So I remember

by TheCowsAteMyHomework

Summary

Her nose is broken.
This was supposed to go better the second time around.

Notes

I said I wasn't going to post another fic without finishing it first, but dammit, I have terrible impulse control when it comes to smolderingly attractive deputies. It seems I can't help myself, don't really want to either. Fight me. I'm so sorry.

I try, but if there are any remaining mistakes/typos, then I apologize. As always, constructive criticism is welcomed, and I hope you enjoy.
Her nose is broken.

“Ow, jesus shit fuck!” It comes out more like, “g’ooww, jesu’ shi’ fuhhgh.”

With effort she manages to roll onto her back, spits the dust out of her mouth. There’s still plenty left, and trying to work it off her teeth proves mostly futile.

“Clarence?” She looks around, doesn’t see him. Panicking, she sits up too fast, then coughs because she inhaled more dust at the same time. The stuff is like glitter, can’t get rid of it. The bout of coughing lets her know her ribs are likely cracked, but a quick search with her fingers doesn’t find an obvious break. Something to worry about later. “Clarence?”

“Here. ‘m fine.” He’s behind her and not bleeding. “You good?”

She takes stock. “Think so.” Her ribs and head hurt. “Mostly.”

“Daaamn.” Clarence sounds a bit dazed, but his eyes are clear enough, looking down the street behind them. “Hotel’s trashed.”

Fuck.

That gets her up, ribs and head be damned. She discovers a semi-twisted ankle in the process and promptly ignores it.

“I’ll head there, you see if you can find the others. Head to the base, not your office.”

Clarence grunts an affirmative, and she sprints back to the hotel, more like a shitty jog.

Trashed. Trashed is what rock stars do to a hotel room after a night of binging and partying. This isn’t trashed; it’s demolished. Half the front of the building is caved in. There’s a huge pile of broken concrete and drywall in the front, but at least getting inside is no trouble since there’s no longer a front wall.

“Carter! Gutterson!” The yelling sends her into another fit of coughing, which sends a thick needle of pain lancing through her side. She squeezes her arm over her ribcage as a brace and yells some more anyways. Their bodies weren’t obviously visible in the rubble outside, so she finds her way to the stair well, which is thankfully all the way on the western side and towards the back, and heads for the roof.

They’re not on the roof either. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Each time she opens her mouth, a little more blood leaks in, mixing with the grit to make mud. She spits again and swipes her face with her sleeve, accidentally jabs her nose a bit too hard, and swears some more. So much for watching her language, but that’s what you get for making New Year’s resolutions in July.

Picking her way carefully along the roof, mindful of cracks, she continues the search. All the effort of her mental faculties goes into finding them, so she doesn’t have to think about the possibility of having gotten two soldiers killed on her second day back. She treads cautiously up to the edge of the blown off roof, and slithers on her stomach to look onto the exposed floor below. Nothing in the first room. She crawls to the left, keeping her weight on the right side of her chest.

“Hey!”
Pushing up on hands and knees, she hightails it as fast as she can over to where the shout came from.

“Where are you?” But she sees him before she’s even done asking. Carter’s standing amidst broken furniture in a penthouse suite. He kneels back down next to a motionless body when he sees her head poke over the edge.

“Gutterson?” Her voice is thin, verging on panic. She’s not sure if she’s calling to the man himself or asking Carter if his partner is alive.

“Alive.” The breakneck build and release of adrenaline leaves her shaky, and she squeezes her hands together a few times to steady them. *Oh thank you.* Hopefully, whatever deity(ies) is(are) responsible appreciates the gratitude and keeps up the good work. She’d feel more relieved if he were moving; as it is, that doesn’t make her overly optimistic. Someone had once told her that preemptive fear is useless as a can of gasoline in a ten-alarm blaze, so she tries to focus on the alive part, the here and now. She tells herself everything is peachy – everyone she knows is alive, and she can still walk. Mostly.

Lowering herself back onto her stomach, she slides around so her feet are dangling over the edge, and lets herself down into the room. Her ribs protest the stretch immediately, so the drop ends in more of a stumble when she lets go of the edge too fast. Her left ankle, already protesting the decision to sprint up twelve flights of stairs, promptly goes on strike.

“Gutterson?” Breathing, not awake. “Carter, you still got a radio?” She limps towards them.

“Maybe.” Satisfied Gutterson’s alive, he gets up to find it.

Very carefully, she lifts the unconscious soldier’s head a fraction and feels under it with her fingers. No blood. Lucky for him he fell on carpet. Another silent thank you to a benevolent deity. She cranes her head around to see Carter blowing drywall dust off a radio, swiping it against his shirt.

Gutterson’s breathing changes, and with a terrified jolt, she fears that he’s about to take a turn for the worse, but when she looks back down his eyes are beginning to screw up. He’s starting to wake.

“Hey, you alright? Nope, keep your head still,” she says when he tries to lift it. He complies and keeps still a minute before unclenching his eyelids.

“You’re asking me if I’m alright? You look like shit.” She probably does. Her nose is throbbing.

“Gee, thanks. And I’m fine.”

“When you say that with so much blood all over you, people are like to think you’re a bit of a liar.” She laughs and immediately regrets it.

“Don’t do that. My ribs hurt.”

“So you are a liar.” Gutterson’s eyes fall closed in self-satisfied contentment.

“You always this sassy?”

“Apparently I hit my head. I’m not responsible for anything.”
“Oh is that how it is?” Come to think of it, this is the most talkative she’s seen him.

Carter comes back over, radio by his side, and plunks himself down on Gutterson’s right. “If that’s how it is, then you ain’t never been responsible for a single thing in your life. We all know your momma dropped you on your head the day you were born.”

“At least my momma didn’t drop me face first, asshole.”

Carter chuckles. “Still prettier ‘n you.”

There’s a couch a few feet away. The legs are broken now, so it’s too uneven to sit on, but the cushions are still in working condition, so she drags them over. After working a small throw pillow under Gutterson’s head she takes one of the bigger ones for herself. They can hear sirens now.

“Where’s the rifle?” she asks.

“Don’t worry, I took it apart and threw it over the side,” Carter sounds pained, “Sorry Tim, barrel was bent all to hell anyways.”

o.O.o

_Sixteen hours prior_

Lena’s boots hit the ground with a crunch. Mmm, no more concrete, no more civilization. No wait, that’s mean…no more…no more…screw it, it’s not mean, it’s true: no more civilization. If this were civilization, people would have dental checkups and there wouldn’t be any child brides. See? _There’s the bright side: you have good teeth and you weren’t married at age twelve_. Dang it’s hot. She chucks her hair back in a messy knot atop her head. A shower sounds pretty nice right about now.

“Mrs. Carlan!” A man in ACUs approaches at a brisk pace. Three chevrons and a rocker.

“Hello Sergeant,” she says when he reaches her and continues affably, “And it’s not Mrs.” She swings her bags to the side to shake his hand, and doesn’t bother to add ‘It’s doctor.’ Around here you sound like even more of an asshole than usual if you say things like that; it’s also irrelevant. His grip is firm, no limp-wristing it for a lady. She decides she likes him.

“Sergent O’Malley.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, ma’am.” That’s right, back in the land of ‘ma’am’.

Sergeant O’Malley is the get-down-to-business sort, something she also likes. Instead of taking her to her room, he leads Lena down a few sterile hallways to a meeting room first. Too much of this visit is going to be waiting, and it’s best to get this show on the road before taking a breather. She throws her duffle and backpack in the corner, plops herself in a chair on the far side of the table, and starts pulling out her laptop. The sergeant tosses her a few cables, which she runs between the laptop and a projector.

There’s a single knock at the door, and before either of them says anything, a guy with a barely-within-reg high and tight pokes his head in. Three more men file into the room behind him. Two of them look like they haven’t been on base for a stretch if the week-old stubble is anything to go by.
Even before she starts speaking, she can feel their full attention. It’s both annoying and flattering, also annoying that she can’t decide which she feels more strongly. On the upside, she reminds herself, at least she won’t have to fight to keep their attention. Any woman on a base, especially one not in uniform, becomes conscious of being just that, a woman. Shania Twain’s “Feel like a Woman” pops into her head for the occasion.

Before she’d come the first time, some of the others in the office who’d already been over had told her she might want to bring baggier clothes, ditch the make-up. She’d taken the advice at first, but the stares kept coming regardless, and it just felt too much like cowardice, admitting defeat. Determined to force everything back to normal again, she wore what she’d always worn before and did her best to ignore the abnormal environment. At least this bunch is silent, no audible whispers that she has to wonder about coming from behind her back.

As the first image pops up on the big screen, Sergeant O’Malley says a few words of introduction on both sides, and without further ado leaves her to explain why she’s here. The first part of the mission is relatively simple. She’s here to find a man named Sayeed Al’Faheen, a doctor in Tagab, had disappeared eight months back right after a convoy of American troops followed his information on a contact into an ambush. Seven people died, and four had been hospitalized.

That was also supposed to have been simple. They weren’t even going after a high value target, nor was it in a particularly dangerous area. They were just heading to a first time meet with one of the local warlords to see how much cooperation and support they could get. It was hardly worth the trouble of blowing up a convoy. An unlucky encounter with an IED might have been dismissed as bad luck. The follow up attack by twenty or so armed men in the aftermath in an area known for being relatively safe was not.

Al’Faheen’s house had been ransacked, and with no sign of him, everyone assumed he’d been taken and killed for working with the infidels. Only problem was the subject of the good doctor had popped up in a phone call six months later. It’s possible no one would have noticed, but self-recrimination and a tendency to dwell on one’s failures makes a person extra vigilant. So she noticed, and she paid attention. He was alive and well. Apparently, last time anyone had heard about the bastard, he’d moved to one of the smaller towns outside of Kabul and grown a beard. During her time back in the States Al’Faheen had since moved on, but the general consensus is that he would still be relatively nearby. She’s pissed that he hadn’t had to work that hard to disappear. Given that their mission shouldn’t have been a blip on Taliban radar, that begged the question of what had made the whole mess worth starting in the first place. She’s fixing to ask him that. She isn’t fixing to be nice about it.

The plan Lena lays out is threefold: find the doctor, figure out what he cares about enough to keep them from getting at, and then go get whatever – or more likely whoever – that is. The first part means a ride into Kabul to meet with Clarence and his contact, Walehd, a low level bureaucrat in the Afghani government willing to take cash in exchange for information. She doesn’t know Walehd, so she doesn’t trust him. Not that she ever trusted any source that she’d developed here, but there were varying degrees of distrust. People who get a salary boost, like Walehd, tend to bombard you with large volumes of information and oversell the importance of what they’re telling you. Anything to keep the money coming their way. Then it falls to you to sift through the muck.

Tomorrow they’ll head into town, she’ll have her sit-down with Clarence and the snitch-for-hire, and the four men sitting at the table – two sniper-spotter pairs – will be up on the roofs. She likes snipers; they’re patient, they don’t wuss out early, and they can keep their attention where it needs to be when the hard part of a mission is the boredom. Their job will be watching for anyone watching the meeting. This isn’t going to be like her last visit. Lena hadn’t been as careful as she ought. She’d thought paranoia was shameful; now she knows it’s smart. She isn’t here to save face;
she’s here to do a job. Once everyone gets a map and their marching orders it’s time to call it a day.

o.O.o

Just open your fuckin’ mouth and offer to carry her bags. ‘Hey, want me to take one of those for you?’ ‘Need a hand with those?’ ‘It’s not that fuckin’ complicated. She’s got a couple big ass bags and probably thinks he’s an asshole for not offering. Tim weighs the potential dangers of asking to help with her luggage. He wonders if she’ll be offended if he offers. Many women on a base fall into two categories: those who develop princess syndrome and those who get standoffish or pissed when they see you trying to get close. He thinks about what Kelsey would tell him to do, but he’s not sure if what his mind cooks up is from the angel on his shoulder or the devil.

She readjusts the position of her backpack, hitching it higher.

“Uhh..” She turns her head to look at him. Goddammit. “Can I help you with that?”

“Huh?” Now he really feels like an asshole. “Yeah, sure. Thanks.” She hands him the computer bag, easily the smallest piece of the load. He swings it over his shoulder.

She’s not a huge talker, leastways not with him, so he settles into watching her as they walk. Tim spends too much time in high places covered in bush netting watching people, and the watching has become habit. Sometimes he has to remind himself that he’s not behind a scope, not to stare. He’d chatted up a girl once when he was on leave. She said he held eye contact too long and reminded him of a sociopath.

He considers Ms. Carlan, contemplates what sort of story he’d make up to keep himself entertained if he had to look at her through a scope for a few days. From the way she dresses, white shirt – that’s just hubris in a place like this – and high heels – they’re walking across gravel for fuck’s sake – she seems like a tourist, the type who brings lipstick on a safari and forgets the bug spray. She acts enough like a tourist, only person looking at everything around her, rather than straight ahead – a squad doing PT, a lot full of MRAPs, the never-ending line of planes coming and going. She must be real new.

“So how long have you been here?” She’s still looking around, but he wonders if she knows he’s watching.

“About three months, ma’am.”

“How many time’s you been here so far?”

“This’ll be the third, ma’am.”

She turns her face up, tired but amused. “You don’t need to call me ma’am. Lena is fine.”

“I’m Tim.”

She smiles, unsuccessfully covering a smirk. “I remember.”

“So Tim,” she’s rubbing it in, “Three times? You like it over here that much, do you?”

“Can’t resist the allure of donkey shit and sand in all the wrong places.” Wouldn’t it be nice if those were his biggest problems. She snorts and takes the hint, doesn’t press. He forgives her a little for wearing white silk in Kabul. Maybe he does like it; he already re-upped once.

When they reach her door he lets her hang her bags on him like a rack while she digs for the
keys they gave her.

“Well, Tim,” still that slight emphasis on his name. Doesn’t let things go, this one, “thanks for showing me to my room.”

He wishes her a good evening and gives the hand she extends a firm shake. Hers are clean and manicured and the sort of soft that comes from working in an office. He looks down at his own after she closes the door. The whites of his nails aren’t so much white as brown. He uses the edge of one to scrape the crud out from under the rest. There’s still a stubborn line of dirt up against the pink part. He decides he doesn’t give a fuck and heads back to his own room, forgets about chronically clean hands, and flops down with the dog-eared copy of American Gods that’ll get him to sleep tonight.

o.O.o

Lena’s obviously tired, still jetlagged, but she’s determined not to fall asleep, gaze fixed out the window as they drive through the city. Her main weapon against lethargy is food. Every time her eyes get heavy, out comes yet another protein bar, bag of dried fruit, or candy to be munched on until wakefulness is achieved. Tim’s beginning to have misgivings about a mission where the person leading it can barely keep her eyes open; doesn’t matter that it’s supposed to be cake. Nothing’s ever cake, and letting yourself think otherwise is not only stupid, but a betrayal to the people with you. He’s not exactly excited for this little day-trip into the city. Easier to see someone coming at you when you’re in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere. There’s too much to keep an eye on when you’re smack in the middle of a densely populated area like Kabul.

The seat in front of him shifts as Lena pushes herself up straight again.

“You could just take a nap.”

“Don’t feel like it.” From what he can tell, that’s exactly what she feels like. Lena finishes off a banana and pulls out a twix.

“I got some caffeine pills,” Carter says, patting his pockets in search of the tin. It takes him a little longer to find them since they’re wearing street clothes, and the pockets are in different places than he’s used to.

“No thanks,” she yawns, “They don’t really keep me awake anyways. Mostly it’s like falling asleep to a crack-induced heart attack.”

She ought to at least give it a shot.

“Oh I got something that’ll wake you up.” Pascal’s tone of innuendo is accompanied by what he probably thinks is a suave wink. Even Tim cringes at his complete lack of subtlety. Luckily, their driver merely turns on the stereo full-blast to Miley Cyrus belting out Wrecking Ball.

Lena guffaws, smacking her head back lightly against the headrest. “Didn’t know you girls had such good taste.”

“Fucking Christ dude, find something else. You’re shaming our country.” Carter tries to fit himself between the two front seats to get at the dials.

After more bitching and arguing, and Pascal reminding everyone loudly that he’s driving and they’re all welcome to try to change the station if they can and Lena ordering everyone to keep their seatbelts on please, a compromise on the music is finally reached. Pascal happily bobs his head in time to Party in the USA, and Carter bitches none-too quietly under his breath about who’s driving
Sixth months and he’ll be stateside again. Sixth months until his whole squad can celebrate at a strip club where all the female flesh of their desires is wrapped up in nothing but lace and string for their enjoyment. Strippers love soldiers, especially those just coming back from a long stint overseas. You can practically see the dollar signs in their eyes, knowing they’re assured a great big fat payday courtesy of a whole lot of saved up deployment pay that’s been earmarked for just this moment.

Despite the conscious frustration and constant bitching during deployment, you never really realize how much you miss women until there’s a pretty girl in your lap you can’t even put your hands on, not giving a shit that you’re three hundred bucks lighter. Women just feel different. Whatever it is about the way men are programmed to look at them – biological, social – women are the opposite of everything about this job, soft and to all appearances something more vulnerable you are. For that night it doesn’t matter that it’s some girl who only cares about your company for as long as you keep handing her cash; it’s nice to pretend. One of his buddies had admitted that once, instead of accepting a private dance, he’d paid a stripper to let him give her a massage. Even if it is all a sham, it’s good for an evening. Most places they go, there’s always a girl looking to make more, who tries to arrange a side deal. Some guys go for it, but most don’t; any woman he sleeps with is going to do it for fun, not cash. Although, according to Kelsey, the way most of his relationships go, he may as well just save himself the trouble and pay up.

But for now he doesn’t jeopardize the chance to enjoy the view and the little bit of female company he can by saying something stupid that she doesn’t want to hear. He doesn’t try to muscle his way into her sights. None of them have a chance. Girl like her with that perfect manicure and done up hair doesn’t wanna hold hands with someone who’s perpetually got dirt under his nails. Ten to one she’s got a boyfriend anyways.

Their destination is near the middle of town, chosen for the chaos inherent to a city’s center. Forty minutes after their departure from Bagram, they and the two guys in the jeep behind them pull up to the Safi Landmark Hotel, unload camera bags that hold rifles and audio gear instead of cameras, and do their best not to walk like soldiers. Lena wraps a scarf over her head before following them inside.

After ten minutes in a room to get fitted with earpieces and a quick sound check, Lena heads to a restaurant down the block to wait for Walehd and his handler, and he and Carter head to the roof. Pascal and Moretti set up on an office building across the street.

It’s hot up on the roof. He fantasizes about a shower, and thinks he’s getting soft from being on a base too long. Too long. It’s been a week, god. But since there aren’t any rocks to dig in his stomach, it’s a step up from something. He sweeps the rifle in an irregular circuit, letting the conversation sifting through his earpiece fade into the background. Lady with two boisterous kids at
a fruit stall, waiter with coffee, group of teenage boys walking down the street laughing, fat guy waddling a little ways behind them, family on their way somewhere, an older woman and her son out shopping… Tim zeros back in on the fat guy. Not a lot of those in Afghanistan.

The bustle of the street makes it difficult to get a good look. “Moretti, fat dude, your 2 o’clock.”

Acknowledgement, then silence. Tim does another fast sweep to make sure there’s nothing else he ought to be seeing before coming back to the fat man who’s now walking in a straight line towards the restaurant where Lena is sitting.

Moretti’s voice is in his ear. “Something in his hand, can’t make it out.” Tim’s heart picks up speed. It’s never cake. He makes a decision.

“Lena, stand up and walk away from the hotel.”

She might be new, but she’s not stupid. She stands up. The fat man walks faster, and Tim knows. He knows.

Even if it weren’t for the crowd, he’s not sure he’d be able to kill the guy without setting the bomb off. “I don’t have a shot.” Neither does Moretti.

“Lena, run!” She’s still standing there, but halfway through yelling again for her to run she’s hauling ass away from the table, hand gripping the jacket of her friend to pull him with her. “No, left!” She banks hard left, fast enough she nearly topples onto the sidewalk. Their Afghani contact moves past his surprise and ducks under a table. The bomber has moved out of sight, and Tim swings the rifle back around to try to find him. People are already starting to scatter. Two foreigners start booking it away from a public place, everyone else is gonna figure it’s a good idea to follow suit. When he finally catches the guy in his scope again, the man is in the street between the café and the hotel.

Fuck.

He drops the detonator before Tim can pull the trigger.
I shoulda gone to bed a while ago, so sorry if there are typos.

It takes hours for the doctors to give her the all clear and send her off with crutches and a small bottle of extra-strength ibuprofen. They’d offered her vicoden, but a self-flagellating part of her needs to remember this. She’s grateful, relieved even, to sit idle while the doctors see everyone else first. If this had been fast or they’d let her out with anything besides ibuprofen then it meant she would have been in worse shape. A mildly sprained ankle, a banged up nose, and two barely-cracked ribs are a small price to pay for not getting blown up.

Clarence is waiting in the small office that’s hers while she’s here. He’d gotten off even easier than she had, couple of scrapes, head a bit knocked about but no need for a doctor’s visit.

“Hey sweetheart, you ok?” He stands back to let her in. “They said I had to wait till you were out. Busy place.”

“Yeah, you should see the other guy.” There’s not much of him to see anymore. To laugh about it is probably tempting fate, but Lena doesn’t want to fall into the rhythm of an invisible drum.

Clarence lays a hand on her arm and gives it a squeeze. “You need anything, you just say.” He means it.

She nods, pulling away. “You want some coffee?”

“I can get it.”

“Nah, I just sat still for five hours. I need something to do.” He relents, but hovers. It’s sweet, but unnecessary.

That was one thing she hated about being in the hospital, especially during the time where she couldn’t even sit up yet cause her gut was still a fileted mess: all the touching. All that patting her on the foot on the way out, the encouraging ankle squeezes through the blankets. She imagines it’s how pregnant women feel once they start showing enough. Maybe that’s what being hormonal is really about – getting pissed with every Tom, Dick, and Jane rubbing your belly all the time. Everyone means well of course, but why when you’re down and vulnerable and unable to do anything about it – or unable to do it politely – do people suddenly think it’s ok to start getting touchy? Anywhere that wasn’t a hospital room you’d have the right to smack them, but when you’re bed-ridden and in pain and just want to be left alone you have to grin and bear it.

“You sure you’re alright?”

She knows what he’s asking, can see the genuine concern there. He’s a decent man, and she reminds herself that that’s how people are taught to provide comfort because that’s how most people need it from others. It feels ungrateful to try to explain that’s not what she wants from most people.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She smiles, “promise.” Depending on the sense he chooses to take it, it’s not a lie.
He doesn’t stop hovering.

“Here,” she holds up the mug between them, “you want sugar?”

“No, thank you.” He turns the mug back and forth in his hands for a bit without taking a drink. “Walehd was killed.”

“I’m sorry.” She’s not really. Maybe in the abstract sense that anyone dying is sad, but it doesn’t pull at her. When she does feel her gut clench, it’s relief and the fear of could-have-beens. “At least we know we’re on the right path. We did get the surveillance right?”

“Yeah, but take a night. There’ll be plenty of time tomorrow.”

That’s fine with her. Sitting still and sifting through footage isn’t what she needs right now. In an hour she’ll probably be crashing like a sack of bricks through a glass roof, but for now, she needs to move. Fuuuuuu…dge, why does her ankle have to suck?

“Right, tomorrow then.” She makes her excuses, confirms that Clarence will be at the base hotel so that they can get started early tomorrow and heads to her room. Instead of turning in though, she only stops long enough to grab her iPod. Lena doesn’t want walls. If she could walk that far, she’d sit outside the airfield and watch the planes, feel the vibrating thrum of the engines. She wants to feel dwarfed and insignificant. There’s a sense of safety in it. There might be a thousand awful little things happening in the universe, but as a whole, it can’t be taken and twisted. It just is.

Lena stands outside her door, unsure where to go and not in a hurry to get there. Once she would have been worried, anxious to have a plan and stick to a schedule, but it’s nice to have time. Finding the energy for stress is something she’s no longer programmed for.

Crutches and cracked ribs are an uncomfortable combination, so she doesn’t get too far. There’s a small circle of stone benches, and since it’s dark and no one else is around it seems as good a place to park herself as any. Good thing the military is full of early risers. Using the crutch as leverage, she manages to lie back on the bench. Kabul is too big to see any but the few brightest stars, so she contents herself with watching the moon and stray wisps of clouds. Now that she’s horizontal, the energy from before drains away. She’s feels like lettuce that’s been left too long in the sun. Soon, there’s a sting in the back of her nose that has nothing to do with the break. Christ, all day and nothing; now this. Of its own accord the stinging spreads to the back of her eyes. It’s always the quiet moments. After the giddiness wears off. No sadness, no fright, just being worn out. The rest of the energy packed up and disposed of now that it’s unnecessary. Lena wonders if she can get it under control before it causes problems for her injured nose. In the end, holding it all back is just going to give her a headache, so she dials up the volume on her music and lets the tears have their way. They’ll decide when they’ve had enough.

o.O.o

“I swear to god, I will fuckin’ beat yo’ ass from here to kingdom –”

“You couldn’t beat a five year old if he handed you a crowbar.” Tim fights to maintain his spot on the floor. Here, video games are a full contact sport, and he’s been shoulder to shoulder with Mark for the past half hour in a shoving match that mirrors their onscreen combat.

“Ohhh!! Can’t touch that now, can ya son!”

They’ve been at it since midnight this morning after Tim was discharged. Doctor told him he was lucky, that if he'd landed on tile, he’d probably have brained himself, like knowing random
chance was supposed to make him feel better. Just a casual ‘by the way, ten feet to the side, you’d be
dead. Here’s some Tylenol. Next!’ This is number three, Carter reminds him, third time’s a charm.
Tim doesn’t point out that the first and second times were a charm too, since he lived to see the third,
but then again, he’s come out of this one in much better shape than the last two.

“You motherfuckin’ –”

“That’s right, who’s your daddy now, bitch? Yo mamma love that shit!”

“My momma’s gonna be the one tea-baggin’ your dipshit – ” No one registers the door
behind them opening at first. Only reason anyone sees at all is because Clark has Pascal in an upside-
down headlock faced towards the door. They’ve given up Mortal Combat for real life. “– ass.”

When Pascal doesn’t have his usual snappy comeback, they all turn around to see what’s up.
Lena’s standing half in, half out of the doorway. She’s got crutches, and her nose is one and a half
times its normal size.

“Ma’am.” Clark nods, but doesn’t release his victim, business as usual. “Something we can
do for you?”

“Uh, no, sorry.” She looks from Tim to Carter, to the rest. “I didn’t mean to interrupt but…”
she shifts her crutch a bit, “Pretty sure I’m breaking a few rules,” She reaches inside her jacket, and
for an absurd moment, Tim’s fingers tense on the controller, “and if you don’t want it, you don’t
have to take it… but someone said it was pretty good stuff, and I thought you might like it.” Lena
sets a bottle on the shelf by the door. The corners of her mouth jerk into a momentary smile as she
tips an uncomfortable nod and slips back out before anyone can say anything.

Clark is first to the door. “Well hot damn,” he says, letting out a whistle, “one of you fuckers
must have a magic prick.” Tim is heartily grateful the door is closed.

“That’d be me.”

“In your dreams, Carter.” “It might be a prick, doesn’t make it magic.”

“Well what is it?”

“This, Gutterson, is the medicine that will heal your wounds, a balm for your soul –”

“Oh Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” Tim jumps the chairs, “Gimme that.” He turns the bottle and raises
his eyebrows. “Staggs…shee-it.”

“Well take a swig and pass it dude.”

“Fuck you, go get a cup.”

“Yeah bro, have some goddamned class.”

He’s probably not supposed to drink with a concussion and pain meds, but Clark is right –
this is some damn fine medicine, and not taking it would be a damn tragedy. Where’d she get this
stuff?

No one is on duty today, and Tim also gets tomorrow off on account of his head injury, so
everyone gets two generous fingers of the Staggs. After the rations are passed out Tim sets it
between his crossed legs like it’s his firstborn. He wins a few more games since no one is willing to
bodyslam the person holding primo alcohol.
Later, when they’ve headed back, and he can’t fall asleep, Tim seriously considers drinking the rest of the bottle. It’s like his body knows being tired is better than dreaming. He knows when his eyes close he’ll be on that roof again. That first jolt of vertigo as the floor gave way, the tug of Carter’s grip on his boot.

Just once he’d like to dream about something mundane, like walking in an endless loop or showing up naked to class. He’d had a fling with a girl once, partier who took too many things in order to stay interesting. He’d liked her for her wild side until he realized she was boring. She’d always said she liked to dream when she got high; without the drugs she just sat in the swings at the neighborhood park she grew up in, looking at the dead plants on the side of the road.

Tim dreams about bombs and bullets. He’d kill for a dream about just sitting in a swing. When he’s not being shot or ambushed, forced to relive the waking nightmares, his brain makes up new things for him to dread. He stands to the side, sometimes incorporeal spectator, sometimes there, but hundreds of yards away, always unable to do shit about what’s happening, just watching as everyone else is picked off and killed. It’s the helplessness that’s the worst. At least the good part of waking up is being able to hold a gun.

It’s too bad the bourbon isn’t the shitty kind, else he wouldn’t feel bad about drinking himself to sleep. Instead he pulls out his flashlight and the book and drifts in and out of the shallows of consciousness, dreaming every now and then about following ravens down empty roads and dodging potholes that have no bottom.

o.O.o

“There, that guy watching him.” Lena points at the frozen image taken from yesterday’s operation.

“Which?”

“Blue hat.”

“He’s got a baseball cap, looks western to me.”

“Look, see over here? People are starting to run. You’d think a westerner would be the first to follow. He’s just sitting there.”

“Damn. He knows he’s not inside the blast radius. Can’t actually see his face though. It could be a ruse.”

“Do we have any other footage from anywhere? CCTV?”

“If it exists then the Afghan police don’t want to give it to us. They don’t like our meddling. Play it out a little. Let’s see if he gives us anything else.”

Lena lets the video run. Whoever the guy is, he manages to keep his face from the camera. Their mystery man is wearing sunglasses, and no matter which way he turns there’s always a hand or something else in the way.

“Oh, truck!” Clarence jerks forward. “Freeze that.”

“I see it.” Lena squints. “It’s an older vehicle, but it’s got Arabic numerals on the plates, so those are newer. You think it was stolen?”

“It’s a good possibility, but it’s worth checking out all the same.”
“I can read part of it, and if the software can’t figure out the rest, then I’ll hope someone back home can clean it up a bit. Are you friendly with anyone who could be useful in tracking the plate down?”

“Everyone’s friendly when you have cash.” Not that Clarence hasn’t been incredibly effective, but in Lena’s opinion he tends to rely too heavily on paying for information. It’s lazy.

“Let me know when you find something, yeah?”

After a firm promise to do just that and a last solicitous inquiry into the state of her well-being, Clarence leaves. Lena sends the still frame of the license plate back to Oona with directions to get her a clear and full picture of the whole thing, but twenty minutes with her own computer gets a complete number. And luckily the US government has its fingers everywhere in the Afghani government, so finding her way into their DMV database takes minimal effort.

Oh hello.

The plate actually belongs to a van, not a truck, but the van it was stolen from is registered as a delivery vehicle for the Safi Landmark Hotel. Coincidentally, this is the same hotel Gutterson and Carter had been camped out on right before someone put a giant crater in the front of it. It’s the same hotel they parked the jeeps at. In a parking garage. With cameras.
Yeah, I know, three chapters in three weeks, holy cow.

It’s different in the CIA; when something’s personal, they let you run with it. Normal law enforcement agencies don’t let you do that. They think you have too much emotion to do the job properly. Normal law enforcement likes tidy, pc results. The agency doesn’t need pretty, doesn’t need tidy, and therefore they see emotional investment as an asset most of the time. The agency doesn’t care about revenge; they care about results. If revenge is a happy byproduct, then all the better. They see it for what it is: a motivation to get things done.

And this jackass… jackhole… will give her the dang surveillance tapes of the garage. Lena can feel Clarence next to her, knows he’d rather just offer a bribe and get this over with. But she hates the corruption that permeates the country and refuses to feed it. Maybe she should have asked to train as a field agent instead of becoming an analyst. Threatening people with a gun sounds pretty peachy right about now. Oh hell…heck…she doesn’t feel mean and petty enough to resort to threats…yet. Anger is hard and it drains you and you never know who you’ll need down the line. She should have let Clarence do the talking. He has a penis, and the person standing between them and the surveillance footage has a penis, so she should have stood back and stayed silent. But the man is a supposedly a cop. Lena had been pulled over once and ticketed for going a measly five miles per hour over the speed limit back in D.C. After the officer had gone on his way, she’d let out a stream of violent cursing that would have made a sailor blush. She would do anything to be dealing with that guy right now, rather than the greedy, stonewalling twat in front of her.

It goes back and forth a bit, Lena politely curious about the bogus ‘rules’ prohibiting the handing over of the security tapes and the ‘cop’ making increasingly less subtle hints about incentive, all torturously slow because the exchange is through an interpreter. Lena can speak Pashto, but her Dari is pretty rusty, and understanding the nuances of the exchange is a bit beyond her reach. Clarence, who speaks both flawlessly, remains silent. His phone pops and dings periodically with the sounds of some app game.

“He says he cannot give you the tapes without making copies first, and they have no blank tapes.” Of course they don’t. Their interpreter, Sadiq, far more wise to the quirks of Afghan bureaucracy, has infinite patience. With no stake in the outcome, he can afford to not care.

“Please tell him I don’t need the copies now.” It’s time to compromise. “I’ll be happy to watch them here, and he can get them to me when he has time.”

Some rapid Dari from Sadiq and some ponderous Dari from the policeman. “He regrets to say that their TV is broken.”

Now he’s just being rude. The gun is sounding more and more satisfying by the moment. Lena is talking herself through the virtues and satisfaction of patience when her pocket vibrates.

Look bored and hassled and turn off all the sound and vibration on your phone. Keep your screen open.
It’s from Clarence. She rolls her eyes heavenward. It’s not hard to pretend.

*Ask if there is someone else you can talk to about the tapes.*

“Please ask him if there is anyone else who has time to get tapes and make me copies.” Lena is proud the word ‘please’ keeps coming out of her mouth.

Sadiq asks, and the reply is expectedly unhelpful. “They are all busy men.”

*Ask him if you can also see the tapes from the Kabul Serena.*

She is regretfully informed that those tapes also haven’t been copied yet, but if she has a good *reason* to expedite the process, then perhaps he can be of service. She’s never heard of any tapes from the Kabul Serena hotel.

*Waste of time. Let’s go.*

No sh…kidding. She doesn’t bother thanking the jackhole for his time since he wasted hers and leaves Sadiq to make their excuses if he even cares to.

Once outside, Lena frustrated, Saddiq indifferent, and Clarence apparently taking a smoke break, their security team – this time a group of contractors – waves them over. They don’t like civilians bumbling around outside for gits and shiggles. She motions for them to wait.

Clarence turns to the interpreter, unlit cigarette in hand.

“Avez vous du feu?” Sadiq looks puzzled. Clarence waves the cigarette in his face. “Avez vous du feu?” Sadiq reaches uncertainly for the cigarette. He’d actually been asking for a light. Clarence lets it go, pulls out another, and lights them both. Satisfied the man doesn’t speak French, he takes a puff and turns to Lena.

“*Must you do that?*” she gripes, unhappy with the cloud of toxicity he so enjoys.

Clarence ignores her. It’s an old argument. “*We need a different interpreter. This one doesn’t like us. Next time we’re bringing Ahmed.*”

“*What are we out here for?*”

“*Try looking a little more bored please. Or annoyed by my incompetence.*”

“*That’ll be hard.*”

“I’m touched, but I’m sure you’ll manage.”

“*Good Christ, why are we here?*”

“*That’s the ticket.*”

“*Clarence.*”

“*Ten to one says he doesn’t even have the damn tapes.*”

“*Well, crap, now what? And who has them then?*”

“*Best guess? It’s above his pay grade, which means someone’s taking this personally. Someone at the hotel had to have handed them over so we can ask them.*”
“And if they don’t want to tell us?”

“Then we’ll pay them because, unlike you people, we’re not on board with ‘enhanced interrogation,’ and,” he holds up a hand, “it will save me time and headache. Idealism is wonderful and all, but we don’t have all day.”

“Unless you count making people listen to lambchops on repeat, then I don’t interrogate people that way. Besides, congress just told us we can’t do that.”

“Ha! That’s never stopped anyone.”

“Freedom baby.”

“What’s lambchops?”

“Kids’ television show in America.”

“You had me horrified at ‘kids.’ You cruel woman.”

Unfortunately, they don’t find anyone at the Safi Landmark to pay off or interrogate, with enhanced techniques or otherwise. The manager informs them that the guard who handed over the tapes quit with no notice. ‘Does he have a phone number?’ It’s disconnected. ‘Can you provide us with an address?’

An hour and a half later, cranky security detail in tow, they find a full apartment, empty only of people and a toothbrush.

“On the bright side, we’re on the right track.”

o.O.o

Tim finds Lena sitting against the wall, one arm curled around a bent knee, head tipped back against the concrete. She seems content rather than tired, and he lets himself notice the way a tight t-shirt flatters the all the parts he likes to look at. And because his brain needs to warn him of the hazards of having nice things, a different image of her pops into his mind. The abruptness of the intrusion brings him up short. This image is framed by a scope and the fear he’s about to watch someone killed by a zealot in a bomb vest. A fucked up corner of his mind offers, ‘Hey, at least that way it would’ve been fast.’ Tim stays where he is for some moments, questioning his original purpose and waiting for the two voices in his head to finish arguing about caution and futility.

He tries to think about what happened in the words he’ll use to tell the story two years from now. Hey remember that time a building blew up under us? Fuckin’ wild man. He decides to say it to Lena, try it out. “Hey, remember that time a building blew up under us?”

Lena startles at his presence, but surprise morphs into a grin – not just a smile, but a genuine grin – with a speed that jerks his stomach a bit sideways. “Well luckily, I had the foresight not to be standing on top of it.”

“I’m not the one with crutches and a nose job.” Tim sits down next to her, careful to keep a good foot of cement visible between them, and folds his hands in his lap. He feels like a schoolboy.

“It’s not that broken.”

“You do know what you look like right now.” She gives him a look, and Tim immediately wishes he could backtrack. He’s too used to being around men, and the imperfection of a purple nose
had made him too comfortable.

“And I’m so grateful you’re here to remind me,” she replies drily. “At least it’s still straight.” That last bit is mumbled, more to herself than him.

Tim wants to say that despite her swollen, technicolor nose she still looks pretty. But he knows better. Or maybe he’s a coward. At this point it would sound disingenuous anyways. He pulls out the flask instead, a different peace offering.

Tim realizes real quick that she’s shit at drinking.

“So is this the kind you sip or is it like a shot?”

“Jesus, you brought it to us. Do you even know what this is?”

“Well the label said bourbon, so I’m going to stick with that assumption.” Lena sniffs dubiously at the open flask.

“It’s treasure. Golden treasure.”

“Not that I’m not happy you like it, but it looks more like burnt sour-juice to me.” Her eyes crinkle with contrary, silent laughter. She has very expressive eyes. It’s nice watching them as she talks.

“You’ve really never had this?” She shakes her head.

“Clarence said it was decent. Did it taste alright?”

“Did it taste alright,” she asks. Jesus woman – I mean ma’am –”

“Lena.”

“Lena,” he amends, “Well now you definitely have to try this.”

She takes a large mouthful – apparently deciding it’s for shots – and her face immediately contorts in disgust. After swallowing – barely – followed by some hacking and sputtering, she declares, “This is awful.” God, what a waste.

“I am deeply offended by that.”

“I mean it’s better than the last time I had whiskey, but it’s still whiskey.”

“But it’s good whiskey.”

“Well…More for you.” He huffs in defeat. Who wouldn’t want that.

Lena pulls out a stick of gum to get the taste out of her mouth, and Tim takes a swallow to make up for it.

“Where did you even get this stuff?”

“I can’t tell you.” She’s got a shifty, sideways smile. Probably wouldn’t tell him regardless.

“Holy shit, you robbed a general.” He laughs at the idea.

“I did not rob a general.”
He tips the bottle at her, eyes narrowed accusingly. “That’s exactly the sort of thing someone who robbed a general would say.”

“Well… crap, you got me.”

“Price of my silence is more bourbon.”

“What, you mean like Jim Bean?”

“It’s Beam, and actually I like this stuff,” he waves the flask, “just fine.”

“Are you blackmailing me, Sergeant Gutterson?”

Tim puts on a serious face and gestures between them. “Oh this here’s a negotiation.”

She laughs, the silhouette of her shoulders shaking slightly. “And here I was afraid you wouldn’t be funny without a concussion.”

He ducks his eyes to the flask in his hand as a smile creeps its way onto his face. There are some of the female persuasion who have referred to him as juvenile, but she thinks he’s funny. Tim watches her a moment, this little piece of serenity in the middle of Bagram. He takes a quick swallow for mental fortitude, and tries not to think about the fact that he needed it in the first place.

“So how’d you get here anyways?” she asks.

“I walked.”

“I meant in the army.”

“I liked the dental plan.”

She giggles, head falling slightly to the side.

“Ma’am, are you drunk?”

“Leeennaaaaa. Repeat after me. Leennaaaa.” Tim likes the way she gets annoyed when he calls her ‘ma’am.’

He scoots himself around slightly to face her. “Lena,” he says obligingly, “are you drunk?”

“You’re awfully judgmental for a man with a contraband flask in his jacket.” The beatific grin hides nothing. “Wonder what the general would say if he found you with it.” Her eyes widen theatrically.

“Are you blackmailing me?”

“I am merely wondering aloud.” She holds out her hand. “Here, let me try that again. I want to see if it tastes better now that I’m inebriated.” She sticks the gum on the tip of her finger and takes a sip.

The second time around goes much as the first did. Lena swipes her sleeve across her mouth, laughing. “Nope, still awful.”

“The general will be sad to hear that.”

“Eh,” she squints up in thought, smile sagging, “he’s got bigger problems.”
That’s one way to put it.

“So,” she says conversationally, “you were in Korengal.”

Tim is not prepared for the change in subject and wills himself to stay put, keep still. He wonders if the abruptness is strategic or a result of her tipsy state.

“Yes. You been readin’ about me?” He doesn’t want to walk this path, but she’s still holding the flask. Her fingers tighten around it as if she’s read his thoughts, and with her next question he realizes it is indeed a calculated move.

“Yeah.” Lena tilts her head to the side, unhurried, casual. “Nice part about working for the State Department: I get the unredacted versions of everything.” He’d have thought a statement like that would be smug, but it’s not, just truth. “Way more interesting that way.”

Tim hunches up his shoulders, uncomfortable knowing she’s read about him, all the facts but still missing half the story. He wonders which chapters she’s read.

“You almost died.” Her previously animated features have become studiously bland. The gnarled patch on the left side of his rib cage itches at a memory he does his damnedest think of in words instead of feelings and color.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t.” Lena’s speaking to the space ahead of her now, gathering pieces of an idea.

Her head bobs a degree too low to the side before swinging back to him. Despite being tipsy, her eyes are clear and focused. There’s too much determination there for idle curiosity.

“You remember a kid named Meyer? Tall, looks like an awkward twelve year old? Private then.” He doesn’t need the physical description. The scar on his side still itches.

“You read the report, what do you think.” Tim wishes she’d get to the point.

She has the air of one in the presence of a skittish animal, and he takes her caution as a challenge. He resents when people feel the need to tiptoe, resents himself because he knows why they do. “He’s a corporal now.”

That part’s a surprise.

“How well did you know him? Did you ever speak to him after?”

Tim doesn’t answer at first, still puzzling out her purpose. The truth is not very well. Some dumbass captain on his first rotation had decided he’d needed to make his mark and that they needed to take another chunk of that goddamned, god-forsaken piece of shit valley. If he remembers correctly, they’d gotten a whole square half mile in the end. Meyer had been a complete boot from an infantry unit they were teamed with, and worse, he’d gone full on deer-in-the-headlights in his first gun battle. Just stood there. Happened to some guys that way. They either got themselves or someone else killed. Meyer had almost been part of the latter group. The bullet went through Tim’s lung instead of the kid’s, cut his second deployment by three months. All Meyer had was a bruise where Tim had knocked him onto the ground. He bets they both wished they could have traded places. “Only met him the once.”

“He said you apologized to him. Why?”
Tim squints upward then back down at the flask she still holds hostage, shrugs. “No point in berating him.” Squads tended to handle that sort of problem on their own.

“Heh,” Lena raises her eyebrows knowingly, “he told me that too.” She passes Tim his flask and with it, his freedom. He counts to fifteen before taking a drink, and something clicks.

“When did you meet him?”

“During my first visit. He’s a good guy you know.” Lena pulls her other leg up, drawing in. “He was in that convoy in Tagab, pulled three people out. Nearly got himself killed doing it too.” She smiles ruefully, one shoulder coming up in a shrug. “Thought you should know.”

So not a total newbie tourist. “He back in the States now?”

“Yeah.” That sideways smile is back. “He’s applying for Ranger school.”

“Oh god.” Tim huffs, wondering whether he should be happy for Meyer or whether this change stems from a darker shade of idealism.

“Well,” Lena rubs her hands over her knees, “I didn’t mean to keep you.” She’d intentionally done just that by holding the whiskey hostage, so it’s his signal to leave. Sure enough, Lena grabs the crutches to pull herself up, but despite the difficulty and the wincing she waves off his hand when he offers it, so maybe it’s a bit of an apology too. Tim knows enough about masochism to recognize when it’s standing in front of him.

He thinks it must be witchcraft the way she manages to look clean even after a stint sitting on the dusty ground. The only concession she’s made to the environment are jeans and reasonable shoes, although he suspects that the shoes are more a result of the twisted ankle rather than the locale. Something else strikes him.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone, especially after dark.”

Another head tip. “We’re in the middle of the base. I didn’t think mortars came this far in.”

Tim frowns. That’s not what he meant, but he also doesn’t want to be the one to explain it to her.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you your face is gonna stick like that?” Her finger points at the space just between his eyebrows, and there’s a careless smirk on her mouth. “It’s fine; one of the captains lent me her car.”

“Aren’t you drunk?”

“Well that’s why you’re driving.” He catches the keys she tosses at his chest.
I apologize for any remaining typos etc. Special thanks goes to drop_an_idea_on_a_page for sharing her ranger knowledge. That said, I’d also like to note (which should already be real obvious) that I’ve never been to Bagram or served in the military, so I hope you can forgive the inaccuracies (which are 100% my fault) and suspend your disbelief.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim tips his head back against the wall, tapping, too tired to move and unable to sit still.

