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LEO J.
MALONEY

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LEO J. MALONEY



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This book is dedicated to John Peterson (Code Name Cougar), who was both my colleague and best friend for many decades. John and I met on our first day of black ops training and developed a special bond that made us closer than brothers. We had each other's back one hundred percent of the time and were so in tune that we knew exactly what the other was thinking. We had talked about writing a book about our many missions together, but he was not able to complete our last mission together as he lost his battle to cancer in 1997.

I think about John every day and know how lucky I was to have him in my life. I miss you, my friend.

CHAPTER 1

Three sharp raps at the door yanked young Zalmay Siddiqi from uneasy dreams, and the adrenaline hit him like a kick in the face. He froze with the primitive instinct of a rabbit cornered by a fox, hoping against hope that whatever predator had come knocking would go away of its own volition. He listened. The knocks came in a familiar pattern of three shorts and three longs: Cougar's signal. As his blazing panic subsided, he realized that he had been holding his breath. He exhaled, but the smoldering dread remained. Even friendly knocks were unwelcome in the middle of the night.

He rolled nimbly out of bed and pulled the lanyard on the light fixture above him, spilling the bulb's dim yellow glow onto the sparsely furnished room: a lone mattress on the floor, a plastic chair draped with his clothes, his few possessions huddled in a corner where cracked plaster walls exposed the concrete underneath.

Tugging on a plain Afghan *khameez* tunic and *salwar* trousers made of rough cloth, he hurried out of the bedroom to the hallway door. The knocks were still coming intermittently in their steady pattern. Zalmay gingerly turned the lock, and no sooner was the dead bolt released than the door was flung open, nearly knocking Zalmay back into the wall. A tall, wiry American, a man he knew as Cougar, rushed into the apartment, also wearing Afghan garb and carrying a black duffel bag. His movements were jerky, his voice breathless.

"Grab your things. You've got thirty seconds."

Zalmay's thoughts were forming a protest at Cougar's abruptness, but the urgency in the American's speech stayed his tongue. With a sudden clarity, he asked only, "Am I coming back?"

"No," Cougar responded, and he looked over his shoulder. "Pack only what you can't live without."

Cougar stood at the door, his head cocked like that of a prey animal listening for stalking predators. Zalmay threw his single other outfit and his prayer mat into a canvas knapsack. From under his mattress, he took out a slim roll of cash tied with a rubber band. He reached in again, pulled out a creased old photograph, and hid it, along with the money, in the folds of his shirt. Then he turned to face Cougar, doing his best to look brave.

"I have been expecting this," he said. "I am ready."

Fear and anxiety had marked Zalmay's life since he'd met the American and agreed to help him. Zalmay was well aware of the consequences of being caught. The thought usually kept him awake at night, tossing on his mattress at night. And on this particular night, his nightmare had finally come calling. He could only feel glad that it was his friend and not an enemy assassin at his door.

"Good," said Cougar, "Now let's . . ." Cougar trailed off and turned his head as if listening for something. Then Zalmay heard it, too, and it stopped him cold. It was the rumbling motor of an approaching car, which came to a halt down below the open window. Zalmay walked to the window to see who it was. Looking down, he saw a black sedan with two men climbing out of it, Americans in Western suits, each with a submachine gun in his hand.

"No, get away from there!" said Cougar.

Too late—one of the men below looked up, called to the other, and pointed right at Zalmay. Both black-suited men dashed for the door of the building. Zalmay's apartment was on the corner, all the way down the hall; the men would have no trouble at all finding them.

"Come on!" said Cougar, motioning for him to go out the door. Zalmay dashed out and was halfway down the hall, past a row of silent, closed doors on his right, when he noticed that Cougar had stayed

behind to shut the door to the apartment. He waited, nervously, as Cougar caught up, and they hurried to the stairs. From there, he could already hear the footsteps of the two men scrambling up, closing the distance with each footfall. Zalmay's apartment was only three floors up, so it wouldn't take them long to get there. And there was no other way out.

Cougar drew his weapon from its shoulder holster. "Upstairs," he whispered. "Quietly." He took the lead, and they tiptoed up a flight of stairs, keeping their footsteps as light as possible. Cougar crouched behind the bend of the fourth-floor corridor, and Zalmay ducked behind him, breathing heavily, his mind blank with panic, the way a rabbit must feel when confronting a tiger. The American kept his Glock pointed toward the stairwell as the sound of the men's shoes on the steps grew louder and louder, and then they heard the footsteps receding down the hallway toward Zalmay's apartment.

"Zalmay," whispered Cougar, pulling a set of keys from his pocket, holding them tightly in his palm so they would not jangle. "Take these. I'm going to hold them off. While they're searching your apartment, you run down as fast as you can and start the car. If I'm not the first one down, you take off without me, understand?"

"But . . ."

"Don't argue, just go. Now, after me!"

Cougar walked back down the flight of stairs, quickly and silently, leading with his shoulder, arm extended and gun pointing down, at the ready. They heard a crack as the men kicked in Zalmay's door. Before reaching the landing on the third floor, Cougar motioned for Zalmay to jump over the rusted railing onto the next flight down, so he wouldn't be seen from the hallway. Zalmay clambered over and vaulted down, but his foot slipped on the metal, and his arm smacked painfully on the railing below. A hollow, metallic sound echoed up the stairwell. They heard voices and then the sound of the two men running out of the apartment.

"Go!" said Cougar. "I'll hold them off!"

Zalmay nodded and started down. He leapt down the stairs two steps at a time, one hand clutching the keys and the other the strap of his knapsack, which was slung over his shoulder and slammed against him with every step.

Gunshots, three sets of them, blasted through the hallway upstairs; the single reports from Cougar's Glock were answered by volleys of fire from the two men's semiautomatics. He slowed down and for a split second considered going back to help his friend. Honor demanded it. But no; Cougar had told him to go on ahead, so that is what he would do. He had learned that the honorable thing to do was not always the right thing. He pressed on, and an inchoate, wordless prayer for his friend's survival formed in his mind.

