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Chapter Ten

1851 Local - 1451 Zulu

USS Seahawk - At a classified location in the Persian Gulf

Christ Almighty ... I don't know if I can do this.

For the past few hours, I'd been clinging fiercely to every word of every military mantra ever devised: "service before self" and "honor above all" and all the purple prose that they could cram into our heads in four years at Annapolis. I'd been trying to force myself to see only the mission, only my duty. And it wasn't working worth a damn.

"Pre-brief's about to start, sir."

I had to physically prevent myself from spinning around and knocking Bounce against the bulkhead for that innocent comment. Didn't he get it? No, of course he didn't. How could he? Somehow that was almost as frustrating as the suffocating silence from CIC. It was almost a sound unto itself, the silence: it penetrated every corner of my consciousness, seemingly growing louder as the minutes ticked by. She hadn't called in. And I no longer had the luxury of pretending that her call was coming at any moment.

On paper, the mission was practically ideal. A clearly defined target with minimum possibility of civilian casualties and maximum likelihood of ensuring that some reprehensible people would never hurt anyone ever again. The others were probably all thinking about how great it would look in their records, and how great it would sound to everyone in the wardroom or the bar back home. I remember days like that, back when these kids were still in high school. All it had taken was one mission, and an unexpected air-to-air engagement over the Gulf of Sidra, to cure me of that particular sort of ignorance. Seeing it resurface in my squadron, even from a harmless talker like Bounce, made me feel so incredibly ancient.

This isn't right. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have to do this.

And yet some part of me still believed what I'd told Coates a couple of hours earlier. If the mission had to launch without word from Mac or Gunny, then I needed to be the one going, if only because of the slightest chance that my Marine really did possess extrasensory powers of some kind. It wasn't much to pin my sanity to, but it was all I had.

A persistent, hideous thought kept creeping into my mind; the possibility that she was already dead. Each time it emerged, I savagely beat it back -- not because I was certain it wasn't true, but because I seriously doubted my ability to function rationally once I acknowledged the idea at all. But it wouldn't be deterred, and finally it wrested from me one of the most dire thoughts ever to take hold in my conscious mind.

If she's still in that camp when we blow it to pieces, assuming there's any justice in the world, there'll be a Stinger down there with my name on it.

I buried that thought quickly as well, out of guilt for its selfishness, and also because it scared the hell out of me. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Cash approaching with caution. I'd given him a brief synopsis of the situation after our target study session earlier, because a RIO deserved to have a clue about what was going on in his pilot's head. He hadn't expressed any reservations about flying with me, nor would I have expected any. Still, it was probably in his best interests not to mess with me right about now.

"Nothing yet, sir?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit that aloud. "Depends on your definition of 'nothing.' The SEALs now have full control of all three ships. That's something."

"Yeah, gotta hand it to them. The crews must've known they'd be coming, and they still managed to get the drop on them." Cash shook his head. He was a lieutenant commander, one of the senior RIOs on the boat, and he'd been in the business long enough to have lost most of the rampant idealism that the others displayed. "CAG'll chew you a new one if you're late to pre-flight, sir. Doesn't matter how much the circumstances suck."

"Yeah, I know." I squared my shoulders and set my face into a mask of non-emotion. "Let's get this over with."

The pre-flight briefing held no surprises. We had four hard targets, corresponding to the main buildings of the camp, and a half-dozen possible soft targets, depending on how many vehicles were present and the amount of weaponry stockpiled in the area. The missiles that hung from our wings were GPS-guided: "fire and forget" weapons, as they say. Forget? Not likely in this case.

Because of our distance from the target, we'd be hitting a tanker both before and after the strike. The Air Force had a KC-135 equipped for Navy refueling in the area, which was convenient, since the carrier's Viking refueler had its own duties over southern Iraq. It all looked so straightforward on the board. Launch, tank, drop, tank, trap. If it worked out that way, I'd only have the rest of my life to deal with the consequences.

Come on, Mac, where are you?

We suited up and headed for the deck with little discussion. Pre-flight checks went without a hitch, and at last I had to mount up. The canopy slammed shut over my head with a sense of finality that tore all but the last vestiges of hope from my soul. I could no longer raise my eyes to the hatch, willing it to offer up some young seaman with news of a transmission from Afghanistan. From that point on, I had no choice but to concentrate fully on my aircraft and my mission, or the result would likely be the deaths of still more courageous officers.

With a silent prayer for forgiveness from both God and Sarah Mackenzie, I saluted the deck officer, and the force of the catapult drove me back into my seat.

1957 Local -- 1527 Zulu
Approaching the southwestern border of Afghanistan

"Echo Flight, this is Air Force eight-zero-three. Y'all looking for a floating gas station?"

"Roger that, Air Force. Slowing to approach."

Bounce snickered into his radio. "Nice to see that you blue-suiters finally wised up and decided to trade in some of your booms for hoses. What took you so long to figure out that the Navy got it right the first time?"

"Speak for yourself, Bounce," I told him calmly. "I ended up with stitches once because of a hose-whip that came through my canopy. The Air Force way doesn't look so bad by comparison."

I could hear the wide grin from the airman on the tanker. "Oh, I like you, sir! Just for that, you get to be first in the pattern."

"No, Air Force, he gets to be first in the pattern 'cause he's lead and outranks us all," Red commented, a wry smile in her voice.

"Fair enough, sirs and ma'am -- step right up, Echo Lead. Closure rate fifteen knots."

My probe engaged easily, and the fuel transfer light obediently came on. "Make sure you get what you paid for, sir," cracked Bounce. "I hear the price of gas has gone down since we came over here and started kicking -- "

"Lock it up, ladies and gentlemen." I'd had enough at that point. Staying loose en route to the target had its advantages, but there was a such thing as being too loose. "From here on in, we're all business, all right?"

"Copy that, sir," Red replied promptly, which quieted everyone down. I made a mental note, in a vaguely detached way, to thank her later if possible. She and I had flown together once or twice before this whole mess, and while I had her respect, I knew than she had the respect of the rest of the squadron. Lead or not, I was well aware of my outsider status. The others would jump if I asked, without hesitation: but if Red asked, the answer would have been "how high?"

Check that - it would have been "how high, ma'am?"

We did the aviation equivalent of treading water until all five aircraft had tanked, and offered our compliments to the genial airman as we departed the area.

"Question from the peanut gallery, Hammer," came the voice of Rocky, Buck's RIO. "How sure are we that these guys aren't ready for us?"

"Approximately as sure as we were when we launched," I answered. "Watcher, you want to update us on that?"

"That's affirm, Lead, nothing lighting up in the region so far." The Hawkeye's radio officer entered the conversation for the first time. "Best intel says that there's no sophisticated radar SAM capability down there."

"Then that's what we go with for the moment. But we all know what can happen when you depend too much on 'best intel'."

"Roger that."

We continued in silence for a while, each finding our way into the necessary frame of mind for the task ahead. This was the part of the job that "Top Gun" didn't cover: straight and level flight, getting from one place to another, with nothing but time to think, and far too much of it. In this case, the time was filled by a near-constant stream of memories playing across my mind: of courtroom battles and evenings spent strategizing over takeout food; of rainy Norfolk docks, doorways hung with mistletoe and warm spring nights on the admiral's porch; even of ferry rides and terrible misunderstandings.