“Be careful, alright?” There’s no smile now, just something strained standing in its place.

“Yes ma’am.”

“You’ve really got to stop that.” But it gets the strain gone even if it can’t bring back the smile.

“Maybe I like it.” The gun in his hands and the pre-mission adrenaline jolt make him bold.

“Maybe you’re a pain in the backside.”

Maybe you like it. But he’s not bold enough or stupid enough to say that out loud.

“Just be safe.”

Jesus fuck.

He drags his hands over his face, grit and dust scraping it raw. It feels good. He tries to erase the image of Mark’s leg, bent and practically inside out, from his vision and can’t.

“Bet I’ll get him first.” That gleeful, dopey smirk is always a sure sign Tim’s about to lose money. Tonight is no exception.

It was the scream that got him. The bullets go quiet but not the screams. Tim laces his fingers behind his neck, arms covering his ears.

“Yeah, and I’m the fucking king of Sparta.”

“The princess maybe.”

Mark, always making everything a goddamn competition. He’d been that way all through Ranger School. During Mountain Phase he’d bet Tim he could dig a four by four hole before sundown. Tim lost that bet, and for a week straight everyone had a shit buddy. Damn thing had been too wide to straddle, and the instructor, whether in need of a laugh or being a sadist or both, had said they were stuck with it. Taking a shit meant someone had to hold you up if you didn’t want to fall in. Mark didn’t care. Asshole was up twenty bucks and didn’t have to dig a single latrine the rest of Ranger School.
He’s too absorbed in the far and recent pasts to hear the crunch of gravel that heralds her approach.

“I thought you said you aren’t supposed to be out alone after dark.” If reincarnation is real, he wants to be a tortoise in his next life. Anything comes along he doesn’t want to deal with, he can just pack up and wait it out.

Tim straightens but doesn’t look up. He’s not in the mood for her smile. It’s like a whore at a funeral – doesn’t belong here.

After a few moments a pair of heels intrudes on his view of the ground. “I didn’t bring a car this time, so we’ll have to walk back.”

Something ugly rears its head. “Shouldn’t you be getting a manicure or some shit?” The words come out in a snarl, meant to cut. Mark’s leg is turned into fuckin’ ground meat and he’ll be lucky to keep it and she’s prancing around a warzone in a goddamn pair of high heels.

His vitriol washes over and slides right off without leaving a stain. “Alas, I already did my nails this morning.” Lena folds herself down next to him, bright green fingernails held out in front for his viewing pleasure. Fuck, of course she was serious. “Look, I even did glitter,” she says, waving her fingers in a flourish to catch the light.

“Well great, now you can go on back and get yourself a facial or whatever it is you do around here.” He flips a hand away from him.

Instead she leans back against the wall, and wiggles into a comfortable position. Where his voice is exhausted and tense, like the ends of a spring pulled too far apart, hers is steady and calm, an unmoving stone indifferent to the river flowing over it. “This is my spot, and last I checked, it’s a free country.”

“Last I checked, you ain’t in Kansas anymore.”


“No, I’ve never fucking been to Kansas.”

“Don’t you want to wash up?” A finger flicks the air between them top to bottom, indicating his filthy, blood-crusted uniform.

“Nah, figured I’d just wait for it to rain.”

“As someone who once tried that, I can say with absolute confidence that that’s a terrible idea. Also, given the air quality around here, the rain’s probably a pH of like… four… which is like bathing in vinegar. So…I mean if you’re into that kind of thing…”

“You just love pissing on everyone’s parade don’t you?”

“I wonder if that would be better for your skin than acid rain. The pH is probably closer to biological…”

“That’s fuckin’ nasty.” Try as he might, Tim can’t keep up the anger. The more she takes, the more useless it becomes, and he doesn’t have the stamina for it.
“Here,” Lena picks up a box he didn’t realize she’d brought and opens it, holding it out, “how’s this for pissing on your parade?”

He looks inside then finally at her. It’s like she can’t help herself. “I thought you were kidding about strawberries.”

“Nope.” She looks happy as a kid doling out daddy’s stolen cigarettes. Lena gives the box an impatient shake. “And since you refuse to wash your hands, try not to get dirt on all of them.”

Tim grabs a careless handful in a last act of rebellion. Lena doesn’t seem to care and sets the box between them. She plucks them up three-fingered one-by-one, picking around the ones he touched. His attention is caught by the shape of her lips as they close around each piece of fruit and then around her fingers when she licks them clean. It feels wrong to be distracted by her at a time like this.

“Where’d you get these?”

She smirks, thumb still caught between her teeth. “Stole ‘em from an unsuspecting general.”

Lena had promised to bring them the last time they ran into each other. Running into each other…it implies an accidental occurrence, which is exactly the way he’ll word it if anyone ever asks. They’ve been running into each other for a few weeks now. He’d come back to the spot by the wall at dawn four days after the evening he shared his bourbon with her, too wired after a night mission and needing a quiet place to read before crashing. She’d been there too, sipping her coffee and watching the sunrise. He was greeted with a chipper ‘See, I’m being good! Sun’s up!’ and a flippant grin that dared him to scold her for wandering about alone. She was celebrating being able to walk without crutches. They passed the coffee back and forth between them, and in the end it was she who scolded him for drinking caffeine when he was supposed to be trying to sleep. The second time Tim came back he told himself it was for a chance to have more of that quality Ethiopian brew with real half and half, which was so much better than the DFAC swill or even what Green Beans had. The fifth time he didn’t bother bringing the book.

“You got my guy.”

Strawberries and coffee evaporate, replaced by a dark room on a hill and a scream from a friend he can’t see. When the present comes back into focus it’s shaped like sharp, serious eyes that don’t blink.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks. And thanks for not shooting him.”

“The mission was alive. We brought him back alive.” The edge is back in his voice.

“I’m not questioning your skill,” she says evenly, swiping her hands up along the side of her jeans, then back down, letting out a breath. “I know he was hard to get.”

“He’ll get you what you need?”

“One way or another,” a slow head bob, “yeah.”

“One way or another?” Statement like that can be taken a lot of ways, but given the circumstances of capture he’s not concerned about the darker implications.

“You know, manicures aside, I’m not terrible at my job. Speaking of…you mind if I ask you
a couple questions about the mission?"

“Don’t want to read the report?”

“Plenty of things no one bothers putting in reports.”

“Such as?”

“What was in the room?”

“Crazy fucker with a couple of AKs.”

The joke falls flat; she’s on a mission. “Anything besides that?”

Tim pushes down the loudest memories to focus on the periphery. The safehouse and temporary refuge of Asim bin Hadid had been a one room grape hut on the top of a low hill. Tim hates grape huts. He’s always outside trying to get in, and there are plenty of holes to shoot out of and thick walls that block whoever wants in. Unfortunately if you wanted the guy inside – who’s doing his goddamned best to kill you – alive, then calling in an airstrike is not an option. They’d almost surprised Hadid. Almost. The difference between almost and actuality in this case is almost big enough to fill Lake Superior. All that was in the hut was a sleeping bag and two cans and a water bottle and the crazy fucker with the AKs.

“ Weird how he was supposed to be holing up there, but he barely had any food, huh?” Lena rests her elbows on her knees and her chin on her fists.

“Maybe someone was supposed to bring him some more or he was supposed to be moved.”

“Maybe.” She says it the way someone tells a kid they can ‘maybe’ have a pony for Christmas.

“You’re thinking someone expected us to take him?”

“They wouldn’t have left him the weapons if they wanted him captured.”

“If they wanted him dead, why not just kill him?”

“That’s a real good question.” She chews on it for a bit, trying to find a way to swallow. “Say, has anyone besides me asked any questions about anything to do with bin Hadid?”

“We only talk about our missions to the commanders who bring them to us and the people who go with us.”

“That great, but it’s not answering what I asked.” The volume and cadence of her voice don’t change, but the calm has turned cold.

“No.”

“No what?” Lena cocks her head, brows drawn in.

“No, no one has asked.”

“I’d like to know if that happens.”

Tim nods, startled and off-kilter by the transition.
“Thanks. I think it’s time to head back.” And just like that the switch flips back and the shoulders relax and the ice seeps away. “Walk with me?”

He gives her a look, regaining his comfort by chastising her.

“What? I brought pepper spray.”

“Seriously?” Pepper spray to a gun fight.

“Have you ever been pepper-sprayed?”

“I’ve been tear-gassed.”

“Dang.” She jumps up, brushing the dust off her ass. Tim doesn’t move. “Oh come on. I got a ride. You have no faith in me.” Pepper spray. Christ.

He rolls his eyes but complies, stooping to grab his helmet.

“By the way,” she begins cautiously, and Tim braces himself, “your friend Mark is going to be fine; he’ll keep his leg. There’s a doctor at Ramstein who can fix anything. He’s reattached a couple of limbs for people, so he’s seen worse. He promised he’d look after Mark. Also told me to tell the rest of you to avoid ‘stupid dumbass shit that creates too much work for me’.”

“You said ‘dumbass’ and ‘shit’.”

“I was quoting someone, so it doesn’t count.”

For the first time since the bird dropped them back at base a few hours ago he can feel his chest unclench. “Didn’t know the state department could pull those kinds of strings.”

“I asked real nicely.”

“Is that right?”

“Well not really. He’s my cousin’s husband, and I told him if he wants the good cranberry sauce at thanksgiving he’ll do as he’s told.”

“You still blackmailing people?”

“I don’t know if you realized, but I make amazing cranberry sauce.”

He’s about to ask what makes the cranberry sauce so good, but the blaring wail of the siren cuts him off before he can start.

A split second later there’s an explosion a hundred yards in front of them as one of the housing units erupts in a fireball.

Chapter End Notes

No offense intended towards Green Beans. I’m sure their coffee is great, and it’s admirable that some of their proceeds go towards charities for families of fallen soldiers.

But fuck Kansas.
As always, sorry for any missed typos. Happy thirteenth everyone!

_Breathe. Don’t panic, just breathe. In, one two three four five six seven, hold, one two three four five six seven eight, out, one two three four five six seven. In, one two three…_

There’s a hand gripping her arm; she only really notices because her arm’s jiggling, but she’s not the one doing it. Then there’s Sergeant Gutterson’s face in front of her, and a hand on each arm, but he’s a bit far away, which is weird since he’s close enough to touch her, and no that’s definitely someone else moving her arms for her now.

“Lena!”

She snaps to. “I’m good.” _In, one two three… “I’m good.”_

“Lena.” He speaks slowly, making sure she’s hearing him, “I’m going back out to see what’s hit.”

Lena knows with an instinctive, gut-punch certainty that this is a terrible idea and grabs a handful of jacket, pulling him to a stop. “No.”

“No that’s not…” He needs to _understand_. “I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to…” Damn, she’d panicked. _English, use it_. It’s time to focus. Panic is useless. _You’re here to do something, and panic isn’t doing something. It’s waving at other somethings as they fly by. You are not helpless, and you will not act like it_. Lena rights herself, shaking off the ashes and putting everything back in its place. “No, you are not going out there.” This time her voice is solid, and it sounds like an order. He’s not required to follow any of her orders, but you can get a long way by pretending. How does he not get that that’s a terrible idea?

The jacket tugs back against her hand. “Lena, the sirens are off. It’s fine.” Her pretending skills need some polishing. She lets go of his jacket, defeated. “It’s fine, I swear.”

She listens a moment. Oh, they are off. _Get it together, dollface_. Lena steps out of the bunker towards the site of the explosion only to be jerked back by a hand around her arm again.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He barks. She’s confused, crouching slightly and looking around again for another threat. There’s nothing.

“I’m going to see if anyone is hurt.”

“Just stay here. There could be unexploded shells or something.”

“You don’t get it both ways, Sergeant. Besides,” she raises her eyebrows meaningfully, “you said it was safe.”
“Jesus Christ, fine, just stay back a bit.” She stays to the side.

By the time they reach the fire, it’s more smoke than fire. The containerized housing units are metal, and there’s not a lot in them to keep a fire going. Several people from the surrounding units are already out and inform them upon their arrival that everyone is present and accounted for. There’s a lot of relieved laughing and ‘holy shit, I pissed the bed’ jokes, and since everyone is safe and – except for one bump gained from falling out of bed in shock – uninjured there’s nothing to do but laugh along with them. The wave of adrenaline shock at the explosion is starting to wear off, leaving her giddy and a tad shaky. When the cleanup crew arrives, Lena takes that as her cue to move on.

It’s then she realizes it was her CHU she saw get blown to shit.

“Well sergeant, it seems the universe agrees with you about my wardrobe choices. Although if you wanted to see me in ACUs that badly you could have just said so.”

She laughs at her own joke, earning a few confused looks from those around her. It’s fine; she’s alive. Clothes? Who cares? Fucks are not given. The world can behold the field in which she sows her fucks, and lo, it will be empty. She can go shopping when she gets home, celebrate that a bunch of clothes got blown up and burnt instead of her. See? Bright side to everything. Actually, now that she thinks about it she’s really looking forward to the idea; it’ll be nice.

“She’s fine. See?” She raises her hands to fully demonstrate her fine-ness. “I am A-OK.”

“You’re,” it’s a syllable drawn out and run through with doubt. “Come on. We need to get you squared away. I doubt you really want to spend a night in the barracks.” Mm, no, no she does not. Single-housing CHUs are a hot commodity, and Lena hopes that they have extras.

“I can take care of it, Sergeant.” Wow, she is in a really great mood right now. “I mean, you should probably sleep. You’ve had a much shittier night than I have.”

His face scrunches together a little more than usual. “I’ll deal. Now let’s go.” Well fine then Sergeant Cranky Pants. He starts off in the direction of what is probably the place that will assign her housing, and she complies, although what they’ll do about it at this hour is anyone’s guess. Or maybe they stay open late in the event of surprise rocket attacks. Either way, her cooperation means they will both get sleep sooner, so it wouldn’t be polite to stand and argue.

The rest of the base is quiet as they walk, unmarked by Taliban rockets or mortars. From the safety of the bunker, they could hear the echoingly loud brrrrrrrrtttt of the C-RAM phalanx guns, designed to shoot down incoming projectiles before they could hit. Lena had seen a demo once and been duly impressed. Her poor little CHU must have been hit in the first volley. It was really lucky none of the others were damaged.

Lena slows her pace, already turning back before the thought is fully formed.

“Lena?”

Another thought bumps up against the edge of the first, growing insistent, and she turns in an entirely new direction, picking up certainty and then speed. The prison.

“Where the hell are your shoes?”
“I dunno,” Lena waves vaguely over her shoulder, trying to catch her breath; Gutterson’s not even a little winded. “Left ’em somewhere back there.”

“What the fuck?”

Lena throws up her hands in exasperation. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I can’t run that fast in heels.”

“What do you think that says about wearing them in the first place?”

“Sergeant, I promise you that I’ll listen to all the I-told-you-so’s you want when we have a quiet moment, but for now I have a bigger problem, so let’s focus on that.”

“Oh right, well excuse me for being concerned about you impaling your feet on sharp objects.”

“Fine, I appreciate it. Jesus.” What she’s not sure she appreciates is his presence. There are three possible scenarios. One, she’s paranoid and dragging him into an unnecessary waste of time when he could be elsewhere. Two, she’s not paranoid and this is going to get ugly and she’s dragging him into a shitstorm, or three, she’s not paranoid and he might not be the one she wants next to her when the clouds burst. Option three is quickly dismissed, earlier events in the evening being pretty good evidence of him not being a traitor. Lena reaches a compromise between options one and two.

“Sergeant, I need you to stay and make sure the MPs don’t let anyone near Hadid’s cell.”

“Not gonna happen.” Gutterson crosses his arms, dug in. “And while we’re at it, how about an explanation for whatever the fuck we’re doing here.”

Oh Christ, there is so not time for this. But nor is there time for her to be annoyed with his refusal to cooperate. *Adapt and survive.* “I’m pretty sure someone’s going to try to kill him if they haven’t already.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that.”

“Because the odds of a rocket randomly hitting the one room I sleep in and missing the others packed tight around it are about nil. So for starters, I’m going to go with someone besides the Taliban being behind that, and I’m also going to guess they don’t want Hadid to talk.”

“And you thought running up here barefoot was a good idea.” But instead of blocking the path he’s already walking ahead of her into the prison, so that’s something. “You have your ID?”

“Yeah.” Tim flashes his own ID and Lena gives her credentials to the outer guards, along with instructions that only military personnel be allowed in or out. When they reach Hadid’s cell, there’s someone waiting to let them in. Unfortunately, the cells in Bagram have only metal bars for ceilings – great for watching prisoners, not so great if you don’t want to be a trapped rat in a cage.

“Do any of the interrogation rooms have a real roof?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Let’s get him in cuffs and go then.”

The guard throws a look at her feet, then at Gutterson, who remains silent. He decides not to ask questions and shuffles Hadid into a full set of shackles. Three minutes later they’re in a sterile
room with exposed cinderblock walls where the only window is a six inch square piece of glass near the top of the door.

The sergeant pushes Hadid into a back corner, pulls one of the chairs off-center of the door, and sits down, gun resting in his lap.

Lena’s first thought is that he’s too exposed. The pervasive, growing fear that she’s leading him into harm’s way negates any sense of relief she might feel at having a heavily armed, trained killer along. It doesn’t matter that he’s just returned from a mission given by her own directive. It doesn’t matter that one of his fellows is being flown by the critical care air transport team to Germany for his injuries. For a sickening moment she’s back on that road, lying in the dirt with a shard of metal sticking out of her ribs, grabbing the shoulder of the person on top of her but he’s not moving because he’s dead, and she’s about to be too, and the worst part is the stark, horrific realization that this is all her fault.

*You are not helpless.*

“Alright I’ll stay here and watch him. You go wake up the captain and let him know what’s going on. You’ve got two guns, so leave whichever isn’t your favorite with me, and I’ll take good care of it.”

“Have you ever shot a gun?”

“I’m pretty sure I can grasp the concept of point and shoot.”

“That’s what I thought. Get in the corner and stay down. And since you have a phone, how about you call the Captain.” *Sit in the corner my ass. Anger is the best defense against fear.*

Lena walks around to stand in front of him. “Ok, let me try this again –”

“Look, I didn’t come here because I need the excitement in my life. I came in here with you because I believe you, and I’ve been through too much trouble to get that piece of shit,” he jerks his head at the corner where Hadid sits against the wall, “to have someone mess that up too, so I don’t give a good goddam about whatever high and mighty bullshit you have about why I shouldn’t be here. Shut up and go make the goddamned call.” He gestures to the side with the gun barrel. “In the corner.”

The look on his face says she’s already lost this fight, but experience and her conscience won’t be quiet, so knowing better becomes irrelevant. “Sergeant –”

The chair falls over as he pushes abruptly to his feet and Lena’s considers the very real possibility that he’s about to bodily throw her in the corner. But then the sound of glass breaking catches his attention and hers, and the small, dark ball that flies past her shoulder and bounces off the back wall lands on the table with a metallic clang.

Her heart takes a single pounding beat and then stops. The fear evaporates, some small part of her brain already accepting the inevitable, or perhaps it has become so intense as to be unrecognizable. There are no breathing exercises in the world that can rein in the adrenaline blooming through her blood and even if there were, the seven seconds between the time a grenade is thrown and the moment it detonates don’t leave time for such luxuries.

“Oh s –”
There’s cold concrete against his back. His ears are ringing and his brain is moving like molasses through the arctic. Tim gets his hands under him and begins to push up, but an arm across his chest slams him hard into the floor. The small body on top of him squirms, and the stab of fear at being held down yanks his brain out of the muck it was mired in. Tim nearly breaks her neck before realizing it’s not Hadid using the chance to kill him, but rather Lena crouching atop him, craning her head towards the door.

She’s yelling something he can’t hear, but he can definitely see the gun – his pistol – in her hand. Lena’s half sitting on him while aiming at the door, but really it’s aimed at the wall and she can’t see that because she’s alternately squinting and widening her eyes trying to get rid of the flashbang blindness.

Worst case scenario: someone comes through that door and kills them because she can’t see well enough to shoot. Second worst case scenario: help comes through that door and she takes a shot at whatever moves. Tim doesn’t like any situation where there’s more than one worst case scenario, so in the split second between the time he hit the floor and this moment, he gets one hand around her waist and the other on the hand she’s holding the gun with and hurls.

Predictably, the surprise causes her to fire a round into the wall, but it’s cinderblock and now he has his gun, and she’s closer to the floor and farther away from being shot. Or having her neck broken.

What comes through the door isn’t pixelated camo, so he shoots it. After the first comes two more of the same. They go down with two bullets apiece. When no one else comes through he shifts a portion of his focus back to Lena.

“You good?” Her legs are still half-tangled in his.

“I’m good.” She doesn’t sound shell-shocked this time. Tim throws a quick glance sideways and finds her clutching his M4.

He holds out his hand. “Get behind me.” This time she doesn’t argue, handing him the gun as she scoots over. He holsters the pistol in favor of the rifle.

Twenty seconds pass, and the sound of boots comes down the hall but no one enters. Tim pushes up, preparing to drag the table over for cover in case they throw another grenade.

“Sergeant Gutterson?” The voice is undoubtedly American, but Tim doesn’t lower the barrel.

“Yeah?” he calls.

“You and the lady alright in there? Can we come in?” No.

“Who’s we?”
“This is specialist Dawes, and I got Captain Simeon on his way.” The barrel keeps its position, but he allows himself the feeling of relief.

“I’ll wait for Captain Simeon. This evening’s made me a bit twitchy.”

“Sure thing, Sarge.”

Tim keeps his rifle pointed towards the door just in case, telling himself it’s more important to be prepared than to get up and check the three bodies that now share the room with them. A little slide to the left and the table legs block the eyes of the man who fell facing him. In the end his preparation proves unnecessary because the next voice he hears is Simeon’s.

“Gutterson?”

“Yes sir.” Tim lowers the rifle and motions an all clear to Lena.

“You wanna tell me why you have three dead ANA men in here?” he asks, stepping inside and over the bodies.

Before Tim can respond, Lena jumps in for him, starting out with the rocket that hit her CHU and ending with the demand that Hadid be kept alone in a cell with four walls and a solid ceiling, accessible only to her and whomever she deems acceptable. No yard time. Captain Simeon agrees, adding on top of that that no ANA will be allowed in without escort at all times, and definitely only unarmed. He’s pissed. Tim saw him pissed once. He doesn’t envy whoever the sad fuck is that’ll have to answer for this. Lena will also be given a separate room in one of the bunkers.

“Is there anything you want to get before we take you to your new quarters, ma’am?”

“No, sir, it was kinda blown to crap.” She says it with the annoyed yet resigned attitude of someone forced to sit through a traffic jam rather than someone who’s been through a rocket attack and an ambush. “But thanks. Any chance you guys have some spare clothes though?”

“You can ask the housing office guys. They’ll find you some.”

“I can take her over, sir.” Tim looks at her feet. She’s gettin’ boots.

Lena steps on another rock and winces. It’s the third one in five minutes, and he’s ready to pull his hair out. “I told you so.”

“Huh?”

“I told you so.” He stops walking. “Just put your shoes on.” She just had to go back and find those damn high heels. The night had already been a ridiculous shit show of a disaster, so why the fuck not?

“No, my feet are dirty.”

“So wash them off later.” Her logic frustrates him. It’s like arguing with an alien life form. Or a three year old. Your feet hurt ‘cause you’re stepping on rocks, you put on shoes. You don’t worry about whether or not the shoes get dirty.

“No, it might not come out.”

Tim throws up his hands, capitulating. “Fine,” he sighs, resigned to having to watch her
wince and swear – if ‘crap’ and ‘dang’ count as swearing – when she steps on something uncomfortable.

“Oh, come on. If my feet really hurt that bad I would, but it’s fine see?” She skips in a small circle, proving her feet’s capacity to do so, before coming to a stop in front of him and finishing with a small bow. “Dang, I need coffee. You want some?” A three year old.

Tim looks at her standing there, dirt smeared up the side of her pants like she took a hockey slide on the ground, shirt scuffed to ruin, and holding those ridiculous high heels she refuses to admit are stupid, and instead of shock or tears or whatever reaction to the night he expected, she’s smiling up at him and asking if he still wants coffee – ‘Oh but decaf because we’re going straight to bed after this’. She’s just as ridiculous as her shoes, and God help him, but the crazy train doesn’t look so bad when she’s driving it. He’s still pumped full of unused adrenaline, hyperaware of everything near him, so when he thinks of going straight to bed it’s not in the sense she means it.

Lena tilts her head, waiting for his reply, always so patient. That patience is what makes her dangerous. Since he’s a masochist and a fool he agrees to the coffee.

“Yeah, sure, why not.” Tim gestures for her to lead the way.

She does another little skip, circling back around to walk beside him. “Hey Sergeant?” She’s using her overly-calm, preemptively placating, talking-to-a-scared rabbit voice. “Thanks for coming to the prison with me.”

“Uh huh.”

He shouldn’t have gone with her; he should have taken her somewhere safe and gone by himself. He should have called his captain first thing. The first ‘should haves’ only break the seal, opening the door for the rest. Should have been faster, should have posted a guard, should have taken Hadid somewhere else, should have been more insistent about not letting Lena wander around alone…fuck what if…hindsight’s a bitch you can’t beat.

The ‘should haves’ snowball into the fear and guilt of the ‘could have beens’. He’d been an asshole earlier, wanted to be alone so he’d lashed out to make her leave. If she had, if she’d gone back to her room… Tim looks down at Lena. In the darkness, the smear of dirt could so easily be blood. What if he’d reacted slower? Only reason he hadn’t been blinded like her was ‘cause she’d knocked him down. God, he should have – Tim shoves the thought aside, unwilling to let it take root, tells himself that it’s just like anything else he’s had to deal with since coming here.

Now that he wants the distraction, she’s quiet.

After letting them into her office she waves him into her chair as she moves about, preparing their coffee. He leans against the desk instead, feeling out of place, like he’s trespassing even though she invited him in. Where the hell did she get a grinder from? The smell – simple and just plain pleasant – is so completely foreign to everything else he’s experienced this evening, like calm sanity and sunrises.

“You know,” Lena hands the coffee over and hops up to sit on the desk next to him, “I thought grenades were supposed to do more damage.”

“It was just a flashbang.” He reminds himself of exactly that fact a few more times. And the mess on her clothes is just dirt.

“Oh…” Lena fiddles with her sleeve, embarrassed by her ignorance, “good.”
Jesus. And because he has no grace and no guts ‘Are you ok?’ comes out as, “You’re an idiot by the way.” It’s so much easier, so much safer, to be angry. Maybe someday if he can feel angry enough at someone else, his own guilt will fade.

“And you’re kind of a dick.” It comes out as a sigh.

He ignores her, the full weight of righteous anger spurring him forwards. “Stop going outside alone. Day, night, it doesn’t matter. Your free-spirited shit can wait ‘til you’re back in the U.S. This is Afghanistan, not a goddamned tea party. And wear a fuckin’ pair of boots. Something actually goes wrong, you don’t have time to kick your shoes off and hope the ground is soft.” The whole time he’s going off on her, he can see her ready to talk back, which means she’s not paying attention, not understanding the danger or taking it seriously, which just pisses him off more.

Of course, the second his mouth closes hers opens. “On one condition.”

“Oh Jesus Christ. Seriously?”

“Teach me to shoot a gun.” She says it fast, getting the words out before she can second guess them. Oh Jesus Christ. Seriously?

‘Oh come on, Tim.’ Giggle, ‘don’t you want to show me how to handle your weapon?’

Several exes had asked him to teach them how to shoot, and they’d come down to the range in their cut-off short shorts, happy to look sexy and soak up attention for being the only girl in the ‘boy’s club’. The girls might have gotten a few looks, but the ones he got were filled with pity. Then they realize that shooting is haadarrrd, and that guns are loud, and gun powder smells bad, and hitting a target is frustrating as shit when you’ve never done it before. Many a day would end with a pouting woman who needed to be coddled and have her ego stroked back up afterwards, and on the real shit days it ended in a fight.

“Please?”

“Why.”

“Cause I was…” Lena gestures helplessly into the air, annoyance deflating into embarrassment, “pretty dang useless,” she finishes with an exhale.

“You weren’t useless.”

An eye roll. “You just called me an idiot. And I mean you…you had it together. I just sat there.” A little jerk of her head, shaking off a memory.

“I called you an idiot ‘cause that’s not how you’re…” he waves his hand, pushing aside the memory of her between him and the door…between him and a flashbang… He should have… goddammit. “It’s not the same.”

“Maybe I’m an idiot, but I’m not a dumbass.”

“Hey, no swearing.”

“You do it all the time.”

“But you don’t.”

“I’ll do as I please.” That’s the problem. “Well? Will you do it or not?”
“It’s hard you know. More to it ‘n just pointing and pulling a trigger.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’ll take a while to get decent. And shootin’ at a target isn’t the same as being in a firefight.”

“I know.” Everyone says that.

“There are a lot of people, they get trained for years, comes time to shoot someone, even someone trying to kill them, they can’t do it.” And even when they can… There’s not always a table to put between you and the face of the man you’ve just killed.

She holds his gaze for a bit, searching. “I’m glad you killed those guys, Tim. Not glad you had to, but glad you did.”

Damn her patience. “You’ll have to wear headphones. Might mess up your hair.” Safety in anger, safety in humor.

“So…yes?”

“Fine, yes.”

“Thanks, sergeant.”

“It’s Tim, ma’am.”

“You’re kind of a pain in the ass, Tim.”

“Says the pot.”

She favors him with an insolent smile. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

*It is, dummy.*

o.O.o

Today is not a good day. Today is a no good, very bad, fuckbucket of a day.

First the car wouldn’t start. Day briefly almost saved by Dave, Lurker #1, who gave her ride to work. Day ironically ruined by Lurker #1’s getting into a fender bender, necessitating the flagging down of a taxi. Taxi driver was an ass. Taxi ride cut short upon abrupt decision to make ass pull over. Walked rest of way to work. Arrived at work sweating and gross and late.

She can hear her phone ringing from the elevator, and sprints to her office, spilling her coffee in the process. Decision to balance coffee on new book and stack of papers bad. She swears colorfully and hopes whoever is on the other end is worth the trouble.

“Oona?” God, fuck, she should just give up on life now. Today was just a terrible idea to begin with, and she should just put it back in the box and return to sender.

“Yes?” She braces herself for the inevitable disappointment. The report that should have been sent last night has not yet been sent. There is shame and also a belligerent sense of unwanted pressure.

“I’ve got a favor to ask.” All hail the gods, saviors of mankind. People asking for favors can’t get angry. The day is looking up. “Actually a couple favors.” The hesitance in the last line bodes ill.
The gods could still be assholes.

“What do you need, boss-lady?”

“First, I need you to overnight me some clothes. I’ve sent a list of stores and sizes. Don’t worry, it’s short. Have Charles handle it.” Neither Oona nor Lena has forgotten Mallgate. This is fine with Oona. America has a dumb sizing system anyways.

“Uh, why do you need more clothes?”

“The ones I had got blown up.”

“Holy shitbubbles.” And why the hell does she say that with such a laissez faire attitude? There was a time when her boss would have flipped her shit if she got mustard on her shirt (despite the back-up that everyone knows she keeps in her desk), but these days you could spill a gallon of red wine over her head and she’d probably wring her hair out over a glass and ask you for crackers. It’s disconcerting. A nice change, but disconcerting nonetheless.

“That’s a nasty image. Also, someone broke into Parwan and tried to kill Hadid.”

“Well sound the fucktrumpets and call in the cavalry. Seriously, did you call in cavalry? My blood pressure can’t take you.”

“You brighten my day, Oona; don’t ever change.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I will, however, and without a shred of compunction or remorse, murder the next person who calls me ma’am.”

“You promise? I can get Steve on the phone if you’ll wait just one minute.”

“Tempting.” Then more seriously, “He behaving?”

“No, not really.”

“Dave and Suki doing their jobs?”

“Yeah, working for the CIA is way better than the FBI.” CIA actually gives a shit about the whole work-place stalking thing. They don’t try to tell you that creeps are just “quirky.” And even if Lena has taken a chill pill, she still has a cold bitch side that’s great when it’s working for you.

“Good, now onto my next favor. I need background checks on some people. Everyone who works in Parwan, all the contractors, and any and all Afghan officials and security forces and police that have anything to do with the ANA or have any connection to Hadid. Give priority to anyone who was there when I was over here the first time and with anyone associated with them.”

“That’s a long as list.”

“I know. Just do it as fast as possible.”

“How about American military?” Why? Why did she just ask for more work?

There’s a pause, then, “I doubt it’s necessary at this point. Tim was there to make sure Hadid didn’t get killed.”
“‘Tim’ huh? Whatever happened to ‘Sergeant Gutterson’? He still call you ma’am?”

“I thought you liked working for the CIA.”

“And I thought you needed a favor.”

“You’re lucky I like you.”

“Careful around the man-meat boss.”

“Bye, Oona.”
In chapter six, I had a specialist call Tim "sir". I have fixed it so that he's calling Tim "Sarge" since it was pointed out to me that an enlisted soldier would not refer to another enlisted as "sir." As always, sorry for typos, and I hope you enjoy :-)

Interrogation is a delicate, tricky thing. Lamb chops and other torturously repetitive children’s songs aside, Lena doesn’t hold with torture. Not that she bears any love or particular sympathy for those she has cause and opportunity to interrogate, and in her line of work ritual self-disembowelment can be easier than mustering any scrap of sympathy for her subjects. Most importantly it doesn’t yield good results. Even in the absence of torture the too-strenuous insistence upon a particular course of events can render questioning useless as the subject shuts down, willing to say anything to bring an end to the ordeal and latching on too readily to what has already been fed him. Sure, now and then you’ll get useful information, but generally there’s also an important piece of the story that is withheld, often to the detriment of your own people. In such cases torture is a betrayal of your cause and allies because you were impatient and could have done far better.

Interrogation, Lena has been taught – lessons she has never had cause to question – hinges just as much upon the time you don’t spend questioning a subject. She doesn’t see Hadid for three days. For three days he is given water and some bread, increasingly stale. The water probably tastes odd. That would be the caffeine. No meat, no vegetables. The air circulation around his cell is impeded, making the air hot and stuffy and heavy. Miscellaneous noises that, to a terrified man, might sound natural to a prison can be heard day and night. Sometimes low, constant annoyances, and every now and then, just to make sure he stays awake, and lest he forget when ANA soldiers came to kill him, a flashbang – useful little things – is tossed in the neighboring cell or outside his door. Usually they have the interpreters do it, always chatting casually in Pashto outside his door before setting it off.

For three days Clarence asks him questions. He is never remotely on time. The sarcastic wit and charm are gone. Despite his penchant for paying people off he can be hard too. Clarence sits at a table with a water bottle in an ice bucket and a crisp salad all for himself. Hadid stands shackled ankles to wrists for hours, no water, no food. The shackles have been rubbed with capsaicin, and his skin is raw from the irritation and the scratching. The clanging and clinking of the metal chains as he squirms is near constant. Clarence asks all sorts of questions, some productive, some a colossal waste of time, some simply because he’s bored. It doesn’t matter; he’s not there to get any information out of him. If Hadid spills his guts then wonderful, but if not then Lena is not worried, not yet.

Hadid is a soft man, a low-level bureaucrat, normally one who could be easily broken or paid off. But he is scared, scared enough that he is so far rather useless. She will find out of whom he is so petrified. Hadid tells them things they already know, desperate to be useful (sometimes the noises he hears outside his cell resemble a firing squad). One useful piece of information Clarence is able to confirm is that his terror of the Afghan government outweighs that of the American military. It is hinted to Hadid that Afghan officials have an interest in his testimony as well. He slips, suddenly interested and asks which ones. Clarence does not answer.

On the fourth day Clarence is gone. In his place sits Lena, clean white shirt, buttoned to her
collar and wearing a hijab. It fully covers her hair, not carelessly resting halfway off her head. There are two plastic cups on the table, each sweating from the refreshingly ice-cold water that fills them to the brim, and there are two chairs at the table. A video camera rests discretely in the corner. Hadid’s shackles are not pre-treated with capsaicin, and he wears them only around his wrists. Lena asks the guards quietly but audibly why his wrists are so raw.

She begins by asking easy questions, some that he has already answered for Clarence and only ones that they have already been able to corroborate with truth. Lena bids him drink after each correct answer, handing him a fresh water bottle once the cup is drained. She does not open it for him. After these questions she asks new ones, seemingly inconsequential, yet leading. She is not so much gentle as business-like and non-threatening. This in itself puts him on edge. It must be a trick. She asks the important questions: who did he give the security tapes to and where are they now, who was on them, and who stole the hotel vans? But he does not answer, feigning ignorance and innocence. Then why was he holed up in a grape hut and shooting at Americans? He was watching his cousin’s land for him while he was on a trip, and the AK-47’s were for his protection. He was confused in the ambush and would never have shot at American soldiers. Their governments are working together, and they are on the same side! She pushes, firmly and knowingly but without meanness or threats. After only three hours, she claims hunger and business elsewhere. Before standing, with a meaningful and mildly concerned glance at his capsaicin-chaffed wrists, she asks if he is being treated well. He nods vigorously, not yet trusting of what she would do with his opinions.

The fifth day goes much the same, as does the sixth; however, on the sixth, instead of feigning ignorance he pleads for her to understand his silence, that he has a family and can’t risk them. She asks about all of his coworkers and his superiors, general questions about what they are like, carefully noting his reaction to each name. She asks him about his family, what they do. He has a brother who used to be in the ANA as a translator, and a cousin who recently joined, but he is in Kandahar, far to the south. She asks if he has any other connections to the ANA. He shakes his head instead of saying no, leaning back slightly and asks for more water. She passes him a water bottle and accepts the lie, that no, he does not know anyone else in the ANA. Lena asks after his treatment. This time there is hesitation when he says everything is fine.

After two more days and a visit from Clarence, he tells her that he is very tired. She promises to see what she can do. There is noise during the day, but during the night, there are no more flashbangs or firing weapons. The next day, he says perhaps, maybe, if it is possible, he might like something besides bread. He is given milk and lamb meat with his bread. Still he does not tell her about the tapes. The day after she informs with professional detachment that the ANA would like to question him, so if he has nothing further to tell her, then he will be moved.

That day he tells her the tapes have been destroyed, burned in the kitchen of the hotel the day of the suicide bombing. He begs for her protection and she trades it for three names.

o.O.o

Tim knows she’s in her office before he even gets within fifty feet of it. How her neighbors are tolerating the loud, pounding base is a mystery he’ll let them worry about though. The sound multiplies tenfold when he opens the door, something rhythmic and electric. Lena has her back to him, bouncing energetically between sections of a massive corkboard. She tacks up pictures and notes, pausing occasionally to uncap the pen she holds in her mouth to write more notes or draw lines between nodes. The music is too loud and she’s too focused on her work, so he leans in the doorway, momentarily happy about her lack of situational awareness. The music may not be his style, but the way she moves to it is. Her hips dip and twist, fluid motions that catch the eye and don’t let go. It crosses his mind that if she were to be a stripper in their post-deployment destination Lena would be an instant favorite. The uncomfortable thought of other men enjoying the same show
shuts down that line of thinking.

She turns around to check her computer, and his eyes snap up to an appropriate target. Lena pulls the pen out of her mouth. He sees rather than hears her exclaim, “Tim!” Flustered looks good on her.

He smirks, eyebrows raised teasingly, smug at catching her out. “You’re wearing boots.”

Lena gestures for him hold on and turns down the music. “What did you say?”

He points to her feet, “I see you’ve finally come to your senses.”

“Yes, in deference to your delicate and finicky sensibilities I am wearing ‘appropriate,’” an eye roll accompanies the air quotes, “footwear.”

“Your want a gold star or something? Now let’s go. I got a mission briefing in an hour and we still have to get you earpro and eyepro.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Ranger Man sir.” She’s quick to follow him out the door, no dawdling.

“So you’ve really never shot a gun before?”

“Only thing I’ve shot at a target is darts.”

“Darts?”

“Yeah, all that time in bars is what got me through school. Does shooting a gun also get easier when you’ve had a lot of beer?”

“I dunno. You could always just shoot yourself in the foot now and find out.”

“Hard pass.”

o.O.o

Lena lets the pistol drop to her side in defeat. This is so much more entertaining than he thought it would be. It’s even better than watching a boot lieutenant trying to find his dick in the woods with a compass.

“That was better.” Better being a very relative term in this case.

“What?” Listening to all that loud music earlier means she’s having a harder time hearing him through the headphones, and he keeps having to repeat shit.

Tim raises his voice. “I said that was better.”

“Oh yeah. Right.” Lena pushes the headphones aside. “Did you see that? I hit the bleeding wall. Over there.” She points six feet to the right of the target. “How is this so hard? You point and you shoot. I mean how do you screw that up?”

“Well I ain’t the one screwin’ it up.” Her mouth pulls down at the corners, and he feels a twinge of sympathy at the shame that covers her face again. “Hey, you do realize that’s why they make us spend years training, right? Also, pistols are harder than a normal rifle.”

“Oh yeah, that’s why everyone’s a sniper.”
“I said normal rifles.”

She eyes him, clearly suspicious of being placated, but accepts it, or at least doesn’t argue the point further. “Well then why am I starting out with the hard stuff? Shouldn’t I be starting easy and work up?”

“Nope, you can’t be carrying around an M4, so you need to learn to shoot somethin’ you can carry on you.”

“Fine. Fair enough.” He thinks he hears her mutter ‘sadist’ under her breath as she pulls the headphones back into place and brings up the pistol again, taking a deep breath that does fuck all to get rid of the frustrated tension.

“Your finger’s too far in on the trigger again,” he yells, “Middle of the pad!”

Despite rising temper and frustration, this isn’t quite the misery Tim expected it to be. Watching Miss-I-wake-up-half-an-hour-early-so-I-can-do-my-eyeliner-when-I-live-on-a-military-base-Carlan continuously fuck up at something that comes as naturally to him as breathing provides a deeply satisfying sense of schadenfreude. And in all fairness she is trying. The only complaints Lena makes are about herself, not the gun or the sound or the smell. The target might have three holes in it instead of twenty, and they might be far from center, but she’s trying. Every three shots Lena stops and looks to him for criticism, and when he gives her advice she does her best to take it. It usually goes to hell the moment she pulls the trigger; every time she fires it’s like there’s a small cannon trying to jump out of her hands. It might have been more than a little bit unfair to start her off with a Colt .45, but he gave her the big gun to see if she’s serious. If she doesn’t quit, she can have a 9 mil next time.

“Stop squinting.”

“I’m not squinting, I’m looking through my left eye.”

“Why didn’t you say you shoot left?”

“I’m right handed!”

“Left is what eye you use.” It’s fun being the calm one in the face of her exasperation.

“Well, if you’d told me that…” Lena grumbles, switching hands and shuffling her feet around. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Would you rather I not?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, then I’ll leave.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Stop bitching at me and take the shot. Keep both eyes open.”

“I’m not bitching!” The shot goes wider than the last one. “That doesn’t help! My eyes cross when I do that.”

“Pick the image you see in your left eye. You’re doing this for something besides target practice, so you gotta get used to both eyes being open. You have to see the surroundings as well as
focus on your target. Stop rushing yourself."

“Maybe I should just shoot myself in the foot.”

“Take those boots off first.” She gives him a withering look, and Tim can’t help the shit-eating grin that spreads uncontrollably across his face. She’s cute when she’s mad, like a little bird ruffling its feathers in a sudden downpour. He’d never say it though. There’s a three in twenty chance he’d end up with a bullet hole in him.

“You –”

“Oy! Gutterson!” Carter is jogging towards them. At least when Lena turns around to look, she keeps the barrel pointed down range instead of swinging it around with her.

“Fuu…great, more audience for my failure.”

“You’re here to learn, not impress people.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re actually good at this.”

Carter reaches them and says to Tim, “Hey dude, captain said to have your gear ready before the briefing.” He turns to Lena, catching sight of the target in the process.

“Shit man. First time?”

“Yes.” It’s directed more at the ground.

Tim waves her back to the line. “Three more shots.”

When she’s out of hearing range, Carter leans over. “Bro, did you give her a .45 for her first time?”

“Yeah, I know right?” he says grinning, happy to have someone else to share the joke with.

“You’re a dick. That’s like giving a virgin surprise anal.”

“Oh god.” Tim tries to spit out the image. “Dude.”

Carter just laughs and elbows him in the side, and Tim is thankful Lena can’t hear them.

She was already frustrated, a condition made worse by another observer, and all three bullets go wide.

“At least,” Carter says with feigned gravity, clapping a hand on her shoulder, “you have a steady day job.” Her shoulder jerks back reflexively at the contact, and she sidesteps neatly out of arm’s reach before recovering with a smile that’s mostly friendly.

“I am holding a gun you know.”

“Yeah, Carter, she’ll cap you.”

“I’ll go stand by that target then, where it’s safe.”

Tim turns to Lena, “You gonna take that?”

True to his word, Carter saunters downrange to stand in front of the target.
“Oh Christ. Screw it all. Today is done.” Lena flicks on the safety, ejects the clip, and pulls the slide to make sure the chamber is empty. Carter laughs and jogs back over.

“You givin’ up on me, ma’am?” Tim asks.

“Fuck you. You’re not getting out of this so easily,” she says, handing the weapon back to him.

“Oh shit, an F-bomb.” But he can’t help being pleased.

“I’m pissed. Besides, I was never good with hard and fast rules anyways.”

“Tim, come on.” Carter snaps his fingers.

“Yeah, yeah.” Then to Lena, “Captain’s waitin’.”

The annoyance evaporates. “Be safe ok?”

“You say that like I want to be hit by bullets or something.”

She purses her lips at him. “Just deal with it.”

He tips his hat. “Ma’am.”
The job

Chapter Notes

Hello all, just a heads up: unfortunately next weekend's chapter will probably be late. I've out of town guests, so free time will be devoted to them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well at least you didn’t get hit by any bullets. You’re obviously a letter of the law kinda guy though. Are you going to make me read you a list next time?”

Lena stands just inside the door, ready with an excuse to go should her presence be unwelcome.

Tim looks at her instead of pretending to be asleep and scoots back, trying to sit up straighter. The effort causes him to cough in the process, and Lena winces. Hoping the macho act is a sign of welcome, she steps inside, though by the guarded expression on his face, like he’s preparing for an assault, perhaps it’s best to temper her expectations. It’s hard to tell with him what she’s going to get sometimes.