Zalmay raced into the dusty night air, easily spotting Cougar's beat-up jeep, parked at a hasty angle to the building, the headlights left on like the still-open eyes of a dead ox. He pulled the door open and swung into the driver's seat, tossing the knapsack onto the seat beside him. He fumbled to slide the key into the ignition and then turned it; the engine rumbled to life. Gunshots reverberated from inside but now they came from much closer. Cougar had made his way down the stairs. Zalmay leaned over to unlatch the passenger door and then kicked it wide.

Cougar burst out of the building. He stopped just long enough to shoot out one of the front tires of the men's sedan. Then he ran over and hurtled into the jeep's passenger seat, pulling the door shut as he did in one fluid motion, yelling, "Go, go, go!" Zalmay saw the two men appear at the door as he hit the gas. They sped off under a barrage of bullets. Several slammed into the back of the jeep, making dull, metallic *thunks*, and one shattered the rear window. Zalmay mashed the pedal to the floor. The sound of gunfire slowly faded in the distance and then stopped altogether.

"Are you okay?" Zalmay asked, his eyes on the dark dirt road. "Were you hit?"

"Still in one piece," Cougar said, with ragged breath and looking back. "You?"

"I am fine. Are they behind us?"

"They won't be getting far. Not in that car."

Zalmay exhaled. "Where are we going?"

"Turn here." Zalmay turned the jeep into a narrow side street. "We'll take the inner roads, just to be safe," Cougar added. "It's best to make sure we're not easy to follow."

Zalmay breathed deeply, trying to calm his frantically beating heart. "Where are we going?" he asked again.

"Highway One, toward Kabul," said Cougar, shuffling through his duffel bag.

"We are going to Kabul?"

"You're going to Kabul," Cougar replied pointedly. "And then out of the country."

"You are not coming, then?" Zalmay said, trying his best to hide his anxiety and disappointment.

Cougar did not respond, and Zalmay didn't press it. He knew the answer already.

"I need you to bring something with you when you go," said Cougar.

He reached into a pocket and produced a small black plastic chip, no bigger than his fingernail: a camera's memory card. "You know what's in there?" Cougar said.

"Is that what those men were after? The photographs?"

Cougar nodded. "This, and you."

"How did they know?"

"I tried to transfer them electronically, and the files were intercepted. That's how they knew to look for us. Now I can't get them through from here—they're watching every single connection. It needs to be carried out of here. And you're going to be responsible for getting it to the US and into the right hands."

"America . . ." he said in a whisper barely audible over the engine's growl. Through everything that had happened, the dream of going to that Promised Land had never left his mind. But he had never allowed himself to fully believe it was possible. To hear Cougar say it now suddenly made it a reality.

"We'll travel together as far as possible, but it's better if you don't take the jeep. If nothing else, these fresh bullet holes are going to be a tad suspicious. We'll stop where you can find alternative transportation—something less conspicuous."

"But, Cougar . . ."

"We don't have much time, so let me finish. While you're on the road, tell no one your real name. Call as little attention to yourself as possible. If you have any identification, get rid of it now. Burn it or toss it into a storm drain or down a well. Do what you can to change your appearance. You have some money; here's more." Cougar handed him a wad of bills—American currency. "If anyone asks you're visiting family in Kabul. Come up with a story, and practice it. And always keep an eye out for tails, just like I taught you. I can't promise you'll make it there safely, between the Taliban and our American friends. But I've done all I can to give you a fighting chance."

Zalmay sat in silence as the morning twilight rose upon the city, making it appear ghostly and unreal. Even now, while they drove alongside light traffic on an arterial road, the scene already felt like a distant memory.

"Why will you not come with me to Kabul?" he asked.

Cougar hesitated, as if gathering his thoughts. "This is the safest way for both of us. I can't get us out of here, not anymore, and I would attract too much attention on the highway, from soldiers and the Taliban."

"The Taliban!" Zalmay bristled. "They would have no love for me, either, if they knew I have been helping you."

"Plus," Cougar added, ignoring Zalmay's interruption, "I have some unfinished business here." He gave a wry smile.

“I will stay and help you,” Zalmay declared. “I am not afraid.”

“No way.”

“I want to stay,” he protested, and anger welled up in him. “I want to stay and fight!”

Cougar sighed and took on a stern but fatherly tone. “I need this memory card delivered. I can’t do it myself, and there’s no one else I can count on to do it. This is your mission, Zalmay.”

Zalmay looked away. “It is a coward’s mission.”

Cougar frowned, and his tone became distinctly one of rebuke. “This isn’t about you proving yourself, Zalmay. Delivering those photos is our top priority. People’s lives might depend on those pictures getting into the right hands. If you want to do something meaningful, this is it.”

Zalmay assented wordlessly. Then he scowled and looked out the window as Cougar proceeded to give him specific instructions for what to do in Kabul. Being sent away like this filled him with shame, because he would be unable to help his friend right there in Kandahar. At the same time, his heart ached with thoughts of America, which had always seemed so impossibly far but was now tantalizingly close—and that filled him with even more guilt, the guilt of choosing a comfortable life while others like him would remain no better off. Ultimately, he knew that Cougar was right. For now, however, he needed to brood.

With daylight approaching, the city was beginning to show signs of life. They were on the outskirts now, where the streets gave way to Highway 1. This highway was one of the Coalition’s most ambitious projects in Afghanistan, cooperatively built by troops from among twenty-six NATO partner countries. Once called the Ring Road, the highway stretched to the capital and beyond, going around the entire country before coming full circle back to Kandahar from the west.

Cougar had Zalmay pull over to the side of the road a short distance from a small bazaar where many drivers stopped for food and tea and to trade information about the conditions of the road before the haul to Kabul.