God, how blind I'd been. And to think it had only taken a threat to everything I held dear to make me realize it.

After a few minutes, the Hawkeye radioed again. "Echo Flight, this is our stop. We'll maintain contact from here. Good luck and good hunting."

"Message received, Watcher. See you back here in a while." I tightened my fingers around the throttle. "Let's close it up, everybody. Two and two."

Through the last rays of daylight, already sinking out of view, I watched Buck's aircraft close the distance between his wing and mine to a matter of a few meters. If this mission had a point of no return, we were now approaching it at near-Mach speed.

All right, ninja-girl, here's your chance. Whatever that thing is that you do, whatever bizarre plane of existence you tap into to locate little girls and idiot aviators - crank it up, because the world's about to go crazy.

Chapter Eleven

**1758 Local - 1328 ZULU
Deserted warehouse
Grounds of the terrorist camp
Outside Zaranj
Afghanistan**

Gasping, I woke from my unconsciousness, finding myself still lying on the concrete floor, tied to the metal chair, completely drenched. A puddle of water surrounded me, partly washing away my dried blood. As I looked around, I saw that Gunny was on his feet again, he, too, still tied to the chair beside me. Kourosh and Rokneddin had returned, bringing us back into the play with the help of two buckets full of surprisingly cold water.

As I struggled to get up despite the heavy chair hindering me, Kourosh stepped up to me and roughly yanked me up.

"Time for confessions, Sarah. Don't bother speaking Farsi - we have an interpreter. I know thinking is hard when you're in pain."

With that he slapped me, thus bringing me back to my true self in full. I quickly scanned my surroundings and saw Rokneddin come near with the interpreter Kourosh had spoken of. I tried to get a good look at him in the dimly-lit room, our eyes met - and we stared. I knew this man and he knew me. It was my friend Ahmad Salimi, the tailor.

I was astonished to see Salimi here. Although he had never dared to say so openly, I knew that he detested Islamic fundamentalism and was fervently praying that the Karzai government would help reform the society of his country. But I also knew that he was very pessimistic about that ever happening. Upon closer inspection, the old man didn't really look as if he were helping the terrorists of his own free will. They must have dragged him out here, knowing he was fluent in English.

When he recognized me, his eyes went wide in shock and compassion. Obviously, I had to be looking really battered.

"Maryam?" he softly called out, his concern evident. Rokneddin at once gave his ribs a nudge with his elbow, making the dignified man wince and then throw him a glance of barely-veiled contempt about his lack of civility.

"Salimi, this is the person in question." Kourosh had met him halfway across the room and now dragged the tailor over to me. *"She's an American Marine colonel and her name is Sarah Mackenzie. She knows something about this camp being attacked and won't talk. We already let her have a little special treatment but I think we'll have to apply stronger measures. She might not be able to speak Farsi in the process. You will translate. And remember - if your translation differs from what she says, we or our friends are going to find out sooner or later, and then you will regret you ever lived. Is that clear?"*

"Quite clear, Mr. Maghari," Salimi answered in his polite, agreeable voice.

Meanwhile, I had noticed with horror that Rokneddin was about to turn the metal chairs that we were tied to into some sort of electric chairs. So that was how they planned on making us talk. Efficient indeed. I wasn't sure how long I would be able to hold my ground once the currents came jolting through my body, grilling me alive. 'Cry, Mackenzie. Cry the pain out of your consciousness until it's over,' I kept telling myself. Looking to my left, I saw that Gunny had his eyes closed as if he were praying for strength.

"Move away, I'll test the circuits," Rokneddin eventually spoke up.

I gritted my teeth. A second later, my body was convulsing in agony as it seemed to burn up from inside. I let out an earth-shattering scream but managed to hold myself upright for the few seconds until Rokneddin disconnected the power.

Kourosh gave his brother a grimly smiling nod. *"Works."*

I met Salimi's glance that seemed just as pained as my own. He squared his shoulders and addressed Kourosh in a low voice, but not low enough for a Marine to miss the meaning. *"Mr. Maghari, as I am to help you in this, might I make a proposition? If you go on like this, Mrs. Goshtasbi won't have too much time left to tell you anything. I think the safer bet might be to let me try and talk to her first. Hearing her own language and talking to a seemingly*

sympathetic mind might weaken her resolve. Torturing always makes women even more stubborn.”

Kourosh seemed to ponder Salimi’s words for a few moments. Finally, he nodded. *“All right, give it a try, Salimi. We’ll stand by right here. You have fifteen minutes. After that, we’ll return to our methods.”*

Knowing that the pain was only put off a little, I felt inclined to be angry with the man who had tried to spare me somehow. I wouldn’t tell anything anyway, so my preference would have been to get it over with as soon as possible.

Leaning heavily on his cane, Salimi drew near. When he spoke to me, his words came out in such a rush that I almost missed the most important part - but that had obviously been his intention. He spoke with a slight accent but his command of English was amazing.

“Ma’am, you heard them. Why don’t you tell me what you know? Are the Americans going to attack this camp? What are their plans? What is your role in the play? There are only two more guards outside, ma’am. Do you think you can take them out? Please, play weak.” While speaking, Salimi had wetted his handkerchief in the puddle on the floor and started to gently clean up the wound on my jaw.

I immediately got the picture. I let a few tears flow, sobbed a little and gave - at least in my opinion - a rather convincing performance of being torn between having to keep quiet and wanting to be spared. Understanding that he needed something to translate back to them, I decided to give him a snippet of information that the terrorists already had.

Trying to keep my voice weak and low, I answered. *“They... they’re coming in through the air... a fighter squadron... tonight... yes, if my... colleague gets off, too... we... we can... is there... a car?”* The constant artificial sobbing almost made me choke for real.

With a seemingly satisfied expression on his face, Salimi turned to the Magharis. *“She says that a fighter squadron is supposed to attack the camp tonight.”*

“We already know that. What are their weapons?” Kourosh seemed pleased that Salimi had obviously gotten me to talk, but his impatience was evident.

Salimi turned back to me and wetted my forehead with his handkerchief. *“Keep playing, ma’am... How are the fighters armed? Yes, the brothers’ car, right in front of the door. Say you want water.”*

I fixed Salimi’s glance, amazed. The old gentleman had to know he was risking his life in helping me. But he only winked.

“I... will tell... but... I need water... they have missiles...”

“The fighters are armed with missiles. She says she desperately needs some water. Then she will give more details. If you ask me, she’s about to break.”

Surprisingly, Kourosh motioned for his brother to refill one of the buckets and Rokneddin instantly complied. There was still something like respect towards the elder in this society.

"Mr. Maghari," Salimi now addressed Kourosh, pretending to have found something in the pocket of my BDU pants. *"You should have a look at this. Could you come over here, for a moment, please."*

With raised eyebrows, Kourosh drew near. What happened then surprised me like few things ever have. Salimi gave me another barely noticeable wink, ensuring my attention. When Kourosh had reached us, the old man pointed at my pocket and when Kourosh bent down slightly and reached for it, Salimi, with a surprisingly powerful blow, brought the brass knob of his cane down on Kourosh's head, making him fall to the floor. I immediately made sure he stayed there, letting myself and the chair drop onto him. Salimi quickly untied me and I at once took Kourosh out for good.

