,” Davila said, returning his gaze to the road. “Boise’s one of their stations. There’s a museum right next to the airport, actually. It’s interesting. Been inside one of their planes, met a couple of them. Most are small guysand all muscle. Guess they got to be to haul all that gear.”

“Cool.”

Davila favored him with a narrow squint. “That was kind of less than a ringing endorsement”

“I’m preoccupied...mostly because this whole bone retrieval thing doesn’t make sense. “They”—he inserted air-quotes— “whoever they are want us...well, me to retrieve Roni’s remains, I get that. Why is kind of a mystery. Having you in the mix is another. I don’t get why you’re along. This wasn’t your fight.” He almost added that Davila hadn’t effed things up the way he had but held his tongue.

“Hank asked me.”

“In case I screw up.”

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“In case you need backup.”

“You say tomato, I say tomahto.” He resisted the urge to say they ought to call the whole thing off. “But why me? Out of the entire intelligence community and out of all Special Forces and all the CIA’s paramilitaries...haven’t you wondered why I’m the only guy?”

“If I’m honest about it?”

“You mean you haven’t been?”

Davila let the sarcasm slip past without comment. “I think it’s probably a combination of factors. One is your personal stake in this.”

He wasn’t going to deny that. “Meaning they...whoever they are...don’t mind manipulating me. What’s another?”

“Very simple. According to Hank, you were asked for by name.”

“Seriously? Who? The CIA?”

“JSOC.” Davila slipped him a glance. “You know Joint?—”

“Joint Special Operations Command,” he said. “Yeah, I know what it stands for.”

“You say that like you don’t like it.”

“I don’t.”

“Care to share?”

“Not particularly, no.” Someone in Kabul either talked or they got around Stan and got access to my files—or both. More than likely, after what happened at the airport with that damn C17, someone had gotten curious to know more about the guy pulling that trigger. He wondered who they’d traced first: Roni or him. “Doesn’t this strike you as odd, though? That JSOC’s involved? You’re seriously going to tell me they don’t have their own people who could do this? The guys in JSOC are the elites and the CIA has paramilitaries all over the place. I know that for a fact. If CIA doesn’t want to use someone in-country, they can pilfer someone from JSOC. I can’t believe that Special Operations Command doesn’t have someone in Force Red or Blue.”

“I suppose. But apparently, they think you’re the man.”

“Okay, how about this? Does it not strike you as, well, odd for JSOC to be interested in a retrieval?”

“Of remains? You mean, instead of a POW?” Davila rubbed his chin with a thumb as he thought. “Okay, I see your point. Which, I guess, means we’re back to...why you?”

Oh, buddy, could I give you an earful. And yet, what did the boy he had been have anything to do with the man he was now? Or with poor, brave, crazy Roni, who’d been in the wrong place at precisely the wrong moment?

After a few miles of silence, Davila said, “You know, I can think of a reason why JSOC would ask for you.”

“And why is that?”

“Either the spooks dropped the ball, or...”

“Or?”

Davila flexed his fingers and then gripped the steering wheel more firmly. “Or they need somebody the government can disavow. Somebody who, if he gets caught, our side can deny knowing about. If this blows up, they can claim you’ve gone rogue or crazy, or rogue and crazy.”

“Just like Mission: Impossible.” These same thoughts had occurred to him about a mile back, but he let Davila have the moment.

“And something else...about what makes you the perfect...”

“Fall guy?” he put in when Davila hesitated.

“I was going to say chump, but that’ll do...Hunh.” A small muscle along Davila’s jaw. “Just occurred to me that they could leak you being at Brighter Days, if things blow up.”

“They sure could. Throw a bit of PTSD into the mix, and it all boils down to one lone wolf, one wild and crazy guy.”

“Two guys. I’m in this, too.”

“Only peripherally. You’re the chaperone, remember?” When Davila didn’t say anything, he added, “I wasn’t dissing you. Remember, I’m hearing this for the first time myself.”

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Davila shook his head in a curt, crisp negative. “I can’t believe Hank would do that.”

“Patterson probably doesn’t even know.”

“But he went along with you going and me tagging along to get you into position, I guess. Which means you’re special in a way I’m not. Hank may not even have been read in.”

“Yeah,” he drawled. “Sucks to be in the dark, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t get cute. Are you saying you knowwhy? Like whyyou, specifically?”

Oh, I’m starting to have a really good idea. But no way he was telling Davila just yet. Even Roni had not known.

That particular story needed stay in the deep, dark past of another kid who was not John Worthy.

He settled for a half-truth. “I think you said it.” John turned his gaze to the yellow plane, which was high above the mountains edging the highway. “Things go south, I’m deniable.”

“But doing what?”

“You’re not a stupid guy, Davila. I don’t know Patterson, but I bet he wouldn’t trust you if you were.” The smokejumper plane banked, and a black rectangle suddenly appeared on the plane’s otherwise pristine exterior. Belatedly, John realized someone

on the plane had opened a door. A moment later, a tiny figure stepped from the plane and into thin air. Within five seconds, the smokejumper's parachute deployed, rocketing straight up before unfurling into a dazzling orange rectangle.

"Take a wild guess." He turned back to the other man. "Tell you what. I'm feeling magnanimous, so you get two guesses."

"Give a body to get a body."

"Bingo. He hits it on the first try, ladies and gents." No other explanation he could think of. Besides, if he never came back, anyone who wondered...he just bet that all official records pertaining to John Worthy, no matter how long he'd lived that legend, would have evaporated.

"And you're okay with that?" Davila asked.

"Are you?"

"Depends on you, doesn't it? I'm just the chaperone."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. We get on that plane, you're in it up to your eyeballs. So, think hard. You've got a wife. A life. Me, I'm picking up pieces. Maybe this is where I start, by bringing Roni home. Wasn't that the point of Brighter Days?"

"True." The airport exit sign flashed past, and Davila put on his blinker. "I just want to be sure you don't trip into the hole. Be nice if we stayed on the doughnut." Another pause. "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he said as Davila took the exit ramp. "What's on your mind?"

"Just how good a shooter are you?"

“I guess,” John said, “that depends on which side of the bullet you’re on.”

ZOMBIES

AUGUST 2021

Kabul Airport is owned by the Afghan government. Located north of the city, the airport is surrounded by concrete walls reinforced with coils of concertina wire designed to slice and dice. A single, four-mile-long runway divides the airport in two: north and south.

The civilian side is south and has three gates. Abbey Gate is tucked into the southeast corner. Nearby and east of Abbey is the aptly named East Gate. To the west of Abbey Gate is an access road leading from the city to South Gate, the airport’s main entrance.

Access to the north side is limited. This is because that side is “hardened,” meaning that the barracks, buildings, hangars, etc., have been designed to withstand conventional weapons. Until the evacuation, Camp Alvarado, a complex maintained by the U.S. State Department, was located there. On that side, the only way in is through North Gate.

At least, that’s what it says on paper.

No one slept on August 15th, the day their battalion arrived. As in, seriously, no one’s head hit a pillow or sandbag; no one got to stretch out for a quick forty winks. This was because, as with so much else about this operation, no one had thought to really set up a secure perimeter or provide enough Marines to keep order.

Which meant that everyone, he and Roni included, stayed up all night doing what they could to secure the airport with what they had. A CO called it Night of the Zombies.

He wasn't wrong. Even John, who was used to staying up all night on-call, was so wrecked, he could've lurched around as an extra in a low-budget Walking Dead spinoff.

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On August 16th, their battalion's second day on the ground, the State Department started processing civilians. Many had been worked over by the Taliban. This meant the next stop for most was John's and Roni's medical triage and treatment down a long alley from Abbey Gate, which had been closed off to traffic by creating a bottleneck with cargo containers. Having armed Taliban hanging out on top of the containers did wonders for crowd control.

Anything really serious—an injury requiring an operation or some more complex procedure John and Roni and the other docs couldn't perform—was shipped across base to a small hospital. Although originally operated by NATO, the hospital, with its two ORs, ICU, trauma bays, CT scanner, and blood bank, was commandeered by the U.S. military. If anything truly awful rolled in or in the event of a mass casualty event requiring more intervention than the forward medical teams could handle, that hospital was their fallback.

The problem, of course, was that if push came to shove, and they were forced to use that hospital for anything more complicated than an appendix...then, the doo-doo really had hit the fan.

By 0600, they had sort of a system down: initial check by a Marine at Abbey Gate; another check—again by a more seasoned Marine—halfway down the alley; then a swing by the med tent if needed. If not, a would-be refugee was loaded onto a van and hauled across the base to a staging area behind an old civilian hangar which the State Department guys had commandeered. Another check before being allowed into that facility and then an evacuee was led down a staircase into the bowels of the building where Marines and States sat behind computers and went through documents one more time.

By 0700, their med tent had morphed into a proverbial beehive, what with personnel bustling from one patient to another and the constant clash of instruments, the thump of the generator powering the lights, the constant thrum of the air-conditioning, and the wail of patients—and of infants, many of whom weren't injured but being watched over, cooed at, and cradled by Marines while docs and nurses and techs worked on their parents.

By 1200, John was walking on his knuckles, he was so tired. His skin felt greasy; his mouth tasted as if something had come in, taken a crap then died. Though cooled, a heavy stink permeated the air: clotting blood, torn flesh, shattered bone, scorched skin, sweat, piss. Stripping off stained surgical gloves, he dropped these in an overflowing biohazards bin and shambled over to Roni's station, two down from his own.

"I need to get out of here and someplace where I'm breathing air that doesn't smell like the inside of a butcher shop," he said. "You about ready for a break?"

"Give me ten." Roni didn't look up from stitching a long, jagged rip that ran from the right thigh of a very thin, very quiet, very small boy all the way to his knee. "Just need to throw in the last few here."

"Sure." He watched her work. The kid really was tiny, maybe three or four, and looked as if he hadn't seen a square meal in weeks. That rip also wasn't the child's only wound. Dark roses of dried blood bloomed on the child's ragged shorts and tattered T-shirt. The poor kid looked as if someone has gone after him with a metal rake. Through one tear, though, he spotted a smiley face surrounded by three stars done in blue magic marker. This was Roni's signature, something she'd picked up working pediatric emergency rooms on nights when they ran out of cute and colorful stickers. She signed kids' and adults' bandages alike. Everyone needs a smile, she'd said, young and old. "What happened to the boy?"

“Her.” Without looking up, Roni tipped her head toward a young woman who stood on the other side of the gurney. The woman’s dun-colored abaya was soaked from the waist down, courtesy of an open sewage canal just outside Abbey Gate. She reeked like a porta-potty left to stew all summer. “She pitched him over the barbed wire. Or tried to.” Even muffled by a mask, Roni’s voice betrayed no emotion whatsoever. She might have been talking about the weather. “She wasn’t strong enough. When he got snagged, she made it worse by trying to shove him over. The Marines just couldn’t get to him fast enough.”

“She the mom?”

“Neighbor. Claims the boy’s mom is dead.”

“Uh-huh.” He should’ve been shocked but wasn’t. A lot of adults saw a small child as a get-the-hell-out-of-Kabul card because the Marines were helping as many children as they possibly could. “You believe her?”

“Do chickens have lips?”

“Does she have papers at least?”

“This is Afghanistan, John.” Roni tied off another stitch. “What do you think?”

Pushing from the air-conditioned medical tent into the world beyond the flaps was a sucker punch. The air was shimmery with heat, the light bleaching the landscape to the color of old bone. To the north, jagged red mountains bit a cloudless bluer-than-blue sky where a bright coin of a sun burned. Throw in a ram’s skull, and the scene could’ve been painted by Georgia O’Keefe.

There was also a lot of noise: a near-constant din of people clamoring, arguing, pleading; the grind of vehicles; the pops of gunfire beyond the gates as the Taliban,

those masters of crowdcontrol, fired randomly this way and that. Overhead, helicopters thumped, ferrying personnel and civilian employees from the various embassies. American soldiers clustered in tight, vigilant knots. Others were tasked with escorting approved civilians wanting passage out of Kabul for processing.

“Wow.” John shoved on a pair of tinted ballistic wraparounds. “Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

“Yeah, but it’s a dry heat.”

“Next you’re going to tell me it’s no worse than Arizona.”

“Never been to Arizona, but this is like all mountain deserts: frying by day, freezing by night. Anyway, the weather’s the least of our problems.” Roni pulled two bottles of an energy drink from a pocket of her cargo pants and handed one to John. “I expected bad, but...” She scuffed yellow dirt with the toe of a boot. “Do you know I used the last of my local on that little boy? Stores are empty.”

“Just take it easy. We’ll get resupplied as soon as the Moose from Doha gets here.”

“Which is when, exactly? I made the mistake of asking our supply sergeant when we could count on a transport.”

“Betcha no one knows.”

“All the sergeant said was the plane’s running on military time.”

“Ah.” In the Army, that translated to a shrug. “Then, we’ll just have to suck it up.”

“How? Tell people to bite down on a tongue depressor when it hurts? If we’re forced to use non-dissolving sutures, who’s going to take them out or even understand when

or that they should come out?”

“There’s always duct tape.” When she only stared, he added, “I’m serious.”

“And where would you even have tried this out?” Before he could open his mouth, she held up a hand. “Wait. You learned in Boy Scouts.”

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“Why do you make that sound like a bad thing? But, as a matter of fact, yes.”

“You ever done it?” When he nodded, she added, “Where?”

“Hiking the Hill Country.”

“Isn’t that in Texas?”

“About an hour northwest of San Antonio, yup. Big old park, something like thirty thousand acres. Anyway, my brother got hung up climbing over a bald cypress across the path, and one of the branches tore up his leg.” He stopped when her eyebrows folded in a frown. “What?”

“I didn’t know you had a brother or ever lived in Texas. Long way from Wisconsin.”

Oh, crap. He had to watch his mouth. My God, that would stir up a hornet’s nest. A certain U.S. marshal would’ve metaphorically slapped him upside the head for that slip. This was precisely what had forced Stan to move him from Kansas to Wisconsin. On the other hand, the boy named Danny—not John—had been a freaked-out, depressed fourteen-year-old and could be forgiven the gaff.

“Yeah, you know, family trip,” he said then hurried on before she could ask anything else he would have to lie about. “Anyway, I washed out the gash with beer...”

“Beer?”

“Yeah, my dad’s.” Man, he was really making a mess of this. On the other hand,

hadn't Stan always said that the best lies contained a kernel of truth? "I shook it up to get, you know, the spray to clear out the dirt, and I figured the alcohol couldn't hurt. Slapped on a couple gauze pads then used duct tape to wind it up tight. ER guy was pretty impressed. He said whenever he hiked, he packed duct tape, too. I always wrap some around my water bottle, so I never forget."

"I wondered why you do that. Didn't Driver make some remark about you and your duct tape? Before one of our marches, I think."

He nodded. "One of the rare times he had something good to say about me." He changed the subject. "I like what you did for that boy back there. Your smiley face? Nice touch."

"He's a little boy. I felt sorry for him. I feel sorry for all these poor people." She sighed. "Look, let's head out to the flight line and get away from this for a couple minutes."

"I'll drink to that," he said, tapping his bottle to hers. "Enough doom and gloom."

"Right." She let go a humorless laugh. "Betcha we never run out of that."

As they ambled for the tarmac, she said, "Tell me more about the Boy Scouts."

"For starters," he said, holding up his bottle of orange drink, "I can tell you that this stuff reminds me of that orangeade crap they gave us at Scout camp."

"How far did you go?"

"High as I could. Eagle."

She snorted. "Figures. Do a lot of good deeds?"

“I guess? We once had a couple kids come over from Russia on an exchange program. I didn’t get to go over there, but our troop hosted some guys who came here. This was after Putin but before things got tense.”

Her eyebrows arched. “There are Russian Boy Scouts?”

“Oh, yeah. Been around a long time. When it was the Soviet Union, they were called YoungPioneers. These days they’re ARSA, the All-Russian Scout Association.”

“What did you guys do together? Did they speak English?”

“Oh yeah, and way better than my Russian. We did Scout things. Played baseball. Taught a couple guys how to pitch.”

“Baseball.”

“Yes, baseball. I even played in college.”

“Get out of town. You?”

He gave her a mock scowl. “You say that as if you can’t believe I might be good at something other than surgery.”

“I can’t. Although...” She put on a thinking face then brightened. “You doknow more movie and television trivia than can possibly be good for a person.”

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“Ah,” he said, slipping her a wink, “but think of the possibilities if I’m ever on Jeopardy.”

“I’ll try to restrain my imagination. Finish the story about the Russian Scouts.”

“There’s not lots to tell. Nu, they played. Too American a game, I guess. I mean, I was lousy at soccer. Anyway, being ambidextrous, I showed guys how to pitch?—”

“Wait, you’re ambidextrous? I’ve never seen you use anything but your right...” Then her face cleared, and she snapped her fingers. “Wait, all those nights on-call, when you were practicing one-handed knots?—”

“I practiced with both hands.” He nodded. “I like my right more than my left. Just more dexterous, but I can use both, and I had a pretty mean sidearm. Less chance of hurting your shoulder that way, and it’s great for off-speed breaking stuff. Keeps the batter always guessing. These days, it’s all about fastballs and home runs. No one knows how to play slow ball...” He stopped at the expression on her face. “You have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Not really. But I think you missed your calling.”

He shook his head. “No offense intended to players, but I met a couple guys in the minors, and all they’re interested in is playing ball. Anyway, the Russian kids loved the game. That’s how I learned some Russian, too. Like up, down, right, left.”

“Seriously?” Roni slid him a dubious look. “What’s up in Russian?”

He thought a second. “Vverkh.” He pronounced it vee-year-ch. “It’s easier, actually, if you’re Jewish like me, because thekhis pronounced pretty much the same as thechet. Like inl’chaim.”

“Anddown?”

“Vniz,” he said, pronouncing it v’NEES. “Accent’s on the second syllable. But don’t ask me anything complicated. I can read a bit, but Russian’s a tough language.”

“I’m still impressed. What other surprises lurk in your Boy Scout past?”

“There might be some grandmothers still around whom I escorted across the street. I’m sure there must be a grateful cat I rescued—” He stopped talking, the rest evaporating on his tongue as he heard a new sound: a powerful guttural whirr.

In the air. Over Roni’s shoulder, he saw other soldiers, heads tipped, turning slow circles as they searched the sky for that low rumble. An engine. “Roni, do you?—”

“Yeah.” Her eyes were wide, jade pools. “I think?—”

“Me, too.” Please be what I think you are. “Roni, you hear that, right?”

“Yeah.” She let out a shaky laugh as soldiers jogged past, all looking almost stupidly joyful—and then held out her hand. “Come on. Come on!”

He let her drag him, laughing, all the way to the tarmac—and why not? They were saved, weren’t they?

He made it twenty feet before realizing just how wrong they all were.

STAMPEDE

AUGUST 2021

Other than on the tarmac, there were civilians everywhere. Most were men: perched on and inside half-retracted gangways, mashed cheek by jowl on dead grass, hunkered in meager slants of shade thrown by the terminal and the few parked civilian planes empty of cargo and personnel. Deserted passenger jets, their cabin doors open against the heat, were jammed with those who'd monkeyed landing gear and crammed through hatches. Even more men perched on the jets' large tires or simply sprawled in lozenges of shade thrown by the planes' wings.

Everyone watched the gray and ungainly C17 transport drop lower and lower, the rumble of its engines growing so loud, it was as if someone had taken a giant eggbeater to the air.

"I count fourteen Marines." Roni lifted her chinto point at a line of armed men along this near side of the runway. "That's not enough. These civilians stampede..."

And it will not be pretty. The Marines would be overrun as civilians swarmed the plane. Even the additional soldiers with whom they were standing wouldn't be enough. Need at least two more squads. He didn't have a radio; he was a doctor, for crying out loud. Turning on his heel, he threw a desperate look left and right. There had to be someone who could get word to Command and?—

"Hey." When Roni turned, he pointed to a series of hangars on the right and at the end of the airport's single runway. Two Humvees were parked at the hangar's open bay. Clustered round were a quartet of men, all in virtually identical garb: cammies, black-and-white shemaghs knotted around their necks, wraparounds hiding their eyes. Football Sunday scruff over their jaws and neck. "You recognize those guys?"