As Zalmay and Cougar popped open the doors and climbed out of the jeep, the muezzins’ voices began to drone over the minaret loudspeakers, calling all Muslims to their morning prayer. Zalmay’s hand instinctively went for his prayer mat.

“I’m sorry, my friend, I can’t wait for prayers,” said Cougar. “But I’m confident Allah will forgive a short delay while you say good-bye to a dear friend.”

Zalmay smiled, and they embraced tenderly.

“Thank you, Cougar.”

The older man laughed hollowly. “I’m the one who should be thanking you, Zalmay. You did far more than anyone could ask for.”

“And yet I am eternally grateful to you.”

Cougar nodded, and Zalmay knew that he understood.

“I’m sorry you have to go alone, Zalmay. But I promise you, what you’re doing is important. I’m counting on you.”

Zalmay nodded in assent. “Will we meet again?”

“In the States, if everything goes right. And let’s pray that it will. Good-bye, Zalmay.”

“Good-bye, Cougar. Peace be upon you.”

Zalmay gave the American the keys to the jeep and watched him as he climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Zalmay watched him as he drove off, feeling more the loss of his friend than leaving his home. When Cougar disappeared into the city, Zalmay turned his thoughts to the road ahead: a harsh, dry land punctuated with towns and villages and a thousand enemies between him and his destination.

CHAPTER 2

Dan Morgan turned onto the small suburban cul-de-sac, the familiar tightness gripping his knee as he forced himself with gritted teeth to pound the pavement harder. *Embrace the pain; love the pain.* He pressed on for the last few dozen yards to his house, feeling the cutting chill of the early-March air on his throat as he inhaled.

Neika, who absolutely would not be tired out, had been straining at her leash to chase a squirrel but now set her sights on home. She let out a frustrated half bark, half whimper, muffled and choked off by her collar. Somehow, she still retained the exuberant energy of a puppy, but he knew she could really do some damage when she was threatened.

“Easy, girl,” Morgan chuckled. He broke into a slow trot and then slowed to a smooth stroll as he walked into his front yard. He took a minute outside to catch his breath, letting Neika off her leash. She trotted into the garage to sit at the kitchen door, panting, tongue lolling, and eyeing him impatiently.

Morgan stretched his calves and, feeling another jolt of pain, rubbed his aching knee. “Well, Dan,” he muttered to himself as he opened the door and Neika plowed inside, “I guess you’re officially not a young man anymore.”

As with everything else, Morgan took aging stoically in stride, even now, with forty-one just around the corner. However, those little signs that his body was no longer what it once was always had their own particular sting, especially in the way that they carried a stark reminder of the life he no longer led.

As he walked into the house, he was met by the smell of coffee and frying bacon. His daughter, Alex, was at the stove, cracking eggs on the edge of a skillet. She was as tall as he, and her brown hair had been recently cut shorter, to chin-length. She combined Morgan’s athleticism with Jenny’s slender frame, and even her casual movements were full of grace.

“Well, this is a nice surprise,” he said.

She turned around nonchalantly, looking at him with sharp, intelligent eyes, and gave him a good-natured smile. “Mom’s out running errands, so I thought I’d be a good kid and make breakfast.” Alex turned back to the counter and scooped crispy strips of bacon from the skillet onto a paper towel.

“Are you sure you should be handling bacon?” Morgan asked, gently ribbing. “Isn’t that against the rules?” She had not eaten meat for nearly three months.

Alex laughed. “Whatever rules there are, Dad, I’m the one who makes them.”

“So it wouldn’t actually be cheating if you had some, just this once?” He grinned with feigned hopefulness.

“And look, eggs over easy, just the way you like ’em,” she said, ignoring his comment. She poked the spatula at one of the three sizzling in the pan and then, a bit too abruptly, flipped it over. The yolk began to ooze out from under it. “Ah, crap.”

Morgan walked over to her and reached for the spatula. “Here, let me show you.”

“I think I can handle frying an egg, Dad.” That was his daughter: independent to the bone.

Neika, who had gotten her fill at her water bowl, sauntered over to beg for scraps.

“Nothing for you here, puppy,” Alex said. The coffeemaker sputtered, then beeped as the last of the brew dripped into the pot. She poured out two mugs and scooped two spoonfuls of sugar into one. “Still take yours black, Dad?”

"You got it."

She handed him a mug and took a sip from hers. "Ooh, sweet, sweet caffeine."

"So," he said, "big plans for the weekend?"

"Oh, I might meet up with Tom and Robbie later today, if they're around. Nothing definite yet."

While she fussed with the eggs in the skillet, he took a moment to regard her, with her new and yet unfamiliar chin-length hair. She really was becoming a lovely young woman, charming and vivacious. It was more than that, though: there was something about her that seemed much more composed and self-assured than the moody adolescent she had been even six months ago, when she had turned sixteen. He had always been unconditionally proud of her, but, now more than ever, she seemed to really command it.

"So, your mother mentioned there's a boy you've been seeing," he said, as casually and good-naturedly as possible. He expected her to roll her eyes and clam up, but he was surprised to find not a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"His name is Dylan, Dad. He's a good guy, and I like him a lot."

"That's great, sweetie. I'm happy for you."

"And if you promise to behave," she said, "I might even bring him home to meet you."

He grinned and sipped his coffee. It was steaming hot, and it made him realize how cold he was. "How did you two meet?"

"An APS event."

"APS?"

"You know," she said. "Americans for a Peaceful Society. Remember I told you I joined up?"

"Oh, the peaceniks . . ." said Morgan, chuckling. He sipped more coffee.

"I think the preferred term is *pacifist*, Dad," she said, with an edge of irritation to her voice.

"In the sixties they called them *hippies*." He had meant the comment to be good-natured, but he knew immediately it was the wrong thing to say at the wrong time.

Alex scowled. "I guess it would be too much to ask for you to take me seriously."

Morgan frowned. Things seemed to have taken a turn rather quickly. "I didn't mean . . ."