Millions of thoughts, hopes, questions and words flooded my mind but I efficiently blocked them out. I had to free Gunny before Rokneddin came back. I ran over to where he was observing the scene, his eyes wide.

"Grab something heavy, Gunny, and go to the door. Make sure Rokneddin makes no noise when he goes down. Shooting would be too loud."

"Understood, ma'am."

As Gunny positioned himself behind the door with a pair of heavy pliers that he had found among the tools Rokneddin had used to connect us to the circuits, I guided Salimi through the room and we took cover near the entrance to the warehouse.

Not a moment too early. The door opened and Rokneddin stepped back in with the refilled plastic bucket. Gunny placed a precise blow on his head and then dragged him over to where Kourosh was lying, tying them together and gagging them. Then he joined us.

"What now, ma'am?" he asked in a low voice.

Somehow I managed to get some order into my spinning thoughts. I turned to Salimi.

"Are you sure there are only two more guards outside the warehouse?"

"Yes, ma'am," the tailor answered, his eyes actually gleaming mischievously. He seemed to be gloating that he had fooled the people he detested. I couldn't quite fight my answering grin, neither could Galindez. "From what I gathered," Salimi added, "They didn't even want too many of their own people to know that you were in here. They feared someone might come in and try to kill you right away without getting the information. You know these people tend to act impulsively..."

"I see," I acknowledged. "Mr. Salimi, could you call them inside, saying you need help with us?"

"Of course, ma'am." The tailor got up and with the help of his cane walked over to the door, opening it and sticking his head out. While he was addressing the guards, Gunny and I got ready to jump at the men.

A moment later, the guards, each of them armed with a Kalashnikov, were led into the building by Salimi. As soon as they had passed our hideout, Gunny and I approached them from behind. A few precise martial-arts movements did the trick. We were free. Well, almost, but anyway...

1823. *Still time to warn the Seahawk.*

"Let's get out of here, folks," I ordered bluntly, ignoring the fact that my body was aching all over, causing me heavy fits of nausea. But I didn't have the time to concentrate on that.

"Yes, ma'am. Excuse me, please, sir." With that, Gunny tossed me Salimi's cane and then lifted the old man up on his shoulder. We would be too slow if we let him walk.

Looking out from between the doorframe and the door, I could see the Magharis' car just a few yards away.

Please, let the doors be open...

Upon my signal, we rushed over, yanked the doors open, got in and slammed the doors shut again. If anybody was near, they'd have heard us by now. Gunny was sitting in the drivers' seat, hotwiring the vehicle. As soon as the motor came alive, Galindez slammed in a gear and we roared off.

Another question would be passing the gate. I didn't have my *Chador*, so I only ducked as best I could into the foot space of the right front seat, hoping no one would see me. If the guards hadn't changed ever since we had been brought in, we were in trouble. We could only hope that they had indeed been relieved and that the new ones didn't know yet about Gunny's true identity.

For the second time today, the little onyx lucky charms on my left wrist worked. First they had sent me an angel in the form of our friend Ahmad Salimi, now they allowed us to pass the guards at the entrance without problems. I sent a prayer heavenward, thanking God - or Allah - for his mercy.

As soon as we had reached the main road leading northeast, Gunny stepped on the accelerator as if his life depended on it. Salimi and I frantically grabbed for the door handles to somehow keep sitting up straight.

Now, I finally had the time to get something off my chest that had been lingering there for quite some time. "Mr. Salimi, thank you. You saved our lives and maybe those of a lot more if we're lucky."

The old man smiled, showing a huge gap between his lower teeth. "You're very welcome, Maryam, Vajih... or what should I call you?"

"Sarah."

"Victor."

Gunny and I had spoken simultaneously. We shared a brief, almost relieved smile.

"Mr. Salimi, why did you do it?"

"Sarah, I told you I have lost my faith that my once so beautiful country will ever rise again. So I want to go looking for a better place to spend my last few years, in a society that respects the rights and dignity of all people. Why do you think my English isn't rusty yet although my time in Europe dates decades back?" His smile was almost benign.

Intrigued, I locked my gaze with his. "That was something I was going to ask you anyway. Your language is almost flawless."

My compliment seemed to give him enormous pleasure - his smile broadened still more. "Even when the Taliban were in power and it was highly illegal, I always kept my old radio. BBC World was my only link left to the world I loved. Now I'm hoping I might see it again before I die. Allah might be willing to grant me that wish..." he sighed wistfully.

"You will, Mr. Salimi, I promise." Somehow this little speech had moved me deeply.

The car's short-wave radio interrupted our conversation. [*"Rokneddin, this is Amal. Do you read me?"*]

Shame. I motioned for Gunny to pull to a halt at the side of the road. He muffled his speech with the sleeve of his shirt and answered, trying to pitch his voice deeper.

"Come in, Amal? I can barely hear you. Just tell me quickly what's on your mind."

["I just wanted to let you know that all is set up down here. Our radar is still inactive. As soon as we get readings of the fighters nearing the river, we'll activate the SAM radar and then we'll have them down in no time. Piece of cake."]

"Got that, Amal. Keep going."

As soon as Gunny had switched off the radio, I couldn't help swearing loudly. All the previous lightheartedness about our escape had evaporated in an instant. They had radar-guided SAMs waiting for my best friend. And he had no clue.

"Gunny, speed up! I've got to get in touch with Commander Rabb ASAP! This isn't just a Stinger attack anymore that we've got to warn them of, and that would have been bad enough."

"I know, ma'am." The frown on Gunny's face matched my own.

1946 Local - 1516 ZULU
Near Kadesh
Afghanistan

We had been speeding over the bumpy dirt road for a little more than an hour, but to me it felt like eternity. Every mile brought me closer to the technical facilities I needed to contact Harm but the distance kept dragging and dragging, making me slowly go insane.

My head was throbbing tremendously, the burn in the pit of my elbow made me want to scream, and the kicks to my belly still made me nauseous. But I willed myself to suck it up. At least the blood on my cheekbone had clotted. Luckily Harm couldn't see me right now. I was convinced I had to be looking like hell.

All of a sudden, Gunny stepped on the brakes and with screeching tires, we skidded to a halt. Behind me, Salimi woke from his peaceful slumber.

Gunny was annoyed. "What the hell does this guy think he's doing?"

A man was standing in the middle of the road, forcing us to stop, waving desperately and motioning to his broken-down car at the side of the road.

"With your permission, ma'am, I'll just leave the road and pass."

Just as I was about to agree, something made me look twice and I immediately knew that, despite all that had happened and was still about to happen, this was really turning out to be my lucky day.

"No, Gunny, come with me. You'll see. It'll only take a minute."

"But ma'am..."

"That's an order, Gunny!"

"Yes, ma'am."

We climbed out of the car.

The man stopped his movements and stared at me, a grin spreading over his face.

"Suzie? Is that really you? Boy, am I glad that you guys showed up. I had a breakdown and in this godforsaken place no one ever stops to help!"

Gunny shot me a glance. He had understood and I could feel his anger well up just as my own rage had instantly returned upon seeing that man. Everything within me kept screaming 'Vendetta!'

Kalesky's face took up an even more astonished expression as we approached. "Great God, Suzie, what did your friends do to you?"

I stopped in front of him. "The same we'll do to you if you pull any stunts, Corporal."

Kalesky's jaw dropped. "What are you talking about?"