"Yeah, from the transport. They got off at Doha."

“And now they’re here,” he said as another man, whippet-lean and clad in NATO-issue cammies, emerged from the hangar. The transport’s engine noise had swelled to a loudwhirr, and he leaned to talk into her ear. “Same guy who met them, the one you pegged as CIA. What are they doing here?”

“Probably grabbing assets to get out of country.” Roni blotted sweat from her upper lip with the back of a hand. “I swear to God I know that tall guy with dark hair. Just can’t place...”

Another Humvee screamed across the runway from the military side, swung around, and jerked to a halt in front of the same hangar. Two men unfolded from the front seat. The driver, an Afghan, was a big brooding guy with a broad chest, tree trunks for thighs, and thick arms: the kind of man who could pull a plow by himself. Hopping out of the Humvee, he kept his head on a continuous swivel. His hands never left the rifle strapped to his chest.

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“Bodyguard.” The engine rumble had intensified to the point where she was shouting. “See how he’s letting the smaller guy lead the way?”

He’d noticed. That shorter guy was also...interesting. His eyes were invisible behind his wraparounds, a black-and-white shemagh pulled up tight over his nose.

Cupping his hand around his mouth, John bawled into Roni’s ear, “Those guys don’t look regular military!”

“CIA!” Roni shouted back.

“Evac?” When she shook her head, he said, “Why not?”

“The jocks!” She was so close, her lips brushed his ear. “You don’t bring four guys to take out only two people who can take care of them?—”

“Hey.” He pointed over her shoulder, back toward the civilian terminal. “Look.”

All along the edge of the tarmac, civilians were scrambling to their feet. The men who’d been perched on gangways were slithering to the ground on wheel struts like firefighters ready to battle flames. Others clambered onto the wings or simply hooked their hands into the cabin door’s edge and swung out, dropping to the ground. A second later, the terminal doors popped open, releasing a gush of people who instantly flooded onto the blacktop.

Roni, in his ear: “This feels like a disaster in the making.”

“They’re not going to get in the way of the plane. They’re not dumb.”

“Maybe not, but they’re something worse,” she said. “They’re desperate.”

The C17 dropped fast. The lower the plane got, the louder the crowd became, jabbering and pointing and snatching up rucksacks, bags, rolling luggage, children. He spotted one guy with two small goats in his arms bulling his way through the crowd, which had begun surging forward.

As they clamored and swarmed the tarmac, the Marines started shouting and pointing and motioning the crowd back. But no one paid them any mind at all and, as the enormous Moose finally touched down with a squeal of rubber, a burst of dust, a sudden throaty cough of deceleration, the watching mob roared.

“Maybe that’s the worst of it,” John said.

“You keep thinking that.” Roni’s tone was grim. “The cavalry had better get here fast.”

As the Moose neared the far end of the runway, the plane turned in a lazy half-circle to present the aft cargo bay and rolled to a halt. There was a puff of air and that high-pitched squall everyone swore was the bellow of a female moose in heat. At the noise, the jabber from the waiting throng ceased; a few children began to cry as people backed up in alarm.

Good. The whole scene was like something out of a science-fiction movie with Tom Cruise, gawking as a Martian death machine unfolded from a deep crater. If people only looked and stayed put, that would buy time for real troops to get here and secure the plane.

“What’s taking so long?” Roni murmured. “I don’t see anyone here to offload

anything.”

“They’ll come,” he said, though he worried this wasn’t a given anymore. Which means someone else has to step up. “The important thing is everyone’s staying put.” Although, if the shuffling and rising swell of murmurs was any indication, that might not last. Inside the plane, he knew the C-17’s pilot and co-pilot were securing the aircraft while, in the cargo bay, the loadmaster would be waiting for the ground crew to connect them to external electrical power. The pilot had to have seen the crowd and radioed for help. So, maybe the lull was to give troops a chance to get here, but jeez, hurry up already?—

“There.” He looked toward a Humvee speeding across the tarmac from the hardened side of the airport. Although he knew how to count: a single vehicle might hold five troops, maybe six if everyone held his breath. “Got to be help.”

“Only sort of,” Roni said, as the Humvee screeched to a stop. Two men jumped from the back and raced for the waiting transport at a dead run. A third, holding a coiled electrical cord attached to a mobile generator, emerged from a ground crew’s station below the main terminal, pushed his way toward the nose of the plane, jammed in the plug, raced back, and flipped a switch. The generator came to life with a cough and splutter as if clearing its throat then settled down to a steady thump.

“Well, that’s three more guys than there were before,” he said, trying to stay positive. “And power’s good.” Power meant that the loadmaster inside could go through his prechecks: electrical, hydraulic fluid levels, everything required before opening that cargo door and them getting their supplies.

“There just aren’t enough troops here for crowd control.”

“Then let’s stop standing here and go get some help,” he said, already half-turning, wondering as he did so just where all the regular troops there only five minutes ago

had gone. “We need to move those supplies out fast and get that transport turned around.”

“You go.” When he turned a questioning look, she said, “I don’t like the look of things here. The minute that cargo door opens, they’ll have a hard time keeping everyone back.”

“And then you do what, exactly? Come on, let’s go back. Help me round up—” He stopped at the high-pitched whirr of hydraulics followed by first a hush and then an excited gabble as the door came slowly down.

“Too late,” Roni said, as the crowd’s clamor became a roar a second before they stampeded—and the Marines started shooting.

“Come on.” Wheeling round, Roni dashed for the hangar where the jocks still clustered. “Come on!”

“Roni! Wait, what are you doing? Where...?” Alarmed, he caught up, flinching at every rifle shot, his shoulders hunching up around his ears. Snatching a quick glance over a shoulder, he saw that the Marines were shooting into the air. Which was pretty much the same as doing nothing because the crowd knew the Marines weren’t the Taliban. But what, exactly, did all these people think would happen once they reached the plane? They’d never get in.

At the hangar, the two Afghans moved to block them, but Roni ducked, shoved the smaller one aside and squirted under the big guy’s reach.

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She got into the face of the dark-haired jock. “Give me the keys!” she shouted. “Give me the keys and a weapon, Daniel, or it’s going to be too late!”

She knew that guy? “Roni!” John tried interposing himself between her and the man she called Daniel. “Roni, stop. What are you doing?”

“Stay out of it, John!” Jamming her hands in his chest, she straight-armed him out of the way with a furious shove before whipping round to the other man.

“Help me, Daniel!” she said, fiercely. “Give me a weapon!”

“I don’t know you,” the dark-haired man said at the same moment the weedy, knife-nosed CIA guy planted a palm against Roni’s chest, holding her back the way a parent might keep a child throwing a fit at bay.

“Problem here?” He looked down the length of his nose. “Do you need something, Captain...” He squinted at Roni’s name tape. “Captain Keller?”

“Yeah, for you to get your hands off me.” Roni brought a forearm up in an abrupt movement and knocked the man’s hand away. “I’m not talking to you.”

“Oooh.” One of the other jocks, a guy with beach-blond hair in a tail, elbowed a neighbor. “Hellcat.”

“Stow it, Flowers.” The one she’d called Daniel squinted down at her. “Have we met? I think I’d remember you. Got a brother in the Marines?”

She shook her head. "My dad's an instructor at Mountain Warfare. You probably know him."

The man opened his mouth, closed it then brightened. "Roni. He was always talking about you. But I still don't..."

"Because I know your dad," she said. "I've been in your house. You know your dad still has your induction picture on his mantel?"

"Roni?" John frowned. "What are you?—"

"He's Driver's son," Roni said, never taking her eyes from the other man.

His mouth fell open. "Our Driver? From DCC?"

"Lucky you," Daniel Driver said. "Piece of work, isn't he?"

"Stop being an ass," Roni said. "Take a look around you. We need your help, Daniel. We need weapons and a vehicle, and we need them right now."

"We?" John said at the same moment the CIA guy said, "Out of the question."

"Stow it, Mac. I got this." Driver's voice was as brooding and dark as his looks. "Nice that you know that son of a bitch," he said to Roni. "Say hi next time you're stateside. But those people, whatever happens to them...not my problem. I have my own mission specs here."

"But you're a Marine," Roni said.

"That's debatable," Mac said, his voice dry and just the near side of sarcastic. "In any event, he's not on loan to you."

“And I’m still not talking to you.” Roni kept her gaze squarely on Driver. “Once a Marine, always a Marine, and that transport is a U.S. military aircraft in need of help.”

“It’s a big plane,” Driver said. “All it has to do is take off and then land again when the crowd’s under control.”

“What is wrong with you?” The cords stood out on Roni’s neck. “Those people are in the way. They’ll get sucked into the engines if they’re too close and if that happens, the plane’s crippled! How will you have done your job if you ignore?—”

A screech cut the air that John recognized as the scream of the Moose’s hydraulic winches and just as he was thinking, Wait, that’s too early. They can’t possibly have offloaded everything, the air swelled with a sudden, enraged roar, the whine of gears and then a sustained burst of gunfire. Spinning on his heel, he looked toward the terminal and felt his heart stutter.

The tarmac had gone from a simple crowd to a mosh pit.

The C-17’s pilot seemed to have finally realized that without additional troops they couldn’t do anything. But that also meant they had to reverse what they had begun: get that loading ramp closed, unplug from that generator, and get the hell out of Dodge.

If they could. People clawed for purchase as the Moose’s aft loading ramp slowly ground and whirled its way back to safe. Shouting, the loadmaster tried kicking himself free of one man who’d hooked his hands around the loadmaster’s left ankle. Grabbing a long grappling hook, the loadmaster whipped the hook down, hard, smashing the man’s wrist. Screeching, the man fell back even as another, younger and stronger, took his place and then a third and then even more men, all scrambling and trying to monkey their way aboard.

Crouching, one wiry guy in a torn tunic leapt from the backs of those struggling for purchase and collided with the loadmaster. Knocked off balance, the loadmaster swayed, his arms frantically pinwheeling, feet jittering a tap-dance. The toe of his left boot caught the wiry guy under the jaw and as that man tumbled off the ramp, the loadmaster toppled. He hit the ramp so hard, his head bounced. Dazed, shaking his head like a dog who's just bitten into something nasty, he managed to crab back on all fours.

Got to do something. The melee reminded John of another scene from War of the Worlds: of that ferry pulling away as the desperate clung to the ramp; of Robbie running to save them. Of the ferry captain gawping at a bright green whirlpool alongside his ship because he knew that, in another five seconds, they would all be dead.

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Even as the ramp was still going up, the Moose was backing away from the terminal, but the mob—all men—followed, heedless of two Humvees filled with shouting Marines spinning futilely alongside. Having managed to climb onto parts of the plane, some men clung to sponsons; others swarmed over one another, using each other as a human ladder to try and boost themselves onto the wings. Over a dozen men balanced on the plane's gigantic wheels and were monkeying up the landing gear.

This is insane, John thought as he watched two agile men—my God, they looked like teenagers—shinny up into the wheel wells. A person would never survive at altitude.

“No, they won’t.” He wasn’t aware he’d spoken aloud, and he turned to look down at Roni who stood, grim-faced, her body rigid with frustration. She said, “If they don’t let go in time...”

She didn’t need to say the rest. There is no wasted space on any military aircraft. That includes the wheel wells. Anyone in the way ends up as a smear. Worse, as soon as the pilot powered up, John remembered the night at Benning when the ambulance brought what was left of an airman who’d been sucked into an engine. Hamburger had more shape and a better consistency.

“She’s right.” He turned back to Daniel Driver, a man he did not know but whose help Roni thought they needed. “We can’t stand here and watch this go down without trying to help. I’m in,” he said to Roni. “You got a plan?”

“Yes,” she said. “Driver gives us weapons and a Humvee.”

“And then what?”

“I drive,” she said, “and you shoot.”

“What?” He gawped. “Roni, are you?—”

“No, I’m not nuts. You’re a better shot than I am, and we both know it.”

Yes, they did. He could thank Emery for that. He was, in fact, better than good; he’d known that, too, for a long time before that nocturnal visit to arifle range. “But what am I supposed to do with a rifle?”

“Easy,” she said. “Don’t hit the plane.”

At that, Driver snorted. “What do you think this is, a Clint Eastwood movie? Next, you’ll tell me you can shoot a kerchief out of a person’s hand.”

“As a matter of fact, I can.” Roni hooked a thumb at John. “And he’s even better.”

“Roni,” John said, a little too sharply. He really didn’t want to advertise because, sooner or later, that meant questions he shouldn’t answer.

“Even I’m not that good,” Driver said.

“Then isn’t it fortunate we’re not you?” Roni snapped.

At that, the smaller Afghan let go of a short bark of a laugh—and John thought, Wait a second...

But then Mac, the CIA guy, said. “Look, Captain...Keller, is it? Captain, if it makes you feel better, I’ll put in a nice word with your command.”

“A nice word?” Roni’s eyes blazed. “I don’t give two sh?—”

Mac spoke over her. “But this isn’t our concern. Those people are not our concern. Really, it’s very simple. No one will be able to hang on. Once the transport’s airborne, the altitude will take care of any lingering problems.”

“That’s pretty cold,” John said as Roni seethed, “You heartless son of a?—”

Driver cut in. “Yeah, he kinda is an SOB. Being CIA, he comes by it naturally.” He favored Roni with another long look then said, “AK or M4?”

“Driver,” Mac warned. “We shouldn’t?—”

“M4. Better sights.” Roni looked at John, who nodded. “Make that two. And it’s Roni. He’s John.”

“Okay.” Driver motioned to another jock, one with a sandy beard and sunburn, who jogged into the hangar. He and returned ten seconds later with weapons and the last two men who’d flown with them from Germany in tow.

“Wait.” Mac put both hands out like a traffic cop. “You men work for me!”

“Oh, stow it, Mac.” Driver turned to Roni. “You and me, we’re together. Meeks.” He tossed keys to the guy with the sunburn, who caught them in a one-handed grab. “You’re driving us. Harris, you and John are together. Flowers, you’re driving.”

“Ah, man.” With his sea-blue eyes and that beach-bum hair, Flowers seemed a bit of a stoner. “I’m always driving.” Flowers hooked a thumb at John. “Why can’t he drive?”

“Because Roni says he’s a better shot,” Driver said

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“Yeah, and you’re so good at driving, Flowers,” Harris said.

Flowers opened his mouth to reply, but Mac cut him off. “All of you, stop. We have another mission. This isn’t why we’re here.”

“Your mission can wait five minutes.” Driver followed Roni who’d already clambered into the Humvee after Meeks. “Let’s go, Marines!”

“Wait.” The smaller Afghan stepped forward. “Musa and I, we will help you.”

At that, John’s jaw almost dropped. Oh my?—

“What is it about a low profile you don’t understand?” Mac snapped. “You can’t?—”

“But we can, if only because the women those men will leave behind end up widows and will starve.” The Afghan looked at John. “If you are so good a shot, come with us.”

“Go, John, go with them!” Shucking her helmet, Roni braced her knees against the back of the driver’s seat and readied her rifle as Driver took up the opposite position. Then Meeks gunned the engine, and they were gone in a screech of tires and spume of dust followed a split second later by Harris and Fellows.

“You men!” Mac shouted. “Damn it, wait!”

No one paid any mind. As John clambered into the back seat behind Musa, the smaller Afghan added, “Be careful where you aim, yes? I not come all this way only

to get shot by...erhm...how do you call it?" The Afghan searched for the word then said, "Yes, afriendly."

And that was the moment the smaller Afghan pulled the shemagh down past his chin—and became a woman.

THE FALLING MEN

AUGUST 2021

Musa hammered the accelerator. Their Humvee leapt onto the tarmac with a screech of tires and spume of dust and then they were screaming down the runway.

The Moose was already a quarter mile ahead but lumbering and going much too slowly, its engines not even close to half-power. Clearly hampered by the crowd, the pilot was probably just as worried about someone getting sucked into an engine. While the person would end up as so much hamburger, the plane would also be crippled. Two armored vehicles filled with Marines still rolled alongside, but they were mostly waving their arms, shouting, and letting a couple of bullets fly into the air. A bad idea since what goes up must come down.

Ahead, John heard pops and saw that Meekshad pulled even with the Moose's nose on the right. This meant both Roni and Driver were able to place their shots at the crowd's feet to drive people away from the aircraft. That was working, too. People closest to the plane flinched and skipped back, away from the plane's wheels.

A rapid-fire crack-crack-crack to his right: the Afghan woman, sending bullets into the tarmac just behind the phalanx of people jogging after the plane.

"Stop! Don't!" he shouted as those farthest back screamed and broke ranks, zipping right and left in front of the Humvee with Flowers, who steered a hard screaming

right, tried to work out of the skid, failed, and spun out. The rear of their vehicle just missed a lanky teenager—and then Flowers and Harris were gone, receding into the distance as Musa steered around them and flashed past.

“What are you doing?” Furious, John rounded on the woman who was again sighting down the barrel of her AK. “You want to kill people, just shoot them, for God’s sake. Pick your targets!”

“We need people away from plane!” The woman hollered something in Pashto at Musa and then their vehicle seemed to levitate as the man stomped on the accelerator. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“Not if you nearly get our own guys killed, not to mention that kid...No!” He straight-armed the woman’s rifle, knocking it off true just before she squeezed the trigger. “I said stop! That’s not the way!”

“You not in charge here!” The woman rounded, fury twisting through her features, and with her came her rifle, swinging his way. Ducking, he pushed himself forward, below the barrel’s arc. Out of the corner of an eye, he saw Musa’s face flash their way and then the vehicle was swerving. But now he was inside her reach, shouting into her face: “Stop, stop!”

For a millisecond—and it was only that because things were moving that quickly—naked hatred twisted her features, turning them ugly and harsh. Then she gave him a mighty shove and screamed, “Then shoot, if you are so good! Shoot, shoot!”

Not yet. Turning, John leaned down to bellow into Musa’s ear. “Pull ahead of the plane on the other side from Driver! Get to where the pilot can see me!”

“What you doing?” the woman shouted.

He didn't turn or answer. Too much going on, too much happening too fast, careful, careful... Dead ahead, people were shedding clothes; there were piles heaped here and there on the runway. They closed on a jumble of tunics and abayas and, wait... He squinted. Was that a sandal? Was that a?—?

“Watch it!” he bawled into Musa's ear a split second before the big Afghan jinked right. Flashing by, John saw an elderly man, his eyes almost comically wide and his mouth open in a slack O—and then they screamed past, missing the old man by less than a foot.

Close. Turning to face front, he braced his knees against the back of Musa's seat, steadying himself as the Afghan mashed the accelerator. Three seconds later, they were even with Roni's Humvee and, more importantly, the cockpit. Looking up, he saw the oval of the copilot's face as the man spared them a quick look...

Please understand. Please. Propping his weapon between his knees, John threw his arms out to either side then brought them up over his head before inscribing a quick circle with his right hand.

“What you do?” The woman demanded.

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Hoping I got the right signal and all those hours watching the planes at Benning pay off. He didn't turn. Instead, he held up a hand, flashing five fingers twice. Five plus five...come on, come on. Come on, you have to get it.

They were so close he saw the copilot's head cock to one side, the way a dog struggles to understand a command—and then, as John signaled again, the copilot jerked his head in a quick nod and flashed a thumb's up.

“What you tell him?” The woman was at his elbow. “What your hand mean?”

He didn't reply. Had Roni seen the exchange between him and the copilot? Would she understand? On the other side of the plane's nose, there was Meeks, keeping pace with them, and then Roni. They locked eyes for a moment. He willed the knowledge into her brain, felt a quick instant's relief when she nodded and said something to Driver. Two seconds later, their vehicle leapt ahead and roared past the Moose.

Excellent. She gets it. “Musa,” he said, “do what Meeks is doing. As soon as the pilot sees us veer off, the plane will make an emergency stop. Ten seconds later, he's going to power up and then he'll wait another ten before releasing his brakes. So, I want you to pull ahead, give us some distance and then turn around so we're facing the plane.”

The woman: “He do nothing?—”

“He has to. You're wasting time.”

“I no understand!”

“And you don’t have to. Musa, please, just do it!”

The woman showed her teeth in a snarl. “And what you going do once plane stop?”