"I know what you meant," she said dryly. "I know how much respect you have for people like—well, people like me, I guess."

"Of course I respect you, Alex," he said. "But you have to admit, this whole pacifist thing tends to be a bit . . . *unrealistic*, don't you think?" He was trying hard not to anger her, to humor her, this new passion of hers, but he could tell he wasn't doing a very good job of it. *So much for being a master of deception*, he thought.

"Dad, do you know what's happening out there? Do you know how many soldiers are dying in our wars? How many civilians? Just innocent bystanders, at home, going to work or to school? Do you know, Dad, what our government does to terror suspects, many of whom turn out to be innocent?"

He nodded. He wanted to tell her he knew more than she could imagine. He wanted to tell her things he had not only heard about but *seen*. Instead, he bit his lip and let her continue.

"So maybe APS is a small ripple in a big pond. So maybe I can't change the world. At least I'm doing *something*."

Dan bit down harder, doing his best to keep from saying something he might regret. "Maybe, Alex. But the truth is, there are evil people in this world. People who would much rather you and I and everyone we know be dead. It's not like we go to war just for the fun of it. The people who make those decisions always weigh everything carefully, to make sure it's really, absolutely necessary."

She scoffed. "Right. And even then, it still never seems to solve anything, does it?"

"Isn't it ironic," Morgan said, grinning in an attempt to change the tone of the conversation, "that we're fighting over this?"

One of the eggs in the skillet let out a loud pop. Alex sighed. "How about you go sit down, I'll bring breakfast in a minute, and we'll forget I ever mentioned anything?"

It may not have been much, but it was a peace offering of sorts. Morgan took it as an opening. "Truce, then?"

"Truce."

"Hey, listen," he said. "I was saving this until after breakfast, but, you know, the Bruins are playing at the Garden this Friday. I thought you might like to go, too."

"Yeah, Dad," she said, with a measure of genuine excitement in her voice, though still tempered with her irritation. "I'd love to." Sports had always been their bond; whatever the arguments between them, this common ground brought them together. He wondered if it would be enough as she grew older and drifted further and further away. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, that he would do anything for her happiness.

"Okay, then," he said instead, and he turned to walk into the dining room. The table was set for breakfast for two, the silverware slightly askew but with pretensions of luxury, like linen napkins clumsily folded into fans, and a copy of the *Boston Globe* sitting neatly next to his plate. What a sweet kid, he thought, even if she was a little misguided by her own naivety. He sat heavily into the chair, relieving his knees with a sigh, and shivered at the chill of his damp shirt against his skin as he leaned back.

He picked up the paper and flipped through to the National section, which had a long piece on Lara McKay, an up-and-coming senator from Ohio who was making waves in Washington. A fresh face in politics, she had been catapulted into the national spotlight in the past year by her powerful appeals for ethics and political reform. She was bold, had a reputation for getting things done, and had emerged as a presidential hopeful in the next election. Morgan knew well how political fads came and went, and he knew even better that politicians sang a radically different tune inside their cabinets than they did to the press. But even he thought there might be something to this one.

He scanned the article but he couldn't concentrate on the words; his heart just wasn't in national affairs at the moment. Then he looked below the fold to find the smarmy mug of Senator Edgwick Nickerson smiling at him. He and McKay were shaking hands at some political event. It made sense, of course, for McKay to be seen with the man widely considered to be the most trusted politician in America. But Morgan's image of her suffered from the association. Nickerson was one of the top players in DC—an old-money aristocrat who had a way of making people trust him implicitly. But Morgan knew better than to believe his public image: the man knew how to play the political game with a reputation among insiders for masterful behind-the-scenes manipulations that no one even dared speak of aloud for fear of reprisal.

Morgan decided he wouldn't let politics spoil what was already not the most pleasant of days, so he turned to the sports page for a March Madness update and was immersed in reading when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" he called out to Alex. He walked to the foyer and opened the front door to find a narrow-shouldered man with thinning blond hair and nervous eyes. It was a familiar face, and one he thought he'd never see again. It fell somewhat short of being a pleasant surprise.

"What the hell are you doing here, Plante?"

"Hello, Cobra. How are you?" said the man softly, with an edge of anxiety to his voice. "It's been a long time."

"There's no Cobra here," said Morgan. "Not anymore."

"Would you rather I called you by your civilian name?" Plante asked. "I can do that, if you prefer."

"I would *rather* you tell me what the hell you're doing at my front door," said Morgan. "Or are you here just to catch up on old times?"

“I need to talk to you,” said Plante, the apprehension obvious in his tone. “Please.”

“Dad, who is it?” called Alex from the kitchen.

“Just a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses, sweetie,” he yelled to her. Then he turned back to Plante.

“You know what? I changed my mind. I don’t care why you’re here. Get the hell off my property before I exercise my right to shoot you as a trespasser.”

“Won’t you—”

“Listen here,” Morgan interrupted, lowering his voice to a growl. “I don’t work for you anymore. Whatever it is, I don’t care. It’s not my problem. It belongs to you and the rest of the clowns at the Agency.”

“What if I told you it’s a matter of life and death? What if I told you no one else could help us?”

“Jesus, it’s always life and death with you people, isn’t it?”

“You know that better than anyone else, don’t you, Cobra?”

Morgan gritted his teeth. “Listen, Plante, my daughter’s here, and she just cooked my breakfast. She’s going in, and I’m going to sit down with her and eat, and you’re going to get the hell away from me and my family.”

“You won’t even listen to what I have to say?”

“There’s nothing you can say, Plante. Now, go away.” Morgan began to swing the door shut.

“Cobra, it’s Cougar,” said Plante. The name stopped Morgan dead in his tracks. “Your old partner Peter Conley. He’s been killed. I’m sorry to tell you like this. But now you’re the only one who can help us.”

Morgan looked at Plante in shock, then took a deep breath.

“Fine. You can come in. But if I find out you’re bullshitting me . . .”