Gunny couldn't prevent himself from grinning grimly. "That should be 'What are you talking about, 'ma'am'?', Corporal."

"What the hell..."

Showtime.

I signaled to Gunny to apply his police grip to Kalesky's arms and locked my glance with the traitor. My voice was deadly calm. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, United States Marine Corps, Chief of Staff to the United States Navy's Judge Advocate General. Lance Corporal Benjamin Kalesky, you're under arrest for desertion, espionage, weapons theft and weapons trading. You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say may be used against you in court-martial. Gunnery Sergeant Galindez, continue reading him his rights in the car. We have a mission to carry out."

Kalesky's face was now the color of a freshly bleached sheet, but he didn't try to escape because right now, Salimi had gotten out of the car with a gun that he must have found inside. He expertly pointed it at Kalesky's head. "You make a move and you're a dead man."

With that, Kalesky was pushed onto the backseat beside Salimi. Gunny sat behind the wheel and we drove off again. Five minutes later, we saw the lights of what had to be the Canadian forces' camp outside Kadesh.

**2006 Local - 1536 ZULU
Canadian forces' camp
Outside Kadesh
Afghanistan**

It had taken me a full ten minutes to get past the guards at the gate and be admitted to the base's CO. Gunny had done his best to help, but two people without any identification whatsoever, not wearing the uniforms that would confirm they really were who they claimed to be, arriving in a car with an Afghan number tag, with two dubious people in tow one of which they claimed was a prisoner - the lieutenant at the gate had needed a few very detailed facts and strong arguments to let us pass and send his colleague over to the car to guard the two men we left outside.

I could see that I had made some impression on the lieutenant and maybe he even believed me, but in times as these, caution was an absolute necessity. The lieutenant had radioed his CO's quarters and, after a little discussion, got the order to escort the two strangers to his office.

Gunny and I entered the building and we immediately came to attention in front of the full colonel who commanded the base.

"Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie and Gunnery Sergeant Victor Galindez, United States Marine Corps, sir!" I presented us, only to immediately continue, "Sir, we have information about an ambush set up for a U.S. Navy fighter squadron en route to attack an al-Qaeda camp near Zaranj. We need to contact them ASAP and we need your help to do that."

The urgency in my voice apparently made Colonel William McTavish take a closer look at my face. His gut seemed to tell him he could trust me but reason made him inquire for further details. "How come you know about the plans, Colonel, and what happened to you?"

Of course I understood that McTavish had to ask, but my impatience and growing fear threatened to get the better of me. "Gunnery Sergeant Galindez and I were working undercover, sir, infiltrating the al-Qaeda cell," I hurriedly explained. "We need to get the information to the USS Seahawk right now. Our F-14s don't know the terrorists have radar-guided SAMs set up. Please, sir, this might be a matter of minutes!"

McTavish heaved a sigh, obviously wanting to believe me. "You don't have any ID, Colonel Mackenzie. How do you want them to believe you're not one of them?"

"Sir," I pleaded desperately, "If you can get me a connection to the Seahawk, I'll find a way to identify myself. Please, sir."

The Canadian colonel pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. Then he again took a look at the battered woman in front of him. I could see he was pitying me.

Come on, sir, trust your intuition...

"Lieutenant, get me someone at CENTCOM, Qatar, now."

Thank you, Lord!

The lieutenant instantly made the call. McTavish exchanged a few words with the officer at the other end of the line and finally was passed through to the Seahawk.

"Captain Johnson? Good evening, this is Colonel McTavish, commander of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry battle group at coalition base Kadesh. I have a woman here who claims to be a Lieutenant Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, and she tells me she needs to pass on urgent information to the leader of the squadron that's right now flying an attack against al Qaeda. I have no means to confirm her identity. What do you suggest we do?"

I noticed I was chewing my lower lip while the colonel was listening to Johnson's reply. Then he looked at me. "Colonel, the skipper seems to know you, but he thinks you might be someone else who got to know the real Colonel Mackenzie at the camp. He's right now trying to contact the squadron leader. He says that the commander might know how to identify you... do you know him?"

"Yes, I do, he's a JAG lawyer like me. We work together."

McTavish stared at me. "The U.S. sends lawyers to do the real work? Now that's peculiar."

Before I needed to come up with an answer to that statement, Johnson obviously addressed the colonel because he listened intently, an expression of utmost astonishment spreading over his features. "Uh... all right, Captain, I'll ask her..."

Bewildered beyond belief, McTavish turned to me. "Colonel, the skipper says that this Commander Rabb wants to know how much time is still left on your deal. If you can answer correctly, I am to believe you. Do you know what he's talking about?"

Despite the situation, I had to fight a smile. Trust Harm to come up with something like this. "Yes, sir, I know, and the answer is 426 days."

Eyebrows up high, McTavish passed on my answer, never taking his eyes off me. A moment later, the colonel's face lit up with a genuine smile and he handed me the receiver. "Colonel Mackenzie, there's someone on the phone for you."

Chapter Twelve

**2013 Local - 1543 Zulu
Approaching the Helmand River Valley
Afghanistan**

"She says it's 426 days, sir."

Relief, swift and overwhelming, washed over me with incredible force. There was no mistaking that response. She was alive, and relatively safe, and the nightmarish scenario that had been haunting me for hours could be laid to rest at last. If I hadn't been strapped securely into the front seat of a fighter aircraft, I might very well have collapsed under the sudden release of that weight.

Steeling my voice in order to sound presentable over the open comm line, I directed, "Put her through."

After a moment, the voice that had rung in my ears for so long finally filtered through my headset. "Harm, is that you?"

It took everything I had not to confess every last thing I'd ever felt for her right then and there. Instead, rational thought automatically took over, and I exclaimed, "Mac! Where are you?"

"At the 3PPCLI camp at Kadesh. We're safe."

She started to say something beyond that, but I couldn't even process it. Without a second thought, I blurted out, "God, Colonel, is it good to hear your voice."

"Same here, Commander." She sounded exhausted, edgy, and reassured all at once. "Listen, Harm, you need to get down below radar tracking altitude, ASAP. They have a SAM battery waiting for you near the Helmand River, and they're keeping the radar off to avoid detection until the last possible second."

"Understood," I responded, a new kind of adrenaline rising in my throat. This shouldn't have been a surprise. I'd told the others as much only minutes ago. Still, it wasn't expected, and it wasn't comforting news. "Have you got specific coordinates?"

"I wish I did. Can you handle it?"

I sure hope so. I attempted to smile through my mask, hoping she'd be able to hear it in my voice. "Sure. This is going to make a pretty bad impression, though. This will be the second time this week that an attack of mine was altered with the squadron already airborne."

I imagined that I could hear her wry grin in reply. "Yeah, I know. Now get down there and watch out for Stingers, okay?"

"Will do." There was more I wanted to say - much more - but it simply wasn't possible. "Mac - thank you. You always find a way."

"Believe me, I'm glad I could. Take care."

"Always. Out." My mind was spinning rapidly as I switched over to the main group frequency. "Echo Flight, this is Lead. Hit the deck. Now."

Instantly and without hesitation, four aircraft plunged toward the earth.

["Always. Out."]

Knowing the connection might be needed again, I didn't hang up but only placed the receiver on the table in front of me. Then I suddenly felt my knees buckle and grabbed for the backrest of a nearby chair. Gunny instantly sprinted to my side and helped me sit down.