“Wait for the pilot to power up.” He snugged his rifle against his shoulder. “Then pick off anyone who’s left.”

Most planes work pretty much the same way. In order to take off, enough power needs to be generated to push the aircraft forward until it reaches a speed where the wings generate lift. The pilot then raises the plane’s nose to the right angle so the plane climbs.

There are two ways to do this.

One is kinetic. Given a sufficiently long runway, the plane builds lift by increasing speed over a long distance.

Another is static. The pilot applies the brakes while revving the engines to full power before releasing the brake. A certain length of runway is still required but not as much because the plane’s engines are already at full. Think of aircraft slingshot and blasting up and away from a carrier.

The beauty of the Moose is that, in a way, it can do both.

When the Moose put on the brakes, all the civilians around and on parts of the plane simply froze. No one spoke. No one moved. The seconds passed...though they seemed to crawl for John.

Come on. Come on. His tongue skimmed sweat from his upper lip, and he tasted salt. Come on, already.

And then the Moose revved its engines.

The sound was monstrous: a guttural, deafening roar that vibrated up his legs and into his teeth. On the opposite side of the tarmac, he saw Roni and Driver took up their stances.

The roar also had the desired effect. Those around the plane jumped back and, as the engines continued their screaming crescendo to full power, as the air became more turbulent and tugged at their clothes...most who were left began to scatter.

Most.

He counted seven left on his side. With only ten seconds to work with, he would have to be fast. Even as he drew a bead on a bearded man in a striped tunic, he heard the sporadic pop-pop-pop that had to be Roni and Driver on the other side: carefully picking their targets and shooting just close enough not to actually hit them or the plane. It was all in the angle, which was why he'd had Musa pull their Jeep in close enough not to be sucked into an engine but shallow enough so any bullet would miss the plane and pass into open space beyond.

The man's striped tunic twitched with his first shot—one second in the countdown already gone—but that was enough. Even as the man jumped away, John was swiveling to peg the shemagh wrapped around another man's head. Two seconds gone. He fired. The shemagh went flying as its owner stumbled back when—three—John swung to a third man perched on a wheel. The man saw him, waved his arms, and tried standing at the same moment John squeezed the trigger. This time, there was a jump of blood and then the man was tumbling off the wheel, clutching at his leg as others nearby dragged him away from the plane.

Damn. He hoped that was a through-and-through. Either way, he'd likely be tending to that guy in twenty minutes or so. And with no fresh supplies.

At that, the crowd broke apart. Men scattered, slipped out of wheel wells, dropped from sponsons, and ran—just as the transport's engines slid from an idle to a throb and began to surge.

John let go of two more shots, but they were moot. There was no one left around the plane and, with eight seconds gone, they had to move.

“Musa!” Shouldering his rifle, he braced himself. On the opposite side of the plane, Roni's vehicle was already spinning back and away from the plane. “Back up. Do what they're doing. Go, go, go!”

There was a terrific lurch as their Humvee spun backward, wheels spinning and skidding, and then the remaining seconds slipped away—

And the Moose's pilot released the brake.

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With a deafening roar, the Moose shot past. Not a soul on a tire that he could see, not a person hanging from a sponson. John had about a half-second's relief.

But then...hedidspot something.

Oh, no.He spun toward the woman. "You got binoculars?"

Her brows drew together. "Yes, but..."

"Give them to me!" By the time he was able to glass the plane, it was nearly at the end of the runway. Its nose was up and then the wheels were just leaving the ground. He focused the binos, spotted what hethoughthe'd seen.

No.His heart knotted.No, God, please no.

"John?"

A part of his brain registered Roni's voice. He'd not even heard the rumble of her Humvee coming alongside. But he didn't take his eyes from the Moose, which was well above the end of the tarmac and lumbering to altitude.

"John." Roni put a hand on his biceps. "What are you?—"

"Ah, man." Driver was glassing the plane with his own binos. "Yeah, I see them. Just above the wheel trying to get inside the well but..." Driver cursed but didn't lower his binoculars. "Something in his way."

“Got to be another person.” John couldn’t look away. “Someone already there who I didn’t spot. I didn’t see him. I just didn’t?—”

“What?” Roni had her own binos out. “Oh,” she breathed. “Oh, John.”

“Yeah, there goes one.” Daniel’s tone was grim. A second later. “There goes another. I think that’s it.”

“I missed them.” John’s mouth was dry. He was still glassing the plane. “I didn’t see them.”

“You couldn’t know, man,” Driver said. “They were probably way up in the wheel well already and then the second guy must’ve slipped on takeoff. We were all focused on the guys we could see. Still, only two people out of the hundreds who could’ve been hurt?—”

“No,” John ground out. “Notonlytwo.”

“What?” Driver brought his binoculars up again. “What do you?—”

“Lookabovethe wheel at the edge of the well,” John said. “See it?”

“What?” Roni peered through her own binos. “I don’t see anything.”

“Ido.” Driver let go of a soft curse. “A foot.”

HIS TEETH ARE THE BEST THING

NOVEMBER 2023

The only flighton Somon Air into Tajikistan from Istanbul arrived at six a.m. Other

than the pilot and copilot, the plane was empty. Which made John wonder what everyone knew about flying into Tajikistan that he and Davila didn't.

Mercifully, nothing fell off the plane; none of the engines exploded. After taxiing to the jetway, the copilot emerged from the cockpit and opened the cabin door and left. A second later, the pilot turned off the power and also exited.

John and Davila traded looks, and then John said, "I don't think we're supposed to clean the cabin."

Grabbing their packs from the overheads, they went down the steps. The tarmac was deserted. No baggage handlers. No ground crew.

"This isn't promising," John observed.

"Let's not panic yet," Davila said.

"Me? Panic? I was only stating the obvious. This is just culture shock speaking. You wait, though, until I settle down and get my bearings."

"What are you talking about?" Davila asked, still looking around for signs of life.

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“When it’s time for me to start panicking.” Clearly, Davila didn’t know Douglas Adams. He also didn’t look like the type of guy who covered his anxiety by making bad jokes. “Never mind.” He hooked a thumb toward an open door into the terminal. “Shall we?”

Once inside, they followed arrows. Their footsteps echoed. After walking down a long corridor, they came to a border guard wearing a uniform and what seem to be a scowl tattooed onto his face. The guard spoke no English but went through their passports with a meticulousness bordering on the obsessive: each page front to back then back to front. Twice.

“Think he wants to bust our balls?” Davila opined as the guard started on the ritual for the third time.

“He might just be bored.” The guard, John noticed, had also gone still and watched with narrowed eyes. “Or waiting for a bribe.”

He watched Davila think about that. “Might be a very good way to wind up in jail. Bribing a security guy, I mean. Hank said the border guys, youknow...but he meant theborder-border, not the airport.”

John tended to agree. Worst-case scenario, they got locked up without so much as a phone call to the U.S. Embassy, much less an interpreter. So, he yawned and stretched and said to the border guy, “Knock yourself out, man. We got all day.”

At that, the border guy’s features darkened. Maybenothing doing, bubwas the same in every language.

“They toss you in jail,” Davila said, “I’m not bailing you out.”

“Just remember to put a metal file into that apple pie,” John said.

“You’re awfully cool for a guy a step away from incarceration.”

“Hey, I’m only looking at the doughnut, man.”

Grabbing a stamp, the border guy jammed that down twice onto an empty page in both passports before tossing them back and hooking a thumb over a shoulder.

“Another universal.” John shoved his passport into an inner pocket of his jacket. “Let’s blow before he changes his mind.”

“Yeah,” Davila said. “And I have got to get Hannah to think of a different metaphor.”

The main terminal was a long, single-story building, whose interior was bathed in a myriad of colors from light streaming through a stained-glass front. The effect would’ve been stunning if the place hadn’t felt like a neglected side-chapel in a derelict cathedral.

“Welcome to busy, bustling Dushanbe.” Davila turned a circle. “Where is everyone?”

“Maybe they’ve got the day off?” John said. The place was silent and virtually empty. No employees behind the counters. Perched on a stool in front of a corner kiosk selling candy and ice cream, a woman slowly leafed through a magazine. At the sound of their footstep, she looked up, decided they weren’t customers, and went back to her magazine. A smattering of passengers with luggage were scattered up and down the length of the concourse.

“Kind of spooky,” Davila said. “Next thing you know, Count Dracula’s going to

jump out from behind check-in.”

“Naw, it’s the daytime. He’s probably in luggage class with his coffin.” But this is ridiculous. Pulling out his water bottle, John swallowed a lukewarm swig as he checked the board for outgoing flights. Moscow, Dubai, Istanbul...

“Nothing scheduled to leave until later today,” Davila said. “Probably accounts for why it’s so empty.”

“Great.” His restless fingers fiddled with the fresh duct tape he’d wrapped around his bottle back at Brighter Days. Patterson had given them both a clean cell and a mini satellite phone. The mini-sat was only for extraction, as Patterson put it, though the unit was also equipped with an SOS broadcast beacon. The cell had one number on speed-dial, which went directly to Patterson, but that was only useful if there was a signal or Wi-Fi. John had no one to text. He wasn’t on social media and there was probably no cell coverage once they go out of Dushanbe. In the end, he’d downloaded some books and a couple of maps just to be on the safe side. Once they were into the mountains, the only way to talk to anyone was via the sat. John couldn’t help but remember that film with Wahlberg where the men can’t raise anyone and the one guy who ventures out into the open to try gets aerated. “We could call Patterson, I guess. See if he can track down our contact.”

“Let’s give it a couple minutes.” Davila turned a full circle. “I trust Hank, and he said this was arranged. Someone’ll find us.”

“Uh-huh.” Digging out the cell, he saw that he had bars. Pulling up Patterson’s number, he stared at the screen. Would Patterson have any more information to offer or a contact number in Tajikistan? He doubted it. Patterson wasn’t truly in charge.

But can he get through to whoever is? His thumb hovered over the speed dial. There’s got to be someone I can talk?—

A voice, heavily accented, from somewhere behind them: “Mr. Child? Mr. King?”

They turned. There were two men at the airport’s main entrance. One was small and wore a felt cap, wide grimy beige trousers, an equally grimy blousy top over which he’d draped a long open vest the color of gunmetal. The other, a bluff man with reddish hair, light blue eyes, and a physique that could’ve passed for Wisconsin-Lean, waved again.

“You are Mr. Child and Mr. King, yes?” The big man’s gaze shuttled back and forth between them. “Which is which?”

Davila hooked a thumb. “He’s Child.”

“Three guesses who he is.” When Davila gave him a sidelong glance, John shrugged. “Doughnut.”

“Never mind him,” Davila said as the big man’s bushy eyebrows drew together in something that resembled a furry caterpillar. “We’re the guys you’re looking for.”

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“I see.” Though his tone suggested otherwise. “I am sorry we were...ehrm...delayed.” His English was good, but his Russian accent was so thick, he could’ve been an extra in a Sean Connery Bond movie. “The van had a few...mmm...what would you call them?Mechanicaldifficulties. But Parviz has repaired.”

At the sound of his name, the small guy’s thin lips peeled back in a smile that revealed a mouthful of what looked more like rotten tent pegs driven into a bog. “He does not speak English well, which is perhaps to your benefit,” the bluff guy confided then offered a hand as large as a bear’s paw. Even his huge knuckles and the back of his hand were furred. “I am Ustinov. Alas, no...mmm...how do you say, nofamily?”

“What?” Davila asked.

“You mean norelation?” John said. “To Peter?”

“So, youknow?Very good!” Ustinov beamed. In contrast to Parviz, his teeth were large, very white, and very even as if someone had implanted two boxes of Chiclets. “Yes,him, that is correct. We have a...mmm...how do you say? Aspiritualconnection.” Ustinov shrugged. “It’s a good name.”

“Yes, it is.” John would also bet good money that Ustinov was about as real a name for this man as Child was for him and King for Davila. A Russian now in the mix was also...interesting. On the one hand, the Russians were supposed to be gone. On the other, theyhadoccupied Tajikistan for a long time.

There was, of course, a third consideration. If this mission, whatever it turned out to

be, was spook-driven, Ustinov might be KGB. Nothing was entirely secret, especially in these days of drone intercepts, AI, and deep fakes. So, anything was possible. The real question was, why would the Russians help retrieve an American's remains? Something did not add up. But what was it?

Interesting, too, that the guy figures I'll get the joke. This implied that Ustinov knew of John's fondness for old flicks and that meant someone, somewhere, had a pretty extensive file on him.

And why was that?

Davila raised a hand. "Seeing as how I'm kind of in the dark here, is anyone going to tell me who this non-relative is?"

"Peter Ustinov was an actor. British. Famous but not Taylor Swift-famous. More like..." John searched for a comparison. "ABBA-famous."

Davila frowned. "Who's ABBA?"

"Exactly," John said. "Anyway, Peter Ustinov died about twenty years ago."

"This is what you do with your downtime? Watch old movies no one else in the universe knows?"

"I have seen only a very few of his movies," Ustinov said. "They are, how do you say..." The Russian put a thick forefinger to his lips. The hairs on his knuckles were like tangles of copper wire. "Ah, yes, classics." He gave Davila an expectant look. "You like classics?"

Davila shrugged. "Terminator was good."

“Gotta agree,” John said.

“Yes, yes!” Ustinov laughed hard enough his belly jiggled. Throw in a little snow, change his clothes, dye the hair, add a beard...the man could be Jolly St. Nick. “I completely agree. Though the sequel was far...mmm...superior. Did you know this was Schwarzenegger’s favorite?”

“Yeah? I don’t think that crossed my radar,” John said. “Which of Peter’s did you like?”

“Let me think.” Ustinov cocked a single eyebrow then offered John that dazzling smile. “His teeth are the best thing about him.”

He instantly recognized the line and the film. “That’s an old one all right. Good choice, though.”

“What?” Then Davila flapped a hand. “You know, forget it. You guys have fun.”

“We’re bonding.” To Ustinov: “Did you know that Kubrick disowned that film?”

“Really?” Ustinov’s bottle-brush eyebrows arched for his hair line. “But Spartacus is a splendid film. Why was Kubrick unhappy?”

“The way I heard it, everybody on-set was fighting with everybody else. Laurence Olivier and Charles Laughton despised each other. Kubrick also didn’t like the screenplay or have total control over the shoot. Once it was released, John Wayne tried to have it banned from theaters.”

“Finally, an actor I know,” Davila said. “Why would Wayne do that?”

“Because of Dalton Trumbo.”

“Who was Trumbo?”

“Writer. Screenplays, mostly, and one really famous book.”

“Which one?”

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“Johnny Got His Gun,” he said—and, in a corner of his mind, wondered if Patterson or whoever really was pulling the strings here was sending him a message. If so, someone knew a lot more about him than even the military. A person would really have to dig and go very far back to a time when John wasn’t John, but another boy who was nothing more than smoke and mirrors—and then further back still, to yet another kid who’d lived through a nightmare.

Maybe that was one of the reasons he was so obsessed with old movies. They were all only fictions. Just a bunch of stories. A collection of other people’s nightmares. Better than dwelling on his own, that was for sure. He bet a shrink would say he had some kind of repetition-compulsion. The shrink wouldn’t be wrong.

“Johnny Got His Gun?” Davila echoed then snapped his fingers. “Wait, I know that one. WWI guy, no arms, no legs, can’t speak or see. He’s deaf, too, right?”

“That’s the one. Trumbo was also a member of the communist party and part of the Hollywood Ten, the writers blacklisted for being communist sympathizers. Even though the film came out several years after McCarthy was booted, people remembered. The Red Scare was pretty potent back then.”

“Yes,” Ustinov said. “If you will forgive the...ehrm...observation, this is one scare from which your country is still running.”

The front of the airport was as deserted as the terminal. No baggage guys, no cars dropping off passengers, and only one taxi. Ustinov had a short exchange with Parviz, who nodded and walked off.

“This way.” Ustinov beckoned them across the terminal approach road toward a large rectangular garden area behind a low border of black wrought iron. An array of bright-red flowers bloomed. A series of hedges were elaborately manicured and trimmed into pyramids, like something lifted from Versailles. A fountain with a statue rising from the center occupied the middle of the garden. The statue was tall, thin, and very white and seemed to be a man wearing a space helmet and an outfit that reminded John of old pictures of John Glenn and the Mercury astronauts, a comparison bolstered by a halo of stylized stars and satellites around the statue’s head.

“Looks like something from Sputnik,” John said.

“The same general idea,” Ustinov agreed. “It’s a tribute to reaching for the stars.”

“Tajikistan has an astronaut program?” Davila asked.

“No, it’s a relic from the Russians. They are why our capital’s parks and fountains and roads are so good. We have the second tallest flagpole in the world.”

“Where’s the first?”

“Saudi Arabia.” Ustinov shrugged. “Times change.”

He led them across the street and down a walkway lined with tall trees. To their left was a largely deserted parking lot. Dead ahead, John heard the whirr of traffic but much more faintly than before as the limbs from the towering trees on either side of the path met above. They were, effectively, in a cool, quiet, green tunnel.

“This area has been swept. It is safe. We must keep walking, however.” Reaching inside his overcoat, Ustinov withdrew two packets. “Identity papers and visas. I must say,” the Russian said as he handed John a packet, “I think *Die Trying* is your best

novel, Mr. Child. Very instructive.”

“Always been one of my favorites,” John said.

“And worthy of a careful reread,” Ustinov said, “if you do not mind my saying so.”

Davila looked offended. “You don’t like any of mine?”

“Ah.” Ustinov put a finger to his mouth, thought, then said, “Desperation.”

“Okay, that’s obscure.” From Davila’s expression, John could tell he’d never heard of the book. That particular novel was as interesting a choice, in fact, as the book Ustinov had referenced for him.

Why did both mentions feel like...code?

“Launceston?” Davila was leafing through his new Australian passport. “I don’t even know where that is.”

“Tasmania,” John said. Perhaps Patterson or, more likely, the nebulous they who’d asked for John decided they could both fake having lived on Tasmania, which was mostly farmland and surrounded by the sea. Probably wasn’t all that different from, say, Lake Superior, other than Superior didn’t smell like salt and there were ducks. He and Davila probably wouldn’t even have to try for the accent. “Just say mate and barbie a lot, and we’re golden.”

Davila pocketed his passport. “You have cash? I heard we’ll need that for the border.”

“Yes.” Ustinov handed over two square black pouches. Both were heavy and zipped, each pull tab snugged into a metal clasp on one end of the zipper. The clasp featured

a gray rectangle in the center. “Money for both sides of the border.”

Davila took one, turned the pouch over in his hands then frowned. “Where’s the pull tab for the zip?”

“Here.” Ustinov indicated the gray rectangle. “Press your left thumb against that.”

Davila did. A split second later, the pull tab popped from its lock slot. “Fingerprint activated?” When Ustinov nodded, Davila said, “How did you get ahold of my thumbprint?”

Ustinov made an apologetic gesture. “That is, as you say, need-to-know and I do not. Both your thumbprint and Mr. Child’s have been programmed into the pouches, which are constructed of cut-resistant material. They are also fireproof. Lastly, should someone be able to somehow pierce the material, there is an...how do you say it...erhm...as a final precaution...”

“A bomb?” John suggested.

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Ustinov snapped his fingers. “An incendiary.”

“You’re serious. The thing is a flash-bang?”

“Of a sort. Only a very small explosion. More like a very bright, very loud firecracker. Just enough to incinerate the contents. There is a way to disable the incendiary, of course.”

“Of course.” John waited. “Which is?”

“Ah, yes.” Turning over a case, Ustinov pointed to a miniscule flap. “This is...erhm...how you say, Velcro? Pull like this.” He pulled then showed them a small white nub. “Press and hold five seconds and that incendiary is disabled.”

“Wow.” He and Davila traded looks, and then Davila said, “Why do I feel like I just tripped into a James Bond movie?”

“He kind of does look a little bit like John Cleese,” John said. “If, you know, Cleese was, like, twenty years young and Russian.”

“Please.” Ustinov looked offended. “I am dead in...erhm...earnest. As you can see, there is no way anyone will be able to deprive you of cash along the way.”

“Unless,” John observed, “they deprive us of our thumbs and wear a blast shield and fire-retardant gloves.”