Morgan stepped aside to let Plante into his home. And just like that, his past had flooded back and wash away his life of suburban tranquility.

CHAPTER 3

Morgan walked into the kitchen hunched in the posture of apology and found Alex with a plate of eggs and bacon in each hand, ready to walk them into the dining room.

“Who was that, Dad?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Morgan said. “It’s a business associate of mine. He has an urgent issue, and he needs to talk to me about it right away. I’m going to have to take a rain check on breakfast.”

“Oh,” she said, obviously disappointed. Then she asked, scrunching up her brow, “What exactly is an emergency for a classic car broker?”

He chuckled. “There’s a surprise entry at an auction that my client is interested in. Sometimes these things can be extremely time-sensitive.”

“I see,” she said blankly.

“I’m going to try to get rid of him as soon as I can, and then we can spend some time together.”

“Okay, Dad,” she said, with a pride and stoicism that he knew masked some hurt feelings. “You should take your breakfast in with you, at least. You need to eat, and I wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

Morgan figured that accepting the food would be the least bad choice, so he took the plate and walked to the foyer, where Plante was standing. He ushered the surprise visitor into his office, shutting the door behind them and setting the plate of eggs and bacon down on the desk.

Morgan sat down in his chair, behind his desk. Plante pulled up a green leather upholstered chair. He was a thin, balding man with a weak nose and chin. He looked aged, too, his hair getting prematurely white and perpetual worry carved into his face even more deeply than before. But some things hadn’t changed: he still wore a rumpled button-down with a loosened tie and sleeves pushed up to his elbows, just like he did eight years before and for as long as Morgan had known him before that. And he still had the same steady anxiety, which, if anything, as Morgan remembered, made him more rather than less effective handler.

“I gotta tell you, Plante, you were the last person I expected to see show up at my front door.”

It was true. He hadn’t heard from Plante in years, not since Morgan’s bitter departure from the Agency. The moment Morgan saw his old associate, a million possibilities had flooded his mind, and he instinctively began to think of how he might take Alex and his wife, Jenny, and leave the country. A lot of these plans involved killing Plante right then and there.

Morgan checked himself. If he were in that kind of danger, he wouldn’t be sitting down with Plante for a chat. He’d be a corpse already. They needed him. And he would have slammed the door in Plante’s face if he hadn’t mentioned the one person who prevented him from doing that, the one person Morgan held dearest from his past life.

“It’s been a long time,” said Plante.

“Yeah. Plante, how did it happen?” Morgan wasn’t in the mood for small talk.

Plante didn’t need to ask what he was referring to. “We’re not sure, Cobra. Cougar was working undercover in Afghanistan. Someone shot him and set fire to his apartment with his body inside.”

Morgan shut his eyes in grief. Conley and he had been partners ever since they left The Farm, until Morgan’s retirement. Being in life-and-death situations had been routine for them, and they had developed a deep and abiding trust and admiration for each other. He couldn’t count how many times they had saved each other’s asses. Morgan would have readily given his life for his friend. He could

hardly hold back the shame and guilt at the thought that if only he had been there with him . . .

“Who?”

“Who what?”

Morgan’s eyes were set with grim determination. “Who did it, Plante? Who pulled the trigger?”

“We don’t know exactly.”

“You’re the goddamn Central Intelligence Agency. Where the hell is your *intelligence*?” His gri was turning into anger, and all the past bitterness he had felt for the organization welled up inside him.

“It caught us by surprise. And he had enough enemies—you know how it is. What do you want me to tell you?”

Morgan got up, slamming his hand down on the desk. “I want you to tell me who did this so they can get the slow, painful death that they deserve.”

Plante regarded Morgan as if he understood, with a look of pain that might have been guilt. Morgan bit his lip and sat down.

“That’s what we all hope for, Cobra. That’s why I’m here, asking for your help.”

“That’s not why you’re here,” said Morgan. “What’s going to happen to his body?”

Plante looked at him contritely. “We couldn’t bring him back and risk exposing what he was. I don’t think I have to explain to you why that is. Given that he had no immediate family and that his body was badly burned . . .”

“*Plante*,” Morgan insisted.

Plante sighed. “We let the locals handle it. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Kandahar. I’m sorry, Cobra. He deserved better, but he knew the risks. Just like you did, every time you went out on assignment. That’s just the nature of the mission.”

Morgan took a deep breath, trying to calm his rage at imagining his friend buried in some lost little mound of dirt, a mangled corpse mourned by no one. He tried to keep his mind on practical matters.

“What was he doing there?”

“You know I can’t tell you that,” said Plante.

“Fine,” said Morgan. “Then don’t. But I know you’re not here just to give me the bad news. What do you want, then? Let’s hear what made the Agency suddenly remember that I exist.” Morgan scowled at him.

Plante returned a look that blended apology and commiseration. “We need your help.”

“I figured as much,” said Morgan acerbically. “I didn’t suppose this was a social call. I was looking for something a bit more specific.”

“It’s a sensitive matter that I’d rather not discuss here,” said Plante. Morgan shot him a look of incredulity, but he continued. “I’d like you to come with me down to Langley. There’s a helicopter about ten minutes away that can take us there, and if everything goes smoothly, I promise I’ll have you home in time for dinner.”

“I don’t have time for your bullshit, Plante. *You’re* here for *my* help, so as I see it, you’re not in any position to bargain.” Morgan leaned forward for emphasis. “Tell me what you need, or get out of my house.”

Plante was apologetic. “Come on, Cobra, be reasonable here. My hands are tied, and I need your help. I wish I could be straight with you, but the order came from above.”

“Then forget it.” Morgan got up and started for the door.

“Cobra . . .” said Plante, getting up as well.

Morgan stood face-to-face with the man and spoke in a low voice. “I mean it, Plante. I’m done with that life, done lying”—he looked around to make sure Alex wasn’t within earshot, and his voice sank to a rumbling whisper—“to my family. Done putting my life on the line for a bunch of spineless politicians and backstabbers.”