His throat works; he’s trying not to cough again. There’s an empty cup on the stand next to him, which she takes.

“I’ll be right back.” She fills it with water and nips a chair from the hall on the way back in.

Lena’s not sure it’s the right thing to do, coming to visit like this, doesn’t know if he’d rather be alone, or if his buddies would be here, but the idea of not coming at all seems heartless. More selfishly, she simply wants to see him. She stays standing at first, just leaning on the chairback. He could tell her to go.

He eyes the thermos in her hand. “Do I get any coffee?”

She smiles and plops herself in the chair, taking a long, slow swig. Then, just to be difficult, “You allowed to have coffee?”

“I thought you weren’t big on rules.”

“On some.”

“They didn’t tell me I couldn’t.” She hands it over and he takes a sip, narrowing his eyes over the rim.

“Yes, it’s decaf. Sue me.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Then don’t look at me with that tone of voice.”

Tim inhales, ready to retort, but aborts at the last moment as a cough escapes instead. He settles for pulling a face and takes another drink.
“Hey, you’re not supposed to make me do that. I’m convalescing.”

“You told me every friggin’ joke under the sun when my ribs were still cracked, so tell karma I said hi.”

He flips her the bird. She smiles back, content.

“Well, other than inhaling enough smoke to kill a chimney, how did it go?”

“How do you think it went?” This time the sarcasm comes with bite instead of sass. Aaaaand it all goes to hell. Talking to him is like walking through a minefield. It’s been thinning out lately, but you have to watch your step.

“Don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.” Getting a man to tell her what she wants to know whether he likes it or not is one thing. Getting this particular man to have a normal conversation is a different animal. Although at this point normal is a bit of a warped term.

“Well then it was fan-fucking-tastic.” He sets the mug down between them and crosses his arms. “I got to sit and watch a guy get his arm sawn off while we waited for the real bad guy to show up. Happy?” He says it like a challenge, like he wants to get a rise out of her. Or maybe this is just him telling her to fuck off. Jesus. But she can be a stubborn little shit too.

“The ‘real’ bad guy? You guys set some high standards.”

He stares at her a moment, long enough that she almost leaves, graceful exit or not. “You know I can’t discuss the mission with you.”

“Kareem bin Adani? Don’t worry, I know what kind of bad guy he is. Torched a village a couple months back. Friend of the crazies trying to declare Iraq a caliphate and all that. Did you get him?”

Tim continues eyeing her, and Lena belatedly realizes she ought not to advertise her fingers being in so many pots. State department employees only have access to so much. “Yeah, he’s got a fourth-class ticket to gitmo.”

“And the guy who sawed off someone’s arm?”

“You always have to know everything?”

Watch out for the man meat. Glib mouth or not, Oona had a point. Don’t get involved with a soldier. You’ll always be second chair to his friends. They get him. You don’t. Lena’s plenty used to how men act on deployment. They flirt, but it’s mostly harmless, usually nothing to get riled up about. Men are like a girl at her sweet sixteen; they like attention and just want someone to think they’re pretty. Tim doesn’t flirt though. He’ll sass, but he respects personal space and keeps his eyes above board. And since she’s an idiot and reverse psychology is a thing, Lena sometimes thinks she wouldn’t mind if he wanted more attention. But it’s hard making friends when you’re tiptoeing across glass.

“It’s my job to know everything. I’m used to it.”

“Well I ain’t your job.” Gosh damn, dude, that’s not what I meant, and you know it.

Lena doesn’t like having to be so careful. “I only meant that my propensity to ask questions is something I haven’t had to reign in in a long while. It’s habit now.” He has a disturbing, discomfiting ability to maintain silent eye contact for long stretches. She wonders if it’s a Spec Ops thing or a Tim
thing. She babbles on with, “I’m like a four year old who keeps asking why, except my boss encourages it.” It would sure be nice if he could say something while he stares.

“Do you know how long it takes to cut off someone’s arm?” Flat. He may as well be asking her how much battery life her phone has left.

“No,” seems safe.

“Well if you do it with a bowie knife and have no idea what you’re doing it takes a good ten minutes.” Holy fuck. “So yeah, that fucker is dead.” He makes a little explosion sound, miming a head blowing up.

“And the guy who had his arm cut off?” The question is out of her mouth before she has a chance to consider how intrusively crass it sounds.

His lips pull in on one side. Shame. “I shot him too.”

A normal person would reach out and put a hand on his shoulder or arm or something, but even if she were like that, it seems trite.

Instead Lena cocks her head, raising her eyebrows in question, careful to keep all trace of judgment from her face. His choice.

“He went after Pascal.”

“Then I’m glad you shot him,” are you supposed to say that? “and that you all came back safe,” she waves her hand at him, “mostly safe.”

“Mm.”

“So when are they letting you out?”

“They gave me two days.” His voice has lost the bite. He’s also relieved at the change in subject.

“You make it sound like a prison sentence.”

“They won’t let me leave my cell.”

“Need someone to break you out?”

His mouth twitches – barely – and with that simple reaction she unclenches. “How you gonna do that?”

“Did you know they leave the keys to all those helicopters just lying around?”

“You can fly a helicopter?”

“You just move the stick thing around right?”

“I recall you saying some similar dipshit nonsense about shooting guns, and we both know how that turned out.” He settles back onto his pillow. “I think I’ll stay here. They have chocolate pudding and a smaller chance of crashing.”

“Suit yourself.” Lena swings her bag onto her lap. “I uh, I brought you something to pass the time.” At this point she’s not sure whether he’ll like it or think she’s a moron.
“More whiskey?”

“Haha, no, the general went home. Our supply has been cut off.” She pulls out a couple books. “I know you like reading, and Carter said you like –”

“What’s this?” Tim goes for the wide, flat book on the bottom of the stack. “You gonna read me a bedtime story?”

“Well since you asked…” he didn’t, not really, but there was a smirk in there somewhere, and she latches onto that like a barnacle to a rock. Lena takes the book back and settles herself in the chair, pulling on her serious face. “Now then,” she clears her throat dramatically in preparation. “The cats nestle close to their kittens, the lambs have laid down with the sheep. You’re cozy and warm in your bed, my dear. Please go the fuck to sleep.”

Lena hears a snort, and with that encouragement she turns the page and continues. “The windows are dark in the town, my child. The whales huddle down in the deep. I’ll read you one very last book if you swear you’ll go the fuck to sleep.”

“You know what helps people sleep? Whiskey.”

She smiles at the next passage. “The eagles who soar through the sky are at rest like the creatures who crawl, run, and creep. I know you’re not thirsty. That’s bullshit. Stop lying. Lie the fuck down, my darling, and sleep.”

She’s about to continue, but a knock and an opening door interrupt. “Lena?”

“Clarence,” she lets the book fold closed, “what’s up?”

“I have something for you.” Damn.

“Sure, I’ll be right out.”

Clarence lets the door shut, and Lena turns to Tim. “Sorry. Um, if you need anything…”

Christ, he’s in here for two days, and has a whole unit of guys to look after him.

She gets a head-tilt and a sly half-smile. “Well, they don’t serve coffee with my pudding.”

“Yes, sir.” She’s not sure if the flippant mock-salute is pushing boundaries, but it’s fun to do.

“It’s Tim, ma’am.”

“Like I said, tell karma hi for me.”

o.O.o

Clarence is doing the thing. The thing where he sits in her chair while she sits in the less comfortable, slightly lower to the ground chair across from him. He leans forward on both arms with an expression of mild, unalarmed concern. It all makes her feel like she’s been called into the principal’s office. In fact, Lena is fairly certain that Clarence used to be a principal, or a teacher, or something involving authority over a bunch of delinquent high school kids before he joined MI6. It would explain how easily he’s able to command attention when he’s an intelligence analyst in a room full of military men, one man in a room full of men who all like waving their dicks around like someone’s got a measuring tape at the ready. She’s always envied him that. Maybe it also helps that he looks like one of them. She does know he used to be a boxer, and in Oona’s starry-eyed words he is a ‘taller, darker, more gravelly Idris Elba.’ Come to think of it, minus the easy homicidal
tendencies, one could squint and see a real life James Bond, if James Bond had a desk job. No way she’s going to convince a room full of soldiers to think of her as James Bond. C’est la vie.

Whatever it is Clarence has, it’s turned on her, and it’s uncomfortable. He has enough of authority in his air and handsomeness in his features to make people want to sit up straight in his presence. Lena leans back slightly instead, an unconscious readiness to deny whatever unpleasant demands are about to be presented.

“Alright, do you want the good news, the bad news, or the other bad news?”

Oh lovely. “How about the other bad news.”

“You housing unit wasn’t hit by a rocket. It appears to have been a grenade.”

“Appears?”

“The explosion came from the middle of the room, like someone tossed it in rather than from the outside, which would be consistent with an impacting rocket.”

“And I’m assuming that the Taliban can’t launch those from miles away.”

“That’s right.”

“Fudge.” Well, rocket or grenade, it didn’t really matter. She already knew whoever did it had a specific target in mind – her. But someone on the inside of the walls was willing to make a direct try.

“You need to stay inside the bunker Lena, and when you’re outside, you need to be in a group.”

“Yes, yes, Gutterson already yelled at me about that. I know.”

“Gutterson?”

“He was the ranger who helped me in the prison.”

“Aa.” Lena doesn’t quite like the way he says that, but pretends to be oblivious.

“Speaking of…any progress on who in the ANA wanted Hadid dead badly enough to make a go of it in the prison?”

“As far as we can tell it must have been financially motivated. Couldn’t have been personal; none of them knew him or had any connection with him. And no one’s families were being held hostage or threatened.”

“Hell of a way to make money, especially seeing as they screwed it up badly. Must have been offered a lot to have tried something so risky.”

“Well we all know they’re a few crumbs short of a biscuit, or in your parlance –”

“Yes, yes, I’m American, not an idiot.”

“There are those who would suggest those are synonymous.”

“If those who would suggest such things are sitting in my chair, then they can, to use your parlance, go bugger themselves.”
The corner of his mouth pulls up before he continues with the subject at hand. “We’ll keep looking into it, but I don’t know how helpful it will be. All I have so far isn’t much more than we knew when we started. All in different ANA units, all local, no extremist connections. There’s one thing though, probably far-fetched, but I’ll run it down anyways.” His voice loses momentum slightly at the end, cautious.

“Yes?”

“Look.” Clarence draws his hands up, resting his chin on his knuckles. It’s friendly, casual, like they’re having a tired and lazy conversation about home or something instead of attempted murder. “When I was in Kandahar four years back, there was this one stretch of road they called potshot street. Imaginative huh? Leave it to the Americans to name something the least creative way possible…”

“Clarence.”

“I’m getting there, bear with me. Anyways,” he takes out a cigarette and a lighter.

“Clarence.” He’s trying to distract her, soften an impending blow with an easy argument, and she can see right through it.

“Yes, yes.” The cigarette and lighter disappear back into his pockets. “It was along a main supply route out to the COPs in the eastern region, so they weren’t just going to abandon it. Never a direct ambush, just long range attacks - mortars, rockets, or remote-detonated IEDs. They rarely seriously damaged the convoys, but constant. Funny thing though, they always stepped it up in late spring. Due to the danger, there were fewer supply runs around that time. Do you know what late spring is around here?”

She shakes her head.

“Poppy season.”

Lena takes a breath, ready to refute his logic. There’s been no connection at all between the names Hadid gave her and anyone in the opium trade.

“No, hear me out.” Fine. “Don’t you think it’s funny? In Mexico, their drug lords are ruthless; you always hear all these stories about finding a truckload of decapitated bodies or something else terrible. But here,” he lays his fingers on the desk, “in a warzone, in a place nicknamed potshot street, we have almost no casualties. Only one that comes to mind is a gunner who got crushed under his MRAP when it got hit by an IED and rolled. No one from direct fire.”

“Really dang lucky.”

“Is it?”

“Where are you going with this?” She’d rather just get the bad news over with and skip the story time theatrics.

“Turns out a small squad of American contractors was smuggling opium out of Afghanistan, used the local warlords to impersonate Taliban and mess with the supply routes when they had a shipment needed getting through.”

“And you’re saying…”

“The only thing any of these guys had in common was that at some point they were all
“I…” Her first reaction is rage, not at him because she trusts Clarence and his instincts, but at GenCorp. She immediately checks that rage to give due consideration to both sides of the Clarence’s suspicion. “How much trouble will I get in if I start bugging offices and phones?” She’s already resigned to it the moment she says it. Anger aside, it’s irresponsible not to check. In their line of work, people don’t get the benefit of the doubt simply because you all salute the same flag.

“Lena, I think it might be a good idea to consider returning to Washington.”

“And what? Let them get away with it? This isn’t just about revenge, Clarence. Whoever Al’Faheen tipped off blew up a convoy of U.S. soldiers. I don’t want to give them the chance to do it again.”

“I’m not suggesting you give it up, but it is something you can investigate from the safety of Langley.”

“Oh right, I’ll just send someone else to conduct interrogations and interviews. What if something happens to them? Or we can just have all the local Afghan population take a short vacation to Gitmo. That’ll help with international relations.”

“Lena.”

“I can’t leave.”

“You’ve got to make sure they don’t see you as a threat. Pretend you’re on the trail of some Taliban warlord or whatever.”

She takes a steadying breath through her nose. In one, two, three… “Yeah. Yeah I’ll do that. And the only people we use are the rangers from now on. And no translators. Given the prison incident no one can look at us funny for that. You and I will just have to handle it. And look out for anyone poking around where they shouldn’t.”

The look on his face says he’ll argue this later, but for now Clarence nods.

Fuck. Fudge. No, fuck. Fuck. She can’t tell if she’s scared. She’s been varying degrees of nervous since the bomb at the hotel, but that’s mostly been on behalf of others’ safety. They say the brain has ways of shutting down potentially debilitating stress. People can complain all day about the jackass who jumped their spot in line at Starbucks, but when your kid nearly falls out of a tree, you don’t talk about it. You can’t handle the what ifs of that situation, so your brain just says ‘we’re not going to deal with this anymore.’ Maybe that’s what’s allowing her to stay in Kabul. Or maybe it’s anger and a lust for vengeance. But she hasn’t had the energy for anger lately, and it really doesn’t matter what lets her sleep at night as long as she gets the job done.

Lena thinks back to that dirt road and the dead man lying on top of her. She will get the job done.

Chapter End Notes

The bedtime story is quoted from Go the Fuck to Sleep, by Adam Mansbach.
Thank you to all of you for your patience. I haven't looked this chapter over as much as I probably should have, so sorry if there are any mistakes/typos.

She’s gone back to Old Lena.

“Stupid mother-fucker. Who the fuck –” Old Lena kicks an empty soda can and it clangs against a concrete wall. “What dipshit piece of –”

“Lena.” At least they’re alone. There are no more cans to kick and nothing to hit, so all she can do is stand and fume, fists clenched and unsatisfied. Old Lena wants blood.

“That dumb fuck!”

Clarence stays quiet and leans on one shoulder against the wall, waiting. One month after their first date, he had met his then-future-wife for lunch. She’d been furious about something. He doesn’t remember anymore what it was about, but he remembers thinking that it was his big chance to prove himself to her, to ride in on a white horse with shining armor swinging the sword that would fix her problems. By the time she’d finished her story – maybe it had been something about how one of the senior partners had foisted off an incompetent intern onto her – he’d been ready with wise, decisive counsel. She’d been livid. ‘Should?! What the hell do you mean should!? Who do you think you are?!’ Lesson one: never tell a woman she ‘should’ do something unless you actually know what you’re talking about, and even then maybe just keep your gob shut or learn how to phrase it better. Trick was to give her advice but make it seem like she came up with it all on her own. Lesson two: they find violent bitching enjoyable now and then. Lesson two had been reinforced by his fifteen year old daughter. ‘Dad! Stop trying to fix everything! I know what I’m doing! Just listen! God!’

“I mean who the hell does that?! What fucking part of ‘no helicopters’ was un-fucking clear?!”

Lieutenant Dale, who was garnering a large number of increasingly profane names by the second, had had the gall to let out a derisive huff of laughter when Lena had called him a dumbass and stormed out of the debriefing room. The young man had then looked around as if to say ‘women, huh?’ Fool. Clarence bets himself twenty quid and his first night of sex home with his wife that the numpted lieutenant who went against Lena’s not-so-optional request of ‘no helicopters’ would soon be transferred or have a fun-and-entertaining note in his file.

They’d been painfully close – fingers around the collar close – to catching Osmini al’Bashir, one of the three names Lena had managed to extract from Hadid. He’d once been a major in the ANA. Now he was a blood-spatter on the walls of his family’s house. The plan had been to capture him for questioning. Lieutenant Dale had ordered a show of force, presumably out of a wish to set an example to deter traitorous behavior, but it had ended up escalating what should have been a simple grab-and-nab to a shoot-out.

“Obviously a bit of a wanker, but –”
“Bit of a wanker?! Bit? Only thing he’ll have by the time I’m done with him is just a bit!”

This has gone on long enough. “Lena.” He slides off the wall and into her field of vision. She’s building to another outburst, but holds in the breath she’d sucked in in preparation. He tries for fatherly concern without condescension. It’s a dangerous game. Instead of continuing the tirade, the breath comes out in an anticlimactic whoosh.

“What.”

“We need to consider our options.”

Another breath in, this one in thought rather than a prelude to violent language. “Right. Well…screw it.” There’s New Lena. “I’ll do it myself.”

This is decidedly not what he’d meant, but she can see him coming and heads off his opening argument.

“No, listen. They think we’re going to go in guns blazing, so we don’t. Qasim doesn’t know we know about him. We can just say we’re having a routine meeting, pretend we’re going to ask for his help with a cash shipment.” Hasan bin Qasim is a moderately high ranking official in the Afghan Treasury, and a fish they’d both dearly love to fry. “We can set up an ambush and make it look like he was kidnapped by the Taliban, so the Afghans can’t get pissed. We’ll question him and then either send him on his way or send him to Guantanamo depending on what sort of response we get.”

“Then why don’t we invite him here to speak.” Security out in Kabul can be a nightmare. Security out in Kabul for a high-value meet for a woman with one assassination attempt on her head is a mite more worrisome than nightmarish.

“He never comes here. An invitation like that is suspicious, and it would spook him.”

Clarence considers. She’s right, but it doesn’t mean he has to like it. Both New and Old Lena have always been very effective, but they each take risks he’d prefer to avoid. Old Lena was ruthless, and New Lena, while still ruthless, is on a crusade. His wife would pause, look over her glass of wine at him, and ask pointedly whether he was only so concerned about her safety because Lena is a woman. He would reply that this would be easier if Lena were a man. He can bully another man into submission without worrying about the whole ‘Stop patronizing me by worrying about my safety because I’m a strong, independent woman’. It’s not about that; it’s about being careful.

“Two ranger units,” she breaks through his musings, “I’ll take two ranger units. If that’s not enough, then we don’t deserve to get the guy.”

Taking two ranger units is hard to argue with. At this point he’d just sound petulant and over-cautious. “Fine.”

“Good. Now,” she crosses her arms, and he knows she’s about to ask for a favor, “I need you to help me set it up so they think it’s the Brits that want the meet. It’ll throw him off the scent even more.”

He agrees, hoping that he can at least direct things in a safer direction. “Go work on your accent. You sound drunk when you try to do public school.”

o.O.o

“Hey dickbutt.” Tim snaps to at the elbow in his ribs.
“What? Christ.”

“Seriously? That’s what you respond to?” Carter smacks him upside the head. “I called your actual name like twice, bro.”

“Well what the fuck do you want?”

“I got you the last biscuit.”

“Awww, thanks sweetie.”

“Hey fuck you,” Carter jerks it out of reach and takes a huge bite off the top. “I had to fight Andre for it, and you’re an ungrateful nutsack.”

“Oh come on,” Tim lunges, only managing to rip the bottom chunk off. Carter shoves the rest in his mouth.

“That’s what you get for ignoring me so you can moon over pussy.”

Ever since they found out Lena had visited and brought him books to read, he’s been assaulted with a steady, never-ending stream of jokes and vulgar suggestions.

“I was fixing the swivel.”

“Yeah fuckin’ right. You were thinking about how maybe you should stop being such a pussy and go after that ‘tang. Or did James Bond beat you to it?” Another elbow in his ribs. Tim ignores it and continues prying at the rifle sling. “Maybe she likes suckin’ on chocolate d –”

Tim flips up his rifle and rams the butt into Carter’s stomach. “Shit, sorry man, it just slipped.”

Carter glares up at him from the dirt. “You asshole, these pants were clean.”

“Run along and tell it to your mama. Maybe she’ll change your diaper for you too.” He lets Carter push himself to his feet, suspecting that if he lent a helping hand he’d be down on the ground as well.

“Oy!” Clark walks over and picks up one of the gear bags. “Playtime’s over, you two. Pack up.”

Lena’s waiting for them by the jeeps. Today’s the day for her. Might be a helluva day for him too. Either Qasim tells her what she wants to know or they get to kidnap a member of the Afghan government. They’re pretending to be cameramen again. The building next door actually does house an Afghan news agency, so it won’t be strange to see American ‘journalists’ entering. A couple British SAS guys will go in with her dressed as private security, while Tim’s unit sits next door. There’s a three foot gap between the roofs at one corner, and if necessary, they can launch a surprise attack from above, sandwiching anyone inside.

This is different than the first time he went outside the wall with her. Lena is fully alert, flipping back and forth between a file of maps and building diagrams in front of her. The mission briefing was yesterday, and she led everyone in rehearsing multiple run-throughs of two scenarios, one for if he cooperated and one for if they ended up doing a forcible extraction. If she was blasé about that first meet, this is the polar opposite, meticulous, determined. Everything has been fully choreographed and drilled and memorized.
Lena looks different this time too. There’s no garish paint on her nails, and she’s forgone the tight shirt and jeans for a suit. The new accent’s a bit of a mindfuck. He can’t decide whether or not he likes it. Everyone loves an accent, but it makes her sound like a lawyer or someone who works in a corner office, definitely not the type of someone who sits in the dirt drinking coffee at sunrise.

They all do a quick gear check, Lena makes sure everyone has a photo of Qasim, and then they’re piling into two large Land Rovers. In less than ten minutes they’re out the gate and headed into Kabul.

o.O.o

Lena stares out the window, eyes constantly moving over the city around them. She’s consciously broken herself of a few habits since the last time she was here, but watching the road isn’t one of them. ‘It’s ok to be nervous.’ The chance of an IED within the city is pretty low however, and she returns her mental focus to the mission ahead.

Today she is Jeanine Calloway of the British Embassy hoping to have Qasim’s help in receiving and then distributing a large shipment of aid money into the country. So far that story has gotten her a meeting and will get them through the door. The trickier part will be getting Qasim alone; he might panic the moment she questions him about her true purpose, and there’s no telling what his reaction will be. Hopefully he’ll prefer to have his assistants in the outside office during his meetings. Given her knowledge of the man, it’s a fair bet. If that doesn’t hold, she can always ask more and more intrusive questions until he asks for privacy in their conversation. Lena would rather she not have to do that. A reaction of panic or anger would make the whole situation a good deal more inconvenient. It would be nice if this didn’t turn into the helicopter fiasco. For once she has taken Clarence’s advice and brought along a briefcase filled with cash, ready to placate and buy whatever she needs. Doesn’t mean she has to give it to him. People always assume that just because you’re showing them heaps of money that it must be for them.

She hopes the contingency plans are unnecessary, but it calms her knowing she has them. The Rangers will be holed up in the adjacent building with a good view into Qasim’s office with Tim on the roof with his rifle, ready to move in case it all goes sideways. Unfortunately, to keep up appearances the SAS guys will have to stay downstairs. It makes her wish she could carry a gun, which is impossible. For now her only line of defense is the wire and ear-link hidden under her hijab. Both the Rangers and the SAS team below will be able to hear her and she them. At least being forced to wear yet another layer of clothing that makes you sweat is good for something.

When they reach their destination, Lena takes three slow breaths to keep her heart rate under control. You are Jeanine Calloway, and you have so much cash that anyone will do whatever you want. You have the SAS and the Rangers at your back. She smiles as they go through security. ‘Smile, sweetheart, it lowers your pulse.’ John had told her that once. She’d been headed into her promotion interview. It had worked then, and it works now.

The Afghan security guard directs her to the elevator and gives her the office number that she’s already memorized. Qasim’s office suite is on the seventh floor and nine doors down. It’s empty except for a young man who sits at a desk with a phone and computer. There’s an old appointment book open in front of him. She is prepared to give her name, but the assistant already knows who she is and greets her by name. He doesn’t wait for a reply, just knocks on Qasim’s door and waves her through.

The man in the office standing behind the desk is not Hasan bin Qasim. She knows because she has his picture. She has given everyone else his picture and made them memorize it. Lena knows his face, and this is not him. The man-who-is-not-Qasim addresses her in Pashto.
“You were expecting Mr. Qasim.” Shit, she shouldn’t even know what he looks like, and this man knows that she does.

“Yes.” The unknown man’s hands stay clasped in front of him, but Lena does not move farther into the room. She ponders bolting, but realizes that the young man outside may very well not be a simple office assistant. “Will Mr. Qasim be joining us?” She considers saying something in English to alert the others, but that might provoke a reaction she doesn’t want.

“Why do you wish to meet with Mr. Qasim?”

“We wish to arrange for the distribution of aid money, and he can help us with that.”

“Do you think all of us are so foolish, Miss Calloway?” Shit. Lena tries to take a discreet, deep breath, evaluating her options. With each passing second, she feels as if the door to some cage is closing her in.

“Where is Qasim?” she asks in English. “Excuse me,” she continues, pretending to have merely slipped, “but where is Mr. Qasim?”

A voice speaks in her ear. “Lena, if you’re in danger, raise your left hand.” She hesitates before raising her hand and picking at her hijab.

“He is not available to answer questions today.”

“Then I am sorry to have wasted your time.” She reaches behind her for the doorknob.

The man reaches behind him, and her hand freezes on the knob, fear punching through her chest.

The next second the window behind him shatters and blood and brain matter explode from his forehead. He falls forward onto the desk. Lena throws herself instinctively to the side and down.

The voice – Gutterson – is immediately back in her ear, “Lena, without getting in front of the door, open it and move as far as you can to the side.”

“Okay.” She scoots over, not getting up, and twists the doorknob, shoving it the rest of the way open with her foot.

Nothing happens for a few moments. She tries to breathe evenly. You are not helpless. By sheer force of will determination replaces a good chunk of the panic. There are footsteps outside, then the crack of a rifle and the thud of a body hitting the floor.

“Stay there a moment. The SAS guys are on their way up.”

The staccato pop of gunshots sounds over her ear-link, and a British voice yells, “Negative, get to the roof!”

Fuck. How? No, don’t ask how; get out and ask later. Lena pokes her head around the corner of the office and listens. No footsteps. Pushing up slowly to a crouch, she heads into the main suite. No one. There’s a gun near the body of the assistant, which she grabs. Hopefully she doesn’t have to shoot at anyone too far away. Then again, hopefully they don’t get close enough to hurt her.

o.O.o

“Fuck.” Tim drops the sniper rifle and sprints to the corner of the roof. He has two back up
pieces, one on his ankle and the other in a side holster. “Lena, stay where you are. I’m coming to get you.” They don’t need her running into a hallway when there could be someone waiting for her. Then on a separate radio to Clark, “Get on the roof and be ready to meet us.”

Barely a hop and he’s on the roof of the office building. The door to the interior is locked, but that problem is solved with two bullets and a shove. Tim draws the pistol at his waist and cocks it, peering around the stairwell. There’s movement near the bottom, but he only needs to get down one floor.

He surprises one man just inside the door of the stairs. That problem is also solved with a bullet. It makes him nervous that there’s no sound on this floor. It just makes him feel like there’s a trap he just hasn’t sprung yet. Although it’s not like they need more than two men to handle Lena. He opens every door on his way down the hall, checking for occupants. All empty. This was a well-prepared ambush.

“Lena, I’m right outside the door. I’m comin’ in.” There’s a shuffle and a door to a back office opens, and there’s Lena, gun dangling by her side. She’s paler, too much adrenaline constricting her blood vessels. “You good?”

“Yeah.” Her voice is steady enough, so he lets her keep the gun.

Somewhere outside there are footsteps. “Get behind me. I tell you to do something you do it.”

She nods, no snarky ‘yes sir.’

Tim gets low and glances back, making sure she’s done the same. A peak around the corner and he can see two men making their way down the hall. Each one is carrying an AK-47. They open each door, pointing the guns inside, searching.

“When I say go, run down the hall to the right.” She nods again, getting up on her toes, ready to sprint.

Tim waits until both men are fully in the hallway before leaning out and firing. He shoots upwards, two in one chest and two in the other in quick succession. They jerk backwards and drop.

“Go!” Lena’s off like a runner from the blocks. He pauses before following, making sure no one else is coming down the hall.

A door opens, and Tim’s about to tell her to wait before going into the stairwell, but when he turns around it’s to see two more men, each with their guns trained on Lena’s head.

They yell in Pashto, a language he doesn’t understand, but the message is clear enough. He drops his gun.
Surprisingly the fear she feels at having two shouting men shoving rifles in her face is not overwhelming. Almost, but not quite. Perhaps it’s a subconscious defense mechanism. They haven’t actually shot her. They want something first. Amazing the things your brain can process without you actually thinking about it. And in all fairness she’s had worse. That’s what she tells herself. You’ve had worse, dollface.

A gun drops behind her. Tim. Another jolt of fear spikes, but Lena shoves it back down. She has a responsibility now. The two men back them into Qasim’s office. One of them uses a cell phone to make a call downstairs saying they have two prisoners.

Lena speaks to the air, hoping either the SAS or the other Rangers will be able to get to them. She doubts their attackers speak English. “Two men have us at gunpoint in Qasim’s office.”

One of the men tells her in Pashto to shut up and whacks her in the stomach to drive the point home. She sits down hard, falling back against the floor. The wind is nearly gone from her lungs, but at least he didn’t hit any ribs. She hates broken ribs. Although, she’d take those over being murdered.

A voice in her ear just says, “We’re coming.” And another – Peter, “On our way up.” There’s a bit more chatter about who will take which stairwell. Looks like the SAS killed whoever had attacked them. That gives her some small grim satisfaction. Even if either group makes it to them in time…stop.

Lena remembers the day she almost died. There were bullets and yelling from people who weren’t screaming. When she’d woken up in the hospital with all the time in the world to remember, one thing came back to her: the only people crying were those who were okay, those not in danger. She’d known she was about to die, known. And yet, no tears. She’d been out-of-her-mind-terrified of course. No fear has ever matched that, before or since. Problem was, lying on the ground with a piece of metal coming out of her chest, she’d chosen not to hope. She tried half successfully to make her peace and tried not to panic. Funny thing about trying to make peace with dying as it’s happening is that you realize you question things a lot more than you thought. She’d never been one for church, but there’s something out there. Her biggest fear in that moment was that she’d somehow be trapped in a broken body for the time it took to rot, and then she’d be trapped in the earth it was buried in, feeling each sensation and pain without the power to move. Totally helpless. Reason asserted that she’d become unconscious after blood loss. After all she’d fainted once as a child when she’d stopped breathing. Lena had reached over and gripped the closest person, but she found herself clutching at a dead body. All alone. In that moment she’d chosen not to hope. She wished for things instead. She didn’t want to die. She wished for an end to the pain. It was splitting hairs really. But hope dashed had been too terrifying a prospect, like all hope was a lie if this one hope – to live – went unanswered.

The weight rolls off her chest. Maybe he was alive. No, someone else had rolled an empty shell off of her. A new pain wrenches through her body as someone grabs her under her shoulders, jarring the piece of metal embedded in her ribs. They drag her across dirt and rough road. If Lena hadn’t already been certain of dying, she would be now. As it is, she wishes whoever it is would stop; it hurts more this way. The dragging eventually stops and a face appears above hers.

“Ma’am, you’re gonna be fine.” If she weren’t in so much pain she’d have laughed in his
He must see her disbelief because he smiles – or tries to – and another new pain stabs into her ribs as he presses down. Aren’t people supposed to pass out from pain? That would be nice right about now.

“You ain’t dead ‘til you’re dead, ma’am, and you ain’t dead.”

Yet, she wanted to correct him.

True to his word, she’d woken up and lived. She had given up hope and survived. Now, burned into her mind is the irrational idea that hope is a jinx that no one can afford. She knows it’s crazy, completely illogical, but knowing and feeling something to be true aren’t the same. So far she’s tried little hopes. She hopes for things that will almost certainly happen. She hoped for a safe flight to the country. She hoped to avoid being airsick (and took Dramamine). In a moment of daring (and a slip of her mental tongue) she’d hoped the first phase of the mission would go well. That had been a mixed bag. Right now, hoping for their safety seems too big a hope, like jinxing their chances. She can’t hope for the SAS or Rangers to save them; that’s definitely too much.

You ain’t dead ‘til you’re dead.

Lena rolls her head to the side. Right before Tim had shot the unknown man who met her in Qasim’s office he’d been going for a gun. As his brain exploded out of his head, the gun had dropped from his hand onto the floor behind the desk. It now rests about six inches from Lena’s nose. Optimism is terrifying, but as she pushes up, she stays by the desk and within reach of the abandoned gun.

Tim has moved in front of her, put himself between Lena and the men with guns. He’s speaking in English, but either they don’t understand or they don’t care. He has body armor over his shirt, but it hardly matters when his head’s right there. Lena’s angry, angry at whatever ingrained foolishness causes men to put themselves in danger for women – because she knows he wouldn’t do this if she were a man, and angry because despite the fact that she can’t help it, she still feels the guilt at being the cause of such foolishness.

The idea of the gun right next to her is an itch in her mind. But she’d never be able to kill them both. Even if she could, their guns are trained on Tim, and their fingers might jerk on the trigger as they die and kill him.

One of the men pulls out zip-ties and Lena feels a stab of panic. An image of the two of them in a windowless room with a video camera and someone ready to behead them with a machete flashes through her mind. One man sets down his gun so he can tie Tim’s wrists together. The other keeps his rifle, but secure in their victory, he lowers it to point at the ground. Lena doesn’t think. She grabs the gun off the floor, swings it up, and pulls the trigger.

She goes for the one still holding his rifle first. The bullet goes through his throat, and blood sprays everywhere. Sure enough, his hand spasms around the grip, and a few rounds go into the floor. The second guy is close enough that she aims for his head. A split second later and half his jaw is gone. For a revolting moment she thinks he might still be alive and fires another round into his face followed by two more into his chest. He no longer has much of a head left at all. The other man is still barely alive. He’s choking on what’s left of his throat. She stands over him and shoots him square in the face. His hand twitches, and she shoots him one more time, just to be sure.

“Lena?”
There’s blood everywhere. For better or worse this is not new to her, and she is able to mostly ignore it once she’s wiped her face off with her hijab. That and the suit jacket are tossed aside.

“Lena?”

When she turns around hands catch her wrist, lightly stopping the movement. Right, still holding a gun. She sets it down on the desk.

“Do you have anything –” she waves at his still-bound hands.

“Knife in my boot.”

Lena pulls out the bowie knife in Tim’s boot and begins slicing through the zip ties. She looks over her shoulder at the dead men. It should be revolting, but right now it’s as if she just took a megadose of heroin. She isn’t dead yet and neither is Tim.

“You good?”

She nods, smiling. Yeehaw! He probably thinks she’s lost it. Doesn’t matter, they’re alive. She speaks into the wire. “This is Lena; Guterson and I are headed to the roof. Everyone get to the cars.”

They run into the other Rangers in the stairwell. A hop and a skip and all of them are running down the stairs of the adjacent building. There’s a pause on the ground floor while they check for an ambush outside and wait for the SAS team. Then they’re walking quickly to the cars. No one bothers keeping up the charade of being a journalist, and everyone in the street ducks at the sight of twelve heavily armed men. One or two people still manage to glare at her uncovered hair.

Screw you.

There’s a brief check of personnel. Luckily no one’s injured. Lena says a quick thank you to whatever may or may not be out there.

“Shit, I think we got incoming.” Lena follows Peter’s gaze to three cars coming down the road. They’re ignoring traffic. There’s an agreeing chorus of “Fuck”.

She makes a decision, “Split up. Stay on the radio,” and jumps into the driver’s side and slams the door closed. A quick jerk and the seat’s in the right place; she’ll fix the mirrors once they’re moving.

Clark stands outside the window, pissed, like she’s holding up their getaway. She may be shite at shooting, but shite at driving she is not, which means someone besides her needs to be holding the guns.

Lena rolls the window down, but doesn’t open the door. It’s entirely possible he’ll just haul her out.

“Ma’am –”

“I know what I’m doing. Just give me the keys and get in the damn car.” It’s rude as fuck, but Lena knows ‘please’ isn’t going to work, and right now that’s more important than manners. And there’s no time to sit and argue about it.

He’s still pissed, but it’s not like there’s currently much of a choice with the other cars closing in on them. Only one of the other enemy vehicles followed the SAS group, so they now have two to contend with. Someone throws a helmet over her head, but Lena doesn’t bother fastening the
“All of you stay down.” She throws the car into gear and floors it.

Nice thing about the military is that they understand the value of manual transmission. Land Rovers may not accelerate like sports cars, but these come with a supercharger, and for giggles, someone also threw in a turbocharger on top of that. So it doesn’t matter – high gear, low gear, this girl can go. All the armor will lessen the effect somewhat, but there’s still considerable power.

Problem right now is that they’re still too close to the city center. All the power in the world doesn’t help if you don’t know the area and there are people and traffic everywhere. They need to get to a highway. On their way in, it took twenty minutes to get from the highway to the meeting. With the way she’s driving, she could probably find it in five.

A series of dull cracking sounds behind her means someone’s hit the back windshield. The glass is bullet proof, but it won’t last forever. Lena takes a hard right, the helmet barely staying atop her head. There’s some cussing from the backseat, and she yells at everyone to put on a seatbelt. There’s more cussing, but she tunes that out. Right now there’s only time for things that matter – the road ahead and the cars behind. Years of being the sober driver have given her good practice for ignoring backseat shenanigans. And the necessity for total focus keeps the panic at bay.

What’s hard to tune out is the automatic weapons fire coming from right behind her head. The back side windows are down, and Gutterson and Clark are returning fire at their pursuers.

Jesus Christ, you stupid fucks. Neither of them is wearing a seatbelt, and it’s much harder to drive the way she needs to when they’re ducking in and out of the windows. The glass would have held for longer, but now the enemy just has a better chance and more time to wear it down. Fuck! No, stop swearing. We are calm. We are a leaf on the wind. Well no we’re not cause he died, but we are calm, and we adapt. Part of adapting is yelling for them to sit down and close the windows. Lena hits the gas harder during a moment when they’ve both ducked back in to reload to force compliance. They did manage to take one car out of the running, whether it was enough lead in the engine or they got the driver she doesn’t know, just sees it fall back.

The other great thing about these cars is that all the modifications have shifted the center of gravity lower. Another hail of gunfire pelts the back windshield, and Lena takes the next turn at a solid sixty miles per hour, bursting out onto one of the main roads. There’s a lot more swearing (which she ignores) as she dodges in and out of traffic in ways that are unacceptable even in a country where traffic laws are more suggestion than hard and fast rules.

Finally she can see an on-ramp. She can also see two jeeps blocking the way. They’re at rest and facing the wrong direction. One has a fifty cal mounted on the roof.

This time she doesn’t even think or look, just peels off to the left. No one even bothers with profanity at this point. The jeeps aren’t in the rearview yet, but Lena doesn’t doubt they’ve joined the pursuit.

The back windshield shatters, and the swearing returns in force. She’s too surprised to scream, and it comes out in a strangled gasp. A Browning M2 doesn’t give a shit about bullet proof glass.

“Someone give me a radio!” Fuck fuck fuck fuckityfuckfuckfuck.

A radio appears, and she rattles off a frequency to Carter. He holds it up to her mouth so she can keep both hands on the wheel.
A crackle and then a male voice with a calm, “Delta zulu niner, identify.”

“Clarence!”

“Lena? Where are you?”

“We’re somewhere near highway nine, but we have three cars after us. I don’t know where SAS is; I told them to split off. Whoever’s chasing us has plenty of guns and a fifty cal.”

“Can you hide?” A spurt of machine gun fire says that’s not really a possibility. Someone in their car fires back, but she’s too busy weaving around buildings that she can’t spare a glance. Lena wishes she’d fastened the chinstrap. *Fuckfuckfuck. Stop swearing.*

“Shit, do you have an IR beacon?”

It’s a day op, so they don’t.

“If I send someone out there, and they can’t distinguish –”

“We’re in a white, military Land Rover, Clarence. They can figure it out! Just fucking come get us!” She bats the radio away from her face and back to Carter. He can talk to Clarence. She needs to outmaneuver and outrun three cars full of homicidal assholes.

They *need* to get to the highway. Getting back on a main thoroughfare is risky, but it’s the best chance they have; staying on the smaller side streets runs too big a risk of running into a dead end. A few more careening turns later and they’re on a different road. This time she can’t see anyone blocking the on-ramp.

Finally free of traffic, Lena takes the ramp at 90 and guns it to the top speed of 155. Their pursuers take a moment to adjust, so she manages to build up some lead, though not as much as she’d like. One of the cars also appears to have dropped off; there are only two in her rearview mirror now. She doesn’t slow down, but she does allow herself the briefest moment of relief. Taking time to acknowledge your blessings is important.

Apparently it’s also jinxing things because about ten seconds later a burst of machine gun fire rips through whatever’s left of the side windows. At least this isn’t the Browning. What is the world coming to when she’s getting picky about what people are trying to murder her with? Lena now knows what people mean when they say bullets whistle when they’re too close. She dimly hears Carter calling out to check on everyone. Before she can control the thought, she thanks whoever’s watching over them that no one was hit.

There are more cars the closer they get to Bagram, so she has to weave now, which slows their speed, but the base is finally in view. They’re still too far away. Another hail of bullets hits the car. It’s a near constant vibration now. The fast moving gun battle is a decent incentive for other vehicles to move out of the way though. She checks to make sure everyone is hunkered down and pushes the accelerator flat. Straight lines don’t matter anymore, just speed.

Suddenly there’s an explosion of eardrum-shattering gunfire, and for a moment Lena’s afraid that the 50 cal had somehow managed to catch up with them. But she never felt the impact, and a glance in the rearview mirror shows it’s one of the cars chasing them that was hit. The rapid thud of a helicopter rotor registers a moment later, and a collective whoop goes up that’s nearly as deafening as all the shooting.

Leaning forward slightly, she sees it when it circles back around, Gatling gun spewing rounds over their heads. *Thanks, Clarence, sorry I yelled at you.*
“‘Murica mother fuckers!”

She laughs, relieved, hysterical, and higher than a kite in a hurricane.

He’ll be heartbroken when he finds out it’s the Brits.

°.O.o°

The helicopter follows them all the way back, but Lena doesn’t slow down until just before reaching the gates. The guards probably piss themselves as the Land Rover comes to a screeching, gravel-spraying stop, but they were warned, so at least no one gets shot.

Lena’s English counterpart, Clarence, is waiting for them, along with the SAS team who beat them back. It’s the first time Tim has ever seen her show a shred physical affection. No sooner has she slammed the car door closed, than she’s thrown her arms around his shoulders in a bear hug. The larger man takes it in stride, as if this isn’t some strange alternate dimension, and for a moment Tim is jealous. She doesn’t even object when Clark and Carter clap her on the back.

“That was some Fast and Furious shit, right there!” Pascal picks her hand up and gives himself a high five with it. She laughs and ducks her head with an eye roll, pulling her wrist away.

Lena wanders over to sit on the bumper, looking suddenly on the verge of collapse. Going from 100% adrenaline to sitting still does that to a person. Tim props himself next to her, close but not touching. “Hey look at that, you weren’t useless.”

He gets a raspberry and a shoulder bump. She looks up at him, mouth quirked in a half smile, and shakes her head. Her eyelids are a bit droopy. “Meanie.” Tim huffs at her switch back to polite language. Their shoulders are still touching.

“Hey, where’d you learn to drive like that?”

“When I was sixteen. It’s a boring, short story.”

He looks at her expectantly, “Well?”

Lena grins, all teeth, “Are you asking me for my secrets Mr. Rangerman sir?”

“Just the embarrassing ones.” Her arm is still pressed against his, and she’s close enough that he can see a tiny scar on the side of her nose, like it used to be pierced.

“Oh yeah?” She raises her eyebrows and gives him another nudge with her shoulder and winces. “Man, my arm feels funny.” Lena pulls back and swings her arm back and forth a bit, like she’s trying to shake out pins and needles. “Must have been gripping the steering wheel too har –”

“Fuck, Lena.” He jumps to his feet and turns her around.

The white of her shirt makes the red stand out, and there’s a darker patch on his own sleeve where she shoved him.

“Huh.” Lena just sort of stares for a moment. “Crap.” Then she moves her arm about a bit more, twisting it around and craning her neck to get a better look. There’s a lot more blood now, and Tim clamps a hand around her bicep.

“Oh! Jesus Christ!” She jerks and looks about to yank her arm away, but thinks better of it.

“Well you’re bleeding you dumbass.”
“It can’t be that bad, I just noticed it.”

“You were too hopped up on adrenaline. Sometimes you don’t bleed until later.”

“Oh,” she considers the information, “how terribly odd.” She’s lapsed back into an English accent, and sounds more than a little out of it now. When he makes her stand, he can see a large red stain on her back.

It’s just a flesh wound. If the bullet had hit anything major she would have been bleeding earlier, and this looks too fresh. But it’s already staining a good chunk of her side. Clark yanks a tourniquet around her arm and she sucks in a sharp breath. Someone presses gauze into Tim’s hand, and he squeezes it over her arm. Clarence hustles her back into the car, and Tim goes with, hands still firmly clamped over the wound.

When they get into the hospital, she insists on walking, “‘S’fine, really.” But the moment she stumbles, Clarence is there to hoist her up. She’d have made it on her own steam if not for the adrenaline crash.

“Clarence,” she sounds more aware and definitely more than a little annoyed. “Put me down.”

He stops and sets her back on her feet, but before he lets her go says, “You fall again and you don’t get to walk.”

“Fine.” Tim doesn’t try to put his hand on her arm again – she’s putting pressure on it herself now anyways.

Lena walks more slowly, but she does get through the doors on her own.

The doctor kicks Tim and Clarence out, saying someone can collect her in a couple hours as long as there aren’t any complications.

“What do you mean complications?” Tim asks.