“There you go again, jumping to worst case scenarios,” Davila said.

“Helps me prepare for unpleasant surprises,” John said.

Ustinov pushed on. “Parviz also has several bottles of vodka. Those are for the Tajik guards. While they are bribes, you must call them ‘gifts.’ You mustn’t forget to phrase them as such. That is very important.”

“What about the Afghan side?”

“Only cash. Don’t offer vodka. If there is a Taliban soldier around, you might be flogged. Or land in jail.” Ustinov put a furry finger to his lips. “Actually, they will have you meet with an accident...say, you will get in the path of a bullet or take one step too many off a short pier. They will take the money, of course. Not that it will do them much good unless, as you say, they deprive you of your right thumb.”

“And have a fire extinguisher handy,” John put in. “Or figure out the flap-and-button thingy.”

“What if the only guards are Afghans?” Davila asked.

“Same result,” Ustinov said. “Only they will drink the vodka and then try to take your money. Best to avoid either scenario, yes?”

“How likely are we to run into hardcore Taliban?” Davila asked.

“Very,” Ustinov said. “They have many reasons to patrol that border area.”

“People smuggling?”

Ustinov nodded. “In addition to infiltration by hostiles through a less-traveled route. Once you are across, however, it will be some time before you meet any Pamiris or Kyrgyz.” Ustinov pronounced it as Kihr-gess. “They are nomads. Pamiris are usually

more settled, though there are several bands who travel the mountains. Here.” Tugging a cell from a vest pocket, Ustinov poked the screen with a hairy forefinger then turned the screen to show them both a map.

“There is where we are in Dushanbe,” Ustinov said, indicating a red teardrop in the center of the country. “You can see we are north of the mountains. Now, this...” He traced a thin black line south of Dushanbe and in the mountains. “This is the border with Afghanistan, which follows a river.”

“The Panj,” Davila said.

“Correct.” Ustinov wagged his head. “On the Tajik side, the border is at Eshkashim. On the Afghan, it is Ishkashim and about five kilometers’ walk to the west. As you can see, the border is not near any settlements, though that is the mouth of the Wakhan into Afghanistan proper.”

“But that’s where we’ll meet our guide on the Afghan side?”

“A guide, yes.”

“Name?” John asked. “Animal? Vegetable? Mineral?”

“What?” Before he could answer, Ustinov waved a hand. “Never mind. You will have a guide. Ask for Abdul-Ami. He will also wait forty-eight hours for you, if you are delayed.”

“Why would that happen?”

“Rockslides, bad weather. We want to allow for contingencies.”

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“Okay.” Adul-Ami was, John knew, the equivalent of Mr. Smith. “And then this guy will take us to...?”

“To your contact in the town who also has instructions to wait. I do not know who. I am sorry. That is, how do you say it? Higher than my money?”

“Above your pay grade,” Davila said.

“Yes. Your idioms...” Shaking his head, Ustinov pointed to another area on his cell’s map. “From here, you will follow the M41 the entire way. This is a relatively nice highway, a big draw for tourists who like to take motorcycles or pedal their bicycles from Osh in Kyrgyzstan to Dushanbe or vice versa.”

“Seriously? Tourists?”

Ustinov made a dismissive gesture. “They are looking for adventure. I have always found it so curious how these people like to...erhm...how do you say?”

“Rough it?”

“Yes, yes, that’s it. As if being dirty and smelly and tired and hungry and cold is somehow very romantic, possibly because they know it is not permanent. They have hot showers and comfortable beds in their homes and good internet. It is, I suppose, a different paintbrush for different people?”

“Different strokes for different folks,” John put in.

“Ah, yes. In any event, the Pamir Highway is a present left from the Russians and well-maintained around Dushanbe and its environs. You will also not use this road the entire way. Once you are through the Tavildara Pass and Khorog, you will travel southwest on the Wakhan Valley road toward Ishkashim.”

John heard the butin Ustinov’s voice. “Let me guess. It isn’t very nice the farther from the Dushanbe we go.” When Ustinov nodded, he said, “They don’t repave?”

Ustinov tipped his head the way a curious dog might at a question it doesn’t quite get. “There is, ah...how do you say it? No such thing in the countryside. Once you leave the valley and begin to climb—and you will be climbing quite high because these are, after all, some of the highest mountains and mountain valleys in the region—the road can be quite challenging. Rocks, landslides, potholes. No trees, little vegetation, no settlements to speak of. In many places, the highway simply evaporates, and the road is a dirt cut wide enough for a vehicle. This is especially true at higher elevations.” Ustinov gave another of his all-purpose shrugs. “On the other hand, that may be to your benefit. That the road is so poor, I mean. It will take you some time to reach Khorog and then the border.”

“How long?” Davila asked.

“Two days. Your guide understands that there may be delays and so will wait for another forty-eight. After that, you are...” Another shrug.

“Toast.”

Ustinov got that one. “More likely than not.”

“Wow.” John scrubbed the back of his head with his knuckles. “I guess the upside is we’ll have time to adjust to the altitude. That’s not a bad thing.”

“How high are we going?” Davila asked.

“The entire Wakhan corridor is more than two miles high, like Denver only doubled. The mountains top out at eleven thousand. Mountains around Brighter Days?” John made a piffling sound. “Like pimples. But I got us covered.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” During college, he’d decided that a ski trip to Taos with friends might be fun. It wasn’t. While his friends skied, he spent the majority of the trip in a dark room with a pounding migraine. He only wished he’d known then what, after pharmacology elective in med school, he now did. “I asked Patterson for acetazolamide.”

“What is it?” Davila asked.

“Diuretic. You’ll pee your brains out, but your brains aren’t gonna dribble out of your ears either.” At Davila’s look, he added, “Hey, man, doughnut.”

“What,” Ustinov asked, mystified, “is this obsession you have with a pastry?”

They kept walking. “What about weapons?” Davila asked.

“Parviz has them,” Ustinov said. “He, too, will be armed.”

Davila’s eyebrows arched. “Oh?”

“Bandits,” Ustinov said. “Most are young men and very poor. There are no jobs, and so they must leave for Russia. Everyone hates them there. Worse, the Russians are also letting in many young Afghan men, who must also feed their families. You cannot be too careful.”

“That wasn’t in any of the travel brochures.” At Davila’s look, John shrugged. “Well, it wasn’t.”

Confused, Ustinov looked from John to Davila and back again. “I am sorry...what?”

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“Nothing. Bad habit.” Stop. You’re not auditioning to be Ryan Reynolds’ stunt double. “Were you able to get ahold of what I asked for?”

“The Glock 19 and that rifle? Yes.” Ustinov nodded. “With plenty of ammunition, though not enough to...how do you say it? Swamp you?”

John was getting used to the way Ustinov mangled idioms. “Bog me down.”

“That, yes. You will likely have to travel on foot once you are within the Wakhan.”

“What about me?” Davila asked.

“Ah, yes.” Clasp ing his hands together, Ustinov looked like a maître-de apologizing for not having someone’s favorite table. “I am afraid you were...an add-on? Is that correct? I only had time to procure a Kalashnikov for you, Mr. King.”

“No sidearm?”

“I’m afraid not, no.”

“Hey, look on the bright side,” John said. “You won’t have trouble finding extra ammo.”

Davila’s scowl only deepened. “How about it’d be nice if we didn’t have to go the trouble of finding any extra ammo?”

“And who said you weren’t a doughnut kind of guy?”

“Your rifle,” Ustinov put in quickly, “this M20?”

“Mk22,” John said.

“Yes, that. I’ve never heard of it.”

“Me, either,” Davila said.

John wasn’t surprised, given that the rifle was only adopted by the Marines a few months ago. “It’s new.”

“How do you even know about it?” Davila asked. “You were at...ah...away.”

Yeah, thanks for not spilling that I was in a kinder, softer loony bin. Brighter Days was nothing of the kind, but sometimes—in those moments when he wondered why he just couldn’t thackit and man up already—he made jokes. Bad ones. “I just know.”

“But why not a Kalashnikov?” Ustinov said. “You can find ammunition more easily.”

“I like the feel.”

“We’ll be fine.” Davila changed the subject. “Where do we meet our contact?”

“Parviz will let you off ten kilometers shy of Ishkashim.”

“Let us off.” He and Davila traded looks, and then Davila said, “And then Parviz just drives away?” When Ustinov nodded, he continued, “With or without our contact actually being there? We got any way of letting him know where we are?”

“I’m afraid not, no.” Ustinov offered a mournful shake. “I’m sure you understand.”

“Actually, no,” John said. The traffic noise was louder. Ahead, the thick canopy made by the trees was thinning and the light on the path below brighter. “What if we’re late? Or really early?”

“All this has been factored into the timing of your rendezvous. Parviz will see to it that you are delivered to the proper location at the proper time.”

“With no one knowing where we are? What happens if the contact is hurt, killed, not able to get there? Or if we get a flat tire, run out of gas...”

Ustinov cut him off. “Again, contingencies have been made.”

This was all very vague. John tossed a look at Davila, who was studying Ustinov—and saw Davila’s face clear. “I get it,” Davila said.

“You do?” John asked.

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Davila nodded. "You don't know what these contingencies are, do you, Ustinov? Or the actual sites? In case this blows up."

Ustinov ducked his head in acknowledgement. "It is important for me to have, as you say in your country, plausible deniability."

But this Parviz guy must know more. The driver would have to in order to drop them where they needed to be and point them in the right direction. John was about to point that out then thought better of it. They could try and pump Parviz out of Ustinov's hearing. But wait, according to Ustinov, the guy's English sucked. How much sense did that make? Giving them a driver who knew only pidgin English? And us, only pidgin...well, what? He didn't know Tajik and, other than stick out your tongue and do you feel sick, no Pashtun either. He wondered how much Russian he could dredge up from the old memory banks.

"Ustinov, you have to know something," Davila pressed.

"Alas, no. Please." The big man held up a palm as big around as a pie plate. "I cannot tell you what I do not know. I am sorry. I have not been, as you might say, written into the book."

"Yeah," Davila said. "A lot of that going around."

They emerged from the trees and onto a path. This led to a long, low, red-roofed building with a parking lot. The only vehicle in the lot was a spotty green-and-brown blunt-nosed van with a roof rack that reminded John, vaguely, of those old Volkswagen vans hippies used to sleep in.

“Seriously?” Davila asked. “This rust bucket is our ride?”

“It runs,” Ustinov said.

“So did Fred Flintstone’s car,” John said. He’d pulled a water bottle—wrapped in duct tape because old habits die hard—from a pocket of his cargo pants.

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind.” Yaba-daba-doo. He took a swig. “This thing really belongs in a scrap heap,” he said, worrying a loose tongue of duct tape.

“The Tajiks are a resourceful people. The Soviets left many vehicles such as this bukhanka,” Ustinov said.

“Which is?” Davila asked.

Loaf of bread. Which John almost said but bit back at the last second. For some reason he couldn’t quite pinpoint, he decided to keep the fact that he knew a bit of Russian under wraps.

“How do you call it...erhm...a bread loaf?” Ustinov said. “What you buy in market? The official designation for this particular variation is UZ3741. Two gas tanks, four-wheel drive. The model comes in many models?—”

He broke off at a sudden, high metallic drill-bit of a squeal as Parviz muscled open the driver’s side door, hopped out, smiled, and did a quick bow before hooking his hands into the slider.

“You ask me, you should’ve put this thing out of its misery,” John said, as he watched the smaller man strain so hard the cords stood out on the backs of his hands

and the muscles on his forearms knotted. “Looks like a refugee from Woodstock. All you need are a bunch of flowers and a peace sign.”

Ustinov’s bushy brows folded. “I do not understand this...erhm...woodchuck? Is this about the animal who sees his shadow?” He had to raise his voice over the slider, which Parviz had finally dragged open with a loud and grudgingsquawwwof metal against metal. “That was a veryfinemovie.”

“Don’t,” Davila warned as John opened his mouth. “Don’t say it.”

“Who, me?” John asked.

Davila ignored him. “I’d like to check out the weapons.”

“Me, too.” John held up a hand as Parviz trotted over to grab their duffels. “We’ll stow our stuff, thanks.” First rule of the military: don’t let anyone mess with your gear or many items might suddenly develop legs.

The cargo space was cluttered: a tool case, a bag of rags, food wrappers, a litter of soda cans, a clutch of zip ties, a spare tire, snow chains, wheel chocks, a lug wrench, a stained tarp, what looked like a prayer rug, and a small cushion. Four large,clear plastic jugs filled with liquid that was probably extra gas were strapped to panels with zip ties.

There were also two hard-shell handgun cases, both black. One was paired with a green long gun shell, while the second nestled next to a battered AK 47.Parviz’s weapon.John studied the nicked wooden buttstock and saw something in Cyrillic, probably the previous owner’s name scratched into the wood.

“I thought you said you couldn’t find a second Glock,” Davila said.

“The second is for Parviz,” Ustinov said. “His request.”

Okay, that’s odd. He waited for Davila to say something, but the other man was already opening the long brown shell to examine a pristine AK nestled in a foam cutout.

John reflected that perhaps what his therapist at Brighter Days said about him not being a very trusting soul was accurate. He thought it was a little odd that Parviz took the opportunity to grab a new weapon for himself. On the other hand, given the state of this van, Parviz was clearly hard up for cash.

Still, something felt a bit off. He wished he knew what.

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He opened the green long gun case first. Nestled in foam cutouts were the various pieces of a pale-brown rifle. A black scope and a suppressor were snuggled alongside. There were also three boxes of ammunition for the rifle. Opening one, he tweezed out and inspected a shiny, pointed brass bullet before slotting the Winchester cartridge back into its box. He would need to put the rifle together and sight it in, but this was not the time or place.

“Nice piece,” Davila said. After safetying the weapon and opening the chamber, he squinted down the bore to check out the barrel. “Clean as a whistle. Looks like it’s never seen a bullet.”

Ducking his head a touch, Ustinov spread his hands. “We were quite careful about procurement.”

“Uh-huh.” Popping his Glock’s magazine, John press checked the weapon, made sure it was empty, then did a basic field strip: fiddling with the locking bar, wiggling the trigger bar, playing with the trigger to make sure it returned and didn’t stick.

“Is there a problem?” Ustinov asked.

“Nope.” There was no lube where the barrel seated, no hint of grease. After inspecting the recoil spring, John studied the barrel and, as with Davila’s AK, saw no dings or cracks. A faint odor of gun oil tickled his nose. Interesting. As he put the gun back together, he said, “But what makes Parviz think he’ll need a handgun on the road? He’s got a rifle.”

“There has been...unpleasantness along parts of the road. Not that I expect you to

have trouble at this time of year, but one cannot be too careful. There are times when a rifle is too cumbersome.”

“Oh?” Davila asked as John reached for the case containing the second Glock. “What kind of trouble?”

“Bandits. You are not going into the most prosperous of regions. With the Americans gone, the Taliban can spread, but so can bandits who cross into Tajikistan and then back.”

“I thought there are Russian soldiers at the border.”

“Some, but the Taliban stay mostly on the Afghan side. The bandits cross back and forth. Many are from militias, some of whom fought against the Taliban and some who did not. Their leaders are gone, and they are...how do you say it? Dangling threads.”

“At loose ends,” John said.

“Yes, yes.” Ustinov gave an enthusiastic nod. “These men have to eat, but there are no homes or villages to which they can return without being reported to the Taliban.”

“That’s harsh.”

“It’s a harsh land, Mr. Child. Their neighbors are just as hungry as everyone else.”

“What will the Taliban do for them?” Davila asked. “In exchange for turning someone in?”

“It is more what they willnotdo. The Taliban willnotburn down your house,nottake yourwomen, kill your parents, or kidnap your children. They even might offer

to buy your children. Girls are particularly..." Ustinov thought about the next word. "Coveted."

John didn't even want to think about that. He thumbed open the second gun case and took out the Glock that had been next to Parviz's rifle. "And the boys?"

"It depends on the boy's age. Some are forced to become soldiers. Many others are..." Ustinov's forthright gaze skittered away from John to study the trees. "Put to different uses in various households."

"Meaning?" Davila asked.

"I'll tell you later." A stone had formed in John's gut. The more things change... Wasn't this the part of the movie where he had come in more than two years ago? He changed the subject. "If the warlords are mostly gone, then you're really only talking Taliban and wealthy guys doing business. What kind of business could there be in the mountains?"

Ustinov opened his mouth to answer but, at that moment, Parviz scuttled around, took a look at the open gun cases, and said something in a language filled with harsh gutturals. Sounded like Russian to John; he caught what sounded like *verkh*, the word he knew meant up. Nodding, Ustinov said, "Parviz has reminded me that the day will not grow any longer."

"Okay," John said as the driver moved in and gestured for him and Davila to step away. Replacing the second Glock case to the right of his Mk22, he repeated his question. "What kind of business?"

"Something every country covets and can't find in quantity," Ustinov said as Parviz busied himself with shuffling items back and forth. "The first deposits were discovered by the Chinese in the Kunar District, at the mouth of Korangal to our

south. Chinese mineralogists also found large deposits in the Wakhan and very close to their border.”

“So, what is it?” Davila asked.

“The locals know it as takhtapat. Waste kunzite in English.”

“Which is?”

“Spodumene.” Ustinov favored them both with that flawless grin. “Lithium.”

Davila was already settled in the cargo bay when John said to Ustinov, “Wait, before we get started, you got a pencil? I like to doodle. Helps me think, but I lost mine.”

“Of course.” Ustinov patted pockets before pulling a pencil from his vest. “My pleasure.”

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“Thanks.” The eraser was only slightly worn. Excellent. Unbuttoning a side flap of his cargo pants where he kept his water bottle, he fiddled with the bottle before slotting in the pencil and buttoning up. Once done, he tugged the balky slider shut then climbed aboard just as Parviz cranked the engine which coughed, chugged then grumbled to life in a gray exhaust cloud.

As he settled into the front passenger seat, he noticed Parviz fumbling through a box of cassettes. “No radio?”

Ustinov, still at the open door: “Nothing you would like, and not once you leave this valley. I hope you like rock.”

“In English?”

“Russian. Some Tajik.” Ustinov considered. “It is very bad rock. Do buckle up, please.”

“Just don’t crash,” Davila put in. “I got no seat belt back here.”

“Yes, but look on the bright side, Mr. King,” Ustinov said. “With such a vehicle, no one will be tempted to steal it.”

JUMPERS

AUGUST 2021

By late afternoon, there were a lot of pictures and videos of two men, the ones John

hadn't seen in time, who'd lost their grip or let go after the Moose was already several hundred feet above the ground. One videographer had helpfully circled the tiny figures in midair.

Another reporter mentioned the discovery of "human remains" in one of the Moose's wheel wells once the plane landed in Doha but didn't go into detail. Add up hundreds of pounds of metal and rubber, factor in the force of all that weight powered by hydraulics against a human body of just about any size, though, and only those lacking in imagination had any doubt about who won that contest.

John and Roni were too busy, initially, tending to the fallout from the stampede to see any of this. To their relief—because the stampede meant they still were low on supplies—most injuries were bruises and scuffs. A few gashes. John saw exactly one bullet wound, a clean through and through in the fleshy part of a man's thigh. John cleaned out the wound, patched the holes with duct tape, and gave the guy some antibiotics. He felt bad about the guy getting shot, but at least the man hadn't ended up as a smashed human blood balloon or crushed into the equivalent of strawberry jam.

Their CO took both John and Roni aside at the end of their shift. Word had come from the Marines on duty along the tarmac, who'd seen the whole thing. The CO thought they deserved a commendation. They declined, pointing out it would be bad press for the military if John Q. Public found out the Army brass were doling out rewards for shooting at civilians.

Besides, sir, Roni said, we're not the story. All these poor people who can't get out...they're the story.

The CO only nodded, unconvinced, mumbled something else about war being hell and then left to go do whatever COs with major logistical headaches do. They watched him go and then Roni said she was going for a walk. Don't take this the

wrong way, but I just need to be alone.

Except what other way could he take it? They'd been in this together. She was the one who spilled the beans about him to Driver.

But what could he say? A jokey reference to Greta Garbo? She'd only roll her eyes. So, he said something like okay, have a nice walk or whatever.