“If you won’t do it for me, do it for Cougar,” said Plante.

Morgan feigned a lunge at Plante, who flinched in response. “*Don’t you dare! You have no right to use his memory to get me to do what you want.*”

Plante seemed to make an effort to gloss over being intimidated and to assert himself, but his speech still had a slight tremble. “What about what *he* wanted, Cobra?” he asked. “Have you considered that?”

Morgan stepped back. “What are you talking about?”

Plante hesitated, looking down.

“Don’t pull this crap on me, Plante,” said Morgan. “You’re not getting anywhere with this cryptic bullshit.”

Plante considered that for a moment. “He sent us a last message before he died. I can tell you that much.”

“What did it say?”

Plante just stared back at him.

“That’s it, we’re done.”

“Stop!” Plante’s voice took on a new urgency. “Look, Cobra, truth is, we don’t know. It’s in some kind of code, a code that we’ve had little luck breaking. And we suspect we’re running out of time.”

“Why are you asking me about this? What makes you think I’ll do any better than the pros over the Agency?”

“Because there is only one thing that’s perfectly clear.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“It’s addressed to you.”

Morgan faltered. “Come again?”

“‘For Cobra’s Eyes Only.’ That’s how it starts. In plain English. The rest of it seems to be in a kind of code, but the words don’t match up with any of ours. We can only conclude that it’s actually meant for you and that you’re the only one who can tell us what it means.”

Morgan frowned, deep in thought. He didn’t know what it could be about. There was a time in his life when coded messages from Cougar would have been business as usual. Just another day on the job. But that time was gone, long gone. Their interactions these days were limited to exchanging cards on Christmas and the occasional afternoon spent over beers, reminiscing about all the times they cheated death together. It was so implausible, all he could manage to say to Plante was an incredulous “Why?”

“Your guess is as good as ours.”

He thought for a moment. Knowing Cougar, it had to be important. And in this line of work *important* could mean *urgent* and *life threatening*. Suddenly, Morgan felt as if he had a mission again. He didn’t waste any time. “Do you have it?”

“Have what?”

“What do you think? The *message*. Do you have it?”

Plante seemed taken aback by Morgan’s sudden intensity. “Sorry, Cobra. I’m not authorized to take it out of headquarters.”

“You’re kidding me,” said Morgan. “What if it’s too late by the time we get there?”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t have the authority,” said Plante, shrugging.

“Then talk to someone who *does* have the damn authority!” Morgan exclaimed, exasperated.

“I already did. Kline said specifically—”

“Kline?” asked Morgan, his eyes narrowing. “You mean *Harold* Kline? What’s he got to do with it?”

Plante hesitated. “He’s Deputy Director of the Clandestine Service.”

“Boyle made *that* worthless, spineless little pencil pusher *Deputy Director of the NCS*?”

Plante stiffened and adopted an affected, professional tone. “Regardless of what you think of him, Cobra, that’s what he is. And that means he has final say, unless you want to personally take it up with the Director himself.”

Morgan leaned forward in his chair as if he was about to lunge at Plante. “Well, you can tell the asshole. . .” He was too beside himself to finish the sentence.

“Look, I know you’ve had your disagreements in the past. But he’s running the show now. This kind of thing has to go through him.”

“I get it. I know him. I know what all this bullshit is about. He wants me to come down there so he can kiss his ring, doesn’t he?” Morgan fell back angrily in his chair. “Wants to gloat and lord his new position and his fancy new office over me, and Cougar be damned—isn’t that it?”

Plante softened. “Look, Cobra, I wish I could help you. I really do. But I’ve been working under Kline for a while now. I frankly don’t believe that he’s purposely stonewalling this. My impression is that he just happens to believe fervently in protocol.”

“Well, screw him,” Morgan said, with incredulous impatience. “You need to do what’s right about Cougar.”

“Nothing I *can* do.”

“Then screw you, too. Let’s see what Boyle has to say about this shit.”

Plante sighed. “NCS Director Boyle is aware of the situation, and he gave Kline the authority in this matter. Calling him is only going to delay this even more. Cobra, this is the only way it’s going to happen. If you want to see the letter, you need to come down with me to headquarters.”

Morgan exhaled, barely containing his anger. He could easily be as stubborn as Plante. He could play this game. He did brinksmanship as well as—hell, probably better than—any of those clown politicians. But how long would it be until Kline caved in? These missions tended to be time-critical, and he knew that Kline would always privilege his own authority over everything else, good intentions or no.

“There was a time when you wouldn’t have put up with this bureaucratic bullshit,” he told Plante, knowing that, by saying that, he had, in effect, caved.

“Maybe I’ve come to realize that there’s a reason why we follow the chain of command,” said Plante.

“To hell with the chain of command.” Morgan exhaled, closing his eyes, letting his anger subside. “I’ll come. But not for them. For Cougar.”

“You’re doing the right thing, Cobra.”

“Yeah. That’s always been my weak spot.”

Morgan escorted Plante out of the office and to the front door.

“Look, Cobra . . .” Plante seemed newly contrite, his face full of heartfelt pain. “This—Cougar . . . It was a blow. He was my friend, too. I can only imagine what it must be like for you. Why don’t you take a few minutes? I’ll be right outside when you’re ready to go.”

Morgan assented tacitly, then closed the door and walked back to his office. He took down a picture of Peter and himself that hung on the wall next to his gun cabinet. Sinking into his chair, he looked at the framed photo, in which he still had a full mustache on an unlined face. Peter Conley towered next to him, wiry, with a high forehead and a prominent chin. Both were smiling widely. The picture had been taken just a few years after they graduated from their year of CIA training and began work on Black Ops. They were showing off new arm tattoos, corresponding to their code names: Conley’s was a cougar, and Morgan’s a coiling cobra, ready to strike—deadly animals for deadly men.