"You all right, ma'am?"

I cast him a feeble smile. "I don't really feel like doing my physical fitness test right now, but thanks. I've been worse."

"Lieutenant Bowler, fetch some water and a washcloth for the colonel, please," McTavish directed. "Bring them directly to the observation room."

"Yes, sir."

McTavish politely offered me his arm. "Colonel Mackenzie? I'm sure you'd like to follow the proceedings from our observation room, right?"

Thankful for his good intuition, I accepted the offered help and let him guide me to the adjacent building, where I was bid to sit down on a chair next to a radar screen. McTavish handed me a headset and a microphone. "In case Commander Rabb wants another word with you," he said with a slight smile.

"Thank you so much, sir, I do appreciate that. Umm... sir..." I felt a little uncomfortable about asking anything else, as he had already done so much for me, but I had to. "Sir, might I ask you to help me with something else, please?"

McTavish actually smiled. "Go ahead, Colonel. Let's see if I can oblige you."

"Thank you, sir. I have a prisoner and an old friend waiting outside in the car, sir. Right now, your guards are taking care of them but I think it might be easier, especially for the old man, if they were brought in here, too. The Gunny will keep a strict eye on our prisoner."

"What did he do?"

"The man's going to be court-martialed for desertion, espionage, weapons trading and weapons theft, sir."

"That's a whole load," McTavish only remarked, one eyebrow up high. He considered my request for a few brief moments, then called the gate and had Kalesky and Salimi brought over. Conveniently, the guards even supplied Gunny with a pair of handcuffs for the Corporal.

"Anything else I can do to help, Colonel?" McTavish pulled up a chair and sat down next to me, casting a curious glance at the delicate string of onyx pearls around my wrist that I was working my nervousness off on, incessantly twirling and twisting it with my right hand.

I met his eyes, finding my worry reflected in his gentle demeanor. "Pray, sir," I only said in a low voice.

Leveling off at four hundred feet, I scanned the blurry landscape below with apprehension. The river was approaching fast enough to make me pretty damn uncomfortable. "Cash, find us an acceptable course deviation - preferably two of them. Let's see if we can come at them from a slightly different direction than they're expecting."

"Right with you, sir." Already prepared, Cash toggled his mike. "Lead and Two, prepare to break right, heading zero-six-five. Three and Four, left to one-one-zero. Copy?"

"Copy," came three voices.

"Map of the earth, boys and girls - follow the foothills. Three ... two ... one ... mark."

We split up smoothly, the two pairs taking slightly different paths, banking on the chance that the terrorists had set up their ambush directly under our predicted flight path.

"So are we going SAM hunting, or not?" Bounce wanted to know.

"Not unless or until they light up," I informed the group. "The SAMs aren't our objective. Having said that, I wouldn't be too depressed if we managed to hit them anyway. I just don't want to walk in the front door. Watcher, you still got our six?"

"Roger, Lead," came the Hawkeye's comms from their loitering position, back out over the water. "Still quiet, but we've got all eyes and ears on the ground."

"Good to hear. Hope your reflexes are good, because as soon as they flip on the power, we're gonna need to know about it."

"Copy that."

A flash of memory surfaced, and I found myself recalling a conversation with Tom Boone from long ago.

"You have to be ready the moment those bastards go active, if not a moment before. They'll probably get off a shot or two, but you've got a technological advantage over them. Your missiles can acquire them faster than theirs can acquire you. But it's only a difference of a few seconds, so if you're asleep at the stick in any way, shape or form, you're in for a very unpleasant day. I almost learned that the hard way once. Fortunately, your dad was a quick son of a bitch."

Somehow that connection to my father, however tenuous, strengthened my confidence. Thanks to Mac, we were prepared for the threat, and I happened to have a guardian angel with SAM-killing experience. Convenient.

"Arm your -88s, Echoes," I ordered: I've never been able to make myself call the AGM-88 High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missile by its more conventional name, the HARM. "But don't fire indiscriminately. We're going to need some of that ordnance for the primary target."

In a motion that undoubtedly mirrored that of my three companions, I held my finger over the pickle button and simply waited.

Monitoring their conversation, it was obvious that Harm was in his element now. For a brief moment I felt that well-known sting again, this 'Will flying ever be second in his heart?' line of thinking that I kept trying to block out whenever he was up there. But it always snuck its way back into my mind.

As I followed the tiny dots on the radar, one always seeming to blink a little brighter than all the others, I couldn't help replaying our previous conversation in my mind.

God, Colonel, is it good to hear your voice.

He had masked his emotions well, but not well enough for me. I had heard this particular tone in his voice before - when he had found me alive in the woods after the poacher's assault, when he had come to get me out of Coster's little sanctuary, when he had learned that I had safely returned from my and Webb's trip to the Afghan mainland during the war. Had he been here, Harm would have all but swept me up in his arms.

But I could fully second his statement. His first, urgent "Mac!" must have been the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard in my life. It had, all of a sudden, reopened all the roads that, mere hours ago, had already seemed closed forever. It had taken me a superhuman effort to keep up the Marine mask at that moment, exhausted and shaken as I'd already been.

I wiped my sweaty hands on my pants, trying to keep my breathing steady. They'd have to make contact any time now. Is there anything that's worse than waiting for something dreadful to happen? Suddenly I recalled something Harm had said to me not too long ago.

Do I give you nightmares?

'The hell you do, Commander,' I silently answered his question. 'You can always wake from a nightmare. What you keep doing to me is infinitely worse.'

"The commander is a close friend, isn't he?" McTavish asked, keeping his voice down.

I even managed a wry smile. "The best, sir."

I was sure the colonel understood what was lying beneath the surface but he didn't comment. He only placed his hand on my forearm, squeezing it for a moment, without saying anything.

Just then, the steady flow of conversation that had been going on among the fighters was interrupted by an urgent call from the Hawkeye. ["Got a flash... active, active, active!"]

This was it. My fingers cramped around my headset, I bit my lip until I tasted blood and my stomach started doing wild flips as my eyes rested glued on the green screen. I was going crazy, sitting by, unable to assist in any way.

'Yeah, flyboy, no nightmares. Genuine hell.'

"Got a flash," the Hawkeye reported suddenly. Then, half a second later, "Active, active, active! Tracking at two miles out, bearing - "

"Got it!" Cash yelled. "Take the shot!"

"Fox one!" I released a missile, and a moment later, I saw another one come off the rails of Red's jet. From the low altitude, it was only about fifteen seconds before the Hawkeye called, "Impact!" and a flash of fire was visible on the ground below.

But there was more to that flash than just our attack. "Missiles inbound," Cash said tersely. "Three and Four, they're coming your way."

So they'd gotten off a couple of shots. Just what we needed. Red and Bounce immediately deployed their chaff and climbed rapidly to evade the missiles, and for once, the tactic worked exactly the way we'd all learned it back in Pensacola. The radar-reflecting chaff diverted the missiles easily, and as they exploded harmlessly over the hills, we all breathed a sigh of relief. One possible disaster averted.

"Watcher, can you confirm that the site is off-line?"

"That's affirmative, Lead - they're not transmitting so much as a squeak."

"Good to hear. Everybody correct back to original flight path and proceed to primary target." I blinked a bead of sweat out of my eye. "Are we still on with Kadesh?"