After she left, he counted to fifteen. He really didn't want to chance seeing where she was headed. That was, if she was headed anywhere. The problem was, he thought he knew where she might be going.

And why did that bother him? They weren't a couple. Even if they had been, she ought to be able to talk to whomever she pleased, right? Besides, he wouldn't make for the best company at the moment anyway. In the end, he decided he didn't want to know one way or the other.

Stepping into the heat after the relative coolish funk of the med tent was still a smack in the face. His upper lip instantly beaded with sweat. He spied a crowd of civilians a short distance away, behind yellow police tape, like gawkers at a crime scene. There were also many more troops keeping watch. Once burned, twice shy, he supposed. Given the time difference, no one wanted a repeat of this afternoon to be broadcast while Americans sipped that first cup of coffee.

He stepped briskly toward the tarmac. He looked neither right nor left and most certainly didn't look toward the hangar where Driver and the others had been that afternoon.

The tarmac was clear. All the discarded clothes, shoes, bits of luggage, and mementos strewn about in the chaos were gone. Here, as around the med tent, the troop presence had been beefed up, too.

Pulling himself aboard a waiting van, he grabbed a lone window seat at the very back and dragged off his helmet. The sun was close to the horizon, just grazing the spiky peaks of distant mountains. He paused to watch the sun sink lower and lower until, suddenly, the sky turned a deep, bloody crimson as if the mountain's teeth had taken a bite out of the sun.

Stop. Shoving on his shades, he slumped and rested his forehead against the window, which was the temperature of warm milk, and quietly sweated, eyes closed, while the driver waited for others to board. As the van filled, the chatter swelled. Most revolved around resupply planes or which team had it worse, everyone trying to outdo one another like a bad Monty Python sketch.

Then, through the scrum, he heard someone—a med tech, he thought—pipe up, “Those guys are on some CIA thing. Marines, if what I heard is right, but not JSOC, so I dunno?—”

“Man, if they told you that,” someone interrupted, “they’d have to kill you afterward. Those guys are hardcore Black Ops. No names, no nothing.”

Except Flowers, Meeks, Harris. Driver’s name was real, so he assumed the others must be accurate. Interested now, he remained still, head lolling and eyes closed, the better to eavesdrop.

Another guy: “Maybe they’re only on loan, you know?”

“Or maybe,” said someone else, “cuz this is what I heard, they were Marines, only they aren’t now on account of something bad going down on a mis?—”

“How would you know?” opined a fourth man. “No one talks out loud about that kind of thing when it comes to Black Ops. Not unless you want to wake up next morning with a knife in your chest?—”

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“That’s what I’m saying,” the other guy responded. “Telling you, something’s going on. Friend works on the flight line. He said these Marines got some Afghans with them. Not Zeros, neither, and one’s a woman, and they helped. Like with the Moose, picking off targets, one right after the other?—”

“Naw, man.” The med tech, again. “Wasn’t just them. It was a couple of docs, too.”

Ohhh, eff me. His heart skipped a beat. His ears tingled. Switch out this van for a darkened stairway and a boy overhearing his mother say to his dad: We can’t ignore this anymore. We have to talk about Casey.

Casey’s fine. His father, testy, impatient. He’s just a little?—

“Really?” someone asked.

“Uh-huh,” the tech said. “Some of the best shooting my buddy’s ever seen. Said it was a miracle they didn’t hit the plane.”

“You know who?”

“Oh, yeah,” the tech said—and then proved that, indeed, he did know, exactly, who’d been doing the shooting.

John stopped listening after that, perhaps because his heartbeat was thundering so loudly, he couldn’t—or maybe he just didn’t want to listen anymore. What was the point? This was only gossip, and gossip like this would pass eventually, though things never would be the same again. Not after what he’d done.

They'll just never look at you straight in the eye anymore, son, Stan had said. They're always going to be uncertain. They'll always be afraid. Everyone will figure that, no matter how much time has passed, it's in the blood.

He waited for the van to empty then tacked on another thirty seconds as the conga line of soldiers shuffled for the chow hall. When the last soldier had disappeared, he said good night to the driver and hustled in the opposite direction. He'd lost his appetite anyway.

His quarters were adjacent to the gym, where many of the Marines were bunked, and an open patch of improbably green grass the Afghan military had used as a soccer field. He slipped into the building through a side door. The facility was skeletal, but the halls were clean, dimly lit, and relatively quiet. The place was almost like a hotel if you overlooked the cinder block walls. Hurrying down the corridor to his quarters, he caught muted gabble and the occasional swell of what seemed like movie music seeping through a few closed doors. Probably something streamed from the internet which they were lucky to have on this side of the airport.

Roni's room was four doors down from his. He slowed then stopped in front of her door. He knew she wasn't there; she'd gone off to...well, whatever. She might be taking a walk, having a think.

Or looking for Driver.

And if she'd found him, what then? Were they merrily chatting away, catching up, getting all buddy-buddy? Were they not so merrily chatting away?

Were they doing something else?

Don't do it. He felt the quiet of the corridor, the silence pressing against the back of her door, as a prickle on his skin. She would never bring Driver here. Would she? If

she had, would they be...

Stop it. Roni wasn't property. They weren't a couple. She could bring whomever she wanted to her quarters. Odds were excellent, however, that she hadn't. Someone would notice and regs were regs. Officers didn't go around sleeping with enlisted...which was kind of a laugh. Besides, Driver and the other Marines...or were they ex-Marines? Or Black Ops? Whatever. If they were no longer Marines, bringing Driver back to her quarters would be totally kosher.

Except Driver and his guys were hanging with a guy from the CIA. Mac would probably cut them a break for this afternoon, seeing as how his Afghan asset had joined in the fun. But slipping off with one of the regular soldiers, like Roni, someone who hadn't been read in, who wasn't part of whatever mission they were on? Mac would probably have them executed. Rubbed out. Quietly erased.

For God's sake. He really did watch too many movies. Suck it up. He gave the door a hard look. He just wouldn't do it, wouldn't even think about checking...

Oh, go on. He knew this voice. This wasn't his but belonged to a nasty imp who squatted in a dark closet at the back of his mind. Every so often, it slipped a few talons through a crack and pulled open that door just wide enough to whisper. The thing had taken up residence in his brain the night he huddled on that stair and eavesdropped on his parents. Go on, you loser. You know she's in there with someone who isn't you.

Turning a guilty look left and right, he put an ear to her door, closed his eyes, and listened...

And got back a whole lot of nothing. No voices, no squeaky springs, no moans or sighs. He listened so hard his ears buzzed.

Nothing.

The hall was so still he heard the squeak of his leather boots as he backed up to study the floor beneath her door. No light. If this were a movie, he'd pull out a paper clip or something and MacGyver his way inside. But what for? Roni wasn't there. He hoped. No, she wasn't, and she most certainly wasn't in bed with Driver somewhere else.

Yeah? The imp let go of a nasty snigger. You sure?

His own windowless room was bare bones: a cot with a thin mattress, a television on a bureau, a small bathroom with stall shower and sink. Shucking his gear, he peeled out of his uniform, kicked off his boots, skinned off socks and undershirt, worked his way to his skivvies, and started for the shower.

But then his gaze snagged on his laptop.

He stopped. He knew what he would look for. He also knew that finding it would be of no use to anyone, least of all himself.

Still...five minutes. That's what he told himself. Five minutes and then he could put this afternoon behind him.

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He watched the videos of that Moose and those two jumpers maybe half a dozen times. Watching didn't get easier. Seeing them reminded him of something else, in fact.

His memories of 9/11 were sketchy. He'd been only fourteen and in school when the first plane hit just about the time they were finishing up the Pledge and moving on to morning announcements. His homeroom teacher had snapped on the TV and tuned to CNN. He remembered how his teacher had gasped and put a hand on her chest, like she was going to have a heart attack. A couple of the girls started whimpering. Mostly, they watched in goggle-eyed silent until the intercom buzzed, and the principal came on and said school was letting out. Buses were already out front. His house wasn't far, and he and his older brother always biked in together. They peddled home as fast as they could, and what his clearest memory of that ride was the set of his brother's face: the fury and something much uglier bubbling underneath...

He shoved the memory aside. Instead, plugging the search terms into Google, he kept clicking until he found the CNN video he was looking for: an interview with a woman in New York.

Her hair was black. Her New York accent wasthick. She was crying hard, her mascara streaking her cheeks in black rivulets: And if you go over by there, you can see people jumping out the window. They're jumping out the windows right now.

As she said that, the cameraman panned to the North Tower—and was just in time to catch the moment the second plane hit.

He watched it again and again. Listened to the screams and the wails and the shrieks

over and over. Then he ran more searches. The more he ran, the more he clicked and watched, clicked and watched, clicked and?—

Why are you doing this to yourself? He'd done what he could this afternoon. Forcing those people away from the plane had been the only play. If something had gotten sucked into an engine; if a civilian had managed to squirrel away a gun and started shooting at the plane...it could have been a catastrophe.

He needed sleep. His eyes, raw and gritty, burned. He checked the time. Four past midnight. What was he doing? He had to get up at six and report back for work at 0700. He wasn't hungry but knew he should eat. The chow hall would be empty. If he was lucky, there'd be a couple of MREs lying around. Probably the crappy ones no one liked. Forcing down the veggie omelet was an exercise in masochism, but he was past caring. All he needed was calories.

This is not your fault. Those falling men, those jumpers, that boy who was crushed...They aren't on you. You did your best.

"Take a shower," he said, aloud, reaching to close his laptop. But then his gaze snagged on a title in a list of his most recent search. A documentary he'd never seen: 9/11 The Falling Man.

Don't. His finger rested on his trackpad. Don't do this to yourself. Don't click.

And then, the imp: Go on. You deserve this. You've got a lot more blood on your hands than just those people from today. So, go on, you loser.

Three guesses what he did.

Sometime after 0200.

He stood, head bent, both hands pressed against one side of his shower stall. Hot water gushed over his shoulders and thrummed against the back of his throbbing skull. Steam rose in plumes; the shower sluiced dirt from his body. The water swirling down the drain changed from brick red to beige to clear. The sound of water was thunderous yet couldn't drown out the voice of the photographer from that damn documentary, what he'd said: Like a sack of cement. That was the sound. When those jumpers hit, it was just like a sack of cement.

Get out. His fingertips were prunes. He was clean. He was also past exhaustion. How he was still upright was a bit of a miracle. He should go to bed. But he couldn't make himself leave, hadn't the energy to turn off the water, never mind pull aside the curtain. So, he leaned his forehead against slick tile and let the wall hold him up. The bathroom was filled with fine mist and for a brief moment, it was almost as if he'd stepped aside from time and this world and was, instead, some futuristic traveler in a capsule just popping by for a visit. Out there was real life, one which demanded that he dry off, get some sleep because, in the immortal words of Scarlett O'Hara, tomorrow was another?—

The curtain suddenly billowed. The movement was slight, but he felt it and then just as his brain was catching up with that, a sudden chill sliced through steam as the curtain was pulled aside—and then all he could think of Vivian Leigh screaming her head off as Tony Perkins, in drag, plunged that knife?—

“Roni?” He must've left the door unlocked. “Roni,” he said, “you shouldn't...” Embarrassed, he tried backing up and covering himself with crossed hands at the same time. “Roni, what are you?—”

“Shh.” Her feet were bare. Her body was swathed in a light blue terry cloth robe knotted at the waist. Tugging at the knot, she let the robe slide from her shoulders before slipping into the shower and under the gush of hot water.

“Roni.” His windpipe narrowed to a straw. His gaze roamed her body. Her skin was tanned along her neck and arms but milky and smooth where her uniform didn’t cover. Her legs were long and muscular, her back and line of her spine toned and supple. “Roni, what are you...?”

“I think it’s obvious, don’t you?” She stood only inches away. Water cascaded over her shoulders and streamed over her breasts, which were small but solid, their nipples pink and stiff. “I thought you might need someone to wash your back. I know I do.”

“Roni.” He was so hard, it hurt. His gaze trailed from a splash of crimson staining her collarbone, to the underside of her jaw, and the domes of her breasts. She might be blushing—or perhaps it was only the heat. “Roni.” His voice was husky with desire, but they shouldn’t, he couldn’t allow himself to... “Roni, I don’t think we should?—”

“Please be quiet, John.” She picked up a bar of soap from its dish. “And if you tell me this reminds you of Sylvester Stallone and Sharon Stone, I might never speak to you again.”

They’d watched that particular film during one very slow night on-call; he didn’t think he’d taken a deep breath for that entire, steamy sequence. “Well,” he said, though his heart was hammering, “it sort of does. Except they had a much nicer shower.” He didn’t mention that Stallone was way more ripped than he’d ever be. But Sharon Stone...she didn’t hold a candle to Roni. Not even close.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Roni wrapped her soapy, slippery fingers around him and squeezed. “What part of be quiet don’t you understand?”

He opened his mouth to say...well, something; he wasn’t quite sure what...but then she tightened her grip and pressed her breasts against his chest and stood on tiptoe. She covered his mouth with hers as his fingers found her, his thumb gently teasing her moist and swollen nether lips as she gasped into his mouth—and then anything

else he might have said dissolved into a moan.

GOING TO THE SUN

MAY 1999 AND NOVEMBER 2023

In 1999, when he was twelve, John and his family went on a cross-country camping trip. This was in May, about a month after Columbine. One place his family visited was Glacier National Park, an enormous, million-acre wilderness along the northern border of Montana.

They were early enough in the season that snowpack lingered at the higher elevations, though the Going to the Sun Road was open. His parents were hot to drive this because, as their dad explained, the road went over the Continental Divide, which separated the Atlantic and Pacific watersheds. They would even, his dad said, be able to see Glacier's Triple Divide Peak. From the top of that mountain, water goes to the Atlantic, the Pacific, and up to Hudson Bay. His father had beamed. Kids, you'd have to go to frigging Siberia to see another place like this.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

As John recalled, he and his older brother, who was almost fifteen, said something like Okay, cool but, being essentially teenagers, thought, Sure, Dad, whatever.

The Going to the Sun Road has two lanes. The road is very steep and also very narrow, snaking and coiling along the flanks of enormous mountains. This becomes even more of a problem when that car is towing a camper, even a small pop-up. On the side opposite these flanks, there is frequently nothing but air and pretty views of high mountains and deep, forested valleys.

There are also no guardrails. All that stands between a car and thin air is a line of large, but very low rectangular stone blocks.

A ranger they met at St. Mary Visitors Center explained why the road could be rough and the reason for those stone blocks. Regular guardrails wouldn't work.

"Hit one at speed, and the metal just crumples." The ranger had a laconic, back-country, almost Southern drawl, the kind that cloaked sarcasm with a cloying, saccharine turn of phrase. Any second, John expected the guy to say, Well, bless your heart. Which, John knew, often meant, Really, just go to hell already.

"Or you flip. Same difference." In fact, the ranger confided that you could always tell when there was a newbie on the road. "Cuz of the smell of burning rubber, on account of them stomping the brakes instead of shifting to a lower gear to control their speed." The ranger shook his head. "Worse, if they're towing a camper. On account of sometimes the camper outruns the car and then you jackknife. Which is hard cuz the road's too narrow to turn around."

This all sounded to John like an excellent reason to avoid this road.

“And slides,” the ranger went on. “You gotta watch out for those. Real common during spring thaw on account of the ice. Snow gets in those cracks and crevices and then it kinda compacts and turns into ice and ice, you know, that expands and rock splinters. Only then it melts in the thaw and then...” The ranger shrugged. “Nothing holding that rock to the mountain, you catch my drift.”

On the other hand, this same guy claimed the Park Service did regular patrols and closed the road if the event of a slide. “So, you folks don’t have anything to worry none about that.” Yawning, the ranger dug at the scruff under his chin. “Don’t let your camper run away from you, is all,” he said, inspecting his nails then flicking something away with a thumb. “And stay away from them grizzlies.”

They had the road to themselves. Their tires hummed on asphalt. Though this was mid-May, the air was chilly enough for his father to have cranked up the car’s heater. Something country burbled, rhythmic and mournful, from the radio. The sun was bright enough for the snow dazzle to cut tears. Meltwater coursed down the mountainside to their left and streamed from platters of stone topped by evergreens. The view on his right—deep forested valleys edged by craggy, snow-covered mountains—was both beautiful and terrifying. His mother oohed and aahed and took pictures. John’s brother, who sat behind their father, had his eyes closed and a pair of headphones for a portable CD player snugged over his ears. Over the hum of the car’s tires on asphalt, John still caught the faint, tinny clash of something raw and angry. Nine Inch Nails, probably. The kind of music that made John’s ears feel as if they were bleeding. Every time his brother spun up something like this on his player at home, their dad hollered up the stairs for him to turn that crap down before it drove him crazy, fer chrissakes.

John sat behind his mother. He had been reading *Catcher in the Rye* for school but had lost interest in Holden Caulfield’s problems. Because, seriously, he had plenty of his

own at the moment.

Like the way his dad was driving. John was going nuts watching his dad's head swivel right and front, right and front, right and front as he steered and peered, steered and peered. The worst was when he steered, peered then took his right hand from the wheel and exclaimed, Look at that! Or Wow, isn't that something? The car always jerked a little to the right—to the valley side—when he did.

“Dad,” he said, “we could pull over at a turnout, you know?”

“Too short with the camper.” His black eyes glared at John from the rear view. “I know what I'm doing.”

Maybe. But maybe not. Even his mom stopped doohing for a second and said, “There's no one coming. If you want, we can stop and switch places so you can look and then it won't be as dangerous?—”

“The only danger is you arguing and your son yakking. I got this!” his dad snapped.

“It's okay, Mom,” John lied. The last thing he wanted was for his dad to lose his temper ten trillion feet above sea level.

His mom shut up. John shut up. His dad went back to his swiveling. John's brother only switched out Nine Inch Nails for Mayhem.

Man, they were going to die. John chewed the inside of a cheek. His dad, a film-and-TV nut who had just about every DVD and VHS known to man, had decided John was finally old enough to see *Thelma and Louise* about a month or so before their trip. John liked the movie, although it was hard to like something where women like his Aunt Jess and his mom got beat up by their husbands or bad boyfriends or whatever. Like, the way his dad sometimes yelled so hard, his eyes went all buggy and the cords

stood out on his neck...did that count? What if Mom got fed up and ran away? So far as he knew, his dad never smacked her. Those, he reserved for him and his brother. (Open palm, mostly. Stung like all get-out. Worse was having to try and explain at school or to his baseball coach how he had run into a wall in the middle of the night. Sometimes his mom even grabbed a slipper and came after him or his brother, but they just laughed and danced away. Even those times she caught them, she hit like a girl. No big deal.)

But, boy, his dad could really let go with both barrels. John's Uncle Dare said it was on account of Vietnam, but that was, like, ancient history. And, anyway, Uncle Dare had been in Vietnam, too, and he didn't yell. Dare also didn't live near other people, though, and only folks from the cities...Houston or Austin...ventured out to the lakewhere Dare lived in a cabin he built. So, there was that.

Anyway, what really stuck with John: when ol' Louise stomps on the gas and that '66 Thunderbird hurtles off that cliff. He remembered being relieved the film stopped then; he could almost believe that Thelma and Louise kept on flying, like angels. (Of course, he knew that couldn't be true. He might be a kid, but he wasn't stupid. Like, that hubcap coming off and beginning to fall? That kind of destroyed the illusion right then and there. He had cried, too, but later and under the covers so no one could see.)

On this road, with these bends...he couldn't stop thinking of that last scene. He was convinced that was going to be them, but with no freeze-frame to catch them in mid?—...

“Whoa!” Their dad stomped on the brakes so hard and fast John's head jolted forward and then back with enough force that it was some kind of miracle his skull hadn't popped right off his spine. There was a high scream as their tires burned rubber. If they hadn't been wearing seat belts, John would've smashed into the back of the front seat. The car rocked on its chassis; the engine sputter and died. Their luggage

pounded against John's back as suitcases slid suddenly forward in the trunk and piled on top of one another, and then there was a flash of silver out of the corner of John's right eye as their camper, still rolling, tried racing past their car and then his father was cursing and wrenching the wheel as their car, tires still screeching, twisted and torqued almost ninety degrees—and stopped.