He glanced at the eggs and bacon, still untouched on the plate, undoubtedly cold by now. He thought of Alex and couldn’t help remembering the night he had told Jenny he didn’t really make his money—or most of it, anyway—dealing in antique cars.

He told her all he could say without breaking his oath of secrecy. All those business trips to c

auctions, celebrity auto shows, private collector negotiations, and fleet deals—most were covers for dangerous forays into foreign countries, and often into enemy territory, to protect American interests. They were full of excitement, yes, as well as deception and violence—he had cheated death again and again. He did it by being stronger, faster, smarter, and better prepared than the enemy—but he knew that others had been, too, and had not survived. He was good and he knew it, but he also knew he owed Lady Fortune his survival on more than one occasion.

Jenny had been a mess of emotions when he told her. She had been proud, yes, of his bravery and service to his country, but she was also livid that he had deceived her into living, unwittingly, under the constant threat of being widowed by a foreign bullet, a car bomb, or a cyanide capsule. Even worse was that little Alex, almost nine years old at the time, could lose her father. They had made a decision together that night:

Alex would not grow up fatherless. Morgan had called Plante in the morning and told him he was out for good. That was almost eight years ago.

Morgan looked down at the picture in his hand and wondered whether Conley would be alive at the moment if they had still been partners. As he brooded on their friendship and what could have been, Morgan heard the sound of Jenny's car pulling into the driveway.

CHAPTER 4

“What do you mean, you have to go to DC?” demanded Jenny. After helping unload the groceries from the car and put them away, Morgan had pulled her into the bedroom, away from Alex, and told her that he had to go. The soft gentleness of her face became uneasy, and she pushed her short brown hair nervously behind her ears. She knew, of course, what was in DC.

“Plante is outside, waiting,” he said, not knowing where to begin.

“Plante? You mean your old supervisor?” she asked, bewildered. She walked over to the window and looked out.

“My old handler, yes.” He tried to project reassurance in his voice. Its effect was limited, at best.

“Dan, what’s going on? What does he want?”

“It’s Peter. Peter Conley was killed on a mission.”

“Oh, Dan, I’m so sorry,” she said, as her natural kindness asserted itself, and she took his hand in hers and held it tightly. “How are you?”

He looked at her stoically, but he knew he couldn’t hide his grief.

“Oh, Dan . . .” she said, embracing him. She pulled away and then asked, “Is there going to be a funeral?”

“No,” he said bitterly. “Apparently it was more *convenient* to have him buried over there.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” she said suspiciously. “I assumed. . . Why do you have to go to DC, then?”

“Something to do with his last mission. They say they need my help.”

She pulled away from him, opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it on a second thought. Then she finally said, “*Help* how?” Her sympathetic dark brown eyes took on a familiar steely glint that was the only thing that still had the power to intimidate him.

“It’s strictly paperwork, I promise. They want me to take a look at something. Some kind of coded message.”

“They’re the CIA,” she said sharply. “Don’t they have people who can take care of that there?”

Morgan wondered how he had ever managed to keep his life hidden away from her for so long. “It’s a special case, Jen. It’s got to be me.”

“Dan . . .” she said, half pleading, half admonishing.

“I have to do this, Jenny.”

“Do you remember what you told me back when Alex was a child?” she asked. “Do you remember what you promised?”

“Yeah,” he replied, with a pinch of contrition. “I said that I was done. Out. And I meant it.” He moved in closer and put his arms around her. “I’m coming in only as a special consultant. This could be important, and I might be the only one who can help them. Believe me, I would not be going if that weren’t the case.”

She backed up slightly and raised an eyebrow. “No running around in a war zone?”

“No,” he said firmly.

“No gunfights? No flying halfway around the world to put your life at risk?”

“No and no. They show me a printout, I tell them what it means, and I’m out of there. That’s all.”

She sighed and looked away. “I know you’re upset about Peter. I am, too. But that won’t make me forget your promise.”

“I know,” he said. “I didn’t expect it to.”

“Did you ask Alex to the game already?” she asked. He nodded.

“Have you told her?” she asked.

“Not yet,” he said.

“She’ll play it cool, but she really craves your company, you know. She will be disappointed.”

“I know,” he said, and he kissed his wife tenderly. “Look, Jenny, I wouldn’t be doing this if weren’t perfectly safe. And if everything goes smoothly, I’m out of there in less than twenty-four hours.” Even if Plante were done with him by evening, Morgan had his own questions. “I’ll be back in time for the game with Alex. No harm, no foul.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

He didn’t have a chance to answer before they heard light footsteps approaching from the hall. The door, which had been ajar, opened, and Alex walked in breezily.

“Oh, hey, Mom,” she said, pointedly avoiding eye contact with Morgan. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m off to meet my friends in a few minutes.” And then, reading their body language, she asked, “What’s going on?”

“Your Dad has to go out of town.”

“Oh. Is this about that auction?”

“It’s just for a day or so,” said Morgan. “It’s happening in Virginia. I wasn’t planning on going, but an important client, the man who was just here—he wants me to be there to bid on a Duesenberg, and well, long story short, I need to fly down today.”

“Are you going to be back for the game?” she asked, with affected nonchalance.

“Are you kidding? I’ll be back before you know it. I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Yeah. I mean, no pressure, Dad,” she said, and he thought he saw the trace of a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

CHAPTER 5

“I hope that there is no one waiting for you tonight,” said Faqeer to Zalmay as he maneuvered the truck around another crater in the highway. The right front tire rolled off the edge of the road, and the entire truck groaned and teetered dangerously as the back wheel followed suit. Faqeer was obviously not new at this, so Zalmay did his best not to imagine the truck tipping over onto its side.

Zalmay had hitched a ride with Faqeer at the bazaar not far from where he last saw Cougar and the bullet-pocked jeep. Faqeer’s rig was what the Americans called a jingle truck, with beads and baubles hanging off the sides and with every surface painted with ornate designs. Faqeer, a Pashtun man in his late thirties with a trim black beard and a beret-style *pakol*, had been mostly silent at first, but he became more relaxed, even gregarious, after Zalmay answered his probing questions regarding his attitude toward the Americans.