“Oh Jesus Christ, I walked in here. Does that count for nothing?”

“Well where the fuck am I supposed to get coffee if there are ‘complications’?”

“Go outside, take a right, and walk about three quarter miles. There’s this sign that’ll read Green Beans. If you go in that door there’ll be a counter about twenty feet in front of you. There’re two boxes on the counter. They look a bit like cash registers and –”

Tim turns to the doctor. “I see what you mean about complications, sir. I think she’s gonna need brain surgery too.”

“You face needs –” Lena picks up a pillow and prepares to throw it.

“That’ll do ma’am,” says the doctor, grabbing the pillow out of her hand. He nods at the door. “Sergeant.”

Tim takes the hint and waits outside.

o.O.o

There aren’t any complications, but patching her up takes longer than he thought it would, and Tim has to report for the mission debrief. He changes his mind a few times before leaving a note
with the nurse for Lena saying she should call his barracks when she’s ready to leave. After a while when there’s no call he gets worried and drops by the hospital to check in, but she’s not there. After some more back and forth in his head he goes to her office. He finally finds her leaning against the coffee wall.

She’s standing this time, cup held loosely between both hands, head tilted back to look at the sky. He notices her hands. She’s painted her nails again, some horrendous dark blue with glitter that’s probably called ‘midnight passion’ or some shit instead of just ‘blue.’ Tim looks around but doesn’t see anyone else, and there’s an immediate rush of anger at her carelessness.

“I thought I told you not to go anywhere alone.” If nothing else, today should have taught her something about mortality.

Lena doesn’t startle at his voice, doesn’t change position or look at him, just lifts the cup to her lips and takes a slow sip. “You ever hesitate?” The question and the thoughtful tone of voice catch him off guard. “When you kill people, I mean. Do most people hesitate?”

Tim crosses his arms. “It happens.” He doesn’t specify whether it happens to him or to ‘people’.

“How long does it take to feel bad about killing people?” Now she turns around, eyes wide. “I mean, I’m not saying you should, but if you did…I mean…” She sighs and takes another sip. “I don’t feel bad about killing those men.” Lena starts to turn the cup in her hands, but forces herself to stop. “Is…is that normal?”

“You think you ought to feel bad?”

“Shouldn’t I?” Lena shifts her weight to the other foot, takes a breath. “First thing I felt was happy.” She looks away, and more quietly, “Don’t tell me that doesn’t sound messed up.”

‘Alright fuckers, listen up. You’re going to get blood on your hands. You’ll probably be up to your goddamn elbows in it, enough to wash your faces in. It better be the right damn blood.’

“It doesn’t.”

Her head comes up, disbelieving, and she looks like she’s about to contradict him.

She’s always been wily, curious, likes slipping her fingers between cracks even when she doesn’t mean to. Right now he wishes he had a drink in his hand to cover his face. Instead he holds her gaze. “Welcome to Bagram, where it’s nice to be alive at the end of the day.”

She gives a soft snort, more to release tension than out of amusement.

“Which is why you shouldn’t be out here alone.” He almost takes her uninjured arm, intending to steer her back to her room, but thinks better of it.

“Well, not sure if you noticed, but there are two of us. Didn’t they teach you to count in Ranger School?”

“All the way to ten.”

“Alright, fine, but who walked you out here to begin with?”

“Rangers don’t need babysitters.”
“Gee. Thanks.”

He tries not to be happy when she elbows him in the stomach.

Chapter End Notes

The quote about being ‘you’re not dead til you’re dead’ was something I read by Dave Grossman. I love that sentence. "Leaf on the wind" – Firefly reference.
How it is

The music is too loud.

It all sort of reminds him of a middle school dance – segregated groups of males and females and someone singing about pick-up trucks and whiskey. It’s too loud to carry on a conversation. He and his buddies have to keep yelling to hear each other. Mostly they’re just talking about how much they want to bang Taylor Swift (or in Clark’s case how he has a better chance with her than the rest of them), as if somehow her physical proximity has turned that fantasy into a real possibility. It’s like being surrounded by Justin Bieber fans if Justin Bieber fans were aggressively horny, camo-clad men. Tim snorts to himself. Lena would appreciate the description. He finds himself thinking that a lot: Lena would think that’s funny. Lena would like that. Lena would…

Yesterday he found himself thinking about Lena while sitting on the helicopter that ferried them back to base after a mission. They’d caught some heat on the way out, and the gunner had laid down a few hundred rounds of cover spray while everyone jumped in. He’d imagined teasing Lena about her skills as a shooter, that even if she can’t hit a target, she’d be good enough for spray-and-pray. She’d have rolled her eyes, elbowed him in the side, and said something scathing all while calling him ‘sir.’ In his imagination, instead of moving back to her seat she’d stay pressed against his side after elbowing him.

Tim lets his eyes drift sideways. Lena’s standing with Clarence near the ‘bar’, the bar being a small counter with many large coolers stocked with soda and water. They’re talking to some guy in civvies with a clipboard dangling at his side. Clipboard dude keeps leaning in to speak, and Lena keeps leaning back, as if the guy needs a mint. The last thing Tim ate was chicken fettuccini and garlic bread from the DFAC. He turns his attention back to the rest of the crowd.

No one really dances, but everyone taps a foot or sways slowly side to side, hypnotized by the glamor and voice of the blond on stage. Ms. Swift has gone for a girl-next-door look. Her managers probably told her to ditch the skimpy outfits, and the blingy jeans and tight t-shirt make her look more like something from home instead of a Hollywood distraction. They might talk a big game, but soldiers are the most sentimental fucks. Everyone bitches about their wife or girlfriend, but god help you if you interrupt a phone call or the letter they’re reading. And the moment they’re home, she’ll say jump and it’s ‘how high you want me to, baby?’ Somewhere in Tim’s second stage of basic training, his platoon had been cleaning their barracks with the radio going in the background. ‘Traveling Soldier’ by the Dixie Chicks had come on. Every single man had stopped what he was doing, and stayed dead silent the whole song.

“Oy,” the back of a hand hits Tim’s arm, “your girlfriend’s makin’ eyes at you.”

Tim rolls his eyes.

“No, I’m serious.” Carter, who has no compunction against openly staring, gives him another nudge. Tim looks, hoping that cooperating will make his friend fuck off. Now this really reminds him of a middle school dance. All that’s left is for everything to get shut down early because someone got caught smoking weed in the bathroom.

Carter’s right; she is looking at him. But there’s no coy glancing over and then away. This is a solid, unblinking stare. Lena holds a bottle in one hand, letting the other rest at her side. The hand not holding a bottle is discreetly but urgently waving him over.

With a nod to Carter, who gives him an I-told-you-so look, Tim goes to investigate.
When he’s a couple feet away, Lena’s face lights up in exaggerated surprise and she launches herself towards him.

“Tim! Hey!” Her arms stay locked around his shoulders and her body presses against his, thigh to chest.

What the fuck? “Hey.” He hovers an arm a moment before setting it on her back.

She yells in his ear, just loud enough to be heard over the music, “Play along. I will literally anything for you just get me out of this.”

Tim says a quick ‘yup’ and lets go.

“Justin,” Lena turns to clipboard guy, smiling, all teeth and no sincerity. “This is Sergeant Gutterson. He’s special operations.”

“Actually –” The smile stays glued in place, but there’s a soft pressure on his toes.

“Oh,” Lena interrupts, feigning guilt, “I’m really not supposed to say that kind of thing.” She puts her fingers over her mouth and winces at Tim. “Oops.”

She takes her foot off his but not before giving one last warning press. Play along dammit.

“I thought you special operations guys were all six five and looked like lumberjacks.”

Tim looks Clipboard Douche up and down. He’s taller than Tim by a couple inches, wearing a leather jacket and a pair of ‘combat boots’ that, judging by the shiny red color, came from Rodeo drive rather than a BX. The overgrown beard he’s sporting looks more hipster than lumberjack though.

Tim gives him another meaningful once over and says flatly, “Yeah, that’s a fantasy a lot of people have.”

The Douche’s mouth tightens. Tim doesn’t have the patience for a dick measuring contest.

“Hey Lena, the Colonel wanted to see you.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder in emphasis.

“Oh shit! I’m so sorry I forgot!” Lena turns to Clipboard Douche. “I’m late, but I hope you have fun while you’re here!” She scurries off towards the exit, and Tim follows.

“You know, you could have just told him you had a meeting,” Tim says when they’re outside. “You didn’t need me for that.”

“Yeah, Clarence already used that excuse,” she snaps. Lena hadn’t looked to be in a good mood before, but the sharp anger is a surprise. “Besides, he was one of those…some guys just make a scene if you don’t want to talk to them.”

“Well who gives a shit if there’s a scene? Just tell him to fuck off. All of them are gone tomorrow.” Tim doesn’t really understand. The whole thing was incredibly simple.

“Look, you’re a guy. This is how it is for the rest of us. He wouldn’t shut up.” Her delivery is rote, like a well-worn speech. “He just kept going on and on about his job and where he went to school – Stanford by the way – like I ought to be impressed. Like Stanford’s so effing great. Everyone knows those little bastards have two chances at every class and cheat rampantly on just about everything. And did you see him?” Lena screws up her face and drops her voice an octave,
“Look at me, I’m Mr. Music Producer and I shit rainbows and girls should want to suck my cock.’ Guys like that don’t shut up for you; they shut up for another guy.” She lets out a huff. “So thanks for being that guy.”

“You bitched out an officer in the middle of a debriefing, and you can’t tell some asshole to shove it?”

Lena opens her mouth, closes it, thinks, opens it again, and this time when she speaks her voice is flat and her expression neutral. “You know what? You’re right. I guess I wasn’t thinking. But thanks. I owe you one. Have a good evening Sergeant.” Lena turns and walks away without waiting for a reply.

Tim knows better than to follow, but he stays in the road, watching as long as he can until she disappears into the bunkers.

o.O.o

“You. Jackhole.” Lena slams the door behind her. “And get your feet off my desk.”

Clarence just grins beatifically, not a shred of remorse.

“You abandoned me.”

“The plan was that we leave separately. Besides, time was a’wasting.” He swivels and stands, striding over to hand her a bag. “Here, these are for the phones,” he pats the large pocket on his thigh, “and the tracking program for the computers.”

Lena continues to eye him. “Abandoned me, Clarence. I mean ew. What normal adult doesn’t get the hint that if someone backs up when you’re talking to them that the appropriate response is not to keep getting closer to their face?!”

Clarence shrugs. “Well you could have just told him you had to go.”

“No, Clarence, no I couldn’t. Because the point was that we both had to just fade out, not make it obvious that we were leaving. And the way that man latched onto people, like a leech from a…like a leech…” Lena shudders at the memory. Lord, his beard was just so nasty. Dark, thick, wiry hair follicles sprouting fish-belly pale skin. “And when I just said ‘sorry gotta go’ he pretended not to understand and kept pestering me. ‘Simply’ leaving would have caused a scene.” And tonight a scene was not an option. Slimy sack of shit.

The USO is the perfect cover for sneaking around base without being noticed. No one, man or woman, fan or not, is going to miss seeing Taylor Swift. There for the show, the socializing, or a new fantasy for the spank bank, everyone who isn’t on some sort of essential duty is in the hangar with the makeshift stage. She and Clarence had both worn the tan t-shirts and camouflage cargo pants that everyone else there was wearing. The key was to be seen, gain an alibi just in case, but not be missed once they left. If someone can’t find them, then it will be assumed that they’re somewhere in the tan-shirt-camo-crowd. Of course that part only worked as long as they didn’t draw attention to themselves.

Years ago, when Lena was in college and working a retail job to pay tuition, she’d had to put up with creepers who didn’t understand or flat out ignored social norms governing personal space. She’d originally chosen a lingerie boutique because she thought most of the clientele would be women. Unfortunately, there’d been too many men who were ‘out shopping for their wives.’ And to keep her job she’d been forced to smile and play nice and accept or pretend not to
understand the comments she so often got from customers. The fact that it was expected that she would put up with that sort of behavior had been galling. Every day a man walked through the front door an instant lump of hot hatred would appear in her stomach. Once she left that job she’d sworn to herself that she’d never put up with it again, even if it meant getting fired.

And yet, because she didn’t want to make a scene – and somehow that smarmy bag of dicks had sensed it, or maybe he just thought all personnel were supposed to ‘behave’ – she’d had to put up with another creeper invading her personal space and making borderline lewd comments. But it was her mission she had to protect, and therefore she had no one to blame but herself for putting up with it.

Before leaving Lena’s bunker, they each don a jacket and hat to match the pants. Lena throws her hair into a bun, coats her hair liberally with hairspray, and tucks it under her hat. They each shove a couple pairs of latex gloves in their pockets. To anyone who runs into them they’ll just look like the poor bastards who had to work tonight, not the government employees skulking around where they shouldn’t. She gives Clarence one last withering glare, turns on her heel, and goes back out the way she came. She doesn’t hold the door for him and takes some small satisfaction when it closes in his face. Jackass.

Clarence and Lena are still careful as they make their way through the offices. Luckily the plan is sound and, as predicted, everywhere is empty. The cluster of containers that housed the offices of GenCorp are marked with a small sign. ‘Elite soldiers, Loyal protectors’ was printed just under the company name. Lena snorts at the second part. That remains to be seen. Each office gets three bugs (one in the phone and two hidden as near the desk as possible) and a key-logger/activity tracking program is installed on all computers. The whole process takes less than an hour, after which Lena returns to her own office and calls Oona to confirm reception of all signals and to have her start recording everything onto one of the servers.

Lena leans her elbows on her desk, thumbs pinching the bridge of her nose. A drink would be nice right about now. But even if she had a bottle of wine, she knows the times a drink sound good are the worst times to have them. She should go to bed. Instead she pulls a set of keys from her pocket and unlocks a file drawer.

Al’Bashir is dead and Qasim is in the wind, but there’s one more name on her list, and Lena is determined to make the third time a charm.
babu: papa, shirina: sweetheart, shahzadah: princess. I basically just googled these words, so if they are misused, then you have my apologies.

*Dear Boss Lady,*

*You suck hairy, sweaty donkey sack.*

Tap, tap, tap.

*Dear Boss Lady,*

*You suck hairy, sweaty donkey sack. Putrid donkey sack.*

Tap, tap, tap.

*Dear Boss Lady,*

*So far we’ve gone through about one hundred and eighty hours of surveillance.*

Tap, tap, tap.

*And I hope you rot in the sixth circle of hell.*

Tap, tap, tap. Who needs coffee when you can drink from the font of desperation? This is exactly how people become addicted to cocaine. Then again she didn’t have to go through nearly all of the one hundred and eighty hours herself. Or stand over everyone else’s shoulders while they did their part.

*Dear Boss Lady,*

*So far we’ve gone through about one hundred and eighty hours of surveillance. Please see attached report for results.*

*Love, Your long-suffering minion*

Tap, tap.

*Dear Boss Lady,*

*So far we’ve gone through about one hundred and eighty hours of surveillance. Please see attached report for results.*

*Best, Oona*

*P.S. Don’t get dead.*

Christ on a cracker and spread with jam. Oona yawns and looks out her office window into
the cubicle pool. Lurker Number One looks busy. She decides she’d feel guilty interrupting his actual work to ask him to take her home. Instead she fluffs her folded up sweater, lets her head fall forward onto it, and eyes closed. Thank goodness for having her own office.

Oona has experienced three Important Revelations in the past few days. One, sleep is truly a necessary part of human life and cannot be replaced with caffeine. Or cocaine. Two, she needs a couch in her office because the sleeping bag just isn’t cutting it. A really puffy, comfy, marshmallow monstrosity would be perfect. Three, she needs to learn to delegate. If she were less of a perfectionist control freak she might have brushed her teeth at home instead of in the office bathroom this morning. Thank god work has a gym with showers. She complained, loudly, and put up with everyone else’s complaining about her micromanagement and hovering, but she knew if she could convince herself she was useful enough around the office that she would have a good excuse to stay. That meant not having to face going home, which meant not having to walk through the house checking the windows and the doors. It meant not having to deal with whatever seemingly innocuous letter is in her mailbox that day. Lurker #2 has probably already collected the mail and put the letter into a file.

Oona groans into the sweater. She just wants Lena to get to the bottom of the traitor doctor, come home, and solve the problem that is Steve. She tries to remind herself not to think of him, that it will only make her bitter and angry, but her brain never really gets the message unless it can be distracted by something else. A small part of her is still afraid that even when Lena does come home that Steve will not be dealt with. The number of times Oona has heard some variation of apologetic refusal, either sincerely or insincerely regretful, has soured her faith in others. The general cowardice of her superiors in the face of simple matters is an ever-growing knot of hatred in her gut. Justice denied when it can so easily be given by those claiming helplessness burns hotter than the fire of Catholic guilt.

“He hasn’t really done anything. We really can’t do anything when there’s no evidence of wrongdoing.”

“It’s not against the law to flirt with someone.”

“You’re both very good at your jobs. I think you can learn to work together.”

But if she can prove her use, prove that without her Lena’s operations would fail, or at least be a great deal less efficient and successful, then she won’t be let down. She will have unequivocally earned justice. It’s not that Lena has ever betrayed her trust. Or lied to her. That she knows of. And it’s not that Oona doesn’t believe that Lena wishes to help. But sometimes helping means an uncomfortable decision, and that decision may not be Lena’s to make in the end. Those who fight for you only fight until it means they’ll lose something. For now they are ‘gathering evidence’. Oona keeps a ‘creep journal’. She saves the letters and texts and emails and has CCTV cameras around her house. She has the Lurkers, Dave and Cindy, who keep watch, who have never rolled their eyes or made fun of her when she comes downstairs in the middle of the night with a bat and pepper spray when she thinks she hears a noise. But despite all of that, she still carries the pervasive fear that in the end Steve will be ‘ sternly spoken to’, perhaps reprimanded, and nothing will change.

So Oona doesn’t go home. She doesn’t delegate, and she micromanages the shit out of everyone. She eats take-out and mainlines Dr. Pepper (and not cocaine). She will be worth justice, and if after all this she isn’t, then she’ll quit. But she doesn’t want to bear the bitter hatred that would arise if her only option is to give up on the life she’s rebuilt and run.

For now, she tries to push the burning, snarled knot of uncertainty and frustrated rage aside and sleep.
Lena opens and closes her mouth a few times, working her jaw slowly back and forth. It’s been ages since she ground her teeth in her sleep, and it annoys her that it happened last night. But with annoyance comes more unconsciously jaw-clenching, and upon realizing she’s doing it again Lena groans and sticks her tongue between her teeth as a preventative measure. She is past this dammit. Dang it.

They’ll be in an MRAP this time, no jeeps. MRAPs are safe. It doesn’t matter if there’s an IED; she’ll be fine. She won’t be impaled on scrap metal and nearly (or completely) bleed out on the side of the road. It’s fine. She is safe.

_Breathe. In one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Out, one, two, three, four._

Breathe. In one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Out, one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Fine. Safe. With deliberate effort, she relaxes her shoulders, bounces a few times on her toes, and stands still. Only person in danger in an MRAP is the gunner, and (she can hear Tim’s snort in the back of her mind) no one is going to make her a gunner. They aren’t even going that far out of Kabul.

Oona hasn’t found the third name on the list yet, but it’s entirely possible that no longer matters. But it is possible that Oona has given her gold in place of copper. The United States has been bugging most Afghan government offices since the Afghans moved back into them, and for some reason employees at the treasury office (who are currently unaccounted for along with Qasim) had been discussing a ‘doctor’. It had nearly slipped by, but Oona (bless every inch of that cantankerous, crude woman and her wonderful sense of initiative) had had the good sense to wonder why they were all planning a group appointment in the small town of Charikar. Why someone would travel thirty miles out of Kabul to see a doctor piqued her interest. Why they all planned to go as a group was downright strange, especially as they all were at work and sounded perfectly healthy. No malady had ever been mentioned. Oona’s conclusion, which Lena agreed with, was that they were planning a meeting.

This time Lena is better prepared. The disaster that had been the treasury mission will not be repeated. The ranger teams have been in the hills keeping an eye on the house. Oona’s report indicated the meeting place would be a large vineyard near the edge of town. The only frequent traffic is the family and the laborers who work there.

The drive is long because MRAPs are slow, but Lena doesn’t complain because there are no IEDs or excitement of any kind. When they’re half a mile out, she radios Carter who informs her that the only people present in the house are the viticulturist and his young daughter. There are a few workers farther out in the vineyard, but Lena takes no chances. The two MRAPs park outside the gates, one on either side, and four soldiers accompany her up to the house.

The man who comes to the door is mid-fifties, slender, but not skinny, with thick dark chocolate hair sprinkled liberally with gray. Were he not a farmer he might appear softer around the edges. His face is lined more from laughter than the sun or age, a man who has lived in prosperity. His eyes are wide at first, frozen, and he moves slowly, careful not to startle the American soldiers who have appeared at his house. He is afraid, but, Lena notes triumphantly, not surprised. There’s no interpreter, nor does the man appear to speak English, so Lena is forced to yell in Pashto over the two soldiers who stand between her and the door. That there is a woman, a civilian, present seems to calm him. No one’s going to start shooting around a woman.

“Basar al’Sharif.” It’s not a question, and wisely Mr. Sharif does not try to pretend otherwise. “May we speak?” This too, is not a question, though Lena is careful to be as polite as the situation allows. More flies with honey and all that.
Mr. Sharif remains still, looking from Lena to the soldiers and back again. He is wary, and they are not welcome, but he asks – politely, she is pleased to hear – if she would mind sitting on the terrace with him. No doubt he does not wish to have four soldiers tromping through his house. Afghans, like much of the rest of the world and unlike Americans, do not wear shoes in the house. Lena likes that. If it offends his sensibilities to play host to a woman, he hides it well; the woman of the house should receive female guests. Or perhaps the four armed men surrounding her are good motivation for breaking tradition.

“Babu, babu!” A little girl comes running out of the house, squealing delightedly. The source of her excitement becomes quickly apparent. She is holding an extremely tiny kitten in her hands. It looks practically newborn. Swinging from the excitable hands of a small child is not a safe position for a baby animal. Lena forgets manners and her original purpose and rushes towards the girl, who comes up short, enthusiasm snuffed at the sight of a stranger.

Lena drops to a squat and holds out her hands with a smile. “Careful, shirina. May I see her?”

The little girl looks to her father, then walks towards Lena with less caution than before, “How can you tell it’s a girl?”

“I can’t until I see it.” Lena wraps her hands under the girl’s, careful not to drop the tiny, still-wet ball of fur as she takes it. “What is your name?”

“Parisa. What’s yours?”

“I’m Lena. And how old are you?” Now that her hands are freed, the girl proudly holds up eight fingers.

“And how old is this little one?”

“Three minutes!”

“Well this is definitely a girl. Do you have a name for her?”

There is a moment of eight year old face scrunching that accompanies eight year old deep thought. “Shahzadah.”

“Have you ever taken care of a princess before?”

A vigorous headshake in the negative.

Lena leans forward a bit, ready to share an important secret. “Would you like me to show you?”

A vigorous head nod.

“Then let us find her mother, the queen.”

The queen mother is safely ensconced in a large basket padded with blankets in a sun-warmed spot on the other end of the wide patio. Lena sets the little kitten against her mother’s stomach, and it blindly seeks and latches onto a teat to feed. The mother cat has already given birth to two more kittens, and she shows Parisa how to (very gently) pick up the babies and move them around to their mother’s stomach so they can eat. Lena moves the first, and Parisa is allowed to place the second, doing so with determination and an upward glance at Lena.
“You must keep them warm,” Lena says seriously, hoping that when she leaves the kittens will be in good hands, “and make sure that they eat.”

Parisa nods earnestly, moving one of the kittens into a better position as if to prove her competence for her new responsibilities. “Are you a doctor?”

Lena laughs, “No, but my cousin’s husband is. Do you want to be a doctor?” She regrets the question almost immediately, remembering where she is. This is not a country where little girls are told they can be doctors and astronauts.

But Parisa, not yet aware of dreams she should not have, nods excitedly. “I want to be a doctor for humans and animals! Look!” She is still too young to wear a hijab, so when Parisa pulls her long hair aside Lena can see a big gauze bandage. She also pulls her shirt up to show another bandage. “Doctor Sayeed fixed me, and he said someday I can learn to fix other people!”

Doctor Sayeed. Sayeed Al’Faheen. Lena once had a gauze bandage like the one on Parisa’s ribs. Now all she has is a too-white scar, and Faheen didn’t patch her up; he’s the reason it’s there. “I’m sure you will. Can you look after the queen and her princes and princesses? I need to talk to your father now.”

Parisa nods, attention already back on the kittens and placing them at a teat each time a new one is birthed. Now that Lena has imparted her knowledge she’s no longer interesting.

“Do you have children, Miss…”

“Carlan.”

“Do you have children, Miss Carlan?” Sharif asks when she rejoins him. He has a slightly hopeful expression, as if her interaction with his daughter will mean less unpleasantness for him.

“No.” And because it’s not a complete lie, and because she knows she will have to play dirty, “Not anymore.”

“Ah, I am sorry.” As intended, the last statement catches him off guard and brings a genuine expression of sympathy. “Would you care to sit?” He indicates a chair, which she takes, keeping both feet firmly planted on the ground.

“Thank you.”

It is rude to jump directly to business in Afghanistan, and though anticipation eats at her patience, Lena waits while Mr. Sharif pours tea. “Parisa is a lovely girl. Very caring.”

“She is the apple of our eyes. I have three sons – My wife has taken them to visit their cousins – but she has more energy than any of them.”

Lena smiles. “If they have even half her determination, you are a blessed man.” Lena takes a sip of chai. Despite the tender ache in her arm, she lifts the cup with her right hand as is proper. “Is she well? I saw a…” She gestures to the spot on her collarbone where Parisa’s bandage is.

His face shadows slightly. “Yes, she had a bit of a fall. You know how children are, running everywhere.”

She nods in agreement. “My cousin has two children. Every time I see them they have a new scrape or bruise. Always climbing trees.” This time when Lena takes a sip of her tea she maintains eye contact. She may speak his language and have some awareness of his customs, but she is not of
his country. She has a purpose in being here today. “It is lucky you had Dr. Faheen to take care of her.”

It’s not a question, but a statement of fact and a clear message that she knows. People are always less likely to lie and more likely to open up when they think you already know something. Besides, it is in her best interest to help him avoid being caught in a lie. Should she have to accuse him of lying he would be shamed, and conversation would go far less smoothly after that. Lena doesn’t need another Hadid. Luckily, he is smart enough not to dissemble.

“I owe him my child’s life,” he says simply, hands raised in supplication – whether to Allah for mercy or to her for understanding she isn’t sure. So that’s how he wishes to play this.

“And he owes me the lives of seven good men.”

Sharif does not meet her eyes, instead staring into his teacup for several long moments before finally answering, “Would a man who risks his own life to save a child be a murderer? He drove all night to save my daughter.” Drove all night. They always talk about what they think you already know. Al’Faheen has a car.

“In my line of work I have seen less likely things.”

There is another long pause, and Mr. Sharif finishes his tea. There is a resignation on his face that Lena doesn’t like, as if he has been preparing himself for this conversation. “You must understand Miss Carlan, if I betray the man who saved my family it would be as if I were betraying my family. No Muslim can face Allah with such a stain on his soul.” Lena’s spirit falls when she sees resignation harden into resolve. “Whatever your government does to me will be more bearable than committing such a sin.”

Lena has interrogated enough people to know the odds of him bluffing are slim. But she owes a debt to sixteen people who died and one who still yet lives. “Then I will not ask you to sin.” This pronouncement does not lessen the tension in Sharif’s shoulders. He still fully expects the four soldiers with Lena to arrest him and haul him off to Parwan. “Do not tell me where he is now. I do not need you to speculate either. If you can only tell me when you last saw him, I will leave you and your family alone.”

This time there is no hesitation. After all, what could that possibly gain her? There are no surveillance cameras in this city. “My daughter fell two weeks ago. He stayed to care for her for three days.” There is an emphasis on three days, as if somehow Lena knowing the length of time Al’Faheen stayed with his daughter will make her think of him as someone other than the traitor who caused the death of seven people and nearly her own.

“Thank you.” Lena stands, motioning to the soldiers with her that she is ready to leave. Sharif stands with them, but the Americans make their own way back to the gate where the MRAPs are waiting for them.

Lena types a quick email to Oona on the way back.

I need you to find me a satellite.

-L
In the last chapter I forgot and put the death toll of Lena’s IED incident at sixteen. It was supposed to be seven. I’ve since fixed that. Disclaimer: Pashto phrases are from google, and may be terribly misused.

He tells himself to stop thinking about her. But there’s nothing to do but sweat and stare through a scope at normal people doing normal things. He can think about her or he can think about that grain of sand under the wristband of his watch that he can’t seem to get rid of.

“You better not have a boner,” says Carter after Tim shifts position one too many times.

“Then tell your mom to stop sending me nudes.”

If they’d been on base the conversation would only have deteriorated from there, but smacking each other around on a hilltop isn’t good for stealth, so they lapse into silence instead.

The sun came up, and with it came thoughts of coffee and snorting laughter. He likes that he can make her laugh. When he realizes that, once again, his thoughts have drifted back to Lena and he has neither the wish nor the energy to direct them elsewhere, he justifies it with the knowledge that at least it’s better than falling asleep from boredom. At least he doesn’t have to make up stories about the targets he watches. He tried making up stories about the rocks he’d propped his rifle on, but it just wasn’t the same.

Tim wriggles. Somehow there’s another rock poking into his ribs. He gets rid of one, and another appears, like a rock conspiracy. Maybe they didn’t like his story. There might be a bug crawling on his calf or it could just be his leg hair itching. Tim squeezes his calves together. If there was a bug, it’s dead. He looks away from his scope and over at Carter, who’s zonked the fuck out like a rhino kicked him in the head. A glance at his watch says he still has an hour before it’s his turn to sleep. *Fuck.* Christ he’s bored.

The mission was supposed to be done after Lena visited Sharif, but they were ordered to stay in position. Their new objective is to wait for Faheen to show up for a meeting and grab him. Would sure be nice if that meeting could happen in the next decade.

Tim stretches, reaching his arms to the front and pointing his toes behind him, extending his body as far as possible before contracting back to look through the scope. The family is at dinner. Sharif’s wife and sons are back, and there are others, maybe extended family or cousins or neighbors. Everyone is divided into two rooms, women in one, men in another. Whoever they are they came on foot, no one from Kabul. No sign of Faheen either.

Another half hour, and the sun is almost gone. Tim tips his head from side to side cracking his neck. A light catches in his peripheral vision. Headlights. He elbows Carter awake and puts his eye back on the scope.

“We got incoming.”
“How many?”

“I see….” Tim starts counting, but suddenly the headlights turn off. The cars hadn’t stopped. “Shit. There were at least two cars.”

He’s sure these are the guys they’ve been waiting for, but something’s not right. This was supposed to be a meeting, so why are they sneaking up on the house?

There’s a soft crackle on the radio. “You guys seein’ this?”

Carter answers, “Smells like somethin’ don’t it?”

“Fishy like yo’ mama’s panties.”

“Y’all makin’ everything about my momma.”

Tim nudges Carter. “Tell Clark to call it in.”

He scans the road, trying to find where the cars would have stopped. There are too many trees and bushes in the way, and it’s almost fully dark. He flicks on the IR sight and tries again. A bunch of green shapes are moving down the road about three hundred yards from the gates. They’re on foot now and walk like they’re carrying weapons.

“Hey, what do they want us to do?” Tim flips the safety off and lays his finger alongside the trigger.

Clark’s voice comes back over the radio, “Did you see a blue jeep?”

“No, just trucks.”

“Cap’ says hold. Faheen has a blue jeep, remember?”

The green human blobs get closer, maybe two hundred yards. Tim turns the barrel half a degree. No one inside looks like they’re expecting more company. Sharif’s daughter is feeding bits of her dinner to a cat. Her mother is laughing and batting playfully at the woman sitting next to her.

The green figures edge closer.

She can’t even be ten years old.

A hundred yards.

“Faheen isn’t coming. Ask if they want us to grab one of these guys.”

Carter and Clark whisper back and forth, and Clark whispers with the Captain back on base.

Eighty yards.

“He says hold, that –” There’s another muffled voice from the radio sitting next to Clark. “She says get one of them. Make sure he can talk.”

Tim can’t hear them, but Clark and Pascal creep down the east ridge, quick and quiet. Marius and Kreisch go down from the west.

The green blobs are ducking through the grape vines, barely thirty yards from the front porch. One of the blobs waves and two groups split off to go around. Tim weaves back to the room where
the women are. A blob raises his gun, aiming it at the window. It’s dark outside, and light inside, so only the blob with the gun can see. Everyone in the house is blissfully unaware they’re being surrounded, and the blobs are blissfully unaware of the rangers coming towards them. It’s an ignorance that needs to last as long as possible, and the moment a bullet flies, everyone’s illusions will be shattered, and the green blobs will turn their guns on the Rangers behind them.

_Don’t do it._ He’s not sure if he’s talking to himself or the guy pointing his gun at the women sitting around the low dinner table.

In the end they both do it. The guy pulls the gun up a fraction and Tim fires. Lena only needs one of them to talk; didn’t need to be that guy.

The shot is like someone yelling fire in a crowded room – complete pandemonium. Tim doesn’t stay to watch though; he finds the other four Rangers, all distinguishable by their IR beacons, flashing lights overlapping the green human shape of them. Beside him Carter radios down enemy positions. Tim tracks a green blob sneaking towards the back of a flashing beacon. One pull on the trigger, and he’s gone too. It’s nice when they make it easy like that. There are more bursts of bright white gunfire down below.

“We got a guy by the side of the house.” The radio crackles with Pascal’s voice. “Don’t need the rest.”

Tim shoots another two blobs, and Clark, Marius, and Kreisch pick off the rest.

“Carter, Gutterson, get down to the house. Got a bird coming.” _Finally._

As they’re sliding down the hill, there’s an explosion near the side of the house where Pascal was. Carter drops to the ground, Tim skidding down to lie next to him.

“Guys what was that?”

For a heart-stopping second there’s no response, and then, “Funny story, dude just ate a grenade. Allah ho akbar! Whooooooo Pfffffffff!” Pascal laughs and continues to make little exploding sounds.

“And the rest of you dickheads?”

“We’re good.”

Carter’s forehead hits the dirt in relief. “Fuck.”

_o.O.o_

Lena doesn’t share their sense of relief. She steps out of the helicopter and meets them at the porch where they dragged all the bodies into a line, looking around at each Ranger expecting him to produce someone for interrogation.

“Punch line is they’re all dead,” says Tim.

Her face goes stony. “You couldn’t have just shot one of them in the leg or something?”

“Funny thing about legs, they still bleed if someone shoots you in them. They got arteries.”

“Well, you could have –”

Tim holds up his rifle, annoyed. “I can shoot down a helicopter with this thing. You know
“what a bullet from this does to a human body?” He points at the line of bodies on the gravel.
“There’s a row of them over there if you don’t.”

“Lena,” Clarence steps forward, but she shrugs off the hand he puts on her arm, “We can check their faces, find out who they are. It’s not a dead end.” Tim stops himself from pointing out that not all of them have faces left, or in the case of the guy with the grenade, anything at all.

Lena looks about to argue, still fuming, and there’s a flare of anger in Tim’s chest. She had quick trip in a helicopter, whereas he’d spent three days and four nights on top of a rocky hill, stones digging into his skin and legs going numb from lying on his stomach on hard ground. He’s the one who had to make the choice between killing a man and keeping that same man alive knowing it would mean giving him a chance to kill his brothers in arms. Then, suddenly, her anger deflates, whooshing out with a breath. She meets his eyes with a curt, “I’m sorry,” and walks towards the house. Tim and Clarence follow.

“Who are all these people?” Lena asks, nodding at the guests still sitting in the living room. They’re quiet, the adults sitting in a loose ring around the children. Tim feels another stab of anger. They’re soldiers, not child-killers, and it was the Rangers who just saved them all from being killed by their own people.

“Dinner guests.”

“Let’s get them in another room. I want to question everyone separately.” She turns back around, and takes another slow breath. “Please.”

“You got another translator? This is a lot of people.”

“Just me and Clarence.” She seems determined rather than daunted. Fuck, they’re gonna be here all night. Tim silently kisses sleep goodbye. Lena turns back to the huddled group, and starts speaking in Pashto. There’s some frowning. A woman without a hijab issuing orders appears to ruffle a few feathers. Tim doesn’t care. He just wants this night done as fast as possible. “Clarence, we’ll talk to the men first. Would you mind asking the questions? Doubt they want to talk to the heathen tart without a headscarf.” Lena sounds uncharacteristically bitter.

The Englishman nods, and waves the first man towards a smaller room to the side. Through the door, Tim can see a desk, Sharif’s study maybe.

The women and children begin filing towards the back of the house, to the room they’d been using for dinner, but Lena halts one of the women with a hand on her elbow. “Parisa chere day?”

The woman looks around then says the same thing to another woman, whose eyes go wide. “Parisa!”

The woman looks around then says the same thing to another woman, whose eyes go wide. “Parisa!”

Lena says something to them in Pashto before turning to Tim. “Keep them here.”

“What –” he starts, but she’s already out the back door yelling “Parisa!” and leaving him to deal with a bunch of panicked women shouting in Pashto at him. Clarence is in the other room with one of the men, so all he and the rest of them can do is try to tell them, in English and with lots of gesturing, that they just need to go to the back room and wait. But now the men have overheard whatever it was Lena and the two women were talking about and have joined the yelling, and Tim wonders what is it now that could possibly be more upsetting to them than the rest of this fucking night has been already, and now they have two groups yelling at them in what may as well be fucking Greek for all anyone is understanding each other, and Tim grabs Clark by the shoulder and points at the closed study door where Clarence has started interrogating the first man.
“Go fuckin’ get him and tell him to calm these people do –”

“TIM!” It’s a piercing shriek, and now it’s Tim’s turn to panic, as he shoves past everyone and bolts out the back door towards her voice, leaving the others to figure out the mess of angry people inside.

“TIIM!” His brain fumbles. She’s alive enough to scream, and her voice is closer, not father away… He finds her on the back porch bent over something on the ground.

The something on the ground turns out to be a little girl. Shit. Shit fucking shit. Lena’s down to an undershirt, and the white button-down she’d had on over it is now pressed to the child’s torso and soaked in blood. The girl is unconscious, and there’s blood on her mouth.

“Shit.” He turns back to the house and yells, “Clark!” before kneeling down beside Lena.

“She’s alive.” Lena’s voice is shaky. She looks up at him, wide-eyed, and stricken as if willing him to tell her the girl will stay that way.

“What happened?” he asks instead, leaning with his ear to the girl’s mouth. Her breathing is wet and strained.

“I think she went to find the kittens.”

“No, I mean –”

“Oh, right, shit. It looked like she was shot.”

“Where exactly?” He doesn’t want her to lift up the shirt to show him.

“The.. Her lung? In the right side.”

Clark comes out, sees them bent down, and hurries over. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ.”

“Think it’s her lung,” Tim says.

With Lena still keeping pressure on her chest, Clark rolls her, fingers pressing on her back. “It didn’t come out the other side.” That means a hollow point, and a great deal more damage.

Lena looks up, “Is that bad?”

“Yeah, it’s bad. Take your hands off.”

Lena looks at Clark like he’s gone batshit and doesn’t move, so Clark shoves her hands away and rolls the girl halfway onto her right side. “Hold her there,” he orders, and Tim complies. How does a child have so much blood? Then he hands a flashlight to Lena. “Hold that here. Don’t move.” The light shakes a bit, but it’s good enough.

Clark takes out a pack of plastic tubing and shoves one end into the wound. A stream of blood immediately starts making its way out and onto the concrete under them. “Hold that,” Clark says to Tim, and when Tim’s hand is holding the tube in place, he whips out a banana bag and inserts an IV into her arm. “Keep ahold of that and take the bag.” Again, Tim does as bid, and Clark carefully hoists the girl up. She looks tiny and flimsy like a ragdoll, and pale, way too pale.

There’s a whole new round of panic when they walk through the house, tube leaking a bloody line across the floor and Tim trailing after with the IV bag, but Clark ignores everyone, intent on getting to the helicopter as quickly as possible. He and Kreisch will ride back with her. After
they’ve gone, Lena turns to him and sweeps her arm toward the row of bodies, “I changed my mind. Thanks for killing them,” and stoms back through the front door.

It hadn’t even crossed her mind that it could have been one of their bullets.

Inside the house is still pandemonium, and Sharif and his wife – the girl must have been their daughter – are screaming at Lena, who is still covered in blood and looks close to snapping. He doesn’t need a translator for what they’re saying, but Clarence tells him anyways.

“They are saying American soldiers murdered their child.”

“She’s not dead.” Yet. “Also, she was shot with a hollow point. We don’t use that kind of ammunition.”

An expression of relief passes over the other man’s face at that last statement, as if he’d been afraid the bullet had been American, and Tim’s anger makes a tenth round comeback. But Clarence cuts in over the yelling, probably relaying what Tim just said. They shut up at least.

Then Lena’s talking, taking the chance to speak before they can start haranguing her again. The only thing he catches is “Faheen”, the name of the doctor. There’s immediately a lot of headshaking and protesting, but Lena barrels on, brows pulled tight in rising frustration. Sharif turns to Clarence, gesturing towards Lena and babbling rapidly as if he could make her see reason. Clarence says something, dashing whatever hope for support Sharif thought he might get, and Sharif goes back to trying to plead with Lena instead.

Whatever he’s saying falls on deaf ears, and in a move Tim knows is insulting, she turns instead to Sharif’s wife, still speaking in Pashto and gestures out the front door where the helicopter had taken off minutes ago. The Afghan woman, already in tears, looks to her husband, but everyone’s attention snaps back to Lena when she yells one short phrase – again something about Faheen – and lifts the front of her shirt.

About half the room flinches back in disgust, and there’s an outburst of shock and anger at what they see as indecent exposure. But Sharif’s wife, along with Tim and Clarence and the other Rangers, stare at Lena’s bared torso.

There’s a thick, uneven rope of mottled skin winding from the bottom right side of her rib cage across the front third of her stomach, a scar that hasn’t aged enough to turn fully white. Carter gives him a look. The fuck is going on? Tim shakes his head. Fuck if I know.

Lena no longer shouts, but there’s a desperate intensity to her voice as she points to herself and then once more outside before pulling her shirt down.

This time Sharif’s wife doesn’t look to her husband, just whispers briefly in Pashto to Lena. Lena nods, gives a short reply, and turns to Clarence. “I’m going to photograph the bodies outside. We can let everyone go home.” Then to Tim, “Are we allowed to bring Sharif and his wife to Bagram with us?”

“I’ll radio it in. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Lena jerks her head once in acknowledgement. “Thanks. I’ll be outside.”

He makes the call. The Captain gives permission for the Sharifs to come back with them on the helicopter. Then Tim spends about ten minutes staring at the radio in his hand, going back and forth in his head trying to decide if he wants to talk to Clark. The little girl – Parisa – had been breathing when they carried her onto the helicopter, but the puddle of blood on the back porch and
the trail through the house hadn’t been small. He’s not sure he wants to know. On one hand, there’s relief from wondering, but if the news is bad, then he has to tell her parents, which means telling Lena. Tim puts the radio down. What they know or don’t know doesn’t change the outcome, only whether or not he has to face it right now.

Tim steps outside, needing a break from the accusing stares of everyone still gathered in the house. He doesn’t know enough Pashto to defend himself, and even if he did they wouldn’t believe him. As long as it was an American, if the girl dies, they get paid.

Lena’s standing away from the bodies, back towards him, stock still and barely visible in the moonlight. He wants to know about the scar on her ribs. It’s curiosity plain and simple, and he feels like a hypocrite for not having a different motive for wanting to ask. Tim gives his eyes time to adjust to the darkness, once again trying to figure out what he ought to do. *Just cause we don’t like talking to you people doesn’t mean we’re heartless.* Kelsey’s words come back to him, but he’s not sure if it’s coming from the devil on his shoulder or the angel. There’s what he wants and what he’s afraid he ought to do instead. Lena’s not big on touching, so maybe she’s not big on company when she’s upset. But she visited him in the hospital, so… Tim rubs a hand down his face, still looking at Lena for some hint as to what she wants. All he sees is a rigid, taught rod. Fuck, women are complicated. *No we’re not; you people are just dipshits. God.* Kelsey always hated it when he said that. *It’s not like you fuckers aren’t just as bad.*

Since he doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do, he does what he wants to do. She doesn’t turn around when he approaches, and he’d made sure to drag his feet on the gravel so as not to surprise her.

Now that he’s up close Tim can hear her breathe. It’s slow, or tries to be, but ends up slightly halting instead. Her arms are crossed tightly over her chest, fingers gripping her biceps, but it’s not cold out. Kelsey’s voice in his head is quiet. They stand like that for a bit, her trying to breathe normally and him unsure of what to do next.

Lena breaks the silence first. “Can I help you?” Her voice is tight, too controlled and too high.

“You good?” he asks. It’s the wrong question, definitely a stupid one.

Abruptly, she falls into a squat, both palms jammed into her eyes. She doesn’t breathe at all for a moment until he hears a sharp heave. *Shit.*

Tim drops down next to her. He decides putting an arm around her shoulders would be presumptuous, so instead he sits up against her, side pressed to side, one shoulder just behind hers. She doesn’t lean away, but nor does she lean in, and Tim stays still, waiting. She smells like girl – soap and shampoo, and Tim is grateful that her nose is too stuffed up to smell him – sniper marinated in a ghillie suit for three days.

There are few more choked sobs, and then a forced, “Jesus Christ,” as her fingers dig into her eyes. It looks like she’s trying to poke them out. “I didn’t used to be like this.”

“It’s fine you know.” He means it.

“Uh huh, cause all you boys are out here carrying on like babies.” She swipes violently at her nose before wiping it on the edge of her shirt and snorting the rest back.

“We’re used to it.”
“Kids?” Her eyes are wide staring ahead.

“Yeah,” he says, “sometimes.”

Lena nods numbly, still staring straight ahead. “I hate this place.” They’re silent a bit longer, and then Lena sinks the rest of the way down to sit on the gravel with him. “You got any water?”

Tim pulls out a canteen and hands it over. After taking a few long gulps, Lena dumps some on the edge of her shirt and uses it to clean her face. The scar is just visible against the skin of her stomach.

He’s not used to asking; he’s used to being asked. “That looks deep.” He points towards the spot under her shirt where the scar is. It’s indirect. She can answer how she chooses. Almost unconsciously Lena’s hand comes up to rub over it.