For a second, no one said anything. The only sound was the tinny leakage from his brother's headphones.

Then John said, "Dad?" at the same moment their mother put a hand to her mouth and said, "Oh my God."

Rocks, big and small, were strewn over the road. The asphalt had buckled in the center to form a huge crater in which a boulder as big as their camper was buried halfway. To John's twelve-year-old eyes, the mountainside looked as if a giant had hacked off a thick slice with an enormous cleaver.

He remembered the crisp snap of his father turning off the radio. He remembered his brother stopping his cassette. The car was quiet. His mother's face was the color of bone. Even his dad had paled.

"Up there." His brother aimed a forefinger to a point high up the mountain, which was on his side of the car. There was a gigantic raw, black gash in the rock face where ice and expansion and then water had forced enormous stony chunks away from the mountain. "You can see where the rocks came off. Pretty recent, too. Rocks on the road are still wet."

"Oh." His mother put a hand to her mouth. "If we'd been going faster..."

"But we weren't, and we're fine." Popping his car door, his father said, "Let's get busy."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

Fast-forward twenty years to the mountains of Tajikistan:

John thought the old adage about things changing yet staying the same was true. The only differences were the road, the country, and the fact that he was freezing his ass off because, you know, winter.

After a night spent in the van—a miserable experience in the cold—they'd started out bright and early with an eye toward dropping straight south and making it to Khorog, a biggish city for these parts. Depending upon when they hit Khorog, they'd either jog southwest to the crossing at Ishkashim or call it a day and spend the night in town before heading to the border. John was rooting for spending the night which, at their current pace, seemed likelier than not.

They came on their fifth rockslide of the day two hours past the highest point on the Tavildara Pass, which had been marked by a white shelter decorated with Russian graffiti. This time, neither he nor Davila even groaned. The slides were almost old news because they seemed endless on this downhill stretch. Several slides, piled high with snow at the foot of the jagged gray mountains on their left, had clearly been there a while.

The fresh slides were the problem. Any and all had to be cleared by hand, the rocks picked up one by one and tossed over the side, which, in itself, was dicey. The only way of knowing where the unpaved road was were from yellow metal markers set at erratic intervals or the deep gouges in snow that their driver, Parviz, said were from yaks or donkeys. So long as they stayed inside the outermost set of tracks, they could be relatively certain of not going tumbling off the edge.

“Where do the yaks come from?” Sucking down another lungful of air, John squatted and slipped his gloved hands under another basketball-sized rock. “Haven’t seen any...” He had to try twice before hefting the stone with a grunt. His knees shrieked with the effort as he slowly duckwalked to the edge. “Any places...people actually...live.” Or people, for that matter, though they’d seen long-abandoned homesteads: deep snow piled high on flat roofs, no curtains, no sign of habitation, no smoke trickling from a central stovepipe.

“Below,” Parviz said. Seeming content to let his passengers do the literal heaving lifting, the driver made a sling from the front of his tunic into which he carefully selected stones, most no bigger than large hen’s eggs. “Most live valley,” he said, scuttling to the edge and bouncing stones from the sling.

“Makes sense, since we’re above the tree line.” Cradling a rock the size of a medicine ball, Davila hurled the boulder over the edge with an underhanded granny toss. Dusting his palms, he headed back to the debris field in long, powerful strides. “Only a few more, and we can go around.”

“Unh,” John wheezed, his breath clouding in the chill air. His own rock was half the size of Davila’s. His muscles shivered from the effort. Sweat oozed between his shoulder blades; his pits were sodden. Shuffling to the road’s edge, he settled for simply dropping his rock which bounced twice and then came to rest against a pileup of other boulders with a soft clack.

“Hey.” Davila was balancing a boulder the size of a watermelon on one shoulder. “You good?”

“Just breathing.” He turned back to the valley, which was so choked with clouds that the bowl seemed filled with cotton candy. He couldn’t see the valley floor at all or the mountains opposite. A brief flicker of memory edged with terror: him as a stringy twelve-year-old terrified that, by venturing close to the edge, he’d somehow slip and

hurtle,screaming, all the way down with no freeze-frame to save him.

He was about to turn away—when he stopped dead.

“Hey.” The word came in a thin wheeze. Clearing his throat, he tried again. “Hey, Davila?”

“Yeah?”

“Come here.” He didn’t want to take his eyes from the spot.Howhad they not noticed this to begin with? Why hadParviznot warned them?

“Problem?”

Oh, you could say that.“Just come here.” When Davila’s footfalls drew near, he pointed with a shaky finger to a spot about ten feet from the edge. “Look at that. Tell me what you think it means.”

A yellow sign with red Cyrillic lettering lay partially buried by snow. Enough was visible to see that someone had used the sign for quite a lot of target practice. Which would’ve been interesting at some other time and place because he hadn’t seen any signs of any kind along the way. But it wasn’t the bullet holes that had made all John’s spit dry up.

For a long moment, Davila was silent. A sough of wind gushed past; to their right, John could hear the crunch of stones under Parviz’s boots and then the driver said, “There is trouble?”

“You tell us.” Davila hooked a thumb downslope. “What the hell is that?”

Brow furrowed, Parviz planted his hands on hisknees, leaned forward, squinted then

spat and turned with a shrug. Shrugging seemed to be the go-to in-country. “Is sign?”

“We see that,” John said. “The thing is what the sign’s about. Like, it’s yellow, and yellow mean pretty much the same thing world-over.”

“Be careful,” Davila said.

Like...warning, Will Robinson.“And, in this case,” John continued, “I think we’re supposed to pay attention to those words done in big red letters.”

“And the exclamation points,” Davila put in.

“Two of them,” John added. Although the words were in Cyrillic, he’d been able to dredge up a few characters from memory. Opas...something. Didn’t matter. A person would have to be a little brain-dead not to get the message from the accompanying diagram.

“So, Parviz,” Davila said, “help me understand this. You got this person here, this stick figure done in black, right? Getting knocked back from that black, exploding pyramid-shaped thing, which is exploding, right? Which is why you got all these jagged red lines?”

“Meaningka-boom?” John added.

“As in anti-personnelland minekaboom?” Davila said.

“Oh, yes.” Parviz grinned, his half-rotted pegs appearing in all their glory. “Say bombs in dirt.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

Yeah, like Davila said. "There are land mines buried on the hillsides?" John asked.

"Most no." Parviz made an equivocal gesture, tilting his flattened palm from side to side: maybe yes, maybe no. "From Russia. Big boom." The driver sketched a mushroom cloud in the air with his hands. "No go off path."

John and Davila tossed a look between them, and then Davila said to Parviz, "You do understand that throwing a very big rock onto a mine will make it explode, right?"

"No mines here." Parviz was shaking his head. "No worry."

"How do you know?"

"Because," Parviz said, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world, "all boom done." He held up two fingers. "This many since last boom."

"Years?" Davila asked.

"No, month." Gesturing for them to follow, the driver turned away. "Come, we drive."

They stared after Parviz's retreating back for a few seconds before Davila said, "Did that make you feel better?"

"No." John studied the sign again. "Tell me what else bothers you about that thing."

"You see something?"

“I don’t want to prejudice you. Just look. Tell me what you see.”

“Sign warning about Russian landmines,” Davila recited. “Snow, rocks all around the sign...none that seem to have done anything. I mean, there’s no crater.” Davila shook his head. “What are you seeing that’s got you worried?”

“Two things.” He ticked off the first with a thumb. “How’d the sign get there to begin with?”

“As a warning. The Russian Army,” Davila began then broke off when John shook his head. “What?”

“You’re not getting it. I understand what the sign says. But how did it get onto the slope? Someone had to put it there, right? Bet if we searched along the road up there, we’ll find the metal pole sawed in two.”

“Okay, so someone tossed it there...” Davila winced as the van’s engine coughed then gave what sounded like a very wet splutter before grumbling to life. “So, what? Maybe they decided there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Maybe not about mines, but...” Parviz gave a short blat of the van’s horn, which John ignored. “Take another look. What’s therethat shouldn’t be?”

He saw from the way Davila’s face smoothed that he had finally seen what John had spotted.

“Okay,” Davila said, “this could be a problem.”

They walked in silence back to the waiting van. Even with the windows shut, John heard the thump of heavy bass. Parviz had exactly three tapes. Tajik rock band, the driver said. After two days of the same three cassettes over and over, though, John

was surprised his eardrums hadn't started to bleed.

"He's not careful," Davila remarked, "he's going to start another slide with that stuff."

John let out a short bark of a laugh. "Dibs on the back this time."

"Be my guest," Davila said, one foot on the running board. "You know the music's only just a little bit softer back there, right?"

"I got AirPods," John said. As he trotted around to the driver's side, he flicked a look at the mountain slope. Something gnawed at the base of his skull, a sense that he was missing yet another thing that ought to make him worry. He wasn't sure what he was expecting to see. In retrospect, he understood that his subconscious had snagged on something well before his conscious mind caught up and just wouldn't quit nagging.

Whatever the case, though, he did look—and then thought, *Hunh*.

And realized they might have another problem.

"So, Parviz!" Davila had to practically shout to be heard over the music blaring from the driver's speakers. "Mind if I ask a question?" Leaning forward, he dialed the volume to something that didn't send vibrations shuddering throughout the vehicle. "Your English," he said, at normal volume. "It's pretty good. Where did you learn?"

"American television." Parviz beamed. "I do for tourists. Most English come other way, from Osh. Way far." He flapped a hand. "In Kyrgystan. I drive them from there."

"You get a lot of tourists?"

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“Used to be many. Big tourists.” Parviz threw his arms out wide. “Huge.”

Why was John suddenly thinking of Julia Roberts? “And now?”

“Not so big because of war.” Parviz made a face. “Then not so big because scared Taliban and nobody go Wakhan. Now, never no getting big because bandits here.”

About whom, John recalled, Ustinov had warned them. “They hang around in winter?”

“No, but—” Parviz both shrugged and blew a raspberry simultaneously. “Never too careful.”

Which might also explain why Ustinov had given them those secured money pouches that could only be opened with the correct thumbprint. Of course, all a bandit had to do was cut off either his or Davila’s right thumb. Or kill them first. Saved on the screaming, he guessed.

“What do they do when they’re not robbing people?” Davila asked.

“Go Russia for work.” Parviz nodded then patted his chest. “Me go, too, Russia. Good for talking, yes? Know Tajiki, Persian, Russian, Uzbek, English.” Parviz counted off on his fingers. “Mandarin getting better.”

“Chinese?” John was surprised. “Why?”

“Business,” the driver said, as if that should be self-evident, then gestured at the

mountains. “Come see rocks.”

Come to see rocks? Then he remembered what Ustinov had said about the Wakhan. About the Takhtapat. Which made perfect sense. The Chinese would be very interested in any lithium deposits they could get their hands on. The U.S. must know about this, too, and be just as hungry for that mineral wealth. But we left, and now it's open season in Afghanistan.

He was about to ask Parviz how many Chinese he'd met recently when the driver said, “Speak pretty good Pashtun, too.”

That snagged his attention more than the revelation about Chinese businessmen. “Really? You spend time in Afghanistan?”

Parviz opened his mouth as if to say something, closed it then offered a shrug. “Little bit. Back, forth during war.”

Uh-huh. “So why aren't you in Russia if work is so scarce?”

“Hate Russians.” Parviz spat. “Russians no like us. Give bad jobs. Build tunnels, roads. But no jobs in Russia, bad or good because wrong season. Too cold. So come back here.”

“Have bandits stopped you?” John asked.

“Me, no.” He said something in a language John didn't understand and then, in English, “Bicycle.”

“Bicyclists?” Davila asked.

Parviz's head bobbed up and down. “Hit with car.”

John blinked. “They run them down?”

“Yes, then...” Parviz raised his arm up and down in a motion that John thought would’ve looked at home during the shower scene in Psycho.

“They stab them,” Davila said.

“Is that why you wanted a new gun?” John asked.

Parviz’s head moved in a vigorous nod. “Maybe okay we wear new guns?”

“Why?” Davila said. “We haven’t passed or seen anyone else, and the clouds are thick. No one’s going to wait in this, hoping that someone will happen by.”

Parviz opened his mouth, closed it then said, “Next slide, we need wear.”

“And I ask again, why?”

“If next slide close to Khorog, means we close to people.”

“You mean, a setup,” John said. “Block the road then rob us. But even if that’s true, shouldn’t the priority be clearing the rocks and getting out of Dodge? You really want to tie up a set of hands to stand guard?”

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“Next slide, one guard,” Parviz’s tone was adamant. “Two work then switch. And use gun no rifle.”

“Still leaves us with one weapon holstered, though,” John said. “So, what’s the point?”

“I’ll have the AK,” Davila said.

“Which you’ll strap on half the time to clear rocks.”

“But we will be nearer people, and if Parviz is right about bandits...” Davila punctuated with a shrug that put Ustinov to shame. “I think it’s a good plan.”

“Yes, good. Good plan.” Parviz’s head bobbed along with his music. “We use weapons next place.”

“If we even have to,” John said. “May not be another slide.”

“Sure, sure,” Parviz said and turned his music up high enough that John felt the bass shuddering into his butt. “If have to.”

A half hour later.

Parviz’s sudden desire for them all to suddenly carry felt...off.

Eyes closed, AirPods screwed in, John lay on his back and thought about that. Claiming fatigue, he’d moved to the back of the van, hoping for a nap. But his mind

wouldn't stop.

Because why now? Why have us locked and loaded now as opposed to this morning or yesterday? He was certain Ustinov would've suggested they keep their weapons close. Yet he hadn't.

The image of that mountainside swam onto the black screen of his eyelids. A problem there...maybe. As he remembered, the jumble of rocks they'd just cleared had only a thin layer of snow. Which meant the slide had been recent except...was it his imagination or was there no place on the mountainside that had looked as if a section had sheared away, leaving behind an enormous gash similar to what he'd seen when he was twelve and on the Going to the Sun Road? He didn't think there had been.

You should check. If you're right...

Beyond the closed curtain, the music entered into a stretch that he knew was loud, raucous, and—most importantly—long. Rolling onto hands and knees, he eased over to the gun cases at the very back of the van.

The cases containing the Glocks were squared alongside their respective rifles: one next to Parviz's Kalashnikov and another alongside his Mk22.

Closing his eyes, he rewound the moments right before they left the airport in Dushanbe: how he had fiddled with a loose tongue of duct tape wrapped around his water bottle; how he'd field-stripped his Glock then replaced it and reached for the case that held Parviz's weapon, actually had it in his hand and was snapping the catch?—

And that's when Parviz came around and said we had to get going.

That was also the moment he'd put Parviz's Glock to the right of the Mk22 and

settled the case with the Glock he'd field-stripped next to the driver's AK.

Opening his eyes, he turned over Parviz's gun case.

He stared a good five seconds, long enough for the music to shift to a drum riff which vibrated through the van and shivered into his thighs.

There was nothing on the case. Not even a speck of dust.

Maybe it fell off. Reaching for the case he'd laid next to his Mk22, he turned it over—and thought, *Okaaaay*.

Because there was something on this case: a tiny bit of duct tape which he'd torn from his water bottle. He'd thumbed on the scrap so he would know which Glock he'd field-stripped and then replaced that case next to Parviz's rifle.

Because he had noticed something important. Something that might have been a mistake. But facts were facts.

Someone had switched the cases. The Glock he'd checked out was, once again, snuggled next to his rifle case.

Who? Ustinov? Parviz? Might have been either: Ustinov when playing with the slider or Parviz while fussing with the items in the back of the van or even while he and Davila took potty-breaks.

And...why? Why switch the cases?

He thought he had a pretty good idea about that, actually. He didn't want to be right, but he thought he was—and that was bad.

Fishing out the Glock he'd not examined, the one Parviz was meant to have, he jacked out the magazine, quickly opened the slide to check for a round then slid the pencil Ustinov had given him into the barrel. Turning to his left, he squeezed the trigger.

The pencil jumped from the barrel.

So far, so good. Clicking the slide back into place, he reseated the magazine and nested the gun back into its carrying case. Then he turned to the case by his rifle, the one marked with duct tape. Taking out the weapon from its foam insert, he repeated the process: jacking out the loaded magazine, opening the slide, and slipping Ustinov's pencil into the barrel.

Then, finger on the trigger, he aimed for the side of the van and squeezed.

And, a half-second later, thought, *Okaaaay*.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

AUGUST 2021

After their rendition of a Stallone-Stone evening—or early morning, depending on how you interpreted time—they made it a point not to hang together quite so much. All that did, though, was fuel the gossip. Not only was it generally known that they were the two officers involved in the whole Moose thing—something best forgotten, in John's opinion—but because prior to that, they had hung out a lot, both in Kabul and back at Fort Moore.

Still, more aware of her presence than ever before, he would steal a sidelong glance. More often than not, their eyes met—the pull between them was that strong, like an irresistible telepathic command—and he would feel this electric shock in his thighs, his lungs squeezed down, all the spit dried up on his tongue. His heart thumped as

hiscock swelled. Sometimes, he lost track of his surroundings and what he was doing in this place. He didn't exactly forget, but, for a second or two, Afghanistan and all this chaos and despair disappeared. For that brief moment, the world contracted until there was only her, this woman in the bubble of his desire.

Of course, tongues wagged; there were knowing smirks and raised eyebrows. One tech said something along the lines of John maybe closing his mouth, otherwise he was liable to catch a couple of flies.

Whatever. Even up to his elbows in work and grime and misery...John was happy. It was like Casablanca, probably one of the most romantic movies he'd ever watched. He first saw the film in college. The auditorium erupted in cheers when, at the end, Claude Rains told his officers to round up the usual suspects. John's date for the evening...a girl whose name he couldn't remember...had welled up. He couldn't take his eyes off Ingrid Bergman. The camera had made love to her face, lingering on her features, the lens gauzed so her skin was luminous, flawless, perfect. Her mouth was so lush John's breath had stoppered in his chest when Bogart tipped up Bergman's chin, so his thumb almost grazed her lips. Bergman was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Until now.

There was only a single thorn.

There were times...all right, virtually every day after the nightmare of The Falling Men...when he would look up from his work—and she wouldn't be around, anywhere. On break was what the charge nurse said, though there was something in the way the nurse said that which tickled John's antennae. Something going on...but what?

Because he did know the where. Roni didn't have to say anything. But when, cheeks

flushed and neck mottled, she slipped back into the med tent, he knew exactly where she'd gone. He wasn't clear on the why, mostly because he wasn't quite ready to look at that one.

Although his thoughts were minnows darting to a shiny lure: invariably swimming around and around the charge nurse's tone. His expression, as if bursting to spill the beans because gossip...but restraining himself at the last second from saying anything to John.

Something was up. The why were elusive, but did that matter? No, not really. Well, all right, it sort of did matter, but mostly...no. It shouldn't matter with whom she spent time when she wasn't with him or why she slipped out for lengthy periods to which the charge nurse turned a blind eye.

So, don't go looking for trouble. Just don't do it. He told himself that virtually every day when Roni disappeared. He was still reciting this same mantra one afternoon about a week after The Falling Men, when, ten minutes after she'd gone, he finished up with a patient, made sure there was coverage, and left the med tent.

He didn't even have to think. Retracing his steps toward the tarmac, he slid into a wedge of shade where he was reasonably certain he couldn't be seen from the hangar. The door there was open, but John couldn't see into the shadows.

You're being paranoid. He should leave. This was crazy. Just plain old, green-eyed, hobgoblin jealousy and what about? That she had friends? That she wanted to hang with Driver and his buddies? Fine, but why Driver? Why almost every day? All right, not every day, but just about every other.

To be fair, he looked for Driver himself. At odd times, when he wasn't with Roni, and even if she hadn't disappeared on a particular day, he would saunter to the area around the hangar. Why? Just because. Hoping Driver had departed on whatever

mission the CIA wanted him and his friends to run? Sometimes when John swung by the Humvees were there. Sometimes, they weren't. He never wandered over, never poked his head in to say hello. After all, it wasn't as if he was exactly hard to find; let Driver come find him if he wanted a blood-brother.

And that's what he and Roni are. Just friends. She knows his dad, for heaven's sake.