"I'm still here, Commander," Mac broke in, having realized the intent of my question. "Nice shooting."

"Group effort." I changed frequencies so that the rest of the flight didn't have to listen in. The Seahawk and the Canadians were probably going to be rather confused by the upcoming conversation, though. With a few moments to regroup before coming within range of the target, I couldn't help but smile a little. "So, 426 days, huh, Marine?"

"Of course. It'd take a lot more than a few pissed-off terrorists to mess up my sense of timing." Her voice held a hint of amusement. "I like the way you think, flyboy, but you probably should have asked a question that you actually knew the exact answer to."

"Shows what you know. I thought the answer was 425 days, that's all."

There was a moment of surprised silence, and when her voice returned, there was a note of pleased disbelief in it. "You've been keeping track?"

"It's not too difficult, considering the fact that those government-issued calendars in our office track the number of days in the year. I can add and subtract, you know."

"Apparently not, since you came up with 425."

"Can I blame it on the time difference? Pretty soon it'll be tomorrow here, and it'll still be today back home."

That sentence didn't make a whole lot of sense, but Mac didn't seem bothered. "Next year's a leap year, you know."

"Really? Damn. I'm never going to get this straight."

Her laugh, static-filled though it was, warmed my soul. "Get back to work, Echo Lead."

"Copy that."

In my mirror, I could see Cash shaking his head. "Do I want to know what happens in 425 or 426 days?"

"No, you don't," I informed him calmly. "Anything out of the ordinary yet?"

"Nope, we're clean so far. Target approach in fifteen."

"All right, time to go. Echo Flight, prepare to start the attack run."

I squared up on my assigned target and noticed some activity on the ground. From our altitude, it was difficult to make out anything specific, but there were definitely vehicles moving. I descended to investigate.

"They're bugging out," Cash commented.

"Yeah, they must know that the ambush failed. Better go put a stop to that. Commence attack ... weapons away."

Other voices chimed in milliseconds later. "Weapons away."

Our GPS-guided weapons had their targets already programmed in: now that they were away, I could concentrate on the 'soft' targets presented by the vehicles.

"Buck, come with me. Textbook strafing run, 250 feet AGL. And don't get in the way of any of the hard targets."

"Got it." Together, we dove to an altitude of two hundred fifty feet above ground level and switched over to guns. We reached the area at approximately the same time as the missiles we'd previously fired, and the explosions reflected off the canopy to my port side. I couldn't afford to turn my head and see what was left of the targeted buildings, though. I had a line of covered trucks in my sights, and it was clear that they weren't transporting food and medicine.

Buck went in first, cannon blazing, and we poured a hailstorm of bullets into the truck convoy. Smaller blooms of fire rose into the evening sky, eliciting that strange mixture of satisfaction and sadness that so often accompanied such a mission. Killing an enemy was still killing, and it was hard to take gratification from it, even when the alternative was unacceptable.

"Incoming!"

I reacted without a thought, rolling away from the camp and climbing as rapidly as possible. Something streaked by - a Stinger? The first one was a clean miss, but another exploded just under our wing, causing the jet to lurch sickeningly.

My head slammed back against the seat, hard enough that my vision swam for a brief second. As soon as it passed, I fought to regain control as warning lights began to flash in front of me. Damn it, we'd been so close ...

"Seahawk, Echo Lead - we've got a little problem here."

The voice that responded wasn't that of the comm officer: Captain Johnson had apparently stepped in. "How little is your 'little' problem, Lead?"

"Best guess is not very, sir. Kadesh, are you still on line?"

"We read you, Echo Lead. What do you need?"

"Well, if you've got one, I could really use an open runway."

Dear God Almighty...

I couldn't respond. A sudden flash of cold fear was choking me. Gesticulating wildly, I made the lieutenant step in for me - I didn't have any information on existent or non-existent open runways anyway.

As everything around me started to fuse into one giant roaring blur, only two things registered in my mind, crystal-clear and merciless:

If Harm asked for a runway, he was having the mother of all problems up there.

I had to get out of here, out to where he would land. If he made it back in time.

Jumping to my feet, I started for the door. I had thrown my headset to the table but I hadn't seen the hook that it was supposed to be hung on. My left wrist brushed past it, though, the string of pearls getting caught. Wanting nothing but to run off, I didn't think about what might be hindering me. I forcefully yanked my arm free - and suddenly a myriad of tiny pearls kept bouncing off the ground, all rolling in roughly the same direction: that of the ventilation shaft covered only by a grille, a few feet away from where I had sat.

Horror made me freeze for a moment. My lucky charm, my savior, my anchor - gone. I watched the pearls vanish one by one, each taking a little bit of my previous luck and hope with it.

'Suck it up, Mackenzie, dammit!'

My vision blurry, I stormed out, only one thought dominating the chaos that was inside me.

Harm.

Chapter Thirteen

**2027 Local - 1557 Zulu
On approach to 3PPCLI base, Kadesh
Afghanistan**

"No pressure in the starboard hydraulic lines." Cash had to raise his voice to be heard over the alert signals, but he was still composed. "How are the control surfaces?"

"No starboard flaps, but I've still got the rudder, and I can hold our altitude for a while with just port surfaces and a little judicious use of the afterburner." I was locked in a constant battle with the controls - Tomcats simply weren't designed to fly with sections of a wing missing. From the beginning, this bird had been built for power, not grace. Now we were going to absolutely epitomize the nickname "Flying Turkey."

"Echo Flight, head for home," I ordered the rest of the squadron. "Cash and I will catch up to you after we partake of some Canadian hospitality."

"Good luck, Lead," Red responded. "Buck, you got 'em?"

"Aye, ma'am." As the other two fighters made a slow, banking turn back toward the sea, Buck came up alongside our damaged wing.

"Lieutenant, are you hearing impaired?" I asked him in a clipped tone, most of my focus still on my own flying.

"Due respect, sir, you didn't think we were gonna leave you without a wingman, did you? If you can't make the airfield and have to punch out, somebody's got to note your position and scare away any unfriendlies down there."

I sighed, the answer not unexpected. "Buck, if you follow us in, you're not going to have enough fuel to get back to the boat, and this airstrip hasn't been cleared for Tomcats. I don't have a better option, but you do, so I'd suggest taking it."

"Appreciate the suggestion, sir, but a bumpy landing isn't gonna bother us. Besides, I could really go for a cold Labatt's right about now."

I had to smile a little at that. "Whatever you say."

Despite my unorthodox use of thrust - I'd been periodically raising the nose and applying short bursts of afterburner to push us temporarily higher - we were still losing altitude faster than I would have liked. Cash radioed over to the other RIO. "Rocky, check us out, will you? Any kind of damage report you can give."

"Can't see much, man. You worried about your wheel well being breached?"

"That's high on the list, but the list is long. We can't drop the gear until the last minute - can't afford the drag. So by the time we find out whether our gear works, we're going to be about fifty feet off the ground."

"And even if the gear does lock, we might not have brakes," I pointed out grimly. "Kadesh, you've got your runway clear, right? And when I say clear, I mean completely clear."

"Affirmative, Echo Lead. We've got a barrier net, but we're not very accustomed to deploying it, so be forewarned."

"Right, because otherwise this would be too easy, wouldn't it?"

A sudden thought occurred to me: Mac was down there, watching and waiting. If I couldn't put this aircraft down in one piece, she would have a front-row seat for the crash.