“Got in a fight with a Humvee door.” Her eyes are still too shiny and the smile doesn’t quite catch all the way.

“Oh yeah? What did the poor door ever do to you?”

“Tried to gut me.”

“Well, I guess it deserved what it got then.”

“It’s pretty dead.” She laughs wetly. “Here,” Lena holds up her left hand, pointing to a ring on her middle finger, “this is a piece of it.”

“Well that’s one way to get revenge.”

“Meyer said it’s like a bullet,” she explains, “If you wear the bullet that shot you then you won’t get shot again.”

He’s still carrying a piece of shrapnel under his collar bone somewhere, and keeps getting shot, so it sounds like a load of shit, but he doesn’t say that. “Meyer?”

“Yeah, he’s the one who pulled me out.” Puzzle pieces he hadn’t thought to look for fall into place. Shit.

“How come you never said you were in that convoy?”

A shrug. “Doesn’t matter, does it?”

He mulls that over. It should matter. Whoever sent her back to track down Faheen should have known better than to let her be involved in something so personal. But then, that’s all war is to anyone in it. You don’t fight for your country, especially in a place like this where it’s pointless; you fight for the guy next to you.

“And he gave you a ring?” Tim tries to imagine the awkward, scared private giving a woman like Lena a ring. He pictures her accepting it and frowns.

“No, no he just gave me the piece. I have a friend who’s a jeweler who made it into a ring.”

Tim reaches for the canteen and her hand and pours it over her ring, scraping off the dried blood with his thumbnail. There’s a design etched into it he can’t see. “What’s on it?”

“A roman numeral seven.”
“Why that?”

“So I remember.” Lena takes back her hand, twisting the ring around her finger. “Seven for the seven who died. I told myself I can take it off when I fix this.”

People dead doesn’t sound fixable. He’s thinking of the right thing to say when they hear the far off thumping of helicopter blades. Lena stands, brushing herself off, for all the good it does. She looks a mess.

“Can I see the water again?” Tim passes it to her and pushes to his feet. Lena dumps the rest of the canteen over her face and wipes off the excess with her hands. She starts towards the house, then stops, turning back to face him and says stiffly, “Sergeant, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about this…even…” she waves at the house where the rest of his team is, “not anyone.”

“It’s Tim, ma’am.”

She hiccups. “It’s Lena, jackass.”
Lena takes the coward’s way out. She avoids him. Like now, when she’s hiding in her CHU with her laptop instead of in her office, where he’d look for her. Because he’d look, and that’s the hard part.

There’d been no ‘buck up’ or ‘power through’ or ‘you’ll have to learn to deal with it’, just ‘it’s fine you know’ when she’d tried to apologize for finally losing it. The kindness had been humiliating, like it made sense that she’d cry over it. It had felt like all she’d done was confirm the worst stereotypes of her gender. She hadn’t even felt like crying until after walking out of the house. All that mattered at the time was getting away from the Sharifs and everyone who was looking at her like she was a two-bit slut for showing them her stomach. Lena rolls her eyes at the memory. Oh the horror. But then she’d seen the line of bodies in the driveway. They’d bled out elsewhere, so there was no blood to be seen then. Their faces had been so pale, like Parisa. And just like that the tears had just come, like an ambush from the back of her mind, and she’d been wholly unprepared for it.

Did he mean it was fine to cry or fine because that’s what they expect out of women? It wasn’t that she couldn’t handle it. She hadn’t just stood there in a panic when she’d found Parisa on the back porch, dang it; she’d acted. Lena closes her eyes and falls back against her pillow, reliving the mortification of having shrieked for him. The last time a sound like that had come out of her mouth there’d been a snake involved.

Hauling herself upright, Lena tries anew to focus on reading her emails.

But Tim next to her had felt so nice, even if he had smelled like complete ass because he hadn’t bathed in nearly a week. Solid, warm. Very nice shoulders. But this is Afghanistan, and you have to be a big girl, and big girls don’t have themselves a good cry on the shoulders of handsome Ranger sergeants who are too nice to them. Because a shoulder to cry on becomes…nope. No. No, it does not.

Watch out for the man meat boss. She’s been repeating Oona’s warning like a mantra. Even if he were interested – and to be fair she’s mostly sure he’s not indifferent – it doesn’t mean much when she’s only one of the very scarce available vaginas in a sausage fest. Just because he’s polite doesn’t mean he’s interested in anything aside from a quick, means-nothing fuck. Not that anything besides that is even practical. Bugger. She’s reading a report from Oona and has managed, yet again, to lose her train of thought.

Lena sets her laptop on the bed and does a few jumping jacks, the better to shake off distracting thoughts. She has other things to be excited about. Like the fact that she finally, finally, after four odd months has a piece, a tiny, golden shred of something truly and concretely useful. Turns out Miriam Sharif is far easier to emotionally blackmail than her husband.

As part of her send off before her first stint in Afghanistan, Oona had insisted on going out and getting shitfaced, fall down wasted before Lena headed into ‘a place dryer than America’s cooch during prohibition.’ At some point in the evening the goal changed to Lena having a drunken fling (‘something to fantasies about so you remember not to suck anyone in a uniform’). Keith had been fun, but their time together wasn’t extraordinary enough to fantasize about. It wasn’t bad as drunken hookups go. But they were both horrifically inebriated. The most memorable part was the novelty of doing it in a club bathroom (now she knows why only college kids bother with that anymore).

A month into her recovery after having a section of Humvee door removed from her liver Lena, out of sheer boredom, had picked up her medical chart and discovered that it hadn’t been the
food at the DFAC putting her stomach into a funk. It was weird, reading about it when it was already over. It hadn’t even been three months. If not for bored curiosity she’d never have known about it at all. Lena had sat quietly for some moments waiting for shock to set in, to feel the horror that would have been normal upon such a discovery. The nurse who came to change her IV had been horrified, but Lena had said calmly that it was fine. And she’d meant it too. She’d tried to dredge up sadness, something, anything appropriate, but all she’d come up with was relief, and then guilt for the inability to muster anything else.

If Clarence ever asks she’ll say it was a perfect lie, and he’ll believe it was a brilliant bit of improvisation on her part. And in a way it was a perfect lie. Miriam Sharif believes that Faheen’s violence knowingly resulted in a miscarriage and that that is the fuel feeding Lena’s insatiable drive to find him. There is no religion in which the murder of children goes unpunished.

And now Lena has a city. Technically Miriam had only given her a district, Surobi, but the largest town, also called Surobi, would be the best place to hide. However, at only 22,000 people, it would be too noticeable for Lena to search herself, or Clarence. Lena doesn’t want to spook Faheen by sending in soldiers on some sort of BS humanitarian mission, not that they would be able to do a proper search of 22,000 odd people quickly enough, so now she has to wait for Faisal, one of Clarence’s people and a native Dari speaker to fly in. Clarence has already vouched for the man, but Lena is loath to trust someone she’s never met with something so important, especially when she is so very close. Or at least it feels close. Maybe she’s jinxing it. She hopes – she would very much appreciate it if – the universe is kind enough not to throw a wrench into the cogs.

Luckily, the universe has blessed her with Oona, who has –

The sudden pounding on her door interrupts Lena as she attempts the fifth read-through of her assistant’s report. Fudge. Well, maybe the mental break will do her good.

Lena opens the door.

This is not a mental break.

“Tim.” Double fudge.

“Hey.” He looks around at everything except her. Lena resists the urge to follow his eyes around her room and hopes she hasn’t left any underwear lying about. “Wanna do somethin’ fun?”

Yes. No. “Yes.”

“Come on then,” he says when she doesn’t move. Right. Lena hops up, surreptitiously glancing around the room to make sure nothing embarrassing is on display (nothing is), and slips on her shoes.

“Seriously?”

“What?”

“What happened to your boots?”

She waves at the corner. “Over there.”

He leans against her door frame and pulls a face as if to say And?

“Well what are we doing?”
“It’s a surprise.” Her chest warms and her stomach does something funny at the way he says that.

“This surprise include running, jumping, and/or climbing?”

“…No.”

“So I don’t really need the boots.”

“You don’t need high heels.”

“What’s wrong with these?”

“I have a list, but it’s too heavy to carry around with me.”

“The boots don’t go with these pants.” She grins playfully.

“Not that your bent towards the ridiculous isn’t entertaining, but put on the boots.” That last sounds too much like an order, and something prickles along her back.

This is a well-trodden argument between them, but normally after one or two jibes the matter drops. The longer he nags, the more she feels the need to dig her heels in. It shouldn’t be so dang hard for him to accept that she likes these ones and that she’ll wear what she dang well pleases.

“Well maybe I like these better.”

“You like walking around with torture devices on your feet?”

“They’re not torture devices; they’re shoes.”

“It might be time to reacquaint yourself with a dictionary. Shoes are under S.”

“Oh come on,” she says, a little fed up, “just deal with it.”

“Jesus Christ, you on your period or somethin’?”

Lena slams the door in his face.

The previously warm feeling that had grown in her chest upon seeing him is gone, replaced by hardened ice.

“My god, Lena, are you on your period?”

“You wreck my brother’s bike – after I fucking told you not to drive it – and then have the fucking gall to ask me if I’m on my period?!”

“It’s not like it was yours. Besides, he should have insurance. It’s just not that a big deal.”

“Yeah, because that makes it alright. Fuck you, Jerry!”

Lena had come home after work to find James waiting on her front porch with a brand new Ducati Sport. He’d been on tour in Italy and ‘just picked one up,’ and did she want to ride it? Since she had a garage and he didn’t feel like leaving it in the hotel parking lot, James had left the bike at her place. Two days later, her (very much ex) boyfriend had crashed it showing off to his friends.

And of course she’d been the hormonal shrew for getting angry when he took what she
didn’t want to give. He’d wanted absolution and that had been the easiest path. In the beginning she’d liked Jerry for his impulsive, adventurous side. After that incident, she realized it was too close to selfish childishness.

And now here she is, her existence and thought processes once again reduced to nothing but hormonal whimsy. It’s like being in Victorian England when every disagreeable trait in a woman was explained away as ‘hysteria.’ Helpfully, her mind flashes back to her sobbing outside of Sharif’s house, and the humiliation is enough to wring a different sort of tears from her. She angrily scrubs them away, annoyed at the irony of her shame bringing about an encore of its own cause.

Later, when the anger has abated, Lena is left with disappointment. All that time, shared conversation and cups of coffee…that adorable boyish smile, sometimes shy, sometimes a brash, impish grin…and this was tucked in there with it. The number of friends she now has is cut by half. She likes Clarence, but there is – was – something relaxing about being around Tim that she doesn’t feel with the Englishman.

Lena returns to her work, determined to use it as a means to forget her ill mood. At least, she thinks, without her wish to see him, it should be easier to focus.

It is not easier to focus.

This sort of anger, the disappointed, frustrated, wish-she’d-said-something-scathing-back-to-him-and-had-the-last-word anger simmers and bubbles, occasionally splattering her thoughts with bile, and after a few hours of stewing and fuming, Lena snaps her laptop shut, opens it, closes it once again with deliberate gentleness, and leaves to go for a walk.

o.O.o

He feels like someone stuck a fishhook in his stomach yanked everything sideways. One second he’d been full of excited anticipation, and the next she’d shut a door in his face.

At first he thinks it’s a joke, that the door will open; she’ll roll her eyes, say something smart, and come out with him as he’d planned.

The door doesn’t open.

Fuck.

It had just slipped out. Pascal hadn’t stopped bitching earlier about the PX being out of his favorite Gatorade flavor, and Tim had asked him sarcastically when he was gonna be off his period or if they’d all have to keep listening to him whine about it. It was the last conversation he’d had and the closest thing to mind, so right off his dipshit tongue it rolled.

Tim stares at the door. He doesn’t know what to do. There’s a hot pressure building in his chest and nowhere for it to go. Lena should know him well enough to get that it was just teasing, no insult intended. He begins to resent that apparently she doesn’t know at all.

His pride keeps him from knocking, from trying to apologize. He almost does it. He wants to see the look on her face when he shows her. Tim knows when he gets back to the barracks he’ll regret not knocking, but his anger is enough to carry him away.

On the way back to the barracks he texts Danny. It’s vague, just that something’s come up because he doesn’t want to explain in person that he crashed and burned with the girl he was gonna bring by.
Danny’s training some of the ANA guys on a Howitzer and promised Tim that he’d let Lena have a go at it. Tim kicks a rock like it did him wrong. She’d have liked firing a Howitzer. But Danny…Kelsey was never really fond of the guy, and he knows what would have happened if he let Lena show up wearing high heels. Tim’s allowed – was allowed – to give her shit for it, but he isn’t certain how she’d react to criticism from a stranger. It would have just been easier.

He tries to slink back into the barracks unnoticed, but the guys are gathered around the XBox playing Halo.

“Yo!” Carter calls out, waving a controller in his direction. Tim tries to brush him off.

“Who pissed in your coffee?” Clark asks. His mood darkens further. He’s come to associate Lena with coffee.

“Maybe he just started his period,” Pascal says, mimicking Tim’s earlier jab.

Tim snatches the controller from Carter and spends several rounds camping the shit out of Pascal.
Guys, given the fact that this appears to be a small subsection of a small fandom, I have to tell you all I’m so grateful for you reading and for the responses I’ve gotten to this story. You all are so lovely and kind, AND THEY HAVEN’T EVEN KISSED YET WHY DO YOU PUT UP WITH ME?! 

As always, sorry for any remaining typos and enjoy!

Lena has been in a foul mood for the past two days. It’s little things. First something went wrong with the showers, and the precious mostly hot water that was once available is now nonexistent. Of course, she refuses to go a single day without a shower, so each morning she braces herself against the cold and powers through bathing as quickly as possible. It sucks. At least she wears long pants, so it’s not like there’s any need to take up time shaving.

Then her coffee grinder breaks. A particularly hard bean got caught in one of the blades and fried the motor. She only has beans, so no more delicious coffee. That sucks too. At least she doesn’t use it to stay awake.

Then Clarence’s man, the one who’s supposed to nose about Surobi in their place, somehow managed to get food poisoning the moment he arrived, delaying his part of the mission in the search for Faheen. That really sucks. At least she isn’t the one with food poisoning.

‘At least’. This is the game Lena plays with herself to avoid sinking into a truly hideous mood. No matter how terrifying and painful and horrific nearly dying had been, it ended up giving her an unlooked for sense of peace – if you ignored the part about being half-gutted. Because no matter how shitty a day she has Lena can, with heartfelt understanding, tell herself ‘Hey, at least I’m alive. The game ain’t over.’ Put in the proper perspective, there are so many things that just wash right off after that.

For the first few months afterward, almost nothing could bother her. Pain from abdominal surgery? No big deal. That’s what morphine’s for. Morphine withdrawal? Shucks, who gives a damn; at least it’s not as bad as recovering from gut surgery. However, as she gradually returned to her normal life, maintaining that same carefree attitude has become a struggle. Sure, so far she’s never gone back to the high-strung person she used to be, but long-lived bad moods feel like a failure. She oughtn’t to be bothered by trivialities anymore. She has no right after all. At least she is alive, which is more than seven others can say.

Perhaps it is because she tries so hard to forbid negative emotion that it builds. She heaps it into a closet instead of throwing it out, and eventually the closet overflows.

Lena sits back with a sigh. Another sigh. Lord, she sounds like a pouting six year old. Snap out of it, dollface. But there’s nothing to bloody do right now.

What she needs is a distraction.

Clarence, in possession of far stronger parental instincts than she, had managed to find
several small stuffed animals (Lena strongly suspects he asked his wife to send them because she hasn’t seen any of the base hawkers selling them, and the BX definitely doesn’t carry plush toys). He’d given them to Lena to pass on when Parisa woke. The little girl is still in a medically induced coma, but, Lena thinks, turning over a stuffed cat in her hands, it might be nice to wake up to something comforting, and Parisa does so love cats.

Taking just the cat with her, Lena heads to the Heathe Joint Theater Hospital. The building is the same depressing, utilitarian tan with black block letters announcing its purpose. Lena giggles a bit to herself as she passes by the 5 mph speed limit sign. She sobers when she passes the hospital marquee bearing a photo of its namesake, Heathe Craig.

Unfortunately, Parisa already has a visitor. Clark, the medic from Tim’s unit who flew with her back to Bagram, is standing to one side of her bed. He looks almost comically giant standing next to the tiny sleeping girl. Partially covered in dust and having only half-successfully brushed himself off, he’s probably recently returned from another night mission. Lena almost asks after Tim, but doesn’t; if something had gone wrong he’d be with his friend, not here. She’d rather have turned tail and run, but he’s already seen her.

“Lena.” Clark smiles over at her from Parisa’s bedside. His normally gruff voice is lightened, and Lena just knows that he knows about The Incident. No matter, she is an adult and plasters a convincing smile on her face and returns the greeting as she forces her feet to walk her through the door. He mentions that he’s just come by to check on Parisa after dropping off his aid bag. Their medical kits contain controlled substances and have to be checked in and out for missions.

“How is she?” Lena uses their mutual concern for the little girl between them as a shield.

“Out of the woods. It’ll be a long road, but kids are pretty resilient.” It’s good news, but Clark’s face remains grim.

“You have kids?” she asks after a few moments of awkward silence. It seems like a safe avenue of conversation.

“No,” he says, “not yet. Maybe someday.” A wry shrug. “Gotta get out first.”

“How long do you have left?”

“After this deployment, little less than a year.”

“Bet your family will be happy.”

“My…my family worries too much.” Lena can hear the history of long arguments behind that statement. “Promised I wouldn’t re-up this time.” He scrubs a hand across his face. “They better fuckin’ appreciate it too. Gotta deal with civilians again. You know how fuckin’ annoying it is dealing with you people?”

Lena would take offense at the dig, especially considering Tim, but it’s not meant to be mean, just teasing. Instead she smirks back. “What do you mean ‘you people’?”

Clark laughs and finishes the joke, “What do you mean ‘you people’? No, but for real. It’s a pain. No swearing, no threatening to kill people, no smacking the shit out of anyone even if they deserve it.”

“You smack people a lot?”

“Not that much.”
“You know what you want to do when you’re out?” Hopefully it’s not as annoying as the ‘So what are you going to do after graduation?’ that annoyed her so much.

“I’ll probably be a PA – physician’s assistant. They’re good in ERs, and I’m used to that kind of work.” Lena looks down at Parisa. I’ll bet. He’s good at it too. “But people will probably expect me to be all sensitive and shit. Your coworkers don’t like you if you call them fucktards, patients neither.”

Lena laughs, “And your coworkers here like being called fucktards?”

“Eh, it’s how we talk to each other. Nice not having to stand on ceremony. I mean hell,” Clark shrugs casually, but he doesn’t blink, “you’ve been around us long enough to see that.”

It feels like an admonishment, subtle but pointed. Lena wants to run. She also wants to explain the fifty reasons she slammed the door in Tim’s face, but she can’t because it’s not like Clark explicitly brought anything up, so she’d just end up sounding crazy, and maybe she is crazy and he’s not talking about The Incident and she’s just paranoid and maybe she’s paranoid because she feels guilty and dearlordinheavenpleasestoplookingatmelikethat.

Lena does the only thing she can. She smiles, nods, and politely excuses herself from the room with mentions of a completely made up meeting.

o.O.o

His feet are ornery. Tim doesn’t want to go looking for her, but he does anyways. He pretends that it’s habit, that he isn’t actually paying attention to where his feet go, that they just walk where they’re used to going.

After his feet follow the usual route and nothing comes along to capture their attention they decide to explore. He doesn’t know what he’d say if he found her, doesn’t want to think about it either.

He finally finds her sitting on a large broken concrete block near the edge of the airfield staring blankly towards the southeastern mountains. She’s alone. It’s well after dark.

And she’s drunk. She’s sitting down and still enough that he can’t quite tell how far gone she is, but there’s enough alcohol in her coffee that Tim can smell it wafting over on the steam.

“The hell are you doing out here?”

She shrugs. “Felt like it.”

“Lena.” He notices she has once again ditched her boots for a pair of high heels, bright red and completely impractical, especially given the last hundred yards of the walk out here aren’t even paved. She’s also wearing an oversized sweatshirt, which looks ridiculous. The nights are getting cooler, but only in the sense that your face will no longer melt off if you step outside; it’s definitely not cold enough for sweatshirts.

“It’s fine.” She sounds tired.

“I know you didn’t drive out here, so no, it’s not fine.” He’s angry that she’s endangered herself out of spite.

She sighs. “If it’ll get you to shut up, I can call Clarence for a ride back.” Lena digs around in a pocket and pulls out a cell phone. She waves it at him before letting it fall back to her lap, not
bothering to put it back in her pocket.

She’s never spoken to him like that, and it jars against his experience of her. “Fine, I’ll walk you back.” His pride won’t let him lose this battle.

Unlike the first time he saw her drunk, she’s quiet now. Instead of answering right away she lifts the cup to her lips and takes a slow sip, then another, head tilted slightly, “I’m good. I’m going to just chill here for a bit.”

“You really can’t –”

“Tim,” she cuts in, voice level, “I’d like you to leave. Now please.”

“You’re out here drunk and alone. You really think that’s smart?”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Dude, I can smell it from here.”

“Doesn’t mean I drank anything.”

“Oh yeah? Then whatdja do with it?”

“I poured some whisky on the ground –”

“What the fuck?”

“– I mean I was going to do wine, but that just seemed more appropriate.”

“Yeah…” She’s not slurring, but she’s not making a lick of sense. “And why are you pouring perfectly good booze on the ground?”

She opens her mouth and takes a breath, about to speak, but instead says only, “’cause.”

“Well if you’re done with your voodoo ritual, then let’s go.”

“No.”

“Lena –”

“Tim,” her voice has dropped to a whisper, “just go.”

“No.”

“Jesus Christ,” she stands to face him, temper rising, cool indifference abandoned. Good. He wants a reaction.

“You don’t have to come back with me, but I’ll sit while you wait for Clarence.” He sits, all the time in the world to wait her out, and nods at the cell phone still in her hand.

“Fine, I’ll call him,” she’s still whispering, but it’s full of restrained anger, “but only if you go. Now.” Lena makes no move to dial, but glances past him instead, her lips thinning into a taunted line.

“I don’t see you dialing.”

“Tim –”
“Jesus fucking Christ, will you just –”

“Tim!” Anger has turned abruptly to pleading, and he stumbles. “Seriously. Please. I just want to be alone.” But her eyes flick over his shoulder again, and there’s too much urgency in her voice.

Tim turns around. There are three guys walking towards them. Given the solitary location and Lena’s obvious anxiety, they’re clearly here for her. She hadn’t tried to leave, which told him Lena was expecting them, but there’s a tension to her posture that means he’s definitely not leaving her alone now.

It’s dim this far out, the floodlights along the fence being all he can see by, but the three men coming towards them aren’t coalition soldiers. With their skinny frames Tim’s best guess is ANA. Each has a rifle slung over his shoulder, and as they near one of them lets his weapon swing around to his front. He doesn’t make a move to lift it, but his hand comes to rest on the grip. Tim steps in front of Lena, entirely aware that for all intents and purposes he is alone, naked and vulnerable without the rest of his unit. He thinks about the pistol at his ankle, but there’s no time to pull it out.

“Tim, don’t –”

He shakes off the hand on his elbow. “Stay there,” he snarls, unsure what the ever loving fuck she was thinking, but entirely sure now that these guys are up close that it was a terrible fucking idea.

“Tim –” He hears her shuffle and grabs behind him at her wrist to hold her in place. She jerks but he’s stronger. He can hear her voice, but the words are indistinct. The ANA soldiers are no longer bothering to pretend to be casual with their weapons; three barrels are up and pointed at Tim’s chest. Too close to run, too far away to make a counterattack, not that bare knuckles against three rifles make for good odds.

They say something in Pashto, and Tim keeps a firm grip on Lena’s wrist when she tries to sidestep out from behind him. “Tim, move. Left,” she says in between run together phrases in Pashto that he doesn’t understand. He ignores her.

Lena tries to keep her voice even, but the three men in front of them are clearly agitated. Even at the best of times these guys are notorious for not bothering to point their weapons in a safe direction, but he can see the finger of the man in front of him squeezing and loosening on the trigger unconsciously, moving to the erratic rhythm of his speech, which is reaching yelling pitch, just like Tim’s heart rate.

Suddenly, there’s a yank. Instead of fighting his grip, Lena’s hand lunges in the direction he’s already pulling, and it catches him off balance. A foot jams into the back of his knee, collapsing it at the same time a small arm locks around his neck and pulls backwards. Tim stumbles sideways, and the crack of a bullet firing rings out. More shots quickly follow.

Lena’s small, but she’s put all her weight into jumping on his knee, and with the surprise of that and the shots, they go down in a heap.

Tim kicks outward, trying to shove Lena to the side and behind him again so that he can get at the ANA soldiers before they’re both shot, but she’s doing her level best to stay on top of him and his leg’s twisted about and he can’t –

He realizes that the shooting has stopped and that the both of them are the only ones still moving.
“Timit’s fine!”

Now that they’re no longer struggling he can feel the hard press of body armor against his chest. “What the hell!” Even though he can see the dead bodies next to them, he’s still half-cocked, ready to fight.

She doesn’t answer for a minute, and he can feel rather than hear her breathing, fast and tight. Then she shifts, ready to stand up, and he grabs her by the wrist. Lena flinches. That hurts.

“I really am, you know,” she glares down at him, out of breath, face contorted in anger, “not completely awful at my job.”

“Is your job getting yourself killed?!”

“No, Sergeant, my job was to get some information, which by the way I did. And we didn’t die because you’re not the only sniper on this base, and the nice British SAS guys sitting on top of that building over there are fairly decent shots as well.”

Tim digests that for a moment. He looks back at the bodies, then at Lena, tries to adjust his head to make sure he can’t see both her and the blood at the same time. “Oh.”

“Not the only sniper on this base.”

“Yes. Oh.” Lena stares at him, too-rigid and too-guarded, and she’s shivering even though it’s not even a little bit cold out. His anger half-dissolves into guilt.

Anger cooling, the adrenaline begins to drain away as well. He lets his head fall back on the ground. Tim wishes again he were a tortoise, or maybe in a coma and could just wake up at a later date when life and his insides had sorted themselves out.

“My period is in two weeks,” she says flatly, out of the blue.

Tim says nothing, hopes it’s the right answer, mostly too tired to think about irrelevant shit. He focuses on the feel of the body armor she’s wearing and tries to fend off the could have beens.

“Ugh, fine.” Lena drops her forehead against Tim’s shoulder. “Clark told me I was being a dumbass.” That wasn’t something he’d expected to hear. Everyone in the unit knows about Clark, and command likes to pretend they don’t know, but even still, he’s a private person and the least likely to meddle in other people’s business. “I mean he said it nicely,” she continues, “and with far more grace than you’ve ever done anything.” But her forehead is still resting on his shoulder, and he can’t bother being offended.

A heavy boot kicks at Tim’s foot, startling him. “That how you Americans work then?” A distinctly British voice is talking down at them. “Lettin’ little girls tackle yeh? Maybe we should revisit yer independence if ye’re that fookin’ easy ta beat.”

Lena’s head snaps up. “Oh don’t be an arse, Peter. No one expects little girls to jump on them like spider monkeys.” Her accent can change so easily depending on who she’s talking to, but the longsuffering tartness is universal.

“And now yeh’ve got the little girl talkin’ for ya? You ranger clowndicks –”

“Peter!” Lena throws a handful of sand at him, but she’s too low to the ground for it to matter, and he just laughs before walking back to his unit. “Go get Clarence!” she yells at his back.

“Ye’re too slow, love! Already on his way!”
Lena heaves a frustrated sigh and mutters, “Jackass.”

“You’re swearing a lot,” says Tim. He’s smiling up at her, pleased. She defended his honor.

Lena glares at him. “You exasperate me a lot.” I forgive you, she means. The smile grows into a grin. She rolls her eyes.

Tim swipes a thumb along the back of her hand, and it feels like balancing on the edge of a cliff.

“Next time I tell you to step left, step to the bloody left.” Her face is pinched; there are still bits of fear caught there.

“Yes ma’am.” He snaps a two fingered salute with the hand not holding hers. Her face unscrunches, and Lena rolls her eyes again.

His already precarious position makes him reckless, so he jumps. Tim rests his other hand lightly on her waist, using it as means to pull himself up to a sitting position. Lena slides sideways out of his lap but stays on the ground next to him. She’s covered in dust and missing a shoe. He privately hopes it stays lost.

“You want some?” she asks, holding out a small bottle. He’d almost forgotten about that.

“No, save it.” He can’t show up to a debriefing smelling like liquor. This might not be his op, but he’ll be expected to report in. “And don’t go pouring it out,” he warns. “Why do you even have this?”

“It was for luck. And ‘cause I knew I’d need the drink.” Lena takes a hefty swig straight from the bottle to prove the last point. She’s still not used to whiskey and makes a face. “I’m tired,” she says. It means she’s calmed down at least.

Tim stands up. “Come on then. I’ll take you back.”

Lena tries to stand and immediately loses her balance. He tells himself he keeps his hands on her shoulders so she doesn’t fall. She looks around for her other high heel, and to Tim’s chagrin, she finds it.

“You good?”

“I am perfectly capable of walking just fine, thank you very much.”

“Maybe if you had real shoes on.”

“You clearly don’t know much about women, Sergeant. We are all experts at walking in heels when drunk.”

“I know plenty about women.”

He has just enough time to regret those words before Lena laughs and asks, eyebrow arched, “Oh yeah? Do you now. And what is it you know?”

“I know that if you keep talkin’ and not walkin’ it’ll be easier to carry you like a sack of potatoes.”

He doesn’t carry her like a sack of potatoes, but after a few hundred yards when they’re back on pavement Lena takes off her shoes and carries them instead. He considers it a mark of extremely
good self-control on his part that he doesn’t comment on it. She looks like some sorority girl doing a walk of shame, bottle of liquor in one hand and bright red high heels dangling from the other.

“Hey,” he says, readying himself to jump off another cliff, “wanna do something fun tomorrow?”

Lena walks a few more steps before replying, “Ugh, you’re going to make me wear boots aren’t you?” But he can hear her smiling.

“I can always carry you like a sack of potatoes.”

“Asshat.”

“Watch your language.”

“Get bent.”
I will be traveling next week, so the next installment will most likely be late. A COP is a combat outpost.

“I told you so.”

“That’s not how it works, Clarence. You can’t say it if I already acknowledged it beforehand.”

“The point stands.”

“The point is noted,” says Lena, with no small amount of exasperation. If one more person says ‘oh wow, that was dangerous’ or ‘that was a stupid risk’, she’s going to shank a bitch. If it’s stupid, but it works, then it’s not stupid. She reminds herself that it’s kind of him to worry. “And tell Peter I owe him one.”

“Get him a date with Oona. He asked about her.”

“Ha! That’ll work out.”

Between Oona’s fetish for all things British and deep aversion to military men, a date between her and Peter would end in either marriage or a murder charge. Maybe Peter would like scotch instead. Or maybe something else. Tim would probably like the scotch.

“Have you heard anything more from Faisal?” she asks, skimming one last time over the translated transcript of last night’s mission. She’s going to bend those GenCorp bastards over a table and fuck them five ways to Sunday.

“Lena.” She likes to think of this as Clarence’s ‘dad voice’. It’s endearing and annoying at the same time. “You don’t need to go rushing off to Surobi right now. Give him a hot second to find something more solid. Preferably a hot week or two.”

“Clarence,” Lena waves the concerned dad voice aside, “His contact said a man from Tagab. Educated. Who the heck else is it going to be?” She doesn’t want to wait a week or two. She’s primed, ready to move, coasting one a wave of righteous determination. Her coat’s on, but now she has to wait for everyone else to tie their shoes so they can get out the door. “Besides, you wanted me to leave Bagram. Surobi is leaving Bagram.”

“I meant for home.” He may actually be annoyed with her.

“Well, we’ll notice if a bunch of armed white dudes show up in Surobi pissed off that I’m about to expose their little opium ring.”

Last night had been a disastrous success. The phone and computer bugs she and Clarence had planted in the GenCorp offices had yielded surprisingly little in the way of information. Ambiguously worded emails were suspicious, but nothing to get one’s panties in a twist about, certainly nothing a Senate committee is going to get their panties in a twist about, which is what she
needs. The only thing that had been really off was the extra disbursements for “personnel expenses”. Apparently the going rate for translators running messages between opium farmers and security companies was an extra hundred bucks a week, a paltry sum considering how much GenCorp is making off the war already.

Lena had contacted the translators, pretending she wanted in on the opium smuggling and was willing to blackmail her way into their little operation. Tim, in all of his well-meaning glory had nearly kiboshed the whole thing. Her stomach still clenches thinking of it. Tim, move. Left. As much as Lena wants to take the Rangers with her into Surobi, his actions have made that impossible, something she has mixed feelings about.

Predictably, the ANA translators didn’t take kindly to blackmail. Perhaps they would have been more receptive if it had been Clarence, but they’d also probably have had less compunction about shooting Clarence as well, so Lena had insisted it be her doing the talking. While specific names weren’t mentioned, she had enough audio to implicate GenCorp for gross misconduct, and as soon as she had Faheen in hand to link the two together, treason.

“At least wait until we have confirmation.”

“If we wait for confirmation, we risk scaring him off or letting him get away. You know that just as well as I. He obviously doesn’t stay put that long.” And because he is kind, unlike others in their field she’s had the displeasure of working with, “And with Peter’s team, the risk is far lower.”

“That sounds far too close to ‘what could possibly go wrong?’ and if you’re asking that at all, it means everything could.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Once we’re there if something goes wrong, if it feels off, just say, and we’ll come back.”

It’s a bit empty as far as comfort goes. They may be unofficial partners, but in the end neither of them has any say over the other’s actions. Clarence knows this, but as acceptance is the only option, he does so gracefully.

“You try to go back on that, and I’ll carry you back here like a sack of potatoes.”

Lena starts, fingers pausing mid-sentence over the keyboard. Maybe not that gracefully.

Tim needles her a lot afterward, always smiling. She needs to be trained to understand him. As a gesture of goodwill – he knows her too well to mistake it for common sense – she wore the boots when he took her to see the Howitzer. He was right – the look on her face was worth it. He bought her a hot chocolate from Green Beans afterward because he wanted to continue the goodwill, and he called her a dumbass when she spilled it on her pants from taking a too-hot sip too soon. In return she called him an insufferable dipwad and threatened to dump the rest on him. Tim considered the day a resounding success. Lena even demanded they continue her shooting lessons; she really liked the Howitzer.

She’s still not great, but giving her a nine mil instead of the 0.45 made a difference. The nine mil doesn’t look like it’s in constant danger of leaping out of her hands every time she pulls the trigger. Sometimes Carter or Pascal shows up. Clark even dropped by once. Tim likes the way the presence of the other members of his unit makes Lena shy at the range. It’s also the one place she’ll always wear boots to. “Well duh, walking’s easy. It’s standing around in heels that’s hard.” Tim lets that bit of faulty logic slide. Lena also wears looser t-shirts. She feels out of place there. Even when
Pascal’s nice and yells encouragement instead of teasing like the others do she drags her feet, taking extra time to repack the clip. But she enjoys it, and Tim likes that she’s not just doing this for him. He likes her this way – brows drawn in concentration, hair messy from the headphones… boots. He can forget the starched white shirts and clean hands, that in a few months she’ll be back in Washington in an air-conditioned office surrounded by suits and he’ll be back in Georgia, sweating and surrounded by olive drab.

Today she looks like what he thinks of as the Washington version of Lena – make-up, an unwrinkled white collar shirt, and nails painted an unnaturally bright red. Her hair’s up, but it’s held in place with some sort of wooden clip that no female soldier would ever bother with or be allowed to wear. She’s barefoot at least, the ridiculous heels kicked under the desk.

At this moment Lena’s wearing a frown, lips tucked between her teeth in concentration. She’s frustrated. It’s cute. Lena versus the trigger. This is the part of her he wants to touch, this woman with her feet thrown up on her desk and a gun in her hands. His mind fills with too many thoughts better left unthunk, so he stays by the door, arms crossed, a fence between him and places he’s not meant to go. She’s leaning back in her seat aiming carefully at an armor plate propped against the far wall doing the dry fire exercises he taught her.

“I swear, if you’re here to tell me not to go to Surobi…” Lena lets the threat hang, trailing off as she squeezes the trigger.

That’s exactly why he’s here. His guilty silence and closed expression must give him away.

“Tim,” she sighs, already on the path to annoyed, but not far enough along to call him by his rank, “I may not be a big bad Ranger man, but I am a big girl.” He wishes he could talk her out of this.

“I never said you weren’t.”

“You’re looking at me the way you always do right before you call me an idiot.” Tim wasn’t aware he had a look for that.

He wants to argue with her, but she’s not some limp-dick private he can order around, even if it is for her own good.

“It’s not like I’m going alone you know.”

That doesn’t make him feel any better. *He* won’t be there to watch out for her, and having to wait and worry until she’s back and safe again is going to suck. But telling her that feels like putting himself too far out there, so instead he says, “You need to practice with the clip in.” The least she can do is know how to kill anyone who tries to do the same to her.

“I don’t want to.” She’s feeling cantankerous. She’d probably also be annoyed to know he thinks it’s cute.

“Just put it back in.”

Lena looks up at him, letting her shoulders sag, and in a sheepish murmur, “It was getting heavy.” She sweeps a few ornery strands of hair away from her eyes. “You think you’re in shape until you have to hold a chunk of metal steady out in front of you for a half hour.”

“Half an hour?”

She twists to squint at the clock behind her. “Thirty five minutes.”
Tim gives her points for dedication. Too bad it does nothing to ease the growing knot of worry in his stomach.

He plants himself on her side of the desk just behind her shoulder. “Come on,” he says, a little more gruffly than he meant to, glad when she doesn’t take it personally, “Lemme see.”

Lena huffs and raises the empty weapon, clip reinserted. “Nope, stand up, feet apart.” Another huff before dragging herself upright.

“Sadist.” He grins at that and looks over her shoulder, pleased to see the pad on her forefinger is centered correctly on the trigger.

Lena squeezes, he offers adjustments, and she corrects. There’s still a slight side jerk now and then when she anticipates the trigger, but it’s a leap and a mile better than she used to be. Finally her arms are tired again, and Lena ejects the clip and checks the chamber before letting her hand fall to the side. Over-cautious, but he’s not going to give her shit about it. He can only hope she’ll keep that attitude when she’s in Surobi.

“Not bad,” he says, “maybe I’ll even give you bullets next time.”

Lena turns her head towards him with a grin, brow cocked. “Oh yeah? Maybe?” Her face is suddenly uncomfortably close in this position. It takes a conscious effort to ignore the urge to lick his lips. But then she turns back around and raises the gun, aiming and pulling the trigger one more time. Her hand jerks sideways.

“Gosh dang it.”

“If you run out of ammo, go for their eyes. Or throat. Or knees. Everyone thinks trying to punch someone in the stomach works, but you can take a lot punishment there. Eyes and knees hurt, and a hard enough jab to the throat will kill someone quick.”

“Tim.” Lena turns back around, and they’re face to face again. He stays still and waits for her to move away. She doesn’t, so neither does he. “I’m not running willy nilly into a hail of bullets. It’s just not that bad.”

She’s too close, so he hides behind the only thing he can. “Well that’s good ‘cause you might have better luck throwing this at someone’s head.” She glowers at him in a completely unmenacing way, and he grins. “How about I show you how it’s done?” He holds out his hand, well into her personal space, and still she doesn’t move away. The bravado rings a bit hollow since there are no bullets involved.

Lena lays the gun on his hand, takes too long to let go. “Alright Mr. Big Bad Ranger Boy, bring it.” The way she calls him bad makes him want to be.

Tim chuckles, holding the pistol in his palm between them. He can see the pulse in her neck, high enough to know she’s nervous under all that teasing. “Oh, I’ll bring it.”

Lena tilts her head, a challenge. “Oh yeah?” She says it slower this time. Still up close, still smirking, and he wonders if she’s really asking a different question. Tim reaches past her, even farther into her space, and sets the gun on her desk so she can’t see his hand shake. His arm brushes around her and still she doesn’t move away.

“Yeah.” He tilts his head, definitely answering a different question, hoping it’s the one she’s asking.
Lena stays still a moment, just looking, first his eyes, then down to his lips, then lower and back up again. But then the smile fades, and Tim thinks maybe he should step back before he embarrasses himself.

He’s about to reach for the gun again when she leans forward, and her lips graze the corner of his mouth. In the time it takes for him to catch up he feels them brush past again, closing gently over his bottom lip. His body gets with the program way before his brain, and it needs so much more than coy softness. He kisses her back hard, lunging forward with enough force that they stumble against the edge of her desk.

Lena’s probably had guys in suits who drive her to fancy restaurants in nice cars and can offer her all the things a woman like her is probably used to. His suit is fifty shades of tan and olive and shit-brown and covered moon dust. The guys she dates probably think they’re all smooth too, with their Ivy League diplomas and corner offices, the sort of assholes who say ‘Oh I thought about joining the army, but I wanted to go to college instead.’ Fuckers. He bites her lip a bit too hard, but she doesn’t slow down. He’s not suave, he’s starving. There’s a moment when his hands have already untucked her shirt and slipped up the back to feel skin and his tongue is more in her mouth than his own that he wonders if he’s gotten overeager, too aggressive. That fear is blown aside in the next moment when Lena yanks him against her, holding their hips together with her legs wrapped around his waist. He’s fantasized for a while about the things those hips could do, and the only disappointment is that there are still clothes between them.

He’s probably supposed to be gentle, to seduce her slowly since it’s the first time he’s really touched her. But he knows deep down that this isn’t just the first, but the only time, so fuck that shit.

Lena groans when his mouth closes over a spot just under her jaw. “Oh, fuck.” It’s breathless, and her thighs jerk involuntarily, squeezing around his waist, and God but it’s the sexiest thing he’s ever heard. He sucks harder. Each curse is savored and chased, his very own private badge of honor, and he means to leave every one of those marks on her neck.

Lena moans in his ear, and her hands drop to tear at his belt. When that doesn’t come off fast enough, she rips open his collar instead; he’ll have a few marks of his own. God. His grip on her waist tightens convulsively as her mouth moves over his chest. He looks down. The skin of her neck is purple, like someone took a crayon to it. He might not be allowed to keep her, but she’ll look in the mirror and remember this. He’ll remember this. When he jacks off he’ll think of the way she pulls his hair and the way her fingers dig into his skin. The way her hands are everywhere, grasping, she can’t seem to get enough of him either, and it drives him wild. He’ll think of the sudden, uncontrollable sounds she makes as he leaves bruises on her neck. The way her ass feels in his hands when he grinds into her, the way her thighs squeeze his waist. He’ll remember the wicked way those hips, god those hips, and that mouth –

Halfway through the frantic scramble of buttons and zippers and Velcro there’s a pounding knock on the door.

“Fuck.” Lena jerks back like he’s a hot coal and immediately starts doing up her shirt. No last soft brush of her lips against his, no lingering goodbye. There’s no time, so he does the same, double quick. Fuck. He thinks of baseball, boot camp, and then because he’s truly desperate – his father.

“Hand me the gun,” she orders, then louder, “Come in!”

The door opens and he plays along, ignoring whoever the shitbag is that just interrupted them. “Don’t pull down, just squeeze.” His face is hot and his balls are bluer than god.

Tim looks down at Lena, pretending to gauge her technique. The only thing he can
concentrate on is the sound of her breathing, still a bit too fast, and all he wants is to shove the intruder out of the room and lock the door so he can feel her again.

Her shirt has his dirt on it from his ACUs. She kept her hair down, which hides the hickeys, but her mouth is too red. His uniform collar hides his own neck well enough.

“Lena, I have something for you.” It’s Clarence. The James Bond wannabe with his stupid suit and his stupid accent.

The gun comes down. “I’ll see you later, Sergeant.” She doesn’t look at him.

“Ma’am.” He says it out of spite, half-expecting her to correct him, but Lena lets him walk out the door unchastised. He’s more disappointed about that than he ought to be and takes his anger out on the rocks during the long walk back to the barracks.

*Fucking British prick.*

*O.O.o*

Surobi is surprisingly beautiful. Although much of Afghanistan is scrubby desert, the Kabul River running through the middle of the district has kept the area a lush green.

They go by helicopter to an outlying COP, thankfully, and the whirring thump of the rotor is calming despite the loudness of it. The drive the rest of the way into Surobi is short, and Peter’s team keeps up a steady flow of bantering conversation amongst themselves.

Listening to them makes Lena miss the Rangers. Really she misses Tim. In a moment of weakness, she’d googled the stateside duty stations of the Ranger battalions. None of them are even close to D.C, nor anywhere she’d have occasion to visit for work. Lena unconsciously scrunches her face, annoyed at herself for overreacting this way to one kiss. But it was a really good kiss, and she can’t help thinking that if Clarence hadn’t interrupted it would have been some really good other things as well.

Lena gives herself a mental smack, sick of finding herself once again going down this path of thought. *Snap out of it, dollface.*

Faisal’s base of operations is a gated house to the northeast of town, comfortably occupied by his minimal team of three, himself and two security officers.

He meets Clarence and Lena and the SAS team on the back porch after they pull through the gate. His contact is waiting for them as well, visible through the back window seated at the kitchen table.

“This is Ibrahim.” Faisal nods at the bearded man inside the house.

“He’ll give us Faheen?” Lena peers intently through the glass, looking for any sign of deception or nervousness in the man that might indicate an ulterior motive. It’s impossible to tell from here how old he is. With his beard he could be anywhere from early twenties to early fifties.

“We don’t know it will be him, Lena,” Clarence cuts in, always the voice of caution, “or that it’s not a trap.”

“He has some conditions.” Faisal twists a pen between his fingers, tense. Clarence looks over at Lena as if to say *I told you so.*
“Conditions?” Lena asks before Clarence can throw up a roadblock.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

Faisal stands and looks at Clarence before gesturing to the door. “He wants to talk to her.” Lena bristles at this. Clarence may be his boss, but he’s certainly not hers.

“Great.” Lena strides over, opening the door before objections can be voiced. “I’ll hear him out then.”

Behind her, Clarence asks hurriedly whether or not the man was searched for weapons, but Lena has already let the door fall shut. None of the assembled Englishmen come barreling through it, so she assumes the answer was yes.