Faqeer was as pro-American as they came—uncommon among the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan to which the great majority of the Taliban belonged—but Faqeer had little to thank the Taliban for and much reason to be grateful to the Coalition forces. He had started his fruit business almost entirely thanks to their nation-building efforts and strategies to wean local farmers off growing poppies, from enlisting the support of fruit producers in the Kandahar province to the renovation of Highway 1, through which he brought all his produce to the capital.

He had a particularly soft spot for the military, even though their presence at checkpoints all along the road caused significant delays. Highway 1 was plagued by attacks, and the craters in the asphalt provided an all-too-clear reminder: Taliban militia prowled that span of the highway, ambushing all kinds of passing vehicles. The sight of troops was always a relief: a guarantee, if only partial, of safe passage.

Zalmay had heard about the dangers of this highway, yet even though he hadn’t been on it in years, the peril was obvious at a mere glance. It wasn’t only the blackened asphalt and mortar holes; looking out the window, he saw the bullet-ridden carcasses of cars and trucks on the edge of the road, no monuments to travelers who were not as fortunate as they had been—so far, at least.

If he had taken Cougar’s jeep, Zalmay could have made it to the capital by noon. The fact that they were in a truck capable of carrying a few tons of weapons and explosives meant that they were stopped at every checkpoint and had to wait behind a line of similar trucks for inspection, even though Faqeer’s truck was, at the moment, mostly empty—it being much too early for harvest season. What should have been a six-hour journey was taking all day, and it was now getting dangerously close to sundown.

Zalmay had days before he was to meet Cougar’s contact—he was not worried about that. But at any moment on the road he could be found by the enemy. Every time a soldier motioned for them to pull over, Zalmay wondered if they had his picture, if he had been flagged as a person of interest, to be detained and delivered to the enemy’s doorstep.

Even if he weren’t suspected, what would happen if a soldier were to find the small black memo card, which he had nervously pushed through a hole in the upholstery of his seat so that it wouldn’t be found when he was searched? He had some comfort in the knowledge that the soldiers weren’t looking for small things. They were more interested in finding Kalashnikovs, from the AK-47 to the AK-103 rifle, or a pallet of hand grenades, stacked like eggs, thirty to forty per carton; but what if one of them had a sudden hunch while searching the cab of the truck, and he casually probed the plushy orange

foam for hidden objects?

“This is why they will lose, you know,” said Faqeer, as they passed the blackened shell of a bus, memorial on the roadside.

“What?” said Zalmay, distracted by his anxious musings.

“The Taliban. This is why they will lose, in the end. They are destroyers, and this is all they know how to do anymore. Just to kill and to make our lives miserable. They are now the enemies of the people of Afghanistan. For this reason, their unjust regime will not return, and their insurgency will be defeated by the will of the people. Even if the Americans leave, we will be free of these vermin.”

“*Insha’Allah*”—if God wills it—Zalmay muttered. At that moment, he noticed that Faqeer was looking intently into the rearview mirror. The truck slowed and veered to the side of the road, as two American army vehicles—what they called Humvees—sped past them, leaving a trail of dust. It didn’t take him long to notice where they were headed; they were following a pillar of smoke rising in the distance, where the terrain rose into jagged hills.

As they drew closer, they came upon a long row of stopped vehicles, most pulled over to the shoulder of the road randomly and askew, as if they didn’t expect to go anywhere anytime soon. The smoke seemed to be coming from the bridge over a shallow ravine a couple of hundred feet ahead, where the two American vehicles had carelessly parked.

Faqeer pulled the hand brake and opened the door. “Stay here; I will see what’s going on.” The driver climbed down from the truck and walked toward the gathering of vehicles. Zalmay watched uneasily as his companion talked to other drivers who were hiding from the punishing sun under the shade of a short cliff. Faqeer came back about fifteen minutes later.

“The bridge is out,” he said, sitting back in the driver’s seat, against the colorful seat cover. “Taliban sabotage. An entire segment crumbled, and there is no way to get across. It will be many weeks before it is fixed. But do not worry. The Americans will not allow the road to be impassable for long. They will bring a temporary bridge, and we will be on our way soon. There are some who are waiting here, but I do not believe that it will be done tonight.” He started up the engine, and the truck rumbled under Zalmay’s seat.

“What happens to us in the meantime?”

“There is a small village, not far, where we can get lodging and food,” said Faqeer, as he maneuvered the truck into a three-point turn. “I have stopped there before. It is a simple place, but it will allow us to resume our journey tomorrow.”

It was only some twenty minutes until they reached their destination, a collection of a couple dozen houses just off the main road. There were two trucks and three cars there already, no doubt for the same reason they were. Faqeer brought his truck to a stop near the other vehicles, and two men in rustic dress came to meet them.

“Are there beds for two more?” Faqeer asked as the two clambered down from the truck.

“All are welcome,” one of them said warmly, and he waved them toward the village. Zalmay followed him, his sandals dragging across dusty terrain to a collection of about a dozen single-story adobe huts arranged haphazardly on a shrub-speckled hill. It was a peasant village, though there was no sign of electricity, and village water came from a hand pump, attached, presumably, to a well. Coming drawing closer, Zalmay noticed that the sides of some of the houses had rows of bullet holes—not befitting a war zone, but the place had obviously not been untouched by violence.

As they arrived within the limits of the village, Zalmay and Faqeer were introduced to their hosts, two brothers named Gorbat and Mirzal. They were both short, with sun-browned, premature wrinkled skin but also with broad smiles that lit up their faces. The brothers showed them the house and room where they would sleep, with two straw mattresses laid out on the floor. Two small children, a boy and a girl, looked on curiously. Zalmay noticed that there were no other mattresses in the house.

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