God, Sarah, I'm so sorry ...

For an instant, I thought I could hear her voice in reply, and I wondered if she'd gotten back on the radio. But I couldn't quite make out her words, and once I realized that it was only in my mind, I had no choice but to put it aside and concentrate on the upcoming landing. Flipping a switch near my left hand, I changed the ejection to rear-seat command. "Ejection's all yours, Cash."

"Not planning on needing it, sir. Kadesh, we're coming in on final approach."

Here goes nothing. "Gear down." I pulled the handle and felt the slight vibrations as the landing gear descended from the nose and both sides of the fuselage. Three lights illuminated simultaneously, and I breathed a little easier. "Everything's locked. Rocky, how's our tire situation?"

"Looks to be intact, sir. Good luck."

The aircraft lurched again: aerodynamic ground effect was playing havoc with our not-so-aerodynamic wing. I pulled the nose up to flare out for landing and soon felt the wheels strike the runway with an uneven jolt. We settled unsteadily onto both sets of wheels, and I applied the brakes with a fervent prayer for them to function.

Even as the nose gear contacted the pavement, we began to skid sideways. The starboard brakes were squishy at best, but the port brakes had caught immediately, sending us off-balance. I eased up on them and applied the rudder hard, hoping to straighten us out. It only partially worked.

Our speed was decreasing, but not fast enough. "We're going off-road," I told Cash curtly. "Hang on."

As soon as the nose gear ran off the edge of the runway into the dirt, the aircraft took a jarring bounce, and I saw stars again - and finally, miraculously, we slowed to a stop, still upright and intact.

Neither of us moved for a moment, still trying to grasp the fact that we'd gotten down safely. A voice crackled over the radio. "Echo Lead, welcome to Kadesh."

I was still clearing my vision, so Cash responded for us. "Much appreciated."

Slowly, I pried my fingers off the throttle and stick. "Tell me you weren't half a second away from punching us out," I prodded my RIO.

"You'll never know, will you?" he replied innocently.

As Buck and Rocky came in for a much calmer landing, I popped the canopy, and we climbed down out of our ailing jet. Both of us yanked off our helmets at the first available opportunity and drank in the first fresh air we'd had in hours. A support truck made its way across the tarmac to us, pulling up alongside and spilling out a throng of flight line personnel to secure the aircraft and its remaining weapons.

The pounding in my head abruptly increased, and rather than risk an embarrassing stumble, I quickly dropped to one knee, waiting for it to pass. The perils of flying without the benefit of my own form-fit helmet. The borrowed one hadn't fit perfectly, and thanks to that Stinger-induced jolt a few minutes ago, I was paying for the difference. Of course, in retrospect, I'd been spending a fair portion of the last couple of days worrying when I should have been eating and sleeping, which probably hadn't helped matters. But there wasn't much to be done about that now.

My gaze trained on the ground, I noticed a pair of black boots moving toward me at a rapid pace. "I'm all right - just give me a minute," I muttered, closing my eyes.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and from that simple contact, recognition instantly set in. As I looked up, she knelt down in front of me with an expression of concern.

An indescribable feeling of wonder swept over me at that moment. With the runway lights illuminating her from one side, I could see the horrible bruises that marred her graceful features, and she was holding one arm tightly to her body, betraying further pain. Through dark eyes reddened either by tears or the harsh winds, she captured and held my gaze.

She was a goddess. A vision. And suddenly I could breathe, really breathe, again.

I pulled her into my arms without a word, trying to be gentle but at the same time desperate to show her the magnitude of my relief. After a measureless time spent holding onto each other in silence, giving and receiving support, I offered the understatement of the year. "Good to see you, Marine."

"You, too." Her voice was partly muffled by the collar of my flight suit, where she'd buried her nose against my neck. It was a wonderfully natural act, but also a more intimate one than just about any I could remember between us. This wasn't Sarah Mackenzie trying to project strength to the outside world. This was Sarah Mackenzie simply *being* strong, just by being unafraid to care.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I just smacked my head. Forget about me. What did those bastards do to you?"

"It's okay. I eventually gave as good as I got. You don't have to go back and kill them again."

I pulled back to examine her, both out of worry for her injuries and out of a desire to absorb all I could of her presence. "Have you seen a doctor yet?"

"That would have required me to leave the operations center. You can imagine why I wouldn't have wanted to do that." Mac held very still as I traced her cheek with my fingers. I'm sure my eyes must have betrayed my feelings, but for the first time, I didn't care. In fact, I welcomed it.

She flinched every so slightly under my unwavering gaze. "Harm, I'm all right," she said quietly. "Those guys are never going to hurt anyone ever again, thanks to you."

"I wasn't alone."

"No, you weren't." She reached up to cover my hand with her own. "You never are."

"Neither are you." I wanted to say more, but couldn't make the words come out. This time, though, there were too many words racing around in my head, rather than too few. So I simply continued to stare.

Mac ducked her head self-consciously. "All right, I know I look like death warmed over. You don't have to keep looking at me."

If she was trying to offer me a way out, it was useless. I didn't want a way out. Ever again. Before I knew it, I was answering. "If I could get away with it, I'd never look at anything else."

At that, a brilliant light shone in her eyes, and suddenly it was so clear. We understood each other, fully and completely, and I could see that the thought that had sustained me throughout this entire ordeal was the same thought that had sustained her.

"We have a few things to talk about, don't we?"

"You could say that. But it probably ought to wait until after we debrief and get you checked out." I got to my feet and helped Mac up as gently as possible, reluctant to release her even after she was standing on her own two feet. "No longer than that, though."

In response, she leaned up on her toes and delivered a kiss that will forever be imprinted on my memory.

When we finally broke apart, I swallowed hard and quipped, "Not in front of the plane crew, ninja-girl."

"Oh, screw 'em."

I couldn't have agreed more. I slipped an arm around her waist and steered her toward the truck that had brought her out. Halfway there, a thought struck me. "You know, I'm starting to think that there's more to this mental connection between us than I realized."

Mac turned, lifting an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"When I was coming in to land, and I knew you were down here, I was thinking about how sorry I was that you had to go through all this ... and I swear I heard your voice."

"Yeah? What did I say?"

"That's the thing. Either I heard it wrong, or it wasn't English. It sounded like 'Anna-shay,' or -"

She stopped walking. "Anusheh?"

"That's it." When her eyes filled with tears, my heart immediately sank. "But like I said, the odds of me being wrong -"

"You weren't." She gave me a smile that lit up the night. "It's a name. It means 'fortunate.'"

"I guess that's appropriate, but I'm still confused."

"It's a long story."

“But it’s a long story that you’re going to explain to me at some point, right?”

She leaned against me, and I had to say a silent prayer of thanks - for this moment, and for all those that were certain to follow.

“Let’s put it this way. If I believed in fate, I’d still have about 426 days to explain it to you.”

Chapter Fourteen (Epilogue)

**25 months later
2144 ZULU
Falls Church, VA**

Surely Harm was convinced that I was asleep.

But I wasn’t. For the past 42 minutes I had been quietly lying in my deckchair, enjoying the sun that bathed our backyard in a warm afternoon light, through my eyelashes observing the two people that meant most to me in the world.

My husband and my daughter.