Sweating, he swigged orange energy drink and kept checking the time. The minutes oozed by; his own break time would be over in five and standing here, stewing in his own juices, was insane?—

And then she was there as if by magic: slipping from the hangar's shadows and into the sun. A medic's pack hung from her left shoulder. A half-second later, they had all appeared, the usual suspects clustered in a small semi-circle: Flowers, Meeks, Harris, that woman and Musa—and then, finally, Driver.

No. His vision irised down, blocking out everything and everyone else. He watched as Driver slid past the others to stand almost toe-to-toe with Roni. No, no. His heart gave a painful knock against his ribs. Hell. Why, Roni, why?

But wait, they weren't touching. Good...except why did they have to stand so close to each other just to talk? He watched her lips move, saw how she glanced down at her watch, and then she was turning because time to get back to work.

Leave, Roni. His jaws clenched so hard he was surprised his teeth hadn't cracked. Just leave, just?—

And then she laid a hand on Driver's shoulder.

No. His mouth went slack. All the spit dried on his tongue. No, no, Roni, don't.

But then she did. She stood on tiptoe because she was a small woman, after all—and kissed Driver's cheek.

There was a sudden small crinkle-crack, the feeling of something wet on his fingers, and he looked down to see energy drink drizzling from the crushed plastic bottle his fist had just throttled.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

Get out of here. His eyes burned. He wanted to weep. Get out of here before she feels you looking and sees what a loser you are.

Still clutching the bottle, he slid back the way he'd come, staying in that long tongue of shadow. When he was sure she couldn't possibly see him, he spun on his heel and double-timed it back to the med tent.

He masked; he gowned up. A nurse directed him to a leg in need of stitching, and so he worked, he just worked, hoping the work would help, praying that the work would squelch the thoughts spinning round and round: Stop. Don't jump to conclusions. Friends do that all the time. Roni...didn't she do this all the time? Crap. He couldn't think of any timewhen?—

A tap on a shoulder. "Hey," she said, holding up a pack, "I filched some extra MREs. So, in a couple hours, you? Me?" When he turned to look down, her gaze was direct and smoldered with desire. "Lunch?"

Somehow, he managed to drag up his voice from wherever it had fallen. "I could eat," he said.

Although, once in his quarters, they went straight to dessert—and with a vengeance.

She's mine, Driver. He tasted the salt in the hollow of Roni's throat and drew circles with his tongue around her nipples and went lower and lower and kissed and sucked as her hands fisted in his hair. She's mine, he thought, his tongue flicking her clit from side to side as she gasped and arched, and her clit swelled, and she pressed herself against his mouth and bucked and came with a loud, long animal cry of release.

She's mine, and you can't have her, he thought as she lowered herself onto his aching cock and began to move, both of them gasping and moaning and he reached for her breasts, felt her erect nipples against his palms as they moved faster and faster...

She's mine. He shuddered as her tongue tasted his ear, his throat. Her hand cupped his balls, her fingertips brushing the sensitive patch at the shaft of his cock. Moaning, he drove himself into her, thrusting as hard and far as he could and then she was shuddering, gasping, telling him of her pleasure: John, John, John, come with me, John, come with me!

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! His back arched, as his pleasure, liquid and fiery, exploded, sheeting his vision white. Ecstasy raced down from his groin to curl his toes, and everything fell away because all that mattered was this woman, this woman, this woman... He cried out and so did she. They were both coming and loudly, and he didn't give a damn who heard.

Because she's mine. The thought was a delirium, a spiraling fever-dream of sweat and salt and her mouth, her tongue, her body. She's mine, Driver, and you can't have her. She's mine, she's mine, she's mine.

Only a little later that day when, sated, he was back on duty at the med tent, did he remember something.

In the end... Bogart didn't get the girl now, did he?

A FORK IN THE ROAD

NOVEMBER 2023: KHOROG

The going had been slow, with Parviz taking many detours to avoid a ruined patch of road or yet another slide, but they finally reached Khorog at two in the afternoon the

day after the test with the pencil. As the van rumbled down Lenin Street, John thought that except for the snow-capped Pamir Mountains and a few free-roaming cows hunkered down in the park, they might be in small-town Wisconsin.

“We eat here,” Parviz said, hanging a quick left and cutting off another driver who leaned on his horn. “Best food.”

“You’re kidding,” Davila said. Facing the street, a red sign with white letters hung from a third-floor railing: MAC Doland’s. In case a customer couldn’t read the English, those unmistakable golden arches were a good a sign as any. “You want a Big Mac? Now? We’ve got only about two hours of daylight left, and we’re behind schedule. We need to keep going.”

“I get you to border tomorrow morning.” Parviz traced a big X with a forefinger over his left breast. “Promise heart.”

“How many hours to the border rendezvous?”

“From here, maybe five, maybe six. We no get to border before dark anyway and, if we go, we miss MACDoland’s!” Parviz gave the sign a rapturous look. “Only cow from here to Dushanbe or Osh. Everywhere goat.” Popping his driver’s side door, he hopped out, stretched, and threw his arms out wide. “Wi-Fi, too! Civilized! We be fast, yes?” Without waiting for an answer, Parviz headed for the stairs.

“I think we’re stopping,” John said.

The restaurant’s entrance was at the end of three flights of stairs. The place smelled of fried potatoes, fried onions, and greasy fried meat, but that was where the similarities with the American version ended. The walls were decorated with red, yellow, white, and green stripes which seemed to be intended to match the eye-watering neon colors of the cushioned benches (red, lime-green, burnt orange) and

Formica tabletops (red, lime-green, yellow, orange, and—weirdly—light lavender). Most customers were white-haired grandparents drinking cups of coffee and scrolling on their cellswile young children, presumably their grandkids, used ketchup to brush up on their finger-painting skills. Judging from what passed for art on the walls—crude, bloody sketches of things which might be either spaceships trailing exhaust or tadpoles with exceptionally long tails—John thought the kids couldn't do any worse.

MAC Doland's served only the basics. No Happy Meals, for example. No combos. No chicken, either. They all ordered Big Macs, fries, and large coffees: milk and sugar for Parviz, black for John and Davila. "Come, come," Parviz said, turning from the counter and heading for the back. "They bring."

"Table service?" Davila asked.

"Cool." John was about to observe that this was a hopeful sign but didn't when Parviz passed several open tables before sliding into a back corner table. Which wasinteresting.

Davila must've been thinking the same thing because he said, "Keeping an eye on the place?"

"Maybe? Wearethe only Westerners in the joint," he said, as Parviz pulled out a cell and started scrolling. The majority of the patrons had given them only a cursory once-over before going back to their conversations or phones. "Not like anyone's eye-checking us, though."

Still, an interesting spot.His gaze drifted to a poster on the wall immediately over Parviz's leftshoulder. "Tell me what that poster reminds you of."

Davila frowned. "Not sure, but...why do I keep thinking of a sewer?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

“It’s in the movie.” The Tajik equivalent of Ronald could have climbed out of a Stephen King-fueled nightmare. “I liked the original. It, but the clown in the remake is totally awesome. But that’s kind of not my point, see what I’m saying? Parviz has a phone. So how come he’s only been using those old maps of his?” The maps were vintage, creased and stained with use, with marginal notes inked in what was probably Tajik next to place names spelled in Cyrillic.

“I don’t understand.”

“Davila, he’s got a cell. Why isn’t he using sat-nav to figure alternative routes?”

“Maybe nothing’s changed. You heard Ustinov. Only the roads around the capital are any good.”

“Okay, I’ll grant you that. But are you really saying that in more than thirty years, nothing has changed? No new roads or villages?”

“Tajikistan’s economy isn’t exactly booming.”

“Booming enough for a McDonald’s lookalike. Booming enough for there to be new buildings on the road to Khorog. Davila, I don’t care how well the guy says he knows the mountains. He can’t possibly have every alternative in his head. I’ll bet there are new routes that don’t show up on his maps.”

Davila studied him a moment then said, “Where is this coming from? Because what you’re really saying is that this might be a setup. What gives?”

He knew exactly why he was pressing this point. A small part of his conscience niggled: You should tell him.

Shut up, you. He straight-aimed that Jiminy Cricket piece of his brain out of the way. Mind your own business.

“Let’s just say that I wonder if Parviz is going slow on purpose or taking roads that are more likely to be impassable than others. That he’s put us behind schedule on purpose.”

“And that this is a setup? Like he says We’ll be next to the clown. These are the guys?”

“Possible. Maybe that poster is the Tajik equivalent of the Waterloo Clock.”

“The what?”

“From an old movie,” John said. “Brief Encounter. This woman and this guy bump into each other under this big old clock which hangs at Waterloo Station in London. She’s married; he’s not. They’re doomed.”

“This is what you’re trying to tell me?” Davila started for the table. “That we’re doomed?”

“Well...”

As they waited, Davila and Parviz texted. When John asked, Parviz said he was talking to his son: He watch home when I go drive. Many childrens. The driver held up six fingers. Many mouths.

Plausible. Of course, since neither he nor Davila could read Tajiki, this was

something he had to take on faith. On the other hand, that was one thing he'd noticed in Kabul: people might've been dirt-poor, but many had cells. Kabul's cell towers were visible from the airport.

As for Davila, he was probably messaging Hannah. Or maybe giving Patterson a status report: A-OK. Food sucks. John not cracked up yet but, boy, talk about paranoid.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stabbing his phone to life, he pulled up the book he was reading. A decent Child novel, and he remembered correctly that it was all about the Army guy teaming up with a female FBI agent after they're both kidnapped and taken into a mountain stronghold. While his cell still had bars in Dushanbe, he'd decided to download the two titles Ustinov had referenced. Why? Because Ustinov had mentioned them, and John didn't think the guy did throwaway lines.

He got only a couple sentences further on but couldn't make heads or tails of the paragraph. His mind kept jumping to the weapons. What had happened with the Glock. The mystery of why and how Roni's remains ended up in the Wakhan, of all places. Although...

Ustinov said there were lithium mines in the mountains.

Which meant there were people. Villagers, more than likely. Parviz said people were hard up for work.

But mines are dangerous. Living in Wisconsin, he'd been to the Upper Peninsula's Rust Belt. Lots of old mines up there and in Minnesota: iron and copper, mainly. What he also remembered was that many of these old mines had medical stations set up underground. Which made sense. If someone's hurt, time matters, all the way around. You don't want to lose time, because time is money. But you don't want to lose a worker either for the same?—

Oh. The light bulb of a new idea went off in his brain. Oh, my God.

“You okay?”

“What?” His thoughts derailed. He looked up from his phone to find both Davila and Parviz staring back. “Yeah. Fine. Why?”

“You don’t look so fine,” Davila said. “At the risk of sounding cliché, you look like you just saw a ghost.”

“He hungry. Food come soon.” Pocketing his phone, Parviz pushed to a stand. “I go pee.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:05 am

“Hope it comes out okay,” John said as the driver disappeared around a corner trailing a big guy wearing a brightly embroidered taqiyya.

“You hope it comes out okay?” Davila asked. “What are you, ten?”

He shrugged. “Trying to lighten the mood.”

“If you’re in the fifth grade.” Davila’s eyes narrowed. “Seriously, man, you look spooked. What is it?”

“I was...” He chewed over what he ought to say and how that might sound. “Do you wonder how Roni ended up in the Wakhan? I mean, why there, of all places?”

“To be honest? Not really. I just figured someone snatched her...” Davila looked uncomfortable. “Her remains. Maybe thought they could use them for barter. You know, how they do POW swaps and all that. Why?”

“Because of what Ustinov said.”

“About?” Then Davila’s forehead smoothed as his frown bled away. “The mines?”

“Yes, because mines are dangerous. So, if you’re operating a mine?”

“Food!” Parviz was there, loaded tray in hand, a grin on his face. “Bottom up!”

Neither of them bothered to correct him.

“You finish?” Parviz unwrapped a stick of mint gum that had been tucked into a napkin. “We need go soon.”

“Almost there.” Davila crammed a last bite into his mouth. “Might want to grab another, though,” he said around burger and bun. “Better than those MREs, and I might get another cup of battery acid...er...coffee, to go.”

Parviz’s jaws worked ferociously. “You no like?”

“Naw,” Davila said. “Although that coffee would’ve tasted better when it was first brewed.”

“Last April,” John said then added, “two years ago.”

“Bingo.” Davila shot him an imaginary bullet. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“I think taste fine.” Parviz looked offended. “Best we got.”

That touched his conscience. People might have cells here, but they were poor. For Parviz, he bet this was something special. “It was fine.” John piled empty food wrappers back onto their tray. “And maybe a burger to go isn’t a bad idea. I could use some more caffeine, too. Parviz, you want another cup? Maybe another burger?”

“Yes, that good.” Parviz cracked his gum. “You get. I go pee.”

The man had a bladder the size of a walnut. “Sure.” As Parviz headed for the men’s room. John picked up their tray of rubbish, turned toward the counter?—

And then, boom.

Déjà vu all over again.

The boy was tucked into a corner booth. When their gazes met, the boy's didn't waver. Which was...different in all sorts of disturbing ways that made him think of Kabul, the airport, Daniel Driver's insane plan.

And Roni. Dodging his gaze from the boy's, John motored for the counter. Roni, Roni, Roni.

"Whoa, wait up. You having some kind of Big Mac attack?" And then, when he didn't respond, Davila said, "What is it?"

John dragged his voice from wherever it had fallen. "Nothing," he said, keeping his gaze screwed firmly on the menu board.

"Tell me another."

He thought about it another second then said, "Kid, about twelve years old. To our left, table at the window next to the door."

Yawning, Davila made a show of stretching and twisting first right and then left. "Yeah, okay, it's a kid," he said, shaking himself like a dog. "What about him?"

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“I think...” But then the counter-guy rapped something halfway between a growl and a bark. “This, this and this,” John said, pointing then held up three fingers. “And three coffees, all to go.” Holding out bills, he finger-walked over the counter. “To go.”

Pocketing the change, he motioned with a tilt of his head for Davila to follow. As they slid over to make room for the next customer, Davila remarked, “Big guy the kid was with just got up...okay, he’s heading for the toilet. What’s the deal? Why’s the kid got you bothered all of a sudden?”

“I’m almost positive,” he began then stopped. What was he doing? This was déjà vu all over again: listening to Driver explain why they were all there. “Nothing.”

“That, my friend,” Davila said, “is a lie. We can’t do this if you’re not straight?—”

He broke off as the counter-guy brought their food on a tray. “No, we asked for a to-go bag?” Davila did the finger-walk again then hooked a thumb over a shoulder. “We’re leaving?”

In reply, the counter-guy pulled both a paper bag and four-cup carry tray from beneath the counter then held out a hand.

“Ah,” John said, relieved the conversation had shifted. “The universal language.”

“Nickel and dimed,” Davila said.

“Thank goodness for walking-around money.” Dipping into his pocket again, John pulled out a fistful of coins, which he held out to the counter-guy, who used a stubby

finger to start picking through change. The guy had two fairly large coins in hand when a voice, boyish and young, said something in Russian. He got two of the words: no and bad. Or was that wrong?

“Well, well, looky here,” Davila said. “We got company.”

Yes, they did. The boy he’d spotted across the restaurant had sidled up without either of them being aware of him until that moment. How long had the kid been standing there? He was, John judged, about eleven or twelve and dark-skinned, with a flop of black hair spilling over his forehead. His clothing was almost extravagant: billowing dark-green trousers and an oatmeal-colored tunic with an embroidered vest of bright cobalt and iridescent emerald, a bit like a peacock’s feathers

“Ears burning, kid?” Davila said. “My friend here was just going to tell me all about you.”

“Not here.” John smiled down at the kid. “Hello.”

The boy replied in Russian, but John couldn’t make heads or tails of what the kid was saying. “Slow.” John made a slow-down motion. “What? Chto?”

The boy tried again, and this time, John caught the word for money. “Yes, we do. Privet,” he said to the boy.

“What’d he say?” Davila asked.

“I think he’s telling us we’re being cheated.” To the boy: “Plokhoy?” Hooking a thumb at the counter-guy, he said, “Is he cheating me?”

“Plokhoy.” The boy nodded then opened his arms wide. “Slishkom. Plokhoy.”

“What’s that mean?” Davila asked.

“Bad and, I think, too much. But don’t quote me on that.” He watched as the boy snarled something at the counter-guy, who looked offended, but then slapped both coins on the counter and spat out something that sounded as if the man was chewing rocks. “What did he say?” John said to the boy and held up one of the coins. What washow muchin Russian? He settled formany.“Mnogo?”

Gesturing for John to hold out his palm, the boy picked through John’s coins then selected one which he put on the counter. The counter guy’s upper lip curled, but he covered the coin with a hand then jerked his head to the door.

“That’s our cue to leave,” Davila said.

“Yeah.” As Davila slotted coffees into the tray and squared their sack of food, John looked down at the boy. The Jiminy Cricket piece of his conscience nagged that he ought to help this kid somehow. But what could he do? Kidnap the boy? “John.” Patting his chest, he said his name again then hooked a thumb at Davila. “Taz.”

“Hey, kid.” Davila showed a rictus of a smile then said through gritted teeth, “Can we go now? We don’t need a mascot.”

John ignored him. Instead, he pointed at the boy. “Imya?”

The boy opened his mouth, but then another voice, much deeper and rougher, interrupted. The words weren’t Russian, but the tone was unmistakable:back off.

“Easy.” Turning, John held up both hands in ayou-win nothing-to-look-at-heregesture. “Easy, easy. We’re good,” he said, backing away from the same big man with the flashy, embroidered taqiyyahe’d noticed before. Where had he come from? The men’s room? “It’s okay. We were only talking.” Glancing over the guy’s left

shoulder, he spotted Parviz scurrying around the corner. “Hey, Parviz, can you tell this guy to calm down?”

“Yeah,” Davila added. “Kid came up to us. We haven’t touched him.”

“No you worry.” Elbowing his way between John and the big guy, Parviz spat something rapid-fire. In response, the big guy’s expression turned thunderous, and he shouted something back.

Uh-oh. All that guy had to do was hammer Parviz on top of the head with a fist. A glance around the restaurant also confirmed that everyone was watching this little side-show. A few patrons had their cellphones up, recording. So much for a low profile. “Parviz, tell him we’re leaving,” John said. “Nothing happened. The boy was only making sure we weren’t cheated.”

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Parviz said something else to the big guy, whose eyes narrowed as his glower deepened. After a breathless moment, the man gave a curt jerk of his head then backed away, fingers clamped on the boy's shoulder and hustled the kid out of the restaurant.

"Okay," Parviz said as the door clapped shut. "We wait minute, two minute, let them get far from here. Then there no more trouble."

"I wasn't looking to make it," John said. "What did the guy say?"

"Say he is boy's uncle."

"His uncle." Now that he'd gotten a good look at the child, he knew this wasn't the whole story and probably wasn't true. "Anything else? Why was he so pissed? Not as if we were harassing the boy."

"Yeah," Davila said, "he came up to us."

"He say boy steal from strangers." The driver mimed pulling something from his vest. "Picking pocket."

"Seriously? That kid's the Artful Dodger?" At Parviz's puzzled expression, John added, "Character from a book...never mind. That guy said the kid's a thief?"

"I sure didn't that vibe, Davila said.

"That what he say." Parviz started for the door. "Okay, come. Enough time pass.

Now, we go. No need more trouble now.”

“What?” Davila snagged the driver’s elbow. “What do you mean more trouble?”

“I mean,” Parviz said, “change of plan.”

PAINT IT BLACK

AUGUST 2021

They called the plan Operation Uplift. John couldn’t decide if this was meant to have religious overtones. Probably not. More than likely, the wit who’d dreamt up the name aimed for a cutesy play on Airlift because who wanted to conjure up images of Berlin? Especially since, in the end, the Commies kind of won that one. Of course, you could say they won the battle and lost the war, but... semantics.

More than likely, the guy who’d presented the operational name to his superiors had also never read H.G. Wells. If he had, he might have been moved to veer away from casting the Americans as Doctor Moreau.

Because, of course, that meant all those clamoring, desperate Afghans were animals.

If John thought operating with dwindling supplies at the beginning of the evacuation was tough, nothing compared to the run up to the finish line.