Ibrahim al’Maswani looks up at her as she enters, squinting as if comparing her to a memory. He’s on the young side now that she’s up close. There are no lines around his eyes, and his skin is overly shiny around his nose and between his brows. Prudently, he sits with his hands flat on the table between them.

“You’re Lena Carlan?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you have identification?” Lena narrows her eyes, suddenly more in agreement with Clarence’s caution. Ibrahim’s gaze is intent, and suddenly she wonders if she’s been lured here.

Lena uses the time digging in her bag under the table to pull out the gun and set it on her lap. She probably wasn’t supposed to take that, but having it along makes her feel better. Placing the laminated identification card on the table between them, she lets one hand drop to rest lightly on the pistol grip. Ibrahim leans forward slightly to look at the card, then her, then back at the card. He nods, and then reaches inside his jacket.

Lena jerks the pistol upward. “Stop.”

Ibrahim freezes, hand still partially obscured by his jacket. He hadn’t expected to find her armed – a naïve assumption in her mind – and his eyes have widened in fear. Lena doesn’t lower her gun, but she breathes more easily. It seems he’d been unprepared for weapons to be involved, and most likely means no harm. But contrary to Clarence’s griping Lena is not reckless.

The door opened a split second after Lena drew the gun, and Peter and Clarence stand in the doorway. Keeping her eyes on Ibrahim she asks, “You searched him right?”

“Yes,” says Faisal from behind them.

“How did he get here?” Lena wonders if there’s a bomb waiting to go off somewhere nearby.

“I picked him up.” She’s beginning to respect Faisal. Then again, Clarence’s good habits can’t help but be ingrained upon his underlings.

“Alright. Thanks.” They don’t back out of the room, instead making themselves comfortable in the doorway.
Lena turns back to Ibrahim, who has remained frozen in place. “What are you reaching for?”

“A cell phone.”

“Take it out slowly.” He takes the order to heart and pulls it out a good deal more slowly than Lena had meant him to.

“There’s a video on it.”

Lena nods, and, still moving slowly, Ibrahim types in the unlock code and taps the icon for stored photos and videos. After finding the right file he slides the phone across the table towards her.

Lena adjusts the grip on the gun to only include one hand and presses the red play button. The video is short, only a couple minutes, and the volume is loud enough to carry to the men behind her. Clarence is the first to speak once it’s over.

“Well fuck me.”

o.O.o

She doesn’t come back.

For the first week he’s not worried. Not that worried. It sits in the back of his mind, but it’s quiet. The second week he wishes he had an email address just to make sure she’s ok, to hear her voice even if it’s only in his head. But no news is good news, so he pushes thoughts of her to the back of his mind and tells them to sit quietly in the corner like before.

Near the end of the third week he sees Peter, one of the SAS members who’d gone with Lena to Surobi, at the DFAC. Tim shovels the rest of his food in his mouth as quickly as possible and jogs the mile to her office. She’s not there. She’s not in her CHU. She’s not in their spot with an extra cup of coffee waiting for him. He waited for an hour, feeling increasingly nervous and at the same time like a pathetic idiot. That evening he finds a laptop to check the news. There are no stories about female civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

Tim goes to look for her the next day and finds the name plate on the door to her office is gone. There’s still nothing in the news. He doesn’t want to talk to Clarence, but Peter is easy enough. Tim finds him again at the DFAC, casually asks him how Surobi went.

“We go’ wot we came for,” is the short reply, then with a hint of understanding, “She left mate.”

She left. Relief is quickly followed by intense and unpleasant feelings of foolishness. He’s not sure what he expected, but goodbye didn’t seem unreasonable.

After that his thoughts sit in their corner, not so much quiet as sullen and studiously ignored.
I realized I hadn’t posted this chapter, only gotten to the proof stage. Sorry guys!

If you don’t know what ‘checking the oil’ means as a wrestling term, look it up. The song quoted herein is by Sarah Bareilles.

“Sometimes I can be perfectly sweet
Got this sugary me all stuffed up in my sleeve…”

Lena turns down the radio momentarily while considering the street signs. She’s never been in this particular part of town before and unsure whether she took a wrong turn or if Fern St. turned into Carroway St. Unfortunately, google maps is not along for the ride, so she turns the radio back up and throws the car in reverse.

“But like most creatures down here on the ground
I’m composed of the elements moving around
I grow and change and I shift and I switch
And it turns out I’m actually kind of a bitch…”

Ah. Turns out she should have veered right. Lena continues down Fern St., humming merrily.

“But that only happens when I get provoked
By some piece of shit asshole we all sadly know…”

Lena giggles and turns the radio up a little louder to cover her voice and belts out the chorus.

“And that guy’s an asshole!
That girl’s a bitch!”

Alone by her onesies is the only place Lena will sing, but despite lackluster skill and dubious talents, sing she does.

“So sing it out with me
And then let it go
Fuck that guy, he’s just an aaaaaassssshooollle!”

Except there are some things that one should not, and Lena will not, let go. Well, she will let it all go once the problem is dealt with. Aggressive optimism aside, one does need to lance the boils every now and then.
A large red brick building looms around the corner, surrounded by a perfect lawn of smooth white snow that is probably perfect green grass in the summer. Lena turns the radio down again, alert and craning her neck about the parking lot, looking for a space in the shadows. Luckily for the residents of Green Fern Estates and unluckily for Lena, lit parking is available in spades; there are only a couple spots in the periphery that lie in partial shadow. Lena’s not overly concerned. The car is from the office pool, and John has already given blank check permission…mostly blank check permission, she reminds herself, within reason.

Before he first put a gun in her hands, Tim had given her two rules: one, you don’t ever pull a weapon unless you’re prepared to use it, and two, you shoot to kill. Hopefully, tonight will not test that too harshly. After all, the man she’s going to see tonight isn’t going to behead her and put the video on the internet.

Carte blanche or not, Lena’s nervous. A gun in your hand is like having a clear paved path through a swamp, but that clear paved path has a toll you only pay once you’re on the other side. It’s so much easier to walk on pavement than struggle through the swamp. Lena remembers that heroin feeling. She also remembers when the high wore off and she’d had ample time to consider the price of crossing.

Lena passes her fingers lightly over the lump in her coat pocket. It’s kind of like standing on the edge of a cliff. You know you shouldn’t jump, but somehow there’s always a voice telling you ‘It’s right there. It would be so easy’.

She’d bought a holster, but after a few practice draws found it to be woefully slower than in the movies. It’s easier to keep a grip on if it’s in her pocket. Besides, it’s in her left pocket and she’s right handed, and it’s cold outside. A hand in a pocket won’t be immediately suspicious.

Pulling her scarf around her nose, Lena steps out of the car, careful not to slip on any black ice. You’d think for the rent this place must bring in, they wouldn’t stint on salt for the parking lot. She’d bought a coat at a thrift store, a large marshmallowy parka she’d normally never be caught dead in. Between that, the scarf, and some snow pants, she’ll look about twenty-five pounds heavier and of indeterminate age to any security cameras.

The door to 1B, painted a neutral, boring shade of grey-blue, opens fifteen seconds after a sharp knock.

“Lena?”

“Steven, sorry it’s late.” Lena smiles and shifts the leather file holder in her hand. His eyes follow the motion, and he steps aside to let her in. Gullible little shit.

“No, stop swearing. We are calm like ice, dollface, clear-headed.

“Can I take your coat?” She takes that and the scarf off and passes them over. “Would you like anything to drink?” he asks, already on his way into the kitchen, “I’ve got tea, coffee, cocoa.” He eyes the file folder again. “Got something stronger too if you need it.” Steven has the easy air of a man talking to a favorite mentor; he probably thinks everyone save John has fallen for his bullshit. Lena shudders inwardly.

“Tea please.”

“Mint, chamomile, or English breakfast?”

“Mint would be perfect.”
While Steve busies himself filling the kettle and putting it on the stove, Lena sets the portfolio on the kitchen counter.

“Oh Lena, perfect come in."

John waves her over and moves a clutter of papers off one of the chairs in front of his desk. The other is occupied by a tall blond woman perhaps a few years younger than she. Lena eyes her while pretending to make fun of the mess on John’s desk.

She’s attractive, very attractive, Lena notices, restraining a double take, the sort of woman who probably wouldn’t need to be photoshopped if her picture was on the cover of a magazine. Weirdly, and Lena chastises herself for such uncharitable thinking, for a natural beauty she has terrible fashion sense. Her clothes are too baggy, her hair is pulled back too severely, and she’s wearing a jacket in the middle of summer.

“There’s a method to all this, ladies, I swear,” John says, moving aside a half-eaten tuna salad sandwich that he’d probably meant to have for lunch but is now beginning to smell queer.

“And I didn’t find your keys in your trashcan last week,” says Lena. It had taken them twenty minutes of searching too.

“Shut up, woman.” The blond’s mouth thins. “Now then,” he says, finally settled, “Lena, this is Oona. Oona, Lena.” They shake hands, and the woman named Oona tries to smile. “Lena, Oona here has a problem. I’m trusting you to fix it.”

Oona looks at the two of them like they’re bible-thumping missionaries who’ve just knocked on her door – politely, but with limited tolerance and without a shred of faith.

Lena takes a breath and reminds herself that regardless of motivation keeping an even temper in the moment is necessary.

“Steven.” Lena opens the portfolio but keeps it tipped towards her to block the contents from his sight. She removes three already opened envelopes and slides them across the counter. “I need you to take a look at these.” She takes the gun out of her pocket and lets it rest hidden just under the decorative tile trim.

He knows what the envelopes are about three seconds after she lays them on the counter. His eyebrows take too long before going up in fake surprise. Steve takes an envelope and pulls out the blue sheet of paper within. Lena lets him carry on the charade a little longer while he pretends to read.

“Creepy huh?” Lena says with casual disdain, brows raised, daring him to continue feigning innocence.

Steve looks up, and like the stupid sack of rancid crap he is, keeps trying when he ought to give up. “It’s a little intense, yeah.” He’d been smart enough to type the letter and not sign his name or leave fingerprints, but Lena can’t help the feelings of incredulity at the statement. He still thinks he can weasel out of this.

With a quick flick of her thumb, she switches off the safety.

“Steve, stop digging this hole before it gets too deep to climb out of.” The kettle begins whistling, and he turns to take it off the burner. Lena tenses, prepared for him to reach for the knife block next to the stove. He doesn’t, instead pouring hot water over a tea bag in a bright yellow mug.
“You can’t seriously think those are mine.” He’s a damn good liar, she’ll give him that, a quality which in and of itself grates on her.

Lena proceeds, ready to get through this efficiently. “Let’s skip this part. You’re only pissing me off. Look, you have two options. One,” Lena lifts a finger, “you turn yourself in and accept whatever plea deal you’re offered. Or two, I’ll have you arrested this evening and you can take your chances in court.”

“Lena –”

“Pick one.”

“Wow, look seriously.” Steve holds up his hands, palms out. His dedication to the role of confused victim is admirably solid. If Lena weren’t already 110% sure of his guilt she’d have second thoughts.

“If you can’t pick, then I will.”

“Okay, whatever it is,” Steve waves at the letters on the counter, “you think I’ve done –”

“Right, option two.” Lena raises the gun, letting her wrist sit braced against the tile corner.

“Holy shit, what the fuck!” He finally seems to grasp the severity of the situation.

“Would you rather option one?”

“You can’t shoot me.” This sounds rather rich coming from the only person not holding the gun. “I know you well enough to know you’d never kill an innocent person.”

“Lucky for my conscience you’re not innocent.”

“It was just a few letters!” Lena remembers Oona’s face at their first meeting. It was never ‘just’ anything. “Look, I won’t talk to her again geeze. I’m not sure what she said or where she got the idea that this was such a thing.” Lena is beginning to sincerely understand the term ‘crime of passion’, but as much as that paved road looks nice, she’s brought her high rubber boots to withstand the muck of the swamp.

“You were already warned. Didn’t really seem to get the picture. Now pick.”

Steve looks around helplessly, like someone might burst through the door and to his rescue. Eventually, there’s a defiant, “I’ll take my chances in court.”

Lena lays the leather portfolio open on the counter. “You ever take heroin, Steve?”

He looks at the syringe and the sharp needle attached to it. “Oh fuck no, are you serious?”

“There is a third option we haven’t discussed.” Lena taps the barrel of the gun on the counter.

Steve’s face is turning redder and redder, and his breath is coming in shorter bursts. “All this over a fucking letter? Look I don’t know what she said but –”

“Steve.” He goes on a bit longer, and finally Lena cuts him off with a sharp, “Steve!” and another rap of the gun barrel on the edge of the counter. She chips a piece of tile. “You’ve chosen option two. This means that either you take the heroin, all of it, or I shoot you in the stomach and inject it for you. This can either look like a tragic accidental overdose – No, shut up. That’s not enough to kill you, but have fun in rehab. Or. This will look like a drug deal gone horribly wrong, and let me tell you, a gut wound is hard to survive.”
“The neighbors would hear –”

“...and the police have an excellent response time, especially in a neighborhood like this. I’m sure they would admire that I tried to save you from an unknown intruder who tried to rob you of a rather large stash of drugs just as much as they would admire that I was also trying to save you from a dangerous addiction.”

“I’ve got a damn good lawyer you know.”

“That’s nice, Steve.”

In the end Steve chooses the easy version of option two, no doubt convinced that his ‘damn good lawyer’ will easily bring down a possession narcotics charge. Lena puts a few more bags of heroin in a locked box at the tops of his closet. Felony distribution is a lot more awkward than possession and will also carry a higher sentence than harassment and stalking. Then she makes him dial 911 and waits until he completes the call for an ambulance before making her way downstairs and back to her car.

Lena feels keyed up, her body having prepared for action and then merely walked away from it. She takes the pistol from her pocket and tucks it away in her purse, an odd, double-edged good luck charm if ever there was one. After firing off a quick text to John (My stomach’s better. Two tums did the trick.), she sits in the car for a while, willing her body to stop jittering. Sitting still doesn’t seem to be the answer, so instead she drives. D.C. has strict speed limits, and she doesn’t want to be pulled over, so instead she drives in wide, meandering circles until her muscles relax properly. When she finally heads home, and has the capacity to focus on both the road and a phone, she calls Oona.

“Boss lady, it’s fucking two in the morning.”

Lena smiles. “Sorry, Oona.”

“Well, Christ, whatcha need?”

“I’m taking a long vacation, but I want you to know, I found a new type of bug spray that got rid of the cockroach problem at the office.”

There’s a protracted silence on the other end of the line. “They’re gone? Like…actually gone?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.” There’s a hint of skepticism that Lena doesn’t take offense at.

“You can keep using the old bug spray for a while, just in case.” Dave and Suki probably wouldn’t like being referred to as bug spray, but they’re not in on this conversation.

“You’re really serious?”

“Yep. Also, hey, listen. Someone will probably ask about me. Don’t lie. Just tell them I asked you for a couple of files.”

“What files?”

“Anything on GenCorp.”

“Those are at the office,” Oona says uncertainly, “which… you already have anyways?”

“So you can’t give them to me now.”
“…No?”
“Good. Now tell them that when they ask about me.”
“Who’s they?”
“Probably army CID. If they want to see any of your work, tell them they have to go through John. And don’t lie for me.”

“Um. Wow, so what the fucking hell is going on?”
“Stuff.”
“Seriously? That’s all you got?”
“Yep.”

Lena can hear Oona glaring through the phone. “You coming back?”
“Probably.”
“You’re running off with that Ranger aren’t you?” Oona tries for light, but it feels stilted.

A flit of shadow crosses Lena’s face. “No.”
“If you need anything…”

Lena ponders that a moment. “Was there anyone at the FBI you didn’t hate?”

“Chick named Kelsey McCoy. Bomb ass investigator. She’s got a helluva bs detector too.”

“Sounds like what I’ll need.”

Oona laughs, and then after a pause, “Your life will be terrible without me you know.”

A corner of Lena’s mouth twists up. “You brighten my day, Oona. Don’t ever change.”

o.O.o

Tim watches a fist go flying past his face. *Heh. Fucker.* The elbow attached to the fist had swung out wide, slowing the punch and making it easy to dodge. That’s what you get for watching WWE and boxing all day. In a real fight you don’t just stand there and let someone hit you. Compared to sadistic drill sergeants and years of grappling and hand-to-hand with a unit that takes the Oil Check trophy very seriously this scrawny ass motherfucker may as well be a Chihuahua trying to take on a German shepherd.

Tim sidesteps, at the same time turning to grab the guy by the belt and giving it a savage yank to the right. A snap kick to his feet and he goes down on the pavement with Tim’s knee in his back.

His hand-to-hand training hinged on two simple principles: how to kill efficiently and how to cause enough pain to force capitulation. Killing fugitives is frowned upon when it’s not strictly necessary, which this isn’t, so he’s left with the second principle: enough pain to cause capitulation. However, none of his drill sergeants or ring partners was ever floating on PCP during a bout. Even with all Tim’s weight pressing through the hard point of his knee and into the guy’s spine and his elbow wrenched up behind his back, he pushes up and back, throwing Tim momentarily to the side.
There’d been this one dude when Tim was going through basic, Palmetti, big ass motherfucker, probably a former defensive lineman. Guy was basically armored in muscle. Trying to fight him was like trying to fight a mountain. No one had the mass to put enough power behind a hit when it came to this guy. It was like those dreams where you try to punch someone and but your fist just slows down and no matter how hard you try it ends up being a light tap. Tim hates those dreams. He has them often.

Somehow this scrawny asshole has the same superpowers as Palmetti and all the dream villains Tim was never able to properly punch. Frankly, shooting the squirrely little fucker in a non-fatal portion of his anatomy is an attractive – and at this point not unwarranted – course of action. However, he has a bet. And he means to win that bet, so his gun stays holstered, and instead Tim kicks the guy, this time full in the stomach, and jumps on his back again, wrapping an arm under his chin. No matter how high you are, everyone needs oxygen.

But it’s like wrestling a crocodile if that crocodile were the bastard offspring from a one-night stand between a crocodile and the energizer bunny. Most people panic when you try to choke them. Apparently PCP relieves you of such petty concerns. Scrawny Asshole throws himself up, but even with drug-induced super powers Tim’s weight causes him to topple back down again. They both fall forward in a graceless, uncontrolled manner that causes Tim’s forehead to crack against the pavement.

Dazed and growing increasingly irate by the second, Tim decides that if the Scrawny Asshole is a crocodile then he’s a Gila monster. Once those get their jaws around something they don’t let go. Pascal, who came from Albuquerque, told them all about a time where he had to decapitate a Gila monster when it bit his brother’s arm. He’d held a lighter under its stomach first in an attempt to make it let go, but that little fucker held on. Right now that thing is Tim’s goddamned spirit animal.

“Holy shit.” Rachel jogs over and snaps first one handcuff and then the other on Scrawny Asshole’s wrists, the latter still struggling to push himself back up, though at this point his efforts are growing weaker.

“You,” Tim’s still a little out of breath, “owe me five bucks.”

“Excuse me?”

“Gun.” He points to his waist. “Holster.”

“Oh Jesus. How about I drive us back to the office, and not tell Art you were an idiot.”

“Hey, you laughed at me.” Rachel had indeed scoffed in his face when Tim had taken one look at their scrawny fugitive and said, ‘We don’t even need guns for this.’ In hindsight, he probably should have listened to her because she’s dealt with her fair share of drugged up criminals.

“And you deserve that black eye you got now.”

Tim lifts his fingers to the eyebrow that had recently smashed into the pavement. It feels tender and squishier than usual. “You still owe me,” he says somewhat petulantly. This is about honor.

“Here.” When they’re in the car with Scrawny Asshole stowed in the backseat, Rachel hands him two bottles, one of pills and one of water. “For the headache.” It’s Midol. Tim glares, and tosses it back in her purse. Rachel mutters under her breath about the stubborn idiocy of men. By the time they get back to the office, his left eyeball feels like someone pumped it full to bursting with liquid
and his head’s about to crack half open. He looks at Rachel’s purse, wishful, but when she sees him, brow arching pointedly, Tim pretends the moment had never been and steps out of the car. That’s also about honor.

o.O.o

“I seem to remember you telling me this would be easy.” Art gives him the smugly satisfied look of ‘I told you so’ over the rim of his coffee cup. Tim’s eye throbs. He can see the cogs turning in Art’s mind, already drawing the (admittedly obvious) conclusions and preparing to be annoyed.

“Hey,” says Tim preemptively, “I didn’t do shit this time.”

“That’s the problem isn’t it?” Rachel says, but low enough that only Tim, who stands next to her, heard it.

“That how you got a black eye? You just lay there and let someone hit you?”

“Yeah, I needed a massage. Figured it was cheaper than going to a spa.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t have any hot stones.” Art sips at his coffee. “Go throw your gear in a locker and get in the conference room. Got a new job for you.” He doesn’t wait for a response before turning on his heel and heading back inside.

Tim’s about to go do just that when he looks through the floor to ceiling glass windows of the conference room and stops.

“You get a concussion? I said guns away first and then get in here.” Art looks up at Tim, who’s standing in the doorway, bag still in hand.

But Tim’s attention is focused on the woman sitting across from Art. She looks different. Her hair’s shorter, and black instead of brown. Despite being late in the day, her black suit is perfectly crisp and without a single wrinkle. Glittery red fingernails match her equally ridiculous red heels. Except they’re in the United States now, not Afghanistan, and those are normal here.

“Tim?” She recognizes him too, half stands.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Tim.” Art’s sharp reprimand brings him back around, but not enough to remember tact.

“What’s she doing here?” he asks Art instead.

“Ma’am, you’ll have to excuse him –”

“No, it’s fine, I –”

“And who’s that?” On Lena’s other side sits a dark-skinned man in a plain blue button down who has so far remained silent, looking curiously between her and the two Marshals.

“Tim,” Lena stands fully and gestures to the man beside her, mouth quirking up in a wry smile, “meet Dr. Sayeed al’Faheen.
“Tim,” Lena stands fully and gestures to the man beside her, mouth quirking up in a wry smile, “meet Dr. Sayeed al’Faheen.

“What the fuck?” Tim blurts out. There are a few things going through his head, none of which will settle in one place long enough to examine.

Art looks from Tim to Lena, an expression of curiosity liberally tempered by annoyed resignation settling over his face. He looks like a parent about to find out from the principal that his child cherry-bombed a whole bathroom.

“Alright, let’s start at the beginning,” he says, clearly bracing for something unpleasant.

“He,” Tim points at Faheen, glaring, “is supposed to be in Guantanamo.” The man in question remains impassive, as if the argument doesn’t concern him, and that rankles.

“Not that that doesn’t make my evening much more interesting, but it still sounds like the middle,” says Art. “Remember when they made you write essays in school? Introduction, middle, and then a conclusion? Try that.”

“If I may –” interjects Lena.

Tim says, “No.” at the same time that Art holds out an inviting hand and says, “Please.” Because Art is the boss Tim loses and Lena is allowed to continue.

“He’s not going to Guantanamo. I need him as a witness.”

“A witness for what?” Tim ignores the shut up look Art throws him. “Didn’t he try to kill you?” Art turns to Lena, his shut up look transforming into a what the fuck look. “What happened to all that?”

Lena twists the ring on her left middle finger. “It wasn’t him,” she says patiently.

“Really? You sure about that? You seemed pretty sure two years ago.” Twelve hours after Tim had first heard the name al’Faheen a building had blown up under him. ‘It wasn’t him’ doesn’t quite reach the parts of his mind that remember being blown up and shot at in the name of that hunt.

“Well if you would just let me, I’ll explain,” Lena replies, a touch less patient.

“Oh I’m all ears.” Tim stays in the doorway, tight-lipped, eyebrows raised in invitation.

“Do you know what Afghanistan’s biggest cash crop is?”

Tim remains still, but Art shakes his head.

“It’s opium. It’s an industry that isn’t going to be shut down, leastways not any time soon. Most people recognize the futility of fighting that battle, just look the other way, but there are also some who have adopted a sort of ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’ attitude. Unfortunately, there was a group of contractors who were part of the latter group.”

“Which ones?”

“GenCorp.” Tim and Pascal had played flag football with a couple of GenCorp guys. They’d
seemed alright.

“How come you didn’t bring this to the commander? They’d have been arrested and sent back.” How come you just up and left and never told me?

“Tim.” She’s using the voice, that careful, kind voice, the voice that begs for a calm that she’s about to upset. It’s a voice that tells him instantly that the information which she’s about to impart will be personally unpleasant. “It wasn’t just the contractors.”

“What do you mean –” He knows exactly what she means.

“Parwan has no contractors. Do you remember Parwan?”

Art looks back to Tim, who stays silent, trying to choke it all down.

“Who do you think let them in to kill us?” she asks, gentle yet firm.

“What’s your proof?” He looks at al’Faheen. “Don’t tell me he’s all you have.”

Lena’s face hardens. “I wouldn’t be here if that were the case.”

“Then?”

“We have a lot of things – bank account information, emails, phone calls. We also have this.” Lena pulls out a phone, and after a few quick taps with her red-glitter nails, slides it across the table towards him.

Tim grabs it and takes a seat next to Art. The phone case is a plain, shiny white plastic, and now that it’s up close he can see there’s not a single scratch or smudge of dirt, and it irritates him.

There’s a video file loaded on the screen. Tim makes sure the volume is turned up and hits play.

It’s short, only about two minutes. The device that had recorded the video appears to have been resting on a table or chair for the duration of the recording; everyone in the frame is at an odd angle, and the picture doesn’t shake even once. An Afghan man in his mid-thirties, who Tim recognizes as al’Faheen, stands in the middle of a room. A teenage boy shifts in and out of the edge of the picture next to him. Both look tense, posture stiff in unsuccessfully concealed nervousness. Facing him are four soldiers. Three of them are American; Tim can make out the flag on the closest one’s sleeve, as well as the double bars of a captain. The fourth is an ANA interpreter. Because of the angle the name patches aren’t visible. Even though there’s an interpreter present most of the talking starts out in English, though towards the end al’Faheen drifts fully into increasingly nervous Pashto, but it’s all simple enough. They want to know where the ‘American woman’ is headed and who she’s seeing.

When the video is ended Lena addresses Art, “This was taken a day before the Taliban attacked a convoy of U. S. troops. None of the soldiers in that video were cleared to know anything about that mission. That last line, as you heard, was one of them telling the interpreter to pass on the information to Abdullah Jafar, a local warlord friendly with the Taliban. As a result of that ambush seven soldiers were killed.”

“Who are they?” Tim asks.

“One was Captain Mark Brown, the other a Private Lashon Welling. I’m not sure who the third one is yet. I’m also not sure who else besides them was in on it. Brown and Welling are in
custody. Their court-martials start next month. So far both have refused plea bargains to reveal their co-conspirators.”

“You’d think they’d jump at that, considering the death penalty must be on the table.” Considering they were perfectly happy to aid in the murder of fellow soldiers, it’s not like it can possibly be about honor or loyalty.

Lena lets out a breath. “Yeah…they’re holding off on that for now in hopes we can still convince them. Another thing – if anyone other than John Sloane from State Department or special agent McCoy from the FBI comes looking for us, tell them you were contacted about relocating a possible witness away from Washington D. C. but you never heard anything further.”

“And which one do you work for?” asks Art, eyes narrowing slightly.

“I’m currently working with the FBI.” Lena’s eyes remain steadfastly on Art, ignoring Tim. She didn’t say ‘State Department,’ and he notes the precise use of ‘with’ instead of ‘for’. “If that last condition is something you don’t feel comfortable with, Chief Deputy, I’d prefer you say so now.”

Art frowns, clearly wanting to ask more questions. He tables them for now, instead replying, “No, I think we can accommodate that.”

“Good. Now,” she continues quickly, still avoiding looking at Tim, “I believe you mentioned a mountain of paperwork we have to get through first.”

“I sure did,” says Art, sitting forward. “Can I offer you something to drink?” and before she can reply, “Tim, would you mind getting us some coffee?”

The last thing Tim wants is to be Coffee Bitch in front of Lena, but he goes back out the door, telling himself that he needed to throw his gear in a locker anyways.

When he comes out of the locker room it’s to find that the coffee’s already been started. Art’s waiting for him in the kitchen, feet set apart, hands casually resting in his pockets. Tim knows better than to believe he means anything but business.

“Tim,” Art begins, taking one hand out of his pocket, waving it towards the figures sitting on the other side of the glass, “how do you know her?”

o.O.o

This is the longest, most uncomfortable elevator ride Lena has ever taken. Chief Deputy Mullen had sent Faheen ahead to the safe house with Deputy Brooks, and now she’s stuck alone with Tim.

Kelsey had mentioned her friend in the Kentucky Marshal’s office was an ex-ranger (“Don’t worry. He’s not some dipshit sheriff from the hills who doesn’t know which way to hold a gun.”), but this is surreal. It’s weird seeing him in normal clothes. And with longer hair.

She periodically steals glances at Tim while pretending to look at her phone. He stares straight ahead at the wood paneling, jaw rigid and brows drawn in.

“So who do you work for? And don’t say State or the FBI because we both know that’s a load of bullshit.”

“I did used to work at the State Department,” she says, off-guard and defensive.
“Oh yeah?” he snarls, “When?”

Lena almost lies, but he’s staring at her like he knows she wants to, so she can’t. “Like, eight years ago.” She almost adds ‘sorry’, but that feels like defeat.

A derisive snort and they lapse back to tense, uncomfortable silence.

_Gosh damnit – dang it._ Lena taps the Candy Crush icon on her phone and tries to ignore reality, but her phone is being slow and uncooperative, so she gives up and tosses it back in her purse.

The day had started off so well. The preliminary report was finished, and John had finally gotten them a hearing date with the Senate Armed Services subcommittee. And now her mood has been shot to hell – heck. Lena stares blackly at the elevator door, willing the damn – dang – contraption to move faster.

_You are not in middle school. Just spit it out and he can take it or leave it._ “Look,” she begins, forcing herself to look at him instead of the panel of buttons near his hip, “I’m sorry I left without saying anything. Faheen had to be in the gates and on a plane without anyone knowing. And,” now that she’s saying it, it sounds incredibly presumptuous, “if anyone asked you about me you needed to be able to say that I left without telling you anything at all.”

Tim stares at her in that still, closed way he has that Lena hates because she can’t tell what he’s thinking. There’s a ding and the doors slide open, but neither of them moves to exit. “You could have just told me not to say anything.” The pessimist in her says his words are merely a sensible suggestion, but Lena hopes the indifferent tone is just a front.

“I don’t know what sort of liar you are,” she says honestly, hoping she can make him understand, “and unless you’re really good anyone who asked would be fairly likely to know if you were hiding something."

“Well, it’s not like it matters, does it?” he says after a moment and steps out the door, walking ahead of her towards the back lot. It feels like a slap.

Lena has to take a few extra-quick steps to catch up. Tim unlocks a black Suburban and climbs in without a backward glance. Hot-faced and annoyed, Lena knocks on the window and steps back when he opens the door again.

“I’m parked around front. You want to give me the address or should I just follow you?”

“Follow me. I’ll be at the west exit,” he says and snaps the door shut. Lena rolls her eyes. It’s a new town and Lena doesn’t know which way is west, but there are only going to be so many black Suburbans waiting for her to follow them, so she doesn’t ask for clarification.

Sure enough, there’s only one SUV waiting at the far end of the lot, and Lena pulls up behind it.

Instead of turning into the street, Tim hops back out of the car, leaving the engine running, and knocks on her window.

“Are you fucking serious?” he asks when she rolls it down.

“Excuse me?”

“No one drives those here. You may as well put a sign in the front yard that you guys are
from out of town.”

Lena resists the urge to yell, and takes a breath before responding. “Does the safe house have a garage?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t see the problem,” she says evenly.

“Fine.”

When he’s back in his own car, Lena lets her head fall forward against the steering wheel.

_Fudge._
Lexington is not in fact one of the circles of hell as Lena had feared it would be. After John's eighty thousand jokes about hill people, she had begun to question Kelsey's recommendation of hiding Sayeed in Kentucky.

But there are things to do. Food. Bars. There's even a gay club. Lena did not point out that last to Sayeed. She did point out a mosque and immediately felt guilty because she wasn't sure that the Marshals would approve of him attending prayer since it was a part of his old life.

Two days after they'd arrived in D.C. Lena had given him a compass with the direction of Mecca marked with a thin line of silver nail polish. It had been the start to a tentative… friendship wasn't the right word… he'd smile at her now and then. A year into his time in America Lena gave Sayeed a cellphone, and he'd been able to download an app to find Mecca and no longer needed the compass. But he kept it, and when they reached Kentucky he'd used the app to mark a new line, though he used a sharpie instead of nail polish.

Lena sits on the back porch sipping chocolate milk while she waits for Sayeed to finish the Isha'a prayer, the last of the day. Luckily the porch is behind him. It had taken time for Lena to get used to the frequent praying, and in the beginning there were plenty of times she'd absent-mindedly wandered in front of Sayeed. It had taken a month for him to become annoyed enough to say anything about it. That was another thing Lena had to get used to: the roundabout language and a different set of social cues following her home. Sayeed had to get used to seeing Lena's hair and to eye contact during their conversations. It was a bit of an adjustment for both of them. They made it work.

Lena doesn't need to be out here. There are two deputies on the back porch with them as well, but she's used to being around Sayeed. And Lexington is new. And she's waiting for the shift change before running out to get food. Though Tim's coming soon, which makes going out to get food now and missing him a tempting prospect, but that feels too much like running away, and Lena refuses to do that. For as long as she and Sayeed are in Lexington this is their house, not the Marshals'.

Lena catches her mood souring at thoughts of Tim. Every time he has a shift at the house he says as few words to her as possible. If it's raining, he sticks himself with porch duty. If it's nice out, then he chooses inside. Anywhere she's least likely to be. For her part, Lena doesn't try to talk to him. If he wants nothing to do with her, then she refuses to be pathetic enough to try. Lena stands. She also refuses to let him put her in a black mood. Eyes closed, deep breath. Open.

Sayeed is on the last surah. He tries to be discreet about his praying, which is unfortunate because he has a surprisingly good singing voice; it reminds her of clear, sun-warmed water. Sometimes she envies him – the voice and the faith. Sometimes he reminds her a bit of herself the way she was just after the attack, filled with relentless optimism, although his is calmer. 'As Allah, wills it.' Maybe less optimism and more acceptance. The line blurs sometimes.

Lena's phone vibrates on the chair arm. A text from unknown. Oona or John. She flips the phone open. Definitely Oona.

*Hope you're enjoying American Wales.*
Meet a lot of sheep-shaggers yet?

If the hill people haven't kidnapped you and eaten your livers, you should read this.

Lena taps the link to an article and starts skimming. Some pharmaceutical company recalling batches of morphine. The doorbell rings so she clicks off her phone. It can wait until after dinner.

o.O.o

"Well hot damn. Think we can find a reason to impound that?"

God dammit. He'd told her to keep the garage door closed. "No." Tim looks around, but the only other people outside are a few kids playing in the yard across the street.

"How fast do you think it goes?"

"Fast."

Raylan continues to admire Lena's car, running his hand covetously over the top. "I mean aren't witnesses not supposed to keep things from their previous lives?"

"It's not his."

"Really." Raylan smiles towards the house, and Tim Strains to remember the most recent bits of conversation and gossip about the status of Raylan's relationship with his ex-wife.

Tim doesn't like the wide smile Lena offers Raylan when she opens the door to them. He likes it less when she holds out her hand to him to shake.

"Evenin' ma'am," he says, taking her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Deputy Givens."

"Oh, no need to rest on formality. Raylan's fine."

"Well then it's nice to meet you, Raylan. You can call me Lena." She won't fucking stop smiling.

Tim follows behind him with his own sarcastic, "Evenin' ma'am," and a smile that's all teeth and none of the sentiment. He immediately regrets the 'ma'am', remembering the way he used to tease her with it.

Her own smile drops, and she gives him a polite but distant, "Deputy."

"Close the garage door."

Instead Lena picks up her purse and gives Tim a look that dares him to give her another order. "I'm going to get food. I'll be back in a half hour." And she's out the door and down the front steps before he has a chance to object.

o.O.o

It's been longer than half an hour.

"Tim, stop lookin' out the window. Someone's going to think you're the new neighborhood pedophile. Dougherty and Waters got it covered."
"I don't like kids," says Tim distractedly, still peering out the curtain.

"Oh. Great. What a relief." A few moments later, "Tim, just call her."

"Nah, it's fine."

"Tim, either call her or stop lookin' out the damn window. I'm startin' to feel twitchy just lookin' at you."

Tim grits his teeth and steps back. Looking through the fridge doesn't offer much distraction. Neither does the TV.

Lena doesn't answer her phone. It's been an hour.

Jacket already on, Tim walks out the back door. "Where'd she go for food?" All he gets from Waters and Dougherty are shrugs of ignorance.

Tim stalks back into the house and finds Faheen. "Where'd she go?"

Faheen's expression shifts quickly to distrust and then just as quickly to blank. "She said she was going to bring back bar-beh-que from a place called Coh-lleen's." His words are heavily accented but well enunciated. The price of that is speed, and as soon as he finally gets to the name, Tim's already on his way back out the front door, Raylan on his heels.

The parking lot outside Colleen's, which looks like a complete hole-in-the-wall at one end of a less than classy strip mall, is mostly empty, and Lena's car is immediately visible just outside the door. The woman in question is not.

"Oh Jesus Christ." Tim takes his foot off the gas instinctively at Raylan's outburst, trying to find whatever it is that the other marshal already noticed.

As they near the restaurant Tim can see four figures through the windows.

"Fuck," he says in crude, wholehearted agreement of Raylan's earlier sentiment.

Three of the figures inside Colleen's stand on one side of a table, and on the other is a woman, gun drawn and pointed at the three across from her.

Raylan beats Tim in the door. Since Lena's the only one with a weapon in hand, his gun stays holstered. "Hey there, fellas, ma'am." He's laying on the country boy charm real thick.

"Fuck on outta here, asshole. This don't concern you." They look like the three little pigs if the three little pigs had been on steroids and failed a few IQ tests. Maybe they're related. All have pale, ruddy complexion and the common bad judgment of wearing cut-off flannel.

"Well," he sighs, turning back to look at Tim, "there are two kinds of people in this world." Then back at the three little pigs, "You really wanna be left alone with her? Seems to me that could be a mite bit dangerous for you."

Lena's eyes flick from Raylan to Tim and back to the three men standing in front of her and stay. She doesn't put the gun away.

"She's not dangerous. Can't shoot all three of us. Besides, that'd be murder now, wouldn't it honey?" Piggy #1 looks back to Lena, a nasty leer plastered across his face, "And now that you two are here, we got witnesses." At this point, Tim's more inclined to let Lena shoot them and make up a good
"Well boys, my momma always said it's always best not to test a lady's anger. Sometimes they surprise you, and not in the good way. Hell hath no fury and all that." Raylan gives a good-natured shrug. "Tell you what, if you leave now, we can pretend this whole thing never happened."

"We ain't leavin' until she apologizes." There's stupid, and then there's special stupid.

There was one night back when Tim was still in boot camp when two of his platoon mates had fallen asleep on fire watch. When they were inevitably caught, instead of shutting up and taking whatever punishment was dealt like a smart person would have done, they had crawled over each other trying to make excuses. Sergeant Gatt, who had zero fucks to give, cut them off with, "IF YOU TWO DONT SHUT THE FUCK UP RIGHT NOW, IM GONNA STICK MY FOOT UP BOTH YOUR ASSES AND WEAR YOU AROUND LIKE A COUPLE OF AUTISTIC FLIP FLOPS!"

Then he smoked them into the ground and gave them double duty firewatch for three weeks straight.

These three fuckers would have made great flip-flops. Flip-flop special.

Raylan, obviously of the same opinion, says, "Son, are you simple? The woman's got a gun. And you're not exactly a small target."

"Simple? Sounds like you also owe us an apology." Jesus Christ, what a fucking waste of time.

"Yo. Dumbass." The three little piggies focus their attention on Tim. "Unless you're planning on apologizing for being a waste of fucking oxygen, no one's getting a damn apology."

"Oh yeah, and what are you gonna do? Make us leave?" The guy is a head taller and looks to be half again Tim's weight.

Tim blinks, nonplussed, and rolls his eyes. "Holy shit, you're for real." He looks back at Raylan and gestures to the dumbass looming over him. "I think this guy's for real."

"Yeah, I think he's for real," Raylan agrees, equally impressed at the flip-flop special on display before them.

Tim has known fear. There has been plenty of fear in his life. Most of the fear has been of situations, not individuals per se, being shot at, watching other people shot, falling, nearly suffocating. But he's rarely afraid of an individual person, a specific face, a single voice. His father once, but that was over a decade ago, and towards the end it had been more of an angry, festering dread rather than pure fear.

Other than that, Tim has only ever feared one person. Staff Sergeant Mariano has a singular place of honor in Tim's nightmares. Drill instructors are possibly the only people besides serial murderers and Wall Street tycoons to take such gleeful, unbridled joy in abusing the absolute power they have over their victims, and they do it all without laying a single finger on you. And no other human being has ever had the same talent for mental torture that Sergeant Mariano had. Attracting his notice was enough to make Tim feel like someone had tied a brick around his stomach and tossed it over the side of a cliff.

Dealing with anyone else after that was cake. In fact, especially after leaving the Rangers, Tim had had to work particularly hard not to laugh in anyone's face when they tried to assert authority or dominance. Luckily for this moment no such restrictions apply.

Tim grins, lips slowly peeling back from his teeth in a way a smart person would find threatening and more than mildly creepy. "Alright, listen here, dipshit." Tim moves aside his jacket and points to
his waist. "This badge." He moves the other side. "This gun." He sets his hand on the grip. "You get it?"

The piggies' demeanor does an instant one-eighty. "Aw, fuck. Seriously?"

"Look man, we didn't mean no harm."

"Hey, she's the one holdin' a gun on us!"

"Shut up." Tim looks past them. "Lena, let's go."

Lena starts to lower her gun, changes her mind, and edges around towards the two deputies, only lowering it when she gets to them.

"You can wait outside if you like," Raylan nods to her, "no need to stay."

After a minute Tim goes as well and finds Lena standing ten feet down from the door, back leaning against a stucco wall. She doesn't say anything when he approaches, not a 'hi' not a 'thanks.'

"What happened?"

When Lena speaks, it's flat, distant. "I wouldn't let them drive it. Then they started talking about taking me for a ride," she looks up at the underside of the sidewalk cover, "if you know what I mean." Her eyes and mouth pull in, and Tim feels a near overwhelming urge to walk right back in that door and make someone bleed. "They were nice at first, came on a little strong, but they liked the car and were just asking questions. I didn't want to be rude," Tim's jaw twitches, "so I talked to them. Then they got pushy. So I got rude. Then, like I said…" Lena waves a hand over her shoulder in explanation. "So much for southern gentlemen."

"Well your first mistake was being polite." He means it as a joke, something to diffuse the tension running in a clear, tight line between her shoulders.

But all he gets is a frown and a quiet, "Huh," before she's opening the car door, climbing in, and pulling away.

Shit.

Tim ducks his head back inside to make sure Raylan can handle the three piggies and goes after Lena.

He speeds a little more than is necessary and catches up to her on the front walk right outside the house.

"Lena, what the hell, I –"

"No, shut up." Her voice is harsh and low, like a snake rattle. Tim claps his mouth shut. "You don't know how it is. Polite is the best we've got. You tell anyone to just go away, and chances are that's only going to piss them off and make them do something stupid. Don't you dare tell me any bit of that was my fault."

"Jesus Christ, I wasn't saying it was your fault. It was just a joke."

"Do I look like I'm laughing? I'm so glad this is all so bleeding hilarious for you. Because for me the evening actually kind of sucked."

Tim starts again, taking more care in where he steps. "Hey, Raylan's gonna hand those assholes over
to the locals, give 'em a good scare. It's fine now."

"No it's not." Lena takes a brief pause, thinking, and then launches forward. "You've killed people. Eighty-seven confirmed sniper kills, impressive by the way. You're probably not a dick, so you go for heads. Or hearts or… whatever. People die pretty fast. I'm sure you got a lot more than that under your belt though." She takes a breath since she's been talking too fast, too much momentum. "Well I don't. I got two. And those were real fucking clear. Just now wasn't clear. But I thought…" She's rambling, still a little out of breath, and her voice is vibrating a bit, the way an overactive child bounces their knee up and down instead of sitting still. "And since I'm not Mr. Big Bad Rangerman or Marshal or whatever, I don't know when to shoot. I mean they weren't trying to kill me, but…" Her breathing is too fast, and Tim gropes blindly for the first thing that'll slow it down.

"You said 'fuck.'" It's automatic, verbal muscle memory of another life.

Her face pinches inward for a split second before returning to its normal position. Then, without another word she turns on her heel and walks away.

"Lena."

"Here's another one for you: fuck off." There was a time when talking to her was easy.

"Lena." Tim jogs to catch up. He almost puts a hand on her arm to slow her down but common sense stops him. "Goddammit, it was a fucking joke!"

She comes to such an abrupt stop that Tim nearly trips into her and says in a tightly clipped voice that could freeze ice, "Is this supposed to make me feel better or something?"

"Yes."

The only parts of her face she isn't quite able to control are her eyes and the corners of her mouth. Her eyes squint and widen, brows pulling in, and the corners of her mouth twitch every now and then, and when that happens Lena looks away. Tim finds himself grasping again for a distraction, this time putting a little more thought into the words before he lets them out of his mouth.

"What are you carrying anyways?" He tries to say it nicely.

Lena doesn't say anything at all, just carefully takes out the gun, checks the safety, and passes it over grip first.

"Well at least you picked a decent weapon." He tries to say that nicely too. It's a Glock 19, effective but compact, good for someone her size.

"That's the one I learned on," she says after a moment.

"You mean…” Tim holds it up for a closer look. It's the one he'd given her back in Bagram. "You took it?" Then, hoping the ice under his feet holds, "Isn't stealing government property a crime?"

"Yeah, I guess it is." Then, "Don't tell anyone." Tim smiles for real for the first time that day.

"Gonna steal me some whiskey from a general to buy my silence?" He wonders if it's a good idea to be bringing up old jokes.

When it gets a small huff and something that could be construed as a smile out of her, he decides it couldn't have been too bad an idea.
"I don't know of any generals around here. And by the way," she continues, "you could have at least showed me how to clean one. Or told me that you had to clean it every time you used it. The girl at the gun shop gave me a terribly dirty look when I brought it in, like it was a puppy I was abusing. I'm pretty sure she charged me extra to fix it out of spite." He laughs for the first time that day too.

"I'm surprised you didn't just get a new one."