Mary, as we called her. Maryam Anusheh Rabb. When we announced to our friends the name we had chosen for our little girl, people were, well, stunned. I could still hear Jen’s reaction: “Colonel, you want your daughter to have your cover name? And, what’s more, that of the very mission where you and the commander might easily have ended up killing each other?”

“Actually, no,” I had answered with an open smile, disarming her and everyone else present, “It’s my grandmother’s middle-name.”

I hadn’t commented on Mary’s middle-name at all. Harm’s and my psychic link was only for us to know about.

Then people had asked what the names meant. Rather than give the full translation, I chose to reply that somehow, the name seemed to create a tentative link between two yet hostile cultures, implying the hope that my little girl wouldn’t have to face a future of constant war against al Qaeda and its worldwide consorts. Harm and I simply wanted our daughter to be ‘Mary, the fortunate.’

From the way I saw Harm interact with the tiny creature in his arms, I could have bet that he didn’t have a clue that he was being watched. Sure, he had come a long way when it came to showing his feelings. Two years ago, it had taken a near-disaster to make him open up. By the by he had grown easy around me, knowing I was with him for good. He didn’t feel the need anymore to keep up the hero façade at all cost. But he was still reluctant to become too openly emotional when anyone was near, even me. I couldn’t blame him - for decades this had been his true self. Seeing that he was trying to change was enough for me. Every little step he took was taken in the right direction.

Mary was clumsily reaching for Harm’s index finger that was gently tickling the tip of her nose. The tall, broad-shouldered fighter-jock was totally engrossed in observing his daughter, smiling at her, making funny faces, reacting to her movements... in short, he was wrapped around her

finger and completely oblivious to his surroundings. I could have gone on watching the display for hours.

The doorbell broke the spell, though. "I'll go get it," I immediately told him, getting up and revealing that I hadn't been sleeping at all. The veranda door closed behind me before Harm even had the time to blush in my presence. I knew he'd appreciate a moment of quiet to regain his star-lawyer dignity.

"Who is it?" I called as I approached the front door.

"Delivery for Mrs. Goshtasbi."

With a wide grin, I opened. "Gunny, you made it!"

Obviously resisting his fleeting instinct to draw back, Galindez heartily returned the bear hug I engulfed him in. "As you see..."

"Please, come in!"

Gunny's smile turned a little guilty. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I can't. Jen Coates is expecting me at 1800 at Tiner's for a little last-minute organizing and I'd better not keep my future fellow godparent waiting. I'm only glad we weren't delayed."

I sharply looked at him, curious. "We, Gunny? Who's 'we'?"

"Uh... I had some time in London, waiting for my connecting flight, so I thought I might just bring a friend..." Gunny turned his head to the right in an exaggerated gesture. I followed his glance - and couldn't believe my eyes.

"Did anyone from this household order a tailor-made christening robe?" Ahmad Salimi stepped forward, smiling mischievously, holding a parcel. "I hope my presence won't create any inconveniences."

After a few seconds of stunned silence, I finally found my voice. "Of course not! Mr. Salimi, it's so good to see you! How are you?" Not knowing how an old British gentleman of Muslim upbringing would react to being hugged by a much younger woman, I only shook his hand, but I did it with all the warmth that was in me.

Then I stuck my head back in. "Harm!"

The creaking of the wooden floor told me that my husband was already on his way.

Salimi seemed genuinely flattered by my warm welcome. "Oh, please, that's Ahmad to you, Sarah. When Victor called me and told me about his idea to join him for his soon-to-be godchild's christening, I found this would be the perfect occasion to give you something that I've been wanting to give you for a long time. Hello, Commander."

Indicating that Mary had fallen asleep in his arms, Harm in a low voice greeted our friends and then proudly presented his daughter. Salimi's grin grew exuberant, letting show the gap between his lower teeth. "*Hello, Maryam,*" he murmured in Farsi, bending slightly over the little girl, "*I'm your Abu Ahmad.*"

"Where will you be staying, Ahmad?"

"Victor's friend agreed to accommodate us both, this Petty Officer... uh..."

"We'll be at Tiner's, ma'am," Gunny cut in. "And don't worry," he added with a slight grin, "Jen Coates has already offered to help him out a little."

"I see."

"Sarah," Salimi now addressed me, handing me the little package, "We will be late to arrive at Mr. Tiner's house if we don't leave now. But first I wanted you to have a look at this."

"That's so sweet, but you didn't need to..."

Salimi gently patted me on the cheek. "Of course I needed to. Afghan tradition meets British education. Have a look."

Chuckling slightly, I removed the delicate tissue paper, only to draw a deep breath. "Oh, my God... this is beautiful."

I held in my hands a simple ivory-white christening robe in the finest cotton. There weren't any laces or frills on it, but something else that made me smile wistfully: on the chest, tiny onyx pearls formed a perfect circle around an Alpha and Omega, artfully embroidered in ivory-white thread.

"I couldn't bring myself to choose snow-white," Salimi's voice was actually apologetic. "I'm sure you know that white is the Muslim color of mourning. But I can assure you of one thing, Sarah: the pearls are yours."

I was overwhelmed. This was so perfect, unpretentious yet beautiful, and it came from the heart. "Where did you find the pearls?" was all I managed to say, my voice slightly shaky.

"Right at the observation room of the Canadian base," Salimi explained. "You were so desperately worried about the commander and at the same time so shocked when you ripped that little chain that you'd been clinging to all night as if it were an anchor... I could see in your eyes that on the one hand you absolutely needed to get out to the runway, but on the other hand you seemed to be thinking that letting the small pearls roll out of reach would be like letting your lifetime's happiness slip away. So when you decided that the urge to get out was stronger, I convinced the Canadian lieutenant who was with us to open the ventilation shaft and get out at least those pearls that had caught on the smaller grille beneath. Half of the chain is lost, though, I'm sorry."

Impulsively, I hugged my old friend, not caring now if he might think it proper or not. After a short moment, I felt him return the hug in a slightly shy but not uncomfortable manner. "Ahmad, you have no idea how much this means to me."

Just a little embarrassed, Salimi somewhat indistinctly waved his hand. "Awww, it was the least I could do. After all, you were about to make my dream of returning to London come true. I've been contemplating ever since in what way I'd give the pearls back to you. As I said, this was just the perfect occasion." Salimi's voice had sobered a little. "Your daughter will be baptized to the name of Jesus, wearing a dress that bears visible proof of Allah's blessing. She may be a child of the first generation that will see our faiths and societies coexist in peace and understanding. That is why I wanted her to have this robe."

All our glances were focused on the girl's tiny, relaxed face as it rested against Harm's broad chest. The olive tan of her eyelids was hiding the stunning blue of her eyes that had as yet refused to show any signs of turning into brown. Maybe they never would.

I leaned against my husband's side, putting my arm around his waist. "I would be glad to know that she'll grow up in a world where young people everywhere decide to build their future, not bomb themselves to death." My voice was thoughtful as I took in the innocent expression on my child's features. "If we want to spare her what we had to go through, then we'll have to make her courageous enough to start building bridges."

Once again, a benign, sage smile tugged at the corners of Salimi's mouth. "Don't ask me what makes me so sure but I can see that happening. Knowing her parents, I know she will make this world a little better."

Never looking up at us, Harm gently smoothed Mary's dark hair with his right hand. "Amen to that," he said softly.

*** THE END ***