With four days to go before the Americans got the heck out of Dodge, the situation, bad to begin with, leapfrogged right over terrible and landed on dire. It wasn’t just that their workload had quadrupled. The problem was the utter and absolute lack of planning that had gone into the evacuation. Nobody really had thought this through. Everything was being done on the fly and on a shoestring. They all lurched from crisis to crisis: a shortage of this, a lack of manpower here, no thought even given to

where troops were supposed to bunk much less how they were expected to care for the thousands clamoring to get out of Afghanistan.

Kabul Airport was a wreck, like a fortress during a prolonged siege. John had seen pictures of people in Indonesia, the Philippines, Ethiopia...think of any overpopulated, impoverished area where the world dumped its garbage. The airport wasn't as bad, probably because only a few weeks had passed. While there were no mountains of waste, the airport had become, literally, a garbage dump. Trash was everywhere: paper, cardboard, empty water bottles, discarded clothing, abandoned vehicles left by the Afghan military, mattresses, tarps, shoes, sandals, hats. Abayas, trousers, boxes of mementos, tunics, cutlery, toys, balls, pictures, electronics of all kinds because none were allowed through.

The Abbey Gate was the only way in. The gate lay at the end of a narrow road. An open sewage ditch filled with gray watery sludge ran down the center. High concrete walls and barbed wire lined both sides of the throughway which was packed with Afghans: a mosh pit with no space to sit or lie down. There was no shade. The air was fetid with the stink of sweat, diarrhea, and sewage stewing under a merciless sun. Perched atop cargo containers which served as a chokepoint before actual entrance, the Taliban sometimes employed their version of crowd control by firing into the air. This only resulted in chaos and stampedes as people tried to flee or find cover. Many who fell or tripped were crushed or suffocated. Children were separated from parents; some were simply snatched because having a small child was seen as a get out of jail free card, a ticket out of town. Almost everyone had papers. Some documents proved previous employment by the Americans. Many more were simply photographs taken with U.S. soldiers or scraps of cards with American names and promises—If you ever need anything—dashed off in ink. Anything a person could think of that might help, he brought, along with his fear and desperation.

Calling this a “gate” was a laugh. There were no crossing rails to be lifted out of the way. There were steel doors, but no one used them. The first and last time the earliest

contingent of Marines tried—this was two days before John and Ronnie landed—they were so few and the numbers of refugees so large that the mob very nearly forced their way through.

What the American troops used instead was a hole in barbed wire. If a Marine stationed along the concrete wall thought papers looked legit, he would pluck that person out of the ditch and pass him or her through that hole for “processing”: a fancy word for sitting for more hours in the sweltering heat, waiting to be called.

What happened next to an Afghan hoping to make it out was a bit like Alice falling down that rabbit hole. Except there was no great hallway lined with doors, and the only key that would get an Afghan anywhere was the proof he or she presented.

The Americans weren’t monsters. If you needed patching, you got patched. If you needed water, you’d get a bottle. You might even score some food. This is where the kids made out. Infants got formula, and more than one Marine took pains to coo and cuddle. Youngsters got water and candy. A Marine might find a ball somewhere and play a bit of soccer. Those were the photo op moments the brass loved.

In the end, though, if your papers didn’t pass muster or a State Department dude decided you were conning him or you’d done something to really piss off a Marine—tossing a baby onto barbed wire and then claiming that was your kid was right there on the list of piss-offable offenses—you were booted right back out, like a mangy, unwanted stray.

Uplift, indeed.

As horrible as this endless stream of the wretched was, John’s biggest worries were two: the Marines—and what the heck Roni was doing on her breaks.

To say the Marines weren’t doing well was an understatement. Most were teenagers

on their first deployment, and not only were they terrified, they were also unprepared. No one sat down and ticked off a checklist on how to decide if an Afghan should be allowed through or not—or even what to say when they had to turn someone away. Everyone was making it up on the fly.

Even worse, soon after their arrival, a stomach flu swept through the troops. John could've predicted this. You didn't need to be a medical Einstein. The troops were stationed at a sewage ditch, for God's sake. So many soldiers got knocked down from puking their guts out—when they weren't crapping their brains out—that the medical teams set up a different treatment area just to tend to the troops needing IVs. Which was both good and bad. Good because sometimes there really was nothing like a bag of saline to perk a guy right up again. But bad because if that poor guy could stand up without falling over, he got sent back out.

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Those not crippled by the virus were overworked, overtired, stressed almost beyond endurance. No one had bothered figuring out where troops could rest and catch some relief from the heat and clamor. Many slept—collapsed, really—on concrete floors or sacked out on a piece of cardboard or plastic laid on the ground.

The emotional toll on the soldiers was huge, but no one wanted to talk about that. No one in command wanted to hear about the agony of having to turn away families without the proper papers. Of listening to young women pleading to be rescued so they'd be safe from Taliban who'd raped them before and would almost surely murder them if the Americans left them behind. The sight of a son pushing a wheelbarrow in which his elderly father sat because the man was crippled or blind...well, soldier, we know this is hard, but you need to toughen up, not let this get to you.

But, of course, all this did get to you. Because there was guilt, too. You had the luxury of knowing you could leave without a backward glance. A soldier would have to be made of stone not to feel a little guilty about that.

John thought that was why, in the end, Roni did what she did.

He was just dozing off when he felt a pressure on his chest and then a whisper brushing his left ear. "You awake?"

"Unh?" Swallowing, he said, eyes still closed, "Sort of."

"Can we talk for a few minutes?"

“Roni.” Clearing his throat, he cracked his lids the way a person might part blinds with a finger just the tiniest bit. “Honey, I have got to sleep. We’re on in four hours. Kind of burning the proverbial candle at both ends.” An understatement. After talking with their CO, he and the other officers were taking turns: swapping out their quarters in rotation with troops in need of A/C, rest, running water, a hot shower. This also meant that he and Roni often spent much of the time they could steal actually sleeping.

“This is important, John.” She propped her head on an elbow. “It’s about you and me. Us, I guess.”

That got his attention. He rolled onto his side, so they faced one another. The room was thick with shadows. The a/c puffed cooled, slightly mildewed air in a short whirr. A sliver of light from the bathroom, which he always left open a crack, sliced across the floor. “What is it you want to talk about? Us? This?”

“In a way.”

“How many different ways are there?” He laid his right hand on her left hip. “This isn’t just a fling. I don’t want to go back to being just friends. Go ahead and put in the air quotes, but I’m serious.” His throat thickened with emotion. “Roni, for me, this...us...we’re forever.”

“I know,” she said, her voice suddenly small.

He waited for her to go on, his own heart hammering. When she didn’t, he said, “And? But?” He pulled his hand back. “What is it? Is there someone...” He let that die because who else could there be?

Who else...but Driver?

And then, close on its heels, a different and altogether unwelcome thought, one that made his skin prickle with new rage and fresh hurt: She sees him, and then she comes to your bed.

“Yes, there is something else, but not in the way, you think,” she said.

“Oh?” God, it seemed to take all his concentration to make the simplest sound. He sat up and twitched the sheet over his nakedness with an abrupt gesture. She’s using me? His heart gave his ribs a painful kick and then that imp, the one who lived in a back closet of his mind, snickered and whispered, You chump, she used you. She came with an agenda. She gives you sex, and you fell for it, you loser.

“Now you’re a mind-reader?” His words were a lash and, even in the semi-dark, he saw her flinch. Good. Let her hurt. “And just what do you think I believe?”

“I’m not thinking what you are.” She pushed to a sit. Unlike John, she let the sheet puddle around her waist and made no move to cover her nakedness. “I haven’t been using you, John.”

Eerie, how she knew that. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Oh. This is as real for me as you, but...” She paused.

“But?” He bit off each word. “But what? This is about Driver, isn’t it? After all, isn’t that where you go, where you sneak off to? Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“And don’t think I’ve not noticed you following.” Her voice was almost maddeningly calm. “How many times?”

“How many times what? That I followed you after you snuck out?” He was suddenly very tired of this. “Four. I might have gone more, but then I already knew where you

were going. Following you after that would've been pure masochism.”

“Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?”

“Likewhat?”

“Think back over those four times you saw me leave or come back.”

“What is this, twenty questions? Just come out with it, Roni.”

“I am, but I’m also not going to make this into a fight.”

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“I’d say you’re a little late about that. And you know what?” He was suddenly, painfully aware of how naked he was, how much he’d stripped himself bare for this woman—and that made him even angrier because...Damn it.Sweeping up his underpants, he quickly pulled them on. “I don’t care. Keep your secrets, Roni.”

He was at the threshold to the bathroom when she said, “The way you keep yours?”

He stopped, dead.No, she can’t possibly... He forced himself to face her and, just as forcibly, willed himself to ice. “Don’t try to turn this around. This isn’t about me, Roni.”

“Yes, it is,” she said, her voice still so maddeningly calm. “You’re as armored as an armadillo, John. Oh, but wait...they don’t have those in Wisconsin, do they? Only in Texas. Well, Alabama, too. I remember Emery mentioning how they’ve migrated into the South.”

His heart bumped against his ribs. “That so? I never saw one.”

“Oh? I’m surprised. All you have to do is look in the mirror, John.” Another pause. “You know what I’ve always wondered about? Why we only went to Emery’s range that one time.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She went on as if he’d not spoken. “At first, I thought I’d done something wrong. Maybe said something. We never went back and, when I asked, you always found a reason not to go.”

He had. She was right about that.

“I finally realized it wasn’t me. I hadn’t done anything wrong.” She let a moment slip. “What I finally realized...was that you had.”

“Get out.” The words came out rough, as if he’d dragged them from some deep pit. He wasn’t even aware of having thought the words, much less said them. The voice which came from his mouth was...different because that voice was so close to breaking, as if the person who’d just spoken those words was only a boy forced to make a choice no child ever should. “Get out, Roni. I don’t care if you have to wander the halls butt-naked looking for a place to clean up, but don’t be here when I come out.”

She might have said something else, but he turned and stormed into the bathroom and flung the door shut. The sound was a thunderclap and so violent his toothbrush jumped.

He took a hot shower, as hot as he could stand. He didn’t want to think but couldn’t help himself because his heart was breaking, and she had used him and the thought of her in Driver’s arms—of her arching and crying out in her ecstasy as Driver pounded into her—was so painful he had to stopper his mouth with a fist to keep the anguish from roaring out of his chest.

When he finally came out in an exhalation of steam—his skin as wrinkled as an old prune and knuckles scored from his teeth—she was gone. Nothing of Roni remained except her scent on the sheets and the salty pungency of their sweat and sex.

He stripped the bed. Wonder if I can burn the sheets? And no more Mr. Nice Guy. He was done playing the patsy. Whichever enlisted guy came in after him this morning could just suck it up and go find new bedlinens. Or sleep on the mattress; he didn’t care. Wrenching off a pillowcase, he thought it was too bad he couldn’t take bleach to

his brain?—

Something dropped to the floor with a small, soft papery rustle.

Only then did he realize he hadn't switched on a light. He bent, patted a hand until his fingers brushed a small, folded square.

A note.

I don't care. He wasn't going to read this. He shouldn't, couldn't afford to. Stan had warned him about precisely this: Son, don't let anyone in who can't handle the boogey-man under the bed. Or the demons hidden away in a box with that imp on a certain, high, dark shelf in the closet at the back of his mind.

But was that right? He still could conjure the confusion and fear and guilt of a certain fifteen-year-old boy boarding a plane for a new life. A new name. A fiction of a past.

He had been so careful all these years. He'd let in virtually no one...until now. Whoever had thought up that old saw about love and pain being tied in the same Gordian knot wasn't wrong. Keeping himself under control was one of the reasons why he loved movies: all of life and passion in ninety minutes, maybe a hundred and twenty on the outside, and it was all so intense and satisfying and, yes, safe. A little one-sided when it came to actual feeling, but then so was masturbation.

She had used him. He should hate her.

When he was certain he wouldn't simply crumple the paper and flush it down the john, he went to the table where his laptop rested and turned on the desk lamp. Then, he carefully spread the note.

She hadn't penned his name. Of course, she wouldn't. Not as if he had an evil twin,

though there was the not-so-little fact that he was, himself, a fraud, a fiction: a made-up boy with a manufactured past.

The note read: Today. 1730.

He stared at those words so hard and for so long the paper ought to have burst into flames. It didn't.

He tore that note into tiny pieces and fed them to the toilet.

"Hey, Doc."

Still standing on the top step of the van, he looked to his left and the med tech raised a hand. "Hey," the tech said, again and then stood to give John the window seat. "Sit here, Captain."

"Thanks, Corporal." He dropped into the seat beside the tech. He didn't feel much like talking, but the van was packed, and this was the last available seat. "Appreciate it."

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“No problem. You’re kinda early, aren’t you, Captain? Glutton for punishment? Shift doesn’t start for another coupla hours and you...” The tech hemmed. “You look sort of rough. No offense, sir.”

“None taken.” He tried on a smile that kept slipping. “I think we’re all run pretty ragged. Anyway, I couldn’t sleep. Figured to get a jump on the day.”

“Thank God, one of the last,” the tech said. “Won’t be too much longer is what I heard. Buddy over at Command said last civilian transport’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” He was startled. He thought that, counting today, they had at least five more days. “Not the end of the month?”

“Doc, we are at the end of the month, more or less. State Department guys are going to clear as many civilians as they got space for and then we break everything down, pack ’er up, and adios. Marines got it the worst. Those poor guys got here first, and they get to stay until the very end when the embassy and command staff leave and the turnover to the Taliban’s official.” The tech shook his head. “Can you imagine what’ll be like? There got to be thousands, tens of thousands of people out there we aren’t taking. Word gets around about the last transport plane tomorrow, and they’re going to try and tear this place apart.”

Just like Vietnam. His Uncle Dare had plenty of stories. He missed listening to Dare talk until the front room of his lake cabin darkened and the night peepers began their evening chorus. “So,” he said to the tech, “we shake the proverbial dust from our sandals?”

“Ah...” The tech didn’t get the allusion. “I guess? I got a buddy said he couldn’t get Iraq out from under his fingernails for a month.”

“Let’s hope Afghanistan doesn’t take that long,” John said as the van’s engine chugged to life. He would take the remainder of the deployment one day at a time. Stay away from Roni. Minimal interaction and then only official or doctorly stuff. Get through the next few days. Things should be easier once the last civilian transport left tomorrow. That would be Friday. It would take them the better part of a day to dismantle the med tent, pack up. He bet they’d be on a transport to Doha and then Germany by Sunday. Monday, at the latest.

As for the rest...what happened when they got back to Benning? He’d put in for a transfer. Try and make sure they didn’t wind up on-call together. Take doubles, if he had to.

Time and distance, that would do the trick. He already knew what helped mend a broken heart.

Déjà vu all over again. A salty lump formed at the back of his throat. I am the Tin Man from Oz and now I know I have a heart because it’s breaking.

Something sparked to his left, and his head swiveled in time to see the barracks’ front door open. Roni, in her camis and geared up, rushed out. Her hand was up; she waved, but the van was already pointed in the wrong direction. Unless the driver looked in his rear view, he’d never spot her.

He only realized he’d been about to tell the driver to stop when he caught himself leaning forward and felt the word ready to take a swan-dive off the springboard of his tongue.

No. He sat back. He aimed a sidelong glance at the tech, who was busy rummaging in

his various pockets. No one else on the van seemed to notice, and he didn't look her way again.

But as the van pulled away and left her in the dust, he did think, and with a stinging red ferocity that surprised him because it felt so damn good: Go to hell. Go break someone else's heart. Go break Driver's. Just don't come crying to me when he breaks yours.

And one more thing. Once they were on a real airplane headed for home? He was sitting in the back, where it was safest for when the pilot had a stroke, and the copilot freaked. Just see if he didn't.

Hasta la vista, baby. He jammed on his wraparounds. Cuz I won't be back.

A few minutes later as they neared the drop-off, a guy in the seat in the van's rear asked, generally, "Anyone hear anything about whether they got the guy?"

"Guy?" Frowning, the tech craned a look over his shoulder. "What guy?"

"Suicide bomber," another soldier, a Marine, said—and then, at the general silence: "Man, you didn't hear? They closed down Abbey last night, 'bout 2200."

Someone said, making no attempt to hide his derision, "You sure it wasn't because the State Department guys went for their coffee break?"

At that, there were general nods and grunts. The consular officials were known to just evaporate, sometimes for twelve hours at a stretch. Without them, no one could be cleared and so the Marines would have to close the Gate. This only made the Afghans on the other side even more desperate than they already were, since no one knew when the line would cease moving for good. In turn, things got even worse for the Marines who had to hold everyone back. The joke—not a very funny one—was that

everyone knew that State Department guys, who were responsible for clearing refugees, worked. The question was whether they worked hard or hardly at all.

“Positive,” the Marine said. “I know someone who said intelligence has been monitoring scuttlebutt all week that there are a bunch of guys holed up in some hotel.”

Someone else said, “So, did they get them or what?”

“We’re going on duty, and there ain’t been a ka-boom,” said another soldier. “So, I guess either they didn’t get them or there was no one to get. But I’ve been hearing this all week.”

“Which kind of makes you wonder,” the tech next to John said, “if maybe they oughtn’t just to close things down now. Like, why haven’t we?”

“I heard it’s on account of the Brits,” the Marine said. “Over at the Baron? They still got a boatload of people to process.”

Much like the State Department checkpoint beyond the Abbey Gate, the Baron Hotel, which was really just down the road, had been chosen by the UK Border Force as their official checkpoint. There, they searched and cleared civilians before moving them to the airport for RAF evacuation flights. Their security apparatus was, in a way, even worse than at Abbey Gate; all the Brits had was a chevron of shipping containers and a bunch of soldiers. That had been so slow, their soldiers had done what the Americans had: ripped open a section of barbed wire along the same canal to allow more people eligible for evacuation through.

“That is messed up,” the tech said.

“This whole operation’s messed up,” someone else said. “I mean, seriously, think

about it. Give us a couple weeks, we coulda set up sandbags, Hescos, good security. But what do we got? Barbed wire on top of a concrete wall. Like that'll do a lot of good. Meanwhile, our asses are hanging out waiting on the Brits to get their act together. You ask me, we ought to just close Abbey down."

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“I get that,” John said, “but you can’t leave the British behind.”

“Tell that to George Washington,” the Marine said. “Dude didn’t fight no Revolutionary War for nothing.”

As the driver opened the van door, the tech pulled a face. “Man,” he said to John, “you were talking about shaking dust from our sandals? I’d settle for anything that might get rid of the stink. Getting so I can’t even eat anything anymore without it tasting like it got marinated in a sewer.”

A soldier to their right grunted. “I bet we all stink, just like we’re all baking under this damned sun. Know what I’m gonna do when I get back? I’m gonna find me a big ol’ metal barrel and then I’m gonna stuff in all my gear, throw on some gasoline the way they do with burn pits. Then I’m gonna light a match and toss it in and watch that stuff burn. I bet the smoke’s gonna be black. I’m gonna do it in daylight, too, so’s for just one minute, I don’t have to look at the sun.”

“Just like Mick Jagger,” the tech said. “That song about the sun getting blotted out of the sky?”

“Yeah,” John said. “Paint it black, baby. Paint it black.”

Following the tech through the alley between hangars, he made sure to put the tech on his right so when they walked from the drop-off to the med tent, he would have to look to his right and away from Driver’s hangar on his left. Just didn’t need that temptation.

The day was already hot. The air was thick, and the tech was right. The reek was so heavy, foul, and oily, no amount of spitting cleared the taste from the back of his throat.

He heard the crowd, too, as a sort of background music, a kind of constant clamor.

“Lot of people,” the tech said, stating the obvious. “What you want to bet they’re all good and panicked on account of Abbey closing last night? They got to know the end’s right around the corner.” The tech paused. “Sounds like a big crowd at a football game you know?”

“Uh-huh,” John said, but that’s not what came to his mind. The sound of all those people made his skin prickle. The sound reminded him of the way the waters of Lake Superior ebbed and flowed, swelled and then retreated only to return and crash against the shore as the wind picked up each successive wave and churned the water into something larger and faster and more powerful.

This was, he thought, the sound of a gathering storm.