"I like this one," she says, affronted, taking it back from him. But there's a twitch of a smile, so he doesn't mind the bite. "Besides, I work for the government, so it's not technically stealing."

"So you do work for Uncle Sam."

"Yes." That's clearly all the answer he'll be getting this evening, so instead of trying to pry loose a tooth that's not ready to come out, he changes the subject. "So, we're having barbecue tonight?"

"Sayeed –" Lena looks down at her empty hands. "Gosh…dang it."

"I know a place that's pretty decent if you want to try it."

"Argh," Lena sighs, "yeah sure." She tucks her stolen Glock back in her purse and digs out her keys.

"Can I drive?" Tim had been looking at the car, and the comment slips out onto thin ice.

A well-arched brow arches further. "You gonna let me shoot your rifle?"

He stays silent, pondering.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Get in. You're riding bitch."

"Hey, no swearing."

"Shut up, Deputy."

Chapter End Notes

Note: That DI quote about flip-flops is something I would love to take credit for, but I can't (found it on reddit).
Lena stares hard at the bed in front of her. The last ten minutes have been a merry-go-round of indecisiveness. This is stupid. She throws the dress in a heap on the bed and pulls on a pair of dove-grey slacks. The dress would be trying too hard; there’s no reason to wear it. She gets to the zipper and nearly changes her mind again, but the sound of the front door opening makes the decision for her. Lena takes a last look at her hair and make-up in spite of herself, swiping once more at her eye shadow even though it’s already symmetrical.

She finds Tim in the kitchen, and Raylan is out on the porch chatting to someone on the phone.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

This is where they are now. ‘Hey.’ Lena’s not sure if it’s ‘Hey, I’m happy to be in your presence’ or ‘Hey, I’ve said hi and now we don’t have to talk anymore.’ Or maybe it’s just ‘hey,’ nothing attached and she’s just driving herself crazy by trying to read into it.

Things have been easier. He says ‘hey’ whenever he comes on shift and ‘see ya’ when he leaves. Sometimes he even asks ‘how’s it going?’ He doesn’t place himself on the opposite side of the house from her anymore, but he’s always reading, which to her is one of the universal signs for ‘fuck off.’ It’s driving her nuts. Maybe it’s her own lack of courage when it comes to him that’s driving her nuts.

Lena had discovered a new coffee place on Tuesday. She’d woken up early, and instead of rolling over and trying to go back to sleep had gotten up and resolved to go find something for breakfast besides raisin bran. On the way home, already loaded up with pastries from several bakeries (it really is true what they say about food-shopping on an empty stomach), Lena had driven past High on Art & Coffee. Because she’d been hangry she immediately judged it to be pretentious and hipster. Because she felt guilty for that, she swung a u-turn, walked in, and ordered a black cherry hot chocolate with extra whipped cream on top. It was amazing. She ordered a second hot chocolate for the drive home, and while she waited Lena dithered back and forth about whether to get something for Tim as well. She almost did. He’d probably have liked the coffee – it smelled a bit like what she used to bring him back in Bagram – but decided against it at the last minute, feeling like it might be weird. She didn’t want things to be weird.

But today isn’t going to be weird. It’s going to be normal. Because it’s just coffee, that thing everyone drinks in the morning and that is totally normal to offer people. Everyone likes it when you give them coffee.

Lena strides over to the coffeemaker with a casual nonchalance that says ‘I do this every day’ and not ‘I got this coffee maker so I could make you coffee so you’d talk to me.’

“I’m going to make some coffee.” She loses her nerve, and instead of following that up with ‘would you like some too?’ like she meant to, Lena leans out the back door and asks Raylan instead, “Hey want some coffee?” Shit, now she seems rude.

Raylan holds the phone away from his chin and gives a quick nod.

Lena turns back to Tim, pretending that she doesn’t feel her face growing hot. “You want
“Nah, it’s fine.” Tim heads back into the living room. “Already had my fix.”

When he’s out of sight Lena lets her head fall forward against one of the wooden cabinets. *Coffee, you idiot, you were supposed to offer him coffee without making it awkward. You had a plan. It was a really easy one. You managed to screw up ‘hey, want some coffee?’ Great going, dollface.* Each self-flagellating remark is punctuated by tap of her forehead against the wood, as if enough taps can shake loose whatever mental deficiency has led to this failure. On the bright side, thank all the gods that she wasn’t stupid enough to wear the dress. Now *that* would have been embarrassing.

The back door slides open and shut. “Hey Lena?” It’s Raylan come back inside. “That was Art. He said he had something he wanted to talk with you about. Would you mind coming to the office?”

“Yeah, sure.” Lena gestures at the coffee pot that hasn’t yet begun to drip. “You got time, or did you want to head out now?”

Raylan pulls his jacket back on. “We can grab some on the way. I know a place that’s fast. Tim can have that pot; lord knows he was bitching enough about me not stopping somewhere on the way over.”

Lena looks at the wall separating the kitchen from the living room. *Great going, dollface.*

They take the Marshal’s black town car to City Hall. Without the need to concentrate on driving, Lena has time to ponder the fact that Chief Deputy Mullen wanted to speak with her in person rather than over the phone. It doesn’t bode well.

The serious look on his face, like he’s preparing to deliver bad news, doesn’t bode well either.

“Miss Carlan,” Mr. Mullen greets her, holding the door to his office. Lena bites her tongue at the ‘miss’.

“What’s happened?”

“Cuttin’ right to the chase, aren’t we?”

“Sorry.” Great, now she feels like an errant child in need of an etiquette lesson, “But if it couldn’t be said over the phone…”

“I’m just givin’ you a hard time.” He rubs a hand over his head, lowering himself into the chair behind his desk, “Well then. Someone called today looking for our witness.” Lena likes that he said ‘our.’ It’s comforting to know there’s a mutual concern.

“Who?” Obviously it wasn’t John. “Do you have the number?”

“They claimed to be from a senator’s office.”

Lena blinks, the fear deflating, although Senator Johnson’s office would have –

“They said I should get in touch,” Art picks up a piece of yellow notepad paper from the top of his desk and passes it across, “if I came across him in the system.”
Lena takes the paper, turning it towards her to read the name and number. Cheryl DeLaney. It’s not immediately familiar. Lena digs out her cell phone and types the info into an encrypted email, then texts Oona.

*Sent you an email. Need answers now.*

She gets a reply about fifteen seconds later.

*You know texting me about an email you just sent me is dumb. My phone does actually tell me when I get emails.*

*Don’t waste calories texting.* Lena rolls her eyes and waits.

A few minutes later her own email dings, a red number one bubble appearing over the icon.


After shooting off a quick *Thanks* Lena picks up her purse. “What exactly did she say? Word for word? Please.”

Mr. Mullen stands with her, sensing the urgency. “She said that she’d like to talk to Mr. Faheen, and would I be able to facilitate a meeting.”

Asked if they could talk to Sayeed, not whether or not he was even there. Lena wonders if it was a fishing trick, or if they’re really that certain he’s in Kentucky. In the end it doesn’t matter whether she or they are certain; Lena’s not taking any chances.

“Sir, I think they might make a try for him.”

To her relief, he nods. They might be a small office, but they’re not a sleepy one, nor does he brush off her concern. “Raylan, you and Tim are gonna take the day and night shift for a couple days. Pack quickly.” Then to Lena, “You two stay in the house.”

...O.O.O...

Tim eyes the coffee resentfully. He’s tired. And possibly slightly hungover. Sometimes he can’t quite tell if it’s lack of sleep or a hangover. Or maybe it’s both. It smells good though, the coffee, and still fresh enough that if he had a cup now it would taste just as good. There’s cream in the fridge; he checked. Tim hates the fact that he still associates the smell of good coffee with sunrise in Bagram, with her. He hates that she offered it to Raylan first.

Tim looks outside at Faheen sitting on the back porch sipping a cup of that same coffee, unconcerned about its origins, while he reads on his phone. He’s almost always on his phone or laptop and rarely speaks to anyone else, even Lena. The only times he leaves the house are to attend prayer and to occasionally shop for food, and never alone. Tim supposes if he couldn’t escape people he’d isolate himself too. Then he remembers that that’s exactly how being in the Rangers was, except he liked constantly being surrounded. Tim cocks his head, trying to see what Faheen’s reading.

The doorbell rings, and Tim forgets about the cell phone and coffee. If that were Raylan and Lena returning then he’d have heard the garage door. If it were anyone else from the Marshals, they’d have knocked, three hard raps, probably also would have texted or called beforehand to warn him they were coming too.

He cracks the back door quietly, motions for Nelson and Dougherty to keep eyes out, and waves Faheen over to him. The Afghani slips his shoes off in the doorway, and Tim orders him in a
low voice to go in the bathroom and stay in the tub. The bell rings a second time. Tim stands at the
edge of the hall just around the corner from the living room, peering out to face the front door, gun
drawn.

The bell dings two more times. Whoever’s outside isn’t getting the picture that no one’s
home. At least they don’t seem inclined to break in.

Tim eats those words when ten seconds later he hears a noise at one of the front windows.
There’s a scrape, like someone’s just removed the screen.

Tim slides down the hallway, stopping every couple feet to listen. There’s the wooden slide
of a window sash in its frame and then a thud and then footsteps. He stops, raises his pistol.
A bedroom door opens and a head pokes out.

His heart takes one great pounding beat and then stops. Jesus Fucking Christ.

“Lena, what the hell!”

She stares back at him and the gun, still and wide-eyed. “Raylan took my keys. I –”

“Then knock!”

Her face contorts. “I rang the doorbell!”

“You’re supposed to fuckin’ knock!”

“What the – it’s the same thing!”

Tim leans against the hallway wall. Did no one seriously explain to her she had to knock? Or
maybe she forgot. Fucking Christ, he could have shot her. Tim flicks on the safety and lets the gun
fall to his side. He feels jittery. “You’re supposed to knock three times. And next time you forget
your keys, call.” His heart is still pounding, so it’s sharper than she deserves.

Lena glares. “Okay, yeah.”

“Sorry, it’s…someone should have told you.”

“It’s fine.” There’s an edge to her voice that says she’s still pissed he yelled. “I was going to
call but I’d left my bedroom window open, and since you didn’t answer…”

Tim nods, still shaken, and heads back out to the porch to tell Nelson and Dougherty to stand
down. He takes two steps into the kitchen when the back window shatters and a bullet sails into the
base of his neck.
**Chapter Notes**

There will most likely not be an update next week. Holidays are lookin' to be busy. I hope you all have a lovely winter-whatever-you-celebrate.

“Sayeed!” *Jesus shitfuckingfuckshittfuck*. The fingers she’s using to press the hand towel against Tim’s neck are beginning to get wet. *Fuckingshitassfuck*. She’s lost the mental capacity to think in anything besides profanity. This is the second most scared Lena has been in her life, and every restrained, unspoken obscenity comes fountaining out of the dark corner to which it had been banished.

There are gunshots outside, someone yelling. Holy shit, she’d thought it had been Sayeed at first. When Lena had come running into the kitchen and seen Tim on the floor instead, blood running freely between his fingers where he held his neck, she’d wished it had been. She will feel horribly guilty about that later, but for now blind terror obliterates all else.

“SAYEED!” *Jesus fuck, where is that –*

Someone slides down beside her and push-drags them both against the stove. Oh of course, line of sight. She’s so fucking stupid –

“Move your hands, Lena.” When she doesn’t do it fast enough he moves them for her.

Hearing direct orders from Sayeed is weird. Somehow it makes this more real, more serious, and that sends a fresh wave of panic crashing through her. Fucking Christ, her heart is going so fast it might stop. Sayeed peels the towel back for a second, and Lena watches the rhythmic pump of blood ooze up from the side of Tim’s neck. She’s never been afraid of blood, but now she nearly vomits.

“Sayeed –”

“It missed his artery.” *Then why is there so much fucking blood?*

“Tim?” His eyes are open. *Shit, he’s dead.* They blink.

“’m fi’.” Tim’s voice. Now she vomits.

“Tim!” Dougherty rushes over to them, but seeing Sayeed’s hands already pressed at the corner of his neck, hovers instead.

“It missed his artery,” Sayeed repeats the information to the marshal in the same calmly clinical voice. How the fuck is he so calm?

Dougherty, still in a squat, goes back to the door, pulling out his cellphone with the hand not holding a gun. Jesus, how fucking stupid is she that she forgot to call an ambulance? *Breathe, dumbass. Panic is useless and you are not helpless. And you will not be a useless sack of shit.***

“Sayeed?” Lena needs something to do. She needs to be useful, a part of the solution.
“Get the blue backpack in my closet.”

Lena crawls as fast as she can for the hallway, then stands and sprints once she’s out of sight of windows. The moment she’s out of the kitchen, a new fear sucker punches her hard in the gut. What if he dies before she returns? Blue backpack. It’s her new mantra to stay on goal. Don’t be a useless sack of shit.

She sprints back to the kitchen, forgetting to stay below the windows. Tim blinks, alive. Breathe, dumbass. In, one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four.

“Put your hands here.” Lena presses on Tim’s neck while Sayeed opens the backpack, pulls out a large pair of scissors, and begins cutting a wide semi-circle in the shirt around Lena’s hands. She looks at Tim’s eyes. They’re still open, still blinking, switching between her and Sayeed. There’s a puddle of blood under his left shoulder. Still blinking. Please keep blinking.

“Move.” Even as he says it, Sayeed pushes Lena’s hands aside, quickly removes the soaked towel, peels back the shirt, and firmly slaps a thick gauze pad over the wound and holds it there. The backpack had been Sayeed’s idea. Whether out of a need for the familiar, or from habit, or boredom, or wanting to be useful he’d asked for medical supplies. Said it might come in handy and that after all he is a doctor. Lena looks down at Tim. After all this shit is over, she’ll bomb half of Afghanistan if that’s what it takes to get Sayeed’s family out.

He looks at Tim. “Can you understand me?”

A nod followed by a grimace.

“This is a hemostatic dressing.” He says hemostatic funny, putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable, and Lena lets herself be momentarily distracted by that. “It will stop your bleeding. Okay?”

Another nod.

Sayeed’s fastidious, careful pronunciation is like a slowly ticking metronome that gently forces her heart’s rhythm to slow.

“You won’t die.” For some reason, even though he’s asserted the opposite, Sayeed saying the word ‘die’ almost negates the comfort of the statement. “And I can hear sirens.”

Tim, stupid man that he is, takes ‘you won’t die’ to mean ‘you’re perfectly fine, do as you please’ and tries to sit up. He makes it to one elbow before the slick of his own blood causes him to wobble and fall back onto the tile.

“Do not try that again,” Sayeed says, unsurprised by the attempt, and presses more firmly against Tim’s neck to ensure his order is followed.

Tim’s jaw clenches and his eyes fall closed only to snap open when Nelson comes through the front door trailing two paramedics behind him.

Lena swipes the pistol of out Tim’s holster.

“Len’” Tim warns, head slowly rolling to face her. One hand tries weakly to snatch at the weapon. Sayeed also opens his mouth to object.

“It’s fine.” She makes sure the safety is on, but positions her thumb to switch it off quickly if the two men behind Nelson turn out not to be paramedics.
"We’re coming too," is the first thing out of her mouth. Sayeed has more training than a paramedic, which is good for Tim, and the Afghani doctor will be safer at a hospital surrounded by marshals. It makes sense, not that she’d give half a shit if it didn’t as long as Sayeed stays with Tim.

Sayeed glances up at the two EMTs, who look ready to argue. “Maybe the less people, the better it will be in the –”

“Fewer,” she corrects automatically.

Sayeed stares at her and in a tone of voice that would make any American teenager proud, says, “Really?"  

“Sorry.” She’s been trying not to correct him in front of other people. He knows she doesn’t mean badly, that it’s a knee-jerk reaction, but correcting someone in public is a terrible thing to do in Afghanistan, and also this is the dumbest time for it. She makes it up tenfold when she says, “I trust you to look after him.” He is, after all, used to treating exactly this sort of thing.

The comment doesn’t win her any points with the paramedics, however, but no one argues, and in two short minutes, Tim is on a gurney, and they’re packed uncomfortably tightly into the back of an ambulance.

o.O.o

The sound of snoring wakes him.

It’s dark. His mouth tastes like ass and chalk.

Tim turns his head to the right, towards the snoring, or starts to. There’s an immediate, painful pull on the left side of his neck that stops the motion. After the pain subsides to a dull burn he tries again more slowly. Lena’s curled up in the chair next to his bed draped in a blanket, dark hair scrunch up on one side where her cheek rests against an arm. He wonders if it’ll stick like that. It looks uncomfortable, and she’ll probably have a neck ache when she wakes up. He wonders how she’d react if he told her she snores.

There’s nothing to drink on the right side of his bed, so Tim begins the frustratingly slow process of turning his head to the left. The reward for that is fuck all. He turns his head back to center and sighs. The snoring stops.

“Ggh.” Lena sits up too fast for her stiff neck, and squints across at him in the dim light filtering through the hospital blinds. “Hey,” she finishes sitting up, one hand working at a knot, “you awake?”

He’s pretty sure she already saw his eyes open. “Yeah.” His mouth tastes terrible, so all words are directed at the ceiling.

“You uh, you need anything?”

“Water would be nice.”

“Oh, right.” She stands, fumbling to keep the blanket from falling to the floor, and Tim sees she’s wearing a loose, over-sized gray t-shirt with ‘Jack Daniel’s’ written across the chest in white. Lena is not a loose t-shirt girl, definitely not a whiskey girl.

“Nice shirt,” he says when she comes back with a plastic cup of cold water.
“Huh? Oh, yeah, it’s Raylan’s.”

“That was nice of him.” Raylan’s an asshole.

“Yeah, mine had blood on it. Doctors said I was a biohazard. I also scared the crap out of some kid.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He had it coming. He was throwing a tantrum in front of one of the vending machines.”

Lena pulls the chair over to sit just in front of him, turning it so she can prop her elbows on the side while she talks. Tucking herself back up in the chair and the blanket back around her shoulders, she leans forward, resting her chin sleepily on her forearms. “Sayeed says you’re lucky. If they’d used a hollow point, it would have gotten your carotid artery.”

Or if they’d had better aim. Or if he’d taken a bigger step forward. Or if a hundred other things had gone a bit more wrong. Best part of surviving is getting to think about all the ways you could’ve died. And all the ways someone else didn’t have to.

Memories of sitting in a hospital in Bagram after falling through that hotel roof flash to the front of his brain. *You’re lucky, ten feet to the side, you’d be dead. Here’s some Tylenol. Next!*

Lena’s still looking at him, expectant, sleepy eyes searching his face. She’d fixed her hair when she went to get him water. Here in the dark, with her face so close to his pillow, he wants to see it messed up again. He wants to be the one messing it up. He wants to be the one messing it up. *Fuck. Two years.* How did the saying go? ‘Fool me once…’ A frustrating mix of uncertainty, hurt pride, and yearning grips his chest. Her eyes have lost their guard, and Tim wonders what would happen if he tried to touch her.

Lena takes his silence for something else. “Sorry, I guess that’s a dumb thing to say.” She licks her lips, and Tim wishes his breath didn’t smell like post-op ass-cotton and that it didn’t hurt to move. Or maybe he’s lucky it does. *Two years.* It would be easier if he could hate her for it.

Two years. It would be easier if he could hate her for it.

She’s beginning to look nervous, stiffening as if in preparation to move away.

“Hey, remember that time a building blew up under us?”

It takes a moment, but Lena bursts out laughing, a loud guffaw that she covers with her hands. She grins, surprised, and the tension bleeds away. God, he really is a masochist. “Well luckily, I had the foresight not to be standing on top of it.” She’d said those same words to him over two years ago. Lena rubs a finger down the bridge of her nose, which had been huge and purple at the time, caught up in the same memory. And just like back then, he doesn’t really know how to approach her, isn’t sure if he should. “And don’t even think about asking me for bourbon because the doctors would murder me, and your boss would let them get away with it too.”

“How about a bedtime story?” He’ll blame that on the morphine.

Lena smiles again, eyes crinkling, and tilts her head. “Sure I’ll just pull a book out of my aaa… err, hat…if I had one.”

“Is Lena your real name?” he asks instead. Suddenly it’s important.

For a moment Lena looks almost offended, and Tim is afraid he’s screwed up whatever it is that made her pull her chair closer, and maybe that’s for the best. But then her face softens. “Yes. Jesus Christ, what sort of cloak and dagger bs do you think this is? It’s not that exciting, I swear.”
Lena squints, then continuing in a lighter tone, “Also, I’m not quite sure you understand the concept of bedtime stories. Pro-tip, it’s not interrogation. I think being a cop has addled your brains.”

Tim snorts, “I’m not a cop.”

Another squint, “So something else has addled your brains.”

“Maybe the blood loss. Do I get a story or not?”

He expects her to argue, but instead she smiles indulgently. “Fine, but only cause you’re an invalid.”

Tim scowls, but she just giggles at him.

“So there’s this guy – we’ll call him Clemence – gets piss drunk with a bunch of French Foreign Legion dudes…”

.o.O.o

On her way back from the bathroom Lena finds Raylan propping up the wall by the nurses’ station. He’s still wearing yesterday’s clothes.

“You look like you could use some coffee, deputy.”

Raylan glances down the hall at the marshal posted outside Tim’s door. “Well I wouldn’t turn it down,” he says, pushing off the wall to follow her.

Lena stuffs her hands in her pockets, hoping she’s taking the right leap of faith. “So, I hear you’re the office problem child.” He’s a blunt type, so that’s the approach she takes.

“Ha,” Raylan looks down at her and lifts an eyebrow. “I suppose there are some who might hold that opinion.”

“And just how much of a problem child are you?”
Happy New Year!

Lena has terrible taste in music. It had started out benignly enough, new school country that had a rock and pop vibe, but it was still country enough that it didn't offend his tastes. Somehow it transitioned to whatever boyband monstrosity they were listening to now. Raylan doesn't say anything of course. It's her car. That and maybe if he gets on her good side she'll let him take a turn at the wheel.

"So I hear you know Tim from Afghanistan." As hoped, she turns down the cacophony to reply.

"Huh?"

"I said, 'you know Tim from Afghanistan'"

"Yeah." There's a quiet smile that creeps across her face that speaks far more eloquently about that meeting than her one-word answer, but Raylan's not the type to pry, leastways not about that sort of thing. "Not sure I ever pictured him as a Marshal."

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

Lena opens her mouth to answer, but pauses, then says, "Guess I never really thought about it. What made you join the Marshals?"

"I wanted out of Kentucky."

She glances over at him, brows quirked as if to say And how's that workin' out for ya?

He decides to change the subject. "How'd you wind up working for the Feebs? 'Round here they don't really like us, kind of assholes really."

She smiles, no offense taken. "So I've heard, but I'm pretty new. Give it time. I used to work at the State Department. That was how I met Tim. But that required a lot of overseas stuff, and I wanted something closer to home."

"You miss it?"

"Sometimes," Lena chuckles, screwing up the right side of her face, "Is that bad?"

He thinks about his own path that led him where he is today and why he set foot upon it in the first place. He thinks about his fellow travelers and the places they've been. "No. Turn right up here."

Lena does, and soon they're pulling up the long drive to Arlo's house - he hasn't been able to bring himself to think of the place as home in decades, ever since he realized it didn't have to be - which is empty while its owner enjoys his stay at the state pen.

"Oh this is perfect." Lena steps out of the car, slowly turning in a circle to survey the land around
them, which is nearly empty except for the house in the center of it. "Bet you never had to deal with
the neighbors pissing you off making too much noise."

That was probably why Arlo had never sold the place even when he could have used the money.
Misanthropic bastard if ever there was one. Raylan longs for the dense life of Miami. And the sun.
"No, not really."

Lena pops the trunk of her car and stands back, one hand disappearing inside her coat pocket. "Out
you go."

"I can't see anything." The muffled voice coming from inside the open trunk is in an ornery mood.

"You're blindfolded; I didn't kneecap you. Get out."

The man they'd hastily stuffed in Lena's trunk clenches his jaw, looking for a moment like he might
argue the point. Wisely, he decides to do as he's told, awkwardly gripping the edge as he wiggles his
way over the side. Raylan doesn't really see the need to keep the guy blindfolded. It's not as if he
cares whether the sonuvabitch sees this house, and he already knows his captors.

Raylan guides their prisoner the rest of the way up the drive and into the house. While he guides the
man to a chair, Lena disappears to the back of the house, reappearing after a few minutes with a few
towels and his Aunt Helen's favorite sweet tea pitcher filled with water. She sets these on the coffee
table and pulls a few zip ties out of her pocket. Raylan hesitates when she undoes the cuffs and binds
their prisoner's wrists individually to each arm of the chair.

"We're going to need his legs too," she says tossing him another couple of zip ties.

Raylan's eyes flick over the towels and the pitcher of water. He'd agreed to let her ask the guy a few
questions before they hauled him off to booking. "This how the FBI works these days?"

She doesn't look up at him, "Like you said: we're assholes."

He should probably put a stop to this, but Art's not here, and the guy did shoot Tim. And not that he
should be taking a leaf out of that misanthropic bastard's book, but Tim wouldn't bat a single eyelash
at this if it had been one them who'd been shot. No real harm in letting the guy get a little wet.

The man is breathing deeply and slowly, but it's stiffed, betraying his efforts to conceal fear. Lena
arranges a couple of towels under the chair and over his clothes.

"Now then," she turns to Raylan, "what's his name again?"

"He doesn't want to say." In Raylan's opinion, it's a pointless way to stick it to the man. Anyone
stupid enough to take a shot at a US Marshal is going to have a record, and his fingerprints will tell
them soon enough.

"Eh, guess it doesn't matter too much. Okay then, Mr. John Doe, feel free to scream. Don't worry,
we're in the middle of nowhere, so no one's going to help you." Raylan can see John Doe's hands
curl and flex, subtly trying to test the bonds, "Now I'm going to ask you a few questions. I'm not
going to be hugely bothered if you don't answer. It's not like I can't find out another way, might just
take longer and annoy me more. However, you attempted to murder a United States Marshal, so
waterboarding you for a couple of hours will be entertaining with or without any answers.
Waterboarding is pretty great by the way. You'll be dry by the time we take you to jail, so no one's
going to believe we did it.

"But just so you know, one of three things is going to happen once you get into the prison. One,
whoever hired you to take that shot is going to let you rot, and since you're an attempted cop killer, your life is going to be full of suck. No one will want to be your friend. Your employers may also hire someone to kill you, just to tie up loose ends, that sort of thing. I really doubt any of the guards are going to give enough of a shit to stop that. Two, they'll bail you out and then kill you. Or three, you can give me the answers I need and I'll make sure you live. Nod if you believe me."

There's enough fear on the guy's face to know he mostly believes her, but there's enough false bravado to keep him from nodding. Lena shrugs and covers John Doe's face with a washcloth, holding it in place on is forehead, and upends the pitcher of water onto it. "No idea why he doesn't," she remarks drily, shaking her head.

Panicked and unable to breathe, he immediately struggles, kicking against the ties that keep his ankles bound in place. The washcloth suctions in and out of his mouth and against his nose as he strains for breath. Looks damn unpleasant. After a pause, where Raylan can see Lena's lips moving as she counts off the time, she peels back the washcloth.

"Why did you shoot the Marshal?"

"Fu -"

Lena snaps the washcloth back over his face and pours more water over it, counting.

"You can't torture people! This is fucking America!" he squeals when the washcloth comes off again.

"And in America trying to kill a cop is a really dumb idea. I mean," Lena walks into the kitchen to refill the pitcher, "I could always just call that domestic terrorism, have you shipped out to Guantanamo. Or maybe Egypt. You ever heard of extraordinary rendition? Hey Deputy, you ever been to Egypt?"

"No, ma'am, but I'll bet the pyramids are really cool."

"Oh they are. Also, this is enhanced interrogation, Mr. Doe, not torture. Torture would be if I smashed your fingers with a hammer or started pulling teeth or something. Or, like, cut off your ballsack with a pair of sewing shears."

John Doe's eyes widen, glancing at Raylan as if to ask has she done that? "You're going to let her do this? This's illegal man!"

"Yeah, so's shooting deputy Marshals," says Raylan, "but you didn't seem overly concerned about that."

"I didn't know he was a fuckin' cop man! I swear! I swear I didn't know!"

Lena stands in the doorway with Aunt Helen's pitcher. "Marshals aren't cops. I learned that yesterday. And if you didn't know he was a cop, then why'd you shoot him?"

"They paid me!"

"I mean I kind of figured." She picks up the washcloth one-handed and drapes it back over his face. "Like I said, this is just kind of entertaining."

"Jesus Christ! Stop!"

"This stops when I believe you've given me something useful or until my couple of hours is up. Do
you have something useful?"

"I already told you -" the rest is cut off in a spluttering choke. Lena counts for a bit longer this time, long enough that John Doe's struggling becomes sluggish and Raylan feels the beginnings of trepidation and starts wondering how much of the cold crazy bitch act is really just an act.

"Don't worry," Lena stops counting and pulls off the washcloth, and John Doe takes a few heaving, wet breaths, "I know enough not to kill him."

"You do this a lot?"

"Nope, first time. Never really had the stomach for it." Raylan raises his eyebrows at that. She's clearly had the stomach for it so far. "So, Mr. Doe, what do you have for me?"

"They just said to shoot everyone in the house as long as it wasn't kids!" 'as long as it wasn't kids'? Oh God.

"Holy shit." Raylan whips his cell phone out of his pocket. "Get him in the car. Now."

"But I'm not -"

"Now." Whoever paid their prisoner had no idea where their target was; they'd just decided to take out everyone in hopes of taking out the one they needed. That meant they were going after every witness the Marshals had.

"Chief Mullen." Art's voice is a bit fuzzy. This place has crappy reception. Raylan prays he doesn't have to spend too much time repeating himself.

"Art, we got a problem."

o.O.o

She doesn't regret it. It's been four hours and her hands and stomach are still rock-steady. If it were going to hit her, then it would have done so when she dropped Raylan back off at his car, taking John Doe with him. But Lena had sat alone in the front seat, waiting, and had felt nothing different.

Lena drags her feet on the way up to Tim's room, even going so far as to walk up the six flights of stairs just to buy time.

She has to tell him. Not telling seems like hiding, and hiding makes her feel guilty. Lena has enough of that when it comes to him. But nor does she want to see the judgment when she tells him.

Her foot pauses mid-step. Shit. Maybe something bad will happen to her since she did someone wrong. But did she really do him wrong? He deserved it. But who is she to say he deserved it. But then who's to say who deserves anything? That's just a silly line of thinking. Well he definitely admitted to shooting Tim, so it would be really dumb to say he didn't deserve to be waterboarded - in fact he deserved way worse. But then, was she lowering herself? Does her waterboarding him count as an independent wrongful act? Will karma grant her comeuppance, and if so how harshly? Is karma real? She gives herself a physical shake and continues upward.

When Lena finally reaches Tim's room, the extra time taken to get there only having compounded the knot of dread in her stomach, she can see him through the window sitting up and watching TV. Awake. Damn. Maybe her karmic justice will be his disgust. No, don't be a coward.

"Hey you."
Tim flips the TV off. "Hey." He's happy to see her, which only weakens her resolve.

Lena sets the grease-stained bag containing a burger and fries on the bed beside him and goes to the window to peak out the curtains, hoping the distance will make the food not feel like a bribe. She allows herself two slow breaths before turning back around - have to see his face; faces don't lie when they're surprised.

Tim is using the french fries like a spoon, scooping up as much ketchup as they'll hold and shoving them gracelessly into his mouth. On one of those mornings they spent drinking coffee against a concrete wall back in Afghanistan he'd told her all the ridiculous strategies soldiers developed for eating as much food as possible in as little time as possible. She'd nearly gagged when he regaled her with the best way to eat breakfast in basic training - stuffing a bunch of sausage, eggs, a banana, biscuits, and gravy all into a pancake sandwich. She wonders if his table manners would improve if she took him out somewhere nice. Stay on target, dollface. And take your hands out of your pockets. Good lord, she actually feels physically sick.

"I water-boarded someone for the first time today." Lena wonders if saying it so casually only makes her look worse.

There's a pause in his chewing, and for a moment Tim looks like he's the one in trouble, like it's a trick. Please don't hate me, please don't hate me, please don't hate me. "Thought that sort of thing wasn't supposed to work."

"It doesn't usually." It's a struggle to keep looking him in the face, but Lena is determined to make it through this, pride intact.

His face betrays nothing. She wonders if that's on purpose or if her hopes and fears are making mash of her ability to read him. "So why bother?"

She'd been wrestling with exactly that on her slog up the stairs. If the whole episode hadn't been cut short, something she couldn't have predicted, Lena would have had ample time for a traditional interrogation. She did it because he'd shot Tim, plain and simple. He deserved it. It wasn't vengeance, or maybe it was, but she'd wanted him to empathize. Waterboarding isn't about pain; it's about helplessness. Lena had felt exactly that when she'd rounded the corner and seen blood running between Tim's fingers as he tried to put pressure on his neck. Maybe she wanted him to empathize with her. Is that different than vengeance? Was that selfish? Either way, 'I did it because of you' is definitely not an appropriate or fair answer to Tim's question.

"He was an asshole."

"He tell yout anything useful?"

"Yeah, turns out whoever hired him doesn't really know where Sayeed was, just decided to go after all your witnesses." She's still wrestling with what to do with Sayeed right now.

That surprises him. "Shit."

"It's being taken care of," she hastens to reassure him.

Tim looks like he'd rather be out there with a gun taking care of it himself, but knowing that's not a possibility, contents himself with shoving another handful of french fries resentfully into his mouth. He waves at the half-full container. "You want some fries?"

She expected... something... else. This is... hopeful... but it's not concrete. Is he shocked? Doesn't know what to say? Does the lack of reaction mean he's fine with this? Does it just mean he doesn't
care? Doesn't want to argue? Express disgust later? Still processing? Tim, the Schrodinger's cat of judgment.

Lena takes a french fry and swipes it through the little puddle of ketchup. "That's it?" _Do you think I'm a terrible person?_

"Yup."

Lena stares, eyebrows quirked in confusion, nervousness momentarily overcome by the need for precise understanding.

His response is cold, yet reasonable, and Lena fleetingly wonders if she should be judging his judgement of her. "It's not like you took a chisel to each of his ribs."

It's Lena's turn to pause, mentally leafing through a file she'd read years ago and can't fully remember anymore. "That's awfully specific." A tentative prod.

"Yup."

She lets it drop, unwilling to push her luck this evening.

A shrug. "You're the one as told me you're good at your job. Sounds like you're still good at it."

"Not really a part of the job." Lena has always considered herself good because she doesn't need to resort to waterboarding.

"Officially." The casual, single-shoulder shrug fools no one. Lord, he was taking another stab at interrogating her.

"Tim."

"Look, I'm on a morphine drip. Fuck that guy. You want me to feed you some hippie bullshit about how you shouldn't have done it and that the guy deserved mercy and a nice jail cell with a bed made of unicorn farts, I can't. If you want someone to put you back on the righteous path of peace and love then go find someone else." Tim abruptly starts to shake his head, winces, and shakes the burger at her instead. "But not Raylan. He's a shitty moral compass."

Lena huffs, the knot uncoiling. "From what I hear, that's never stopped you from following him around."

"Don't tell anyone. The Marshal's office is strictly don't-ask-don't-tell."

"Is it serious?"

"Why, you jealous?"

"Of you? Totally. That cowboy hat is hot."

In a moment of supreme, self-indulgent pettiness Lena enjoys seeing Tim's smirk falter. It's back again quickly enough, but she savors the victory of a well-placed hit and what it implies. In an even pettier move, she cuts off whatever comeback he's prepared by pulling out her cell phone.

"I gotta go call my assistant. I'll bring you back a present." Lena can see the hope rising in Tim's face, so she cuts that off too with a, "No, not bourbon."

"You're mean." The heartfelt disappointment in his voice almost makes her relent.
Lena raises her eyebrows and says pointedly, "I'm sorry I saved you from eating hospital mush."

He glances at the burger wrapper and empty fry container and sulks. It's adorable, and she can't help smiling. The crease between his brows deepens when he looks back at her and sees it. He'd probably hate being called adorable. Why do men have to hate that? Dammit - dang it - she really does still like him. Oh gosh darn it all.

Instead of talking in the hallway, Lena phones Oona on her way to High on Art and Coffee. It's a short conversation, not even really that, as it consists of Lena making a single lengthy and specific request for Oona to determine if the computer system of the Marshals was compromised in any way, and Oona responding as she always does - 'Sure, boss lady,' in a tone that Lena is only sixty-five percent sure is fond and not homicidal.

When she returns to the hospital, she startles Tim by setting down the largest, tastiest - she tried enough of their coffee that she is both certain of her judgment and most likely loathed by the barista who had to make up all those sample cups (he definitely looked homicidal) - coffee they had. She waits for him to drink it. He does.

This victory does not seem so petty.
I have been staring at this chapter for way too long, and I am done dammit, so sorry if there are typos.

Lena takes one more spin in front of the mirror. Perfect. Nothing manages to project professionalism and say ‘fuck me’ at the same time like a tight, perfectly tailor skirt-suit and backseam pantyhose. Today is Tim’s first day back at the office, and she means to be noticed.

Sayeed gives her the side-eye as they climb into the car, and Lena’s not sure if it’s judgment or surprise at her choice of ensemble. Out of consideration, she generally limits herself to pantsuits around him. It had better not be judgment. I keep you alive, dude. After ten tensely silent minutes he compliments her hair, and Lena takes back every mean and preemptively defensive thought that she’d been stewing over.

A few months into their acquaintance, they’d been sitting at tea in the backyard of his then safe house, and a few pine needles had blown into her hair. She’d felt the prick of one against her cheek, saw his eyes tracking the snag as it blew around in the wind, but she’d pretended not to notice it for nearly an hour to see if he said anything. He never did. Lena smiles, trying not to grin, warmed by his words far beyond the flattery to her appearance.

He says it more slowly and with even more fastidious dedication to pronunciation than usual, and Lena gets the feeling he’d been rehearsing the phrase in his head. He complimented her cooking once. Once. A year ago. That had been a landmark in their relationship.

Lena’s in a good mood when they pull up to the courthouse. She and Sayeed climb the stairs to the floor housing the Marshals’ offices, but when they walk past Tim’s desk he’s not there.

“Is he alright?” she asks Chief Deputy Mullen, feigning only professional concern.

“Heart Gutterson’s doing just fine,” assures her. He just wanted to take another day to recuperate from his injuries. Lena nearly calls bullshit and clenches her jaw against the instinct. She’d texted him two days ago, and he was practically climbing up the wall because he couldn’t wait to get back to work.

But she’s not here to see Tim; she’s here to discuss how to handle Sayeed’s case in the wake of the shooting, so Lena puts all thoughts of the deputy Marshal on hold to be dealt with later.

They’d been moved of course. No other witnesses had been shot at, but according to Oona this was most likely because they were families with children and therefore potential shooters would have known that they couldn’t have been Sayeed or Lena. She hadn’t found any abnormal traffic on the Marshal servers, but given that whoever was behind this was working for the US government, that didn’t mean anything. It’s easier to be sneaky when you don’t have to be.

“I think you should consider staying in Lexington, Agent Carlan.” Ha, agent. That still gets her. Oona was really good at faking badges. “Actually, it’s totally real, and if you ever stop by the New York office where you officially work say high to Jeff for me.” Lena doesn’t know if ‘say hi’
means ‘say hi’ or ‘it’s ok to shoot him and I’ll help you hide the body.’ One never knows with Oona.

“You really want to keep us after all that trouble?” Lena asks dubiously. She’d already found two more potential safe houses out of state and had planned to ask for a detail to escort them. Hopefully Tim would have been on that detail.

“Well, I doubt whoever’s hunting you would think we’d actually keep you here after all that,” Deputy Mullen addresses Sayeed, “That probably it the best place to hide you now. It’s so stupid it’s smart.” He leans back in his chair, fingers laced behind his head. “Also, he shot one of my deputies, and I wouldn’t mind getting one over on them.”

It makes sense, so Lena agrees. For now. Although she’s made some security modifications of her own to the house – she’d installed a few discretely positioned cameras and motion sensors the day they moved in and linked them all up to her phone.

Lena drops Sayeed back at their new safe house, but stays in the car, wondering if she ought to go check on Tim, when her phone pings. She digs it out of her purse to look at the notification.

Passed goat lab. ur looking at a new combat medic now :-)

Lena relaxes back into her seat, a soft, irrepressible smile spreading across her face. Meyer. She’s always made sure he has her number. She’d insisted. “I owe you.” He doesn’t know how deeply she means those three words and the lengths to which she’d go – that she can go – to even that debt, and the affection she feels for him is deeper because of it.

She’s in the middle of texting him back, I don’t see anything :-P, when a photo pops up on the screen – Meyer standing with a group of soldiers, probably at a bar, all frozen in some ridiculously juvenile, celebratory pose.

She deletes the message she’d been typing out and sends Grats! instead, followed by a few emoticons of confetti horns for extra enthusiasm.

At the same time she’s proud and happy for him, and maybe a little relieved too, there comes the sobering realization that now that he’s finished with training he’ll be deployed. Lena had followed his progress, first as he finished airborne school, and then his spec ops combat medic, or SOCM, training. She’d rooted for him every step of the way, and even when training rendered communication impossible, she still accessed his files to check his progress. Now all she feels is the overwhelming fear that he’ll be hurt or killed.

What unit are you assigned to?

Not sure yet. I’ll let u kno.

Lena debates the ethics of trying to quietly get him assigned somewhere that will be stateside for a while. Or to try to fix things so his unit goes somewhere marginally safer. You thought you were safe once, and look how that turned out. She pauses, frozen in a circular loop of worst case scenarios, paralyzed by the fear that each choice is the wrong choice. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Snap out of it, dollface. Lena gives herself a shake. He fought for this path; she can’t take it away from him. For now.

Be safe.

Yes ma’am.

He’s the only one she lets call her ma’am. He’d insisted. Lena smiles to herself. She should
tell Tim. She wants him to be just as proud of Meyer as she is. Though to be fair, Meyer did get him shot, so maybe he… Lena frowns. A few pieces in the back of her mind rattle against each other before fitting together. Tim requesting the day off. Meyer. It’s six years to the day Tim knocked a scared private out of the path of an enemy bullet.

Lena sits silently in the driver’s seat, pondering. Fudge. She’s never going to hear the end of this. She pulls out her phone and dials then starts the car.

“Hey, boss lady, what’s up?”

“Oona? I need an address.”

o.O.o

God, people are fuckin’ morons. Tim slams the cupboard closed, the glass on the counter, and the bottle down after it once the glass is full. The first swallow of bourbon is a relief, and a second quickly follows. His mind is loud, and he can either find something louder to drown out the noise or he can force it all to be quiet. Right now he wants quiet, so a third glass is downed, followed by a fourth, this one savored now that the edge has been dulled.

First it was the fuckers in line in front of him at the grocery store, a group of vapid, twittering hipsters whose biggest concern in life was their damn hair or lame party. He’d had to endure fifteen long minutes of listening to some twenty-one year old who probably still lived in his parents’ basement whine about how his shitty, greasy hair wasn’t quite long enough for a man-bun. What the fuck is a man-bun? Men don’t have fucking buns. And who worries that goddamn much about their hair? Then he’d had to listen as the guy explained, in excruciating and pompous detail how to pick out ‘proper’ red wine. Douchebag had been holding a case of Natty Lite.

Tim takes another swallow, angry again and a little jealous that someone can go through life that concerned about insignificant shit. His twenty-first birthday was in Iraq.

He has to take a piss, brings his drink with him. Tim looks at his hair while he washes his hands. Only time he cared so much about it was when they handed him a DD214 and he realized he’d never again have to get a high-and-tight from the Bx barber.

A loud knock downstairs jerks him back to the present. Shit, he thinks, mind immediately jumping to work, and what could have gone wrong, and from there to how he’s going to handle it in his current state. His extremities are already pleasantly warm, and Art would probably kill him if he tried to drive –

Tim yanks the door open to find Lena standing on the front porch. He’d thought it was Art, or maybe Rachel. The pounding had been too businesslike for Lena. The bourbon has taken enough effect that his eyes drop immediately to her skirt and linger, appreciating what it does for her legs. He wanted to see her again, but not today, and not when he was like this.

Her mouth draws into a thin line as she takes in his appearance – no doubt put off by his old flannel shirt and oil-stained jeans – and Tim’s earlier admiration turns hard. Her presence, especially in contrast to his own, makes him acutely aware of each and every flaw. Well fuck her. Tim squares his shoulders, on the defensive. This is his home, and this is him in his home, and he refuses to feel ashamed of it.

Lena is oblivious to his resolve. She looks like a woman with a purpose and a plan, and given that his only plan is to drink himself into a comfortable stupor, she represents a disturbance in the force. He gathers excuses to deny unvoiced demands, anticipates how best to refuse whatever she
Then she steps forward and he steps back reflexively, and just like that she’s inside and he’s scrambling to mount a new defense, unsure of what attack she has in store. Tim glances behind him. There are crusted plates and old cups layered with grimy film covering his coffee table. There’s still cold, half-eaten pizza at one end of the couch left over from lunch. He hasn’t done the dishes in two days. Planting himself firmly between Lena and the path to the rest of the house, this time he’s determined to hold his ground.

“How do you know where I live?”

“It was pretty easy to figure out,” she says, not really answering. Lena squints uncertainly, not at the mess, but up at him. “Are you drunk?”

Lena’s shorter than him, so with her standing so close he’s forced to look down, but his eyes keep going before climbing back up. Tim wonders if tonight is the night he does something Raylan-level stupid. She’s wearing those ridiculous heels again, and because he’s already a little drunk, he forgets to hate them because they’re colluding with her skirt to show off her legs. The sudden, sharp memory of the both of them in her office, Lena’s legs wrapped around his waist, jumps to the front of his mind. Tim wishes he were wearing a different shirt and didn’t smell like a distillery. Tonight is not the night for stupid. But she’s still looking up at him, standing close enough that he thinks maybe…

Lena takes another step forward and plucks the glass out of his hand without so much as a howdedo, and continues on past him down the hall. The memories evaporate.

“Where’s your kitchen?” she asks, not looking back. But she’s already found it, and Tim follows her in, wondering what the fuck she’s doing with his bourbon, and turns the corner just in time to see her finish pouring it back into the bottle he’d left on the counter.

“What the fuck?” Given her feelings about whiskey, he should probably be grateful it’s not going down the sink.

“Happy alive day.” She turns back to face him.

He looks away and goes to the cupboard to pull out a new glass and a different bottle and pours another drink. But Lena is beside him again, and she takes that glass and the bottle too this time.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell?” Goddammit, all he wants is tradition and quiet. He isn’t prepared for intrusions, and definitely not her.

“You don’t need any more.” Anger flares. As if she has any right to make that call.

“You gave me whiskey in the middle of a goddamned warzone where I wasn’t even allowed to have it, and now you’re taking it away when it’s my day off?”

“Well back then you’d just saved my life, and you were cute, and you had this whole...” she waves her finger around haphazardly at him, “southern charm thing going.” She’s in a mood, with no patience for mincing words or holding anything in, and what would otherwise sound like a compliment sounds instead like dispassionate rationalization.

He glares belligerently, pulls out another bottle, doesn’t bother with a glass, just drinks from it right in front of her, a line in the sand.
“Alright. Fine.” Lena unscrews the cap on the bottle she’s still holding hostage. “You drink, then I drink.”

Tim sneers, “Yeah right. I’ve seen you drink.” He takes another swallow, calling her bluff.

She raises her eyebrows in calm – god, why is she always so fucking calm? – acceptance of his challenge and takes a hefty pull. It obviously still tastes like shit for her, which gives him a moment of sadistic satisfaction. Lena opens the cupboard behind her and hands him a glass. He thinks he’s won easy. Then she pulls out another.

“I can’t keep track if you drink from the bottle.” Her stubbornness confuses him.

Tim pours a drink, sets it on the counter, then snatches her glass over and pours an equal measure.

“There you go,” he says, sliding it back, tipping his own towards her in a mocking toast.

Lena holds up her glass. “Your health and happiness.” It sounds so formal.

Whatever. Tim drains his glass in a gulp, and when he sets it back on the counter hers is waiting as well.

“Well go on then, pour.” Her determination – or maybe it’s her pig-headed refusal to admit certain failure in what is, for her, a stupid idea – irritates him.

He counts in his head and figures she’s probably had about three shots in five minutes. Tim shrugs and does as she asks. Lena’s a big girl and can tap out whenever she wants.

Lena doesn’t tap out, instead settling in at his kitchen table with her stolen liquor, tipsy but not wasted. She’s still sitting up straight, one leg crossed primly over the other. In defiance of her earlier disappointment and her clean cut appearance, he sprawls on the chair next to her, one arm slung over the back. Tim wonders if she’d been pretending to be drunk that time in Bagram, some sort of trick to loosen his tongue and weaken his guard when she wanted information. The thought that he’d been deceived about that too puts a bitter taste in his mouth.

Tim doesn’t knock them back, but he keeps pouring, growing more resentful with each glass she finishes with him. She’s had roughly seven drinks now.

“Jesus, your liver is a gladiator.” She’s speaking a little more slowly, taking care to enunciate properly, but nowhere near the sloppy drunk he’d expect.

“You done yet?”

“Nope.”

He shrugs again. Not his problem.

Lena nods at the liquor in his hand. “How does this help?” she asks, genuinely curious.

“Not all of us want to remember everything.”

“And this erases your memory does it?” Lena looks down at the glass, tilting her head at the liquid in the bottom. “It’s not really working. If you want to feel better, heroine would be more effective.” She fixes him with a look. “Don’t do heroine.”

“What? You don’t feel like shootin’ up with me?”
She twirls her glass on the edge of the table, and Tim waits for it to fall on the floor. “Meyer passed his SOCM training.”

The non sequitur startles him off balance. “Good for Meyer.” His tone is sarcastic, but the next swallow he takes is a sincere drink to the other man’s success. “That what you came here to tell me?”

“Yeah.”

Goddamn her.

Lena jerks, fumbling the glass. It falls off the table and she panics, tumbling after it. Lena ends up on the floor, glass cradled in both hands over her stomach. “Ow.” She giggles and holds it up to him, her prize.

“It’s just a glass,” he says, setting it on the table before giving her a hand up. It takes several tries for her to get her feet under her, and Tim realizes she’s considerably more inebriated than he’d previously thought.

“Oh fuck it.” She toes off her heels, tripping as she does so and nearly falls again. A moment later she chucks each one against the doorframe with a thunk.

“You’re an angry drunk.” He pours himself another glass, and she does the same, knocking the bottom of her glass against his in a clumsy toast.

“Says you.” Lena leans forward over the table, looking up at him from where her head rests sideways on her forearms. Her eyes are slow to focus. “Why does being alive make you sad?”

“I like being alive.”

“Why are you drinking so much?” she amends.

“You always gotta know everything?” he shoots back.

She looks at him, searching, and one corner of her mouth twitches up weakly in a nervous smile. “Would it be so bad?”

He meets her gaze, vulnerable despite having him on the defensive. He’s not drunk enough or sober enough for this and chooses to distract her instead. “That’s pretty funny coming from someone who won’t even tell me who she works for.”

“You always gotta know ever’thing?” she parrots back at him. “You’re awfully concerned about where my paycheck comes from,” and because she’s more resistant to his attempt at distraction than he’d hoped, she says quietly, hesitantly, “I always celebrate my alive day.”

“I used to. But it’s not so fun when not everyone else is alive to celebrate with you.”

“But tha’s not your fault.” An offhand, confident assumption that she doesn’t realize cuts until it’s out of her mouth.

Tim pours himself another drink, and says nothing. His silence speaks loudly enough, and Lena’s face falls guiltily as she slides her own glass over as well.

“Is that what you’re trying t’forget?”

“Why do you want so badly to remember?” he counters.

“Just ’cause I can remember it doesn’t mean I can fix it.”

She smiles sadly. It’s not like she’s that ignorant.

After a while Lena picks her head up off her arms, sitting straighter. She licks her lips, nervous. “Hey, remember tha’ time a building blew up unner us?” Her words are a lot more slurred than before, but the determination hasn’t disappeared. “You saved m’life. You saved i’ way before tha’ too. ‘F you hadn’ taken that bullet for Meyer, then he wouldn’a been there t’ pull me outta that Humvee. Can you at leas’ drink t’ that?”

He’s reluctant at first, but it’s easier just to agree, so he humors her, holding up his glass. But Lena’s face lights up when he does, a big goofy grin spreading from one end to the other. Yeah, he can drink to that.

“And when y’saved me ‘n Clarence from tha’ su’cide bomber.”

He raises his glass again.

“And when you came wi’me t’the prison.” Her glass smashes clumsily against his. “An’ when y’came an’ got me from th’guy pretendin’ t’be Qasim.” Lena continues enthusiastically, making toasts to the entire chronology of their acquaintance. She is now completely blasted-off-her-ass drunk, and he’s having a hard time remembering to resent her presence.

“When you fast and furious-ed us back to base,” he adds.

This earns him an extra-large grin.

“Oh!” She jumps up, immediately stumbles against the table, grabbing his shoulder for balance. “C’mon,” the hand on his shoulder tugs, and he gets up to follow, curious to see where she takes him. “Got’n idea.”

Lena bends down to grab the shoes she’d tossed into the hallway and hands one to him before continuing unsteadily towards the front door.

“Here,” she says when they’re outside, “now throw it.”

Tim gives her a look. “Um, what?”

“Throw it. I ain’ slurrin’ that badly.” She is, but he chooses to take things one at a time.

“And why in the hell do you want me to do that?”

Lena steps back and draws herself up, uncertain again. “It’ll make you feel better.” Tim looks down at her swaying slightly from foot to foot, waiting for him to throw her shoe. God, she’s ridiculous. And in that moment he doesn’t want her to leave. Fuck, he wishes she weren’t so drunk.

Tim throws the shoe up in the air as high as he can, and the stupid thing comes crashing back to earth with a solid, satisfying thwack. He turns back to find Lena smiling at him and can’t help returning the expression. Absolutely ridiculous.

“Hey,” She steps in and a brightly painted finger pokes his cheek. He’s less surprised at being poked than by her initiation of physical contact that’s not solely for the purpose of keeping her upright. “You smiled.”
“Jesus, you’re drunk,” he says, doing it again. He feels less self-conscious about smelling like a distillery when she smells like one too.

“I also came here for that too you know.”

“You wanted to get this drunk? You’re going to be hungover as shit tomorrow. You also didn’t need me for it.”

“No, dufus,” she pokes his smile again, this time letting her finger trail down his cheek, “fer this.” Oh, how he wishes she weren’t drunk.

He lets out a breath and steps back, keeping his hand on her arm in case she starts listing again. “It’s time for you to have a Gatorade.”

Lena sways forward, the smile slipping away to something more serious, and shudders. “Um, I…”

This time Tim doesn’t step back. Lena pukes down his front.

“Shi’I’m so sorry.” She stumbles backward, “I don’ feel so good.”

“Yeah, I gathered that,” he says, wiping at his shirt. It’s pure liquid, no chunks, and Tim wonders if she’d bothered eating before embarking on this little bender. He steers her back inside only to have her throw up again in the entryway.

Lena continues her slurred apologies all the way to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet for the third round. He twists her hair back, tucking it into her collar and hopes it holds. She leans forward heavily, and Tim prays she’s too drunk to notice the state of his toilet. Of course she is.

“I’ll be right back with Gatorade, alright?” He gives her hair one more twist. It’s gonna be a long night.

Tim grabs a couple bottles of Gatorade, and after a little more rummaging he finds a half-full box of crackers. He takes the roll of paper towels with him as an afterthought.

Lena’s resting across the toilet, chest to cheek, eyes closed and breathing heavily.

“Hey,” he gives her a gentle shake, so as not to upset her stomach further, and tries to press the Gatorade bottle into her hand. Her eyelids twitch. “Lena?” He shakes a little harder this time. “Lena?” Fuck, he hadn’t realized she was this drunk. She’d been sitting down the whole time, and he’d drunk pretty fast so she had too. He no longer remembers how much she had. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He’s such a fucking idiot. “Lena?”

He hauls her off the toilet seat and shakes her hard now, starting to worry. Her eyes flutter, but don’t open, head lolling back. “Nnggh.” He thinks maybe that’s a good thing, but then a ripple runs through her body, and she throws up again. Tim turns her head quickly to the side, but only half makes it into the toilet bowl. She coughs weakly.

“Shit. Lena?”

She doesn’t respond.
There’s a gold high heel in the middle of the sidewalk.

Rachel has just enough time to see that it’s sporting a few deep gouges before Tim’s front door bangs open and two figures come stumbling out of it. Tim staggers towards her, making remarkably good speed considering he’s supporting a woman who’s doing next to nothing to help him. Rachel recognizes the FBI agent who’d brought in their latest witness.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” she puffs out, biting her tongue against the rest. Tim and Agent Carlan are both messes, her gray and him white, and when he draws even with her she can see the half-dried vomit covering them both.

“I’m sorry, but I just…” he trails off helplessly, unsure, the slur of alcohol and panic pulling at his tongue.

“Get her in the car.” The change in momentum this process entails is too much for a semi-conscious Carlan, and she falls forward, heaving. A thin string of liquid spools from her lips to the ground, and Rachel resigns herself to her car smelling like Ocean Wave and puke until morning.

Tim crawls into the back seat first, and they push and pull Carlan up next to him. He positions her on her side, head tilted slightly down. Despite the late-autumn chill Rachel rolls the front windows all the way down.

“I’m sorry about your car,” says Tim when they’re on the road. “I’ll get it cleaned.”

“I’ll send you the bill.”

She sees him nod distractedly in the rearview mirror, his attention more focused on holding a few strands of Agent Carlan’s hair in front of her mouth to make sure she’s still breathing.

“She good?”

A nod and a grunt.

“What the hell happened?” She also wants to know what he’s doing with a Feeb. If this were Raylan it would be funny, but Tim hasn’t mentioned bringing a girl home for a while.

“She drank too much.”

“I can see that,” she says, unimpressed with his attempt at evasion. “What I mean is why’d you let her?” That’s a funny question coming from Rachel. Tim doubts she’s ever cared about a man ‘letting’ her do anything, and he says so, giving a brief explanation of the circumstances that led to them being in the back of her vehicle.

“You’re both idiots.” Instead of the sardonic comeback she expects, he takes it, rolling over and letting it kick him in the soft part of his stomach.

When they reach the hospital, Rachel stays with Tim in the waiting room. He sits silently, fingers laced tightly and kneading against each other, eyes riveted on the double doors leading back to the patient rooms.

Rachel sighs. “At least you didn’t try to drive her yourself.” Tim called her once for a ride not
long after Art had given him a dressing down for showing up intoxicated to the VFW. He’d mumbled something about losing his keys, and Rachel’s still not sure if they’d been held hostage by an unusually conscientious bartender or if he’d needed an excuse to call her for the ride.

The wrinkle between Tim’s brows deepens, and for a split-second it’s Clinton sitting next to her and not Tim, and a bubble of anger expands in her gut. Rachel thanks Jesus, God, and Mary that she heard her phone ring when he called because she knows he wouldn’t have waited for an ambulance.

“You need a shower,” she says when his fidgeting becomes too much, deciding he needs a break from sitting around in the hospital he just left.

“Someone should be here when she’s done.”

“Tim, you’ve got puke all down your front, and I’m pretty sure if I lit a match next to your face, the air would catch fire.” Determined to be stubborn, he takes off his flannel over-shirt and tucks it under the chair; the old wife beater he’s got on underneath only has a quarter-sized stain in the middle where some of the vomit soaked through.

Rachel eyes him, brows pinched together in disapproval. “You really want her to wake up to you looking like this?” It’s just like telling Nick to brush his teeth and him insisting swishing around some mouthwash is the same thing.

He pinches his lips between his teeth, and she watches as his resolve cracks and then crumbles. Men and their egos. Stick a hook in that and you can lead ‘em anywhere. “Come on, I’ll take you home so you can shower. We can pick her up a spare change of clothes while we’re at it.”

“I owe you,” he says, once they’re back in the car, still fidgeting, drumming his knuckles against the window.

“Damn right you do.” She leaves it at that, restraining the urge to chastise him further. He looks beaten enough that she can save the lecture for another time, but damned if she ever has to look at him again, a man she depends on, and think of her brother in law. “Man, you and a Feeb.” It’s a feeble effort to lighten both their moods, but it falls as flat as the expression on Tim’s face.

“She just came for a drink.”

Rachel snorts, “Uh huh,” brow cocked and loaded. Don’t lie to me, boy. He pretends to ignore the look, feigning tiredness, and leans his head against the window, eyes closed.

When they arrive back at Tim’s house, Rachel picks up the mysterious lone high heel on her way back up the walk. It’s frivolous and impractical; the heel is too high, a stiletto, and the whole thing is covered with a sheer lace that’ll tear if you look at it wrong. Someone obviously gave it a hard glare, an expensive tragedy, she notices when she sees the brand. “Damn, this is a Christian Louboutin.”


“Louboutin. It’s French.” Rachel frowns, considering. “What the hell are you doing with a girl who wears two thousand dollar shoes?” The better question is what the hell an FBI agent in Kentucky is doing with two thousand dollar shoes. She takes in Tim’s living room, the dishes, the cold pizza with oily, congealed cheese sitting on one of the couch cushions, curious what Tim sees in a woman who wears those kind of heels. Only accessories he’s ever dropped big money on were for his guns. It’s not that she thinks Carlan’s out of Tim’s league; it’s that Carlan probably thinks she is.
Ole Miss had plenty of girls like that, sweet southern belles with sour centers who didn’t give guys like Tim the time of day unless they had use for them. And girls like that don’t change, only the way they use others.

“I guess one of us is an idiot.” From his tone it’s unclear which one of them he thinks that is. Then realizing what she said, he continues uncomfortably, “And I ain’t…I’m not with her.”

Rachel rolls her eyes at his back as it disappears up the stairs then back at the shoe before setting it by the door. Not that the man doesn’t deserve some happiness in his life, but she doubts that’s what Agent Carlan would bring to it. It’s probably a good thing she ended up with alcohol poisoning instead of in Tim’s bed. Rachel flops down on the couch and watches TV for the five minutes it takes him to shower, gargle some mouthwash, and throw on clothes.

O.O.o

“I’ll bet he even tucked you in after he took you home. Did he tuck you in, Lena?”

“Deputy Brooks gave me a ride home last night.” Talk about awkward.

“Are you sure Deputy Gutterson wasn’t the one giving you a ride home?”

“Yes, Oona, I’m sure.” Lena had been wrong. It wasn’t that she was never going to hear the end of it; she’s going to be constantly assailed with it. “Now that drug company you were –”

“Chivera.” Lena nearly sighs in relief but stays silent, hoping to prevent any more tangents.

“Yes, them. The ones with the morphine recall.” Lena takes another bite of breakfast between searching through papers. “Okay, last week –”

“What are you eating so loudly?”

“I’m not eating loudly.” She’s chewing with her mouth closed for chrissakes.

“If I can hear you chewing then –”

“Deviled eggs,” Lena interrupts shortly, trying to steer the conversation back on track. “Can you tell me where the last shipment came from?”

“Oooooh, did the deputy devil your eggs?”

“Ew! Oona! Good grief, woman, will you just –”

“Fine, fine, get your panties out of a twist and out of your ass crack. Jesus. I’m just saying.” She’s been ‘just saying’ for the past twenty minutes, and all Lena wants is the damn shipment information. No one needs to know about her train wreck of an evening with Tim. Well, partial train wreck.

“You’re a dumbass.”

“You changed your shirt.”

“Some dumbass puked on it.” Tim one-finger nudges a large takeaway paper cup towards her. “I brought you coffee.” He brought her coffee.

Tim’s sitting with his boots thrown up on the hospital bed, getting road grease on the blanket, but Lena doesn’t give a damn – darn – about that right now, because instead of calling her
a crazy psycho stalker who showed up uninvited and then proceeded to drink herself half to death (Dr. Evans had given her a weighty, meaningful look over the rim of his glasses. ‘At your age?’ his eyes admonished.), he’s brought her clean clothes and coffee from somewhere that’s not the hospital cafeteria.

“I’m sorry I ruined your evening,” she says sincerely. Lena takes the lid off and blows across the top. If the IV hadn’t already taken care of the nausea and the hangover, the smell of this brew would. Beans roasted by the gods, infused by the tears of virgin unicorns –

A shrug brushes off her apology. “Eh.” He sips at his own coffee, adjusting his feet to tip the chair back on two legs, further spreading the black smear on her blanket. “It was nice to have the company.”

Oona had been the one to give her the address and so feels entitled to a complete rundown of the whole night. This is why you don’t befriend your employees, her grandfather’s voice whispers in the back of her head, and because it’s the voice of an uptight old codger she ignores it.

“Oona. Shipment,” she snaps, hoping her efficiency will engender like behavior in her assistant.

“Yeah, yeah.” Oona has known her far too long to take her irritation seriously, even when Lena wants her to. “The recall was for a batch from their New York lab, and as far as I can tell…” Lena can hear her tapping on a keyboard as she pulls up a document, “their last two shipments came from Italy, which may or may not be strange. Most of the time they’re coming from England to New York; Chivera has only had a few from Italy in the past year.”

“Where from?”

More tapping. “From…Ancona, from another pharmaceutical company called Angeliano.”

“Ancona…Ancona…” Lena’s eyes sweep across a Google maps page. “That’s only about four hours south of Aviano Air Base.”

“You think Chivera’s using the air force as mules and then shoveling it all off onto Angeliano?”

That’s exactly what she would bet. These guys are even smarter than Lena had given them credit for. Why bother smuggling it back to the U.S. to run some second-rate drug ring when you can get a legitimate pharmaceutical company to get it through customs for you? Kelsey had made a few discreet inquiries at the DEA, and no snitches or undercover agents had reported anyone flooding the market with opioids. The stuff had to be going somewhere.

“Probably. Oh my gosh, would you look at that. They have an American office.”

“Oh, and would you turn back around and look at its ass. It’s in D.C.” Oona’s tone finds room for serious, “You gonna come home and visit?”

“Maybe,” Lena hedges. Sayeed is her first priority.

“Well stop by work sometime. John has two sandwiches rotting in his office and refuses to look for them. I’m about to firebomb the place, so you’re our only hope.”

o.O.o

Tim brought a hangover and a cloud to work with him, and the day is fixing to continue
sliding downward. The coffee falls the wrong way out of his mouth, splashing inelegantly back into his mug. A few wayward drops sprinkle his shoes and cuffs. Fuckin’ great.

“Who made this?” Coffee is too generous a term for the thin, vaguely coffee-flavored swill he found in the pot. No one in the bullpen meets his eye, but Nelson is a little too interested in the paperwork on his desk, so Tim decides it’s his fault that his hangover is being prolonged by a lack of quality caffeine. “It’s eight scoops!” he calls out. The noise and effort of raising his voice don’t do good things for his headache, but the satisfaction of yelling outweighs the discomfort. Everyone continues to ignore him, save Nelson, who chances a furtive, guilty glance. Tim glares, and Nelson goes back to filling out his report with an enthusiasm Art only wishes his deputies had for paperwork.

Back at his desk Tim yanks the blinds closed and flips open a file on one, Robbie Gates, a second-rate thug for the Dixie Mafia and the asshole responsible for the twelve stitches on the left side of his neck. Looking at the photo clipped to the first page, Tim thinks some time in the state pen will do Gates some good; at least in prison they take you to the dentist.

His eyes flip to the clock and then the door. Raylan is late of course, but Tim means to go with him when he heads to KSP to interview Gates. Another glance at the clock. Maybe he already headed there without him…Tim takes out his phone, preparing to call Raylan when he hears the doors open.

It’s Lena. Sayeed holds the door since her hands are full carrying a cardboard coffee holder and a paper bag. She pauses at Rachel’s desk to hand off one of the coffees and the bag. Rachel accepts each, saying something to Lena that Tim can’t hear even though he tries. He gets the second coffee and a smile before she heads into the conference room. In rude contrast to his hungover, grainy-eyed state, Lena appears crisp and fresh and smells like a fresh pine forest but without the dirt and bear piss. His eyes follow her through the glass door, wondering how many thousands of dollars she’s wearing on her feet today. *Fuck.* How do you buy a girl dinner when she’s wearing those? But she let him throw one. It’s still sitting, sad and mangled, by his front door.

He looks away to find Rachel regarding him, one brow raised meaningfully. He gives her a look back and is about to say he was looking at Lena’s shoes, not her ass, but then checks himself because wow, how fucking gay would that make him sound?

The paper bag on Rachel’s desk is too big for just one pastry, so Tim heads over to investigate. She glares over the top when he gets close.

“I get first pick.”

He backs up a step, hands out in peaceful surrender. “Yes ma’am.” In hindsight he should probably be the one bringing her coffee.

Rachel pulls out her selection and passes the bag back across her desk. His mulling over of the contents is interrupted by a loud concert of car horns outside. It sounds like rage. Tim looks out the window at a traffic jam in the lot, a couple of SUVs making three point turns and gumming up the works.

“Bet you five dollars that’s Raylan,” Rachel says, not bothering to look herself.

“Nah, we’d’a heard gunshots if he was down there.”

Sure enough, four minutes later Raylan walks through the door.
“You’re late,” says Rachel, holding out her hand to Tim. He rummages in his pockets and slaps a crumpled bill on top of it.

“A bunch of idiots out there didn’t know how to park.”

“I’m going with you to KSP today,” Tim interjects into Raylan’s own little cloud. “When you headin’ out?”

“You got a water bottle on you?”

Tim’s brows quirk, confused. “No.”

“Then let’s go.”

Rachel looks up from her computer screen. “You’re going to go interview the guy that shot you?”

“Yeah.” She’s gearing up for protest, which he tries to head off with, “It’s fine, I’ll be with Raylan.” It’s not the most convincing argument he’s ever made.

She fixes the both of them in place with a look that very clearly says bullshit.

“I promise we won’t kill him. He’ll be alive when we leave.” Tim pulls on his jacket and dumps his keys in the right pocket. “He’ll have a pulse and everything. Scouts honor.”

Rachel huffs, suspicious, but unable to stop them. They’re halfway to the door when the fire alarm goes off.

Raylan looks up at the alarm flashing in the corner, annoyed. “Oh hell, who burned the popcorn this time?”

“Raylan! Tim! Get back in here!” Art’s hanging out his office door. “Someone just called in a bomb threat.”

“Great.”

Tim’s eyes go automatically to Lena and Sayeed, both out of their chairs and looking bewildered that no one’s making much effort to leave the building. Tim sidles up to the window and peaks out. Those SUVs from earlier are still there, settled in a clump at one end of the parking lot. He lets down the blinds and pulls his sidearm.

“Yeah, problem is that if someone actually wants to bomb you, they don’t call it in.”
Tim has a list – a long, carefully defined, and strictly adhered to list – of things that he does not dwell on for a sustained period of time. His subconscious may not obey all the rules, but when he’s awake he shoves, cajoles, and beats his conscious mind onto the right track, the safe track. It’s never been particularly obedient either.

“No. That’s the dumbest fuckin’ thing I’ve heard in my life. You are not going to fuckin’–”

“Oh c’mon, Sarge, it’ll be fine. There’s plenny of big ass rocks for cover, an’ I’m faster ‘n all of you.”

“That’s exactly what your girlfriend told me before we shipped out.”

“Shut up, Gibson.” Tim turns to Ferraro, “No, dipshit, I’m not letting the Taliban play fuckin’ whack-a-mole with you. Stay the fuck down until they pass.”

Ferraro grumbles but remains hunkered down behind his boulder and out of sight, and Tim thinks it’s a good thing they’ve got leave coming up in a few weeks. Every time he looks in that kid’s eyes they’re a little less grounded, the edges a little wilder. Last few patrols Ferraro’s been the first out in front and the last to find cover. It happens to some guys that way, sliding into the mindset that the more they dare death the more control they have, the less they have to be afraid of. It’s a twisted comfort, that illusion of choice.

Tim doesn’t know what catches the attention of the larger Taliban patrol farther down the ridge, but something does. The first rocket hits over their heads, and Ferraro’s off like a jack rabbit, yelling and spraying bullets back at them. He gets all of thirty yards before one of their bullets knocks him in the chest and down for good. His parents get a purple heart and a body.

“What my deputy means to say,” Art continues more tactfully, “is that our team is going to go investigate the situation, and I’ll decide what to do from there.” Tim notes Art’s precise language – “our team” and “I’ll decide”. This is his castle, and as long as she’s on this side of the drawbridge, she’d do well to remember it.

“Hey, I think it’s a pretty good idea. Gimme the keys, and I’ll drive.”

Lena and Art turn to Raylan as one. “No.”

“I would, of course, be wearing a vest,” Lena tries again.

“Are you deaf or dumb? You of all people should know a car ain’t bulletproof.”

“Tim,” Lena turns on him, patience ruffled, “I’m pretty sure they don’t have a .50 cal.”

“Oh, and your car has armor that can take the rest, does it?” Her expression says no but that she’s not giving up the idea either. “You aren’t gonna be fuckin’ bait, Lena.”

A couple years ago he saw a woman in crisp white shirt, who was always too clean and smelled too good for the shithole he’d met her in, staring down the barrel of a pistol, and a few minutes after, a couple of AK-47s. He saw her white shirt wet and stained all over with blood. Each of these is on his do-not-dwell list. Tim glares at Lena’s white shirt, then back up at the woman herself.
“Ms. Carlan,” Art continues, once again voicing his wishes for him, “for now I’d like you
and Mr. Faheen to wait in the conference room, back corner away from the windows.” There’s a
steel there that says ‘this is my office and it’s not a request’, though they can both see she considers
treating it like one. “You,” Art circles a finger around at the rest of them, “go see what’s outside.”

They pass the bomb squad on their way out, suited up like waddling grey-green turtles.
Raylan gives Tim a nudge. “Let’s check those SUVs.” He’s still pissed about the earlier parking jam.
Honestly, half of Raylan’s problems would probably disappear if he just learned to let shit go. Tim
just shrugs and follows; it’s not like he’s got room to judge on that account.

They approach slowly, guns unholstered and half-raised. The windows are tinted, but the
sun’s at the right angle to see that all of them are empty.

Raylan lets his Glock drop. “There’s no one inside.”

“Shit really? I thought they were just invisible.”

Tim turns back around, surveying quickly. Overflow from the Marshal carpool, staff lot,
visitor lot…he strains to see the inside of the cars, stepping forward…cars parked out on the street.
That’s weird considering there are still plenty of spaces left in the visitor lot. Tim catches Raylan’s
eye and jerks his head towards the two cars parked on the curb across the street, a blue impala and
something dark green he can’t see the emblem on.

He’s just taken the first tentative steps toward them when he’s startled still by squealing tires,
and a rumbling silver blur shoots past him and into the street.

o.O.o

Lena rummages around the inside of her purse, shoving the contents about in a jangling
slurry. For once she regrets being prepared for every eventuality; the pill bottles are bulky, the deck
of cards has slid out of its pack and turned everything to soup, and why the heck does she need so
many pens? She gives up and dumps everything onto a chair.

“Is he looking over here?”

Sayeed gives a quick, discreet shake of his head. “He’s on the phone.”

Ah! There it is. Lena snatches up her quarry, a little cloth zip-bag with tampons, and dumps
everything else back into her purse except her keys, wallet, and cell phone, which go in with the	tampons. She surreptitiously slides the pistol into her coat pocket.

Lena looks up in time to see Sayeed eye the pistol dubiously, obviously debating whether to
talk her out of what is certainly not going to be the wisest decision she’s ever made. But she knows
that whoever is out there waiting for them, it’s not just the bozos in the SUVs. Those are a
distraction. The most surefire way she can think to draw out the lurkers is with bait.

Sayeed’s shoulders fall a fraction, untensing – he’s still not thrilled with her – and with a last
flick of his gaze towards Chief Deputy Mullen’s office, he says a quiet, “Fi Amanullah.” May Allah
protect you. It must be comforting to put oneself in God’s hands, believing that whatever happens, it
was a benevolent being’s ultimate will. Faith in someone’s grand plan, and that it includes you, just
feels like disappointed hope waiting to happen. All she has is an obligation. Everything past that day
in the convoy was just extra, a fluke of death’s math, and if he decides to take it back, she’d better be
allowed to do something useful first.

“Fi Amanullah. Stay with Chief Mullen. Do what he says, and stay away from windows.”
Her admonishments are met with a raised brow, gently mocking. “As you are doing?”

She grins with more confidence and fewer nerves than she feels and turns to lean through the door to Mr. Mullen’s office.

“Chief Mullen?” Lena jiggles the little bag down by her side, half behind her leg as if in unconscious urgency, making sure he notices while pretending to be discreet. “I’m going to use the ladies room. Be back in a flash.”

His eyes do go to the bag and away again just as fast. “Stay on that side,” he waves to indicate the back wall.

She does as asked, skirting around empty desks to the door. Resisting the urge to look back to see if he’s watching her, Lena turns right towards the bathrooms and, passing them, heads for the stairwell. The building is mostly empty, and on the two occasions she runs into anyone, she flashes her fake FBI badge. The trip down to the parking garage is quick.

Lena bypasses all the cars, creeping towards the outside entrance first to peek into the exterior lot. Her car, impressive machine though it is, is loud, with a distinctive purr even in idle, so she scouts ahead to make sure the path out will be clear. It is, so she hurries back to the car, pops the trunk and pulls out and straps on a bullet proof vest.

This time when she reaches the exit, Lena pulls out farther this time. She can see the Marshals patrolling in groups around the courthouse. There’s a cluster around the SUVs, weapons up and at the ready. She sits still a minute, squeezing her hands around the steering wheel and willing that first pump of adrenaline and nerves back down. Come on, dollface, this is your jam. Then she hits the gas and the engine roars and the tires scream and that second pump of adrenaline goes unchecked, a shot of cocaine straight down her spine and all the way out to her fingers. It’s thrilling, the stuff addiction is made of, she thinks, yanking the gear shift from first straight into fourth and spinning the wheel in a hard left that would send a lesser vehicle into an uncontrolled fishtail or a roll.

The high lasts all of five seconds, right up until the first hail of bullets shatters the back windshield and she has to duck. Her eyes snap to the rearview before swerving another too-fast left, narrowly missing the cars in the middle of the intersection. Angry, scared drivers lean on their horns in protest, but there’s no room for guilt right now. It’s not the SUVs following her, but a couple of dark sedans. She wonders if the SUVs back in the parking lot were decoys or if they’re following further behind, waiting to pounce.

Another staccato pop of bullets wipes everything but the next left out of her mind. She has to circle the courthouse, trick them into staying on her tail until the Marshals and LPD can catch up and take them out from behind. The trick is to let them see her but turn before they can shoot her.

It might be cold outside, but the gods have blessed her with dry weather, and the tires barely skid as she leans into the turn, pressing the gas pedal down, and shifting it up to fifth. She shouldn’t be that hard to find; just follow the chorus of pissed off car horns and people screaming obscenities. Lena barely sees a pedestrian in time and swings a near-two-seventy degree turn, swearing right along with them. A few more bullets whistle past, and a spider web of cracks blooms across the front windshield. Shit. Lena stays straight for a moment, reaches into her pocket for her pistol to finish the job. She has to come to a near stop to make sure the thing does whip back into her face. Her pursuers have gotten too close, but the blue and red lights reflecting off the rearview mirror and into her eyes mean that someone else has caught up with them as well. Putting pedal to metal, Lena allows herself a small cheer and heads out of town.
“Tim! Sit your ass back down! There are people everywhere!” Rachel reaches over to yank on his pant leg, and the car swerves. She over-corrects and swerves the other direction.

“Then stop trying to run them over. Or are you just livin’ out a real life Grand Theft Auto fantasy?” He’s pissed ‘cause the yank made his last shot miss the tire he was aiming for. He should have gone with Raylan. Raylan wouldn’t have bitched at him for blowing out the tires of murderous assholes. Hell, he probably would have steered with one hand and shot with the other.

Rachel slaps a radio into his chest. “Just tell me where they’re headed. And put your damn seatbelt on.” He does so, marveling at the stupidity of civilians who act like they’ve never had to pull over for a police vehicle before. It slows them down, and they lose sight of the chase. He grinds his teeth and wishes he could wave his shotgun out the window, scare them into getting their fucking shit together and moving out of the goddamn way. Some fucker actually makes a left turn in front of their car. Rachel slams on the breaks and when she recovers says evenly, “You can shoot that guy’s tires.”

The radio squawks, and Raylan tells them to book it north up the seventy-five.

Rachel turns. “Jesus, how fast is she going? It’s only been five minutes.” The seventy-five is a fifteen minute drive, at best, and Lena didn’t take a straight route.

Tim shifts in his seat, antsy, uncomfortable with nothing to do but wait. “I bet she’s really good at Grand Theft Auto.”

Driving a hundred and forty with no windshield is hard. And stupid. Aside from the windburn from the cold air on her face, her eyes keep tearing up, making it hard to see properly. But slowing down and letting the people trying to kill you get a better shot is an even worse idea, so she keeps her speed, leans on the horn, and wills everyone the fuck out of her way.

LPD is keeping up, but hangs back. The people chasing her have automatic weapons and have already turned one car into swiss cheese. If she’d thought this through better, she’d have brought a rocket launcher and someone to shoot it.

Her heart lifts when she sees a building-sized blur in the distance, and windburn and tears aside, she speeds up, hoping to find cover, provide LPD and the marshals with a better chance to bring these guys down.

Lena’s wipes at her eyes, straining to see what the structure up ahead is, when a much smaller, much closer blur runs into the road.

She does exactly what she’d been told never to do and swerves to avoid the animal. If she’d swerved left, she’d have crashed into the median and probably killed herself, but she swerves right instead, off the shoulder and skimming dirt. Her tires can’t grip loose soil the way they can grip black-top, so she can’t correct and keeps sliding sideways. The slide, combined with considerable forward momentum, flips the car. Lena curls in, covering her head against the airbag, and screams. Or at least she assumes she does because by the time the car finishes sliding her mouth is full of dirt.

It takes a bit for gravity to reassert itself and to figure out which way’s up, which is difficult because the front corner of the car is caved in, making it lean forward on the diagonal. Luckily, the windshield was lost, so there’s less glass than there otherwise would be where she braces her hand.
on the ground. Wriggling and crawling her way out of the car doesn’t hurt too badly. Her head’s a bit shaken, the rest a bit banged up but just bruises. Some shards of glass from the side window swiped her face and shoulder during the roll, and the middle two fingers on her left hand are jammed from the airbag deploying. The vest, while cumbersome, probably prevented worse.

The sound of tires sliding on pebbles is a bucket of cold water thrown over her sluggish brain. *The gun.* Lena shoves her hands in her pockets, but they’re empty. *Fuck fuckfuck.* Heedless of the glass and bent metal edges, she scrambles back towards the car. If she can just –

A hand closes over her ankle and jerks backward, tearing her shirt and the vest up and raking her stomach across the rocks and dry grass. Panicking, she kicks out, twisting, trying to get loose, but whoever’s dragging her has a grip like iron.

“So,” the hand drops her and Lena turns over to a man with a hard face and a gun, “you’re the State bitch? Where’s your Haji boyfriend?” Lena remembers what Tim told her about guns. *Don’t pull it unless you’re prepared to use it.* This man is one hundred and fourteen percent prepared.

He kicks her hard in the shin, cocks the hammer. “I said where’s the goddamn doctor?”

Part of interrogation is asking precise questions and paying just as much attention to the exact wording of your suspect’s answers. The sneaky ones tell the truth just enough to let you fill in the blanks with erroneous assumptions.

“I left him behind. I don’t know who’s with him now or where he is.” All truth. He could be at the courthouse or not, with Chief Mullen or not.

“Then I guess you ain’t any fucking use are you?” The gun twitches up, and Lena flinches at the sharp crack of a pistol firing.

Two little spurts of red mist fountain out of the man’s chest, and he crumples forward.

Lena stays on the ground a minute, frozen, puzzled, working out how he, the man with the gun was shot, and she, the one without the gun, is unscathed.

A shadow in the shape of a cowboy hat flickers over them, and Lena looks up to see Raylan squatting down next to her. “You good?”

o.O.o

A shiny glint of silver catches his eye. Then they get closer, and he notices there’s a dark patch on the silver glint, and a second later that it’s Lena’s car, and it’s upside down. He tells Rachel to step on it. She marks the fear, unusual in the unflappable ex-ranger, and does as asked.

“Jesus.” Rachel’s slow to open the door. The show has already gone down, and there’s not thing to do but figure out what happened and clean it up.

Tim jumps out of the car, eyes scanning, alert, and through the crowd he can see the lumpy white sheets on the ground. There’s one apart from the rest, next to the silver glint, and for a second his vision goes dark at the edges.

“Hey, Tim!” A voice calls and an arm waves.

He ignores the voice and the arm, runs towards the overturned car and the white sheet next to it.
“Tim!”

He ducks under the tape and around everyone who’s pissed he hasn’t shown them a badge and kneels down next the thin plastic, pealing it back.

Raylan catches up to him and pulls on his shoulder. “Tim, I said, she’s fine!”

Tim stares at the pallid face under the plastic. It’s not her. It’s some guy. He notices that the lump under the sheet is too big to be her body, and looks around at the rest. They all are.

“Where is she then?” His heart slows down and his lungs stop trying to choke him.

“That truck stop over there. She’s okay, just shaken up. LPD’s with her.”

Tim trudges the two hundred or so yards to the truck stop, shaking out the jitters. Now that the fear has died down, the rage moves in its place.

Calmer – or at least more cognizant – he shows his star to the officers in the truck stop, and they tell him the FBI agent he’s looking for is still in the bathroom getting cleaned up.

He pounds on the restroom door, ready for a fight, ready to yell, to make her understand how much of a fucking idiot she was.

It opens with a soft click, and the anger sticks in his mouth like peanut butter. She looks like shit. There’s blood smeared over her face, only half-cleaned off, and more on her shirt. There’s a wet pink wad of paper towels in her hand. She stares back at him, defensive, tries for a smile, but it’s too unsteady and slides right back off. There are too many emotions, all too strong, and he keeps his mouth shut tight so the wrong one doesn’t come out.

Lena shifts her weight to the other foot. “Hey.”

The emotions slip out anyway, and Tim steps into the bathroom, steps into her and keeps going. The first pass is a clumsy mash of lips, rushed by desperation and an overwhelming need for touch, for proof of life. His aim improves on the second go round, and he keeps on forward, as close as he can get because, as after any brush with death, what he needs most is to feel life.

Lena’s back hits the wall with a thud and a gasp, and he’s afraid he’s hurt her, jarred an injury from the crash or something and goddamn, he should have thought to –

Her hands climb up his neck and around his jaw and into his hair, and then she’s pulling him back into the kiss with a death-touched desperation that mirrors his own. Tim grabs two handfuls of hair and pulls, anything to hear her make noise, to show life. Her nails dig crescents in the back of his neck, and he grinds into her, filthy and needy. She jerks against him, a moan vibrating against his lips. He shoves the jacket back and off her shoulders and bites down hard on the soft hollow of her collarbone, working his way back up until he can taste her pulse, sucking until there’s a dark purple welt in the shape of his teeth.

Lena pushes him back, fumbling open the buttons of his shirt, swollen red lips trailing after. Her nails scrape over his sides, down his stomach. He exhales sharply, “Fuck.”

Another shove against his hips and he stumbles backward, catching himself on both hands against the sink. She looks him in the eye, runs a hand over the tattoo on his chest, then lower. Lower. He grips the cold porcelain, thinks about taking off her clothes and having her right here, hard and rough enough and as many times as it takes for him to forget the body bag next to her car. Jesus fucking Christ.
“Tim?” She takes her hand back, uncertain.

He leans up and hooks a hand around the back of her neck, pulling her against him. His other arm wraps firmly around her shoulder blades, holding her in place so he can feel the rise and fall of her chest against his. He holds his breath, unwilling to lose it in front of her.

“Hey,” she says into his neck, soft, coaxing. Lena pushes gently against his chest, trying to lean back and get a look at his face. “Hey.” But he doesn’t want that right now, so he holds her right where she is. Eventually she gives up, slipping her hands into his open shirt and around his waist. Her hands are cold, and he concentrates on that, lets the feeling pull him back down. “I’m sorry I upset you.” Not, ‘I’m sorry I did that.’ Goddamn it.

His chin is pressed against her temple, and he turns his head to kiss her cheek just under the corner of her eye. “There was a body right next to your car,” he says, half in explanation, half in accusation.

“Oh Jesus, shit.” When she tries to pull back this time he lets her, and Lena’s hands move quickly from his waist to his face. She lifts herself up on her toes and pulls his head down, kissing his lips, his cheeks, anywhere she can reach. “Raylan shot him before he could get me. No one else got hurt.”

Tim looks down at Lena, and for a moment her face blurs with the memory of a reckless private who didn’t want to get anyone else hurt either. He doesn’t know how to talk her out of the guilt, still hasn’t managed to talk himself out of it, but a selfish part of him is gratified that the woman who’s read his mission files understands something of the soldier behind the bland play-by-play accounts.

Her palms squeeze around his jaw. “It’s fine, see?”

He doesn’t want to argue about the definition of the word ‘fine,’ so when her mouth comes back to his he holds it there, happier to kiss her instead of think, just happy to kiss her.

There’s a knock on the door, a warning, not a request, because it opens without invitation. Lena tries to jump back, but Tim’s arms around her hamper the instinct.

It’s Art. A startled Art who quickly morphs into a wickedly bemused Art as he takes in the tableau before him, eyes traveling over Tim’s undone shirt, the hematoma on Lena’s neck, and their compromised position. His expression tells of a man delighted to have something to hold over his deputy’s head. He gives Tim a pointed look and jerks his chin towards the outside and backs out, closing the door.

Lena’s head falls into Tim’s chest with a groan. “And here I was, all happy to be alive. Where’s my gun?”

“You sure your aim’s good enough?” A fist smacks half-heartedly into his stomach. “Oh it’s fine. Give Raylan a week to screw a witness or shoot one or set the office on fire – all are equally plausible – and Art’ll forget all about a succubus FBI agent corrupting one of his deputies.” He gets another smack for ‘succubus.’

“God bless Raylan. May he fuck up spectacularly and harmlessly.” Tim thinks about his most recent adventures trailing after Raylan around rural Kentucky. He doubts it’ll be harmless. Might be fun though.

“Come on,” he picks up her jacket and sets it back her shoulders, gives her one more kiss,
then one more ‘cause he’s becoming addicted, “music’s playin’. Let’s go face it.”
I don't miss

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting. Life kept getting in the way, and I couldn’t find the middle of this chapter (mentally). It ended up getting practically rewritten from scratch, thus the lateness.

Tim, slinks into the office a half hour early, plenty of time to start the coffee, pour himself a cup, and be safely ensconced behind his desk, face hidden behind a computer and paperwork by the time anyone else shows up.

A half hour later, nine a.m. on the dot, the doors open to admit Rachel, Art one step behind. He slouches just a little further down, squinting at the screen. Tim can smell the cinnamon roll that Rachel picked up for breakfast on the way in. If he weren’t intent on avoiding their notice he’d slide on over to her desk and pester her until she gave him a piece. She always says ‘a bite’ and then complains when he takes as large a one as possible. Recently, she’s learned to just tear off a bit and keep him away from the rest. Today he settles for the aroma and makes an extra effort to look occupied as Art passes him on the way into his office.

Art doesn’t stop to talk, and Tim’s beginning to relax, relieved his plan has worked, when a hip and the smell of up-close cinnamon roll intrude into his morning.

He refuses to look up.

The hip on his desk refuses to leave.

Tim shuffles some papers industriously and continues to type.

The hip continues to lean. A chunk of cinnamon roll lands on his keyboard with a spray of crumbs.

“Hey!” Tim looks up, falls into the trap.

“A truck stop bathroom?” Rachel smirks, “Really?”

Tim shoves the piece of cinnamon roll into his mouth and returns his glare to the keyboard.

“I’m starting to get why I never see you with a girlfriend.”

Tim takes a half-chewed wad of cinnamon roll out of his mouth and tosses it at her.

Rachel jumps back with a loud “Ew!” and comes back to smack him over the head with one of his own files.

Saving them from further grossness or physical harm, Art appears at his door, and tells them both to get the hell in his office.

“Robbie Gates was found dead yesterday in his cell,” he begins while they settle themselves, Rachel on the chair in front of the desk, Tim standing back with his shoulder blade against the
doorjamb. “Apparently his cellmate took a sudden dislike and stabbed him.”

“Cryin’ shame, that. Can’t imagine why.”

Art tosses him a look and continues, “Somehow he managed to get ahold of an actual knife too. And given that Raylan was supposed to have gone down to question Gates yesterday, I find the whole thing to be a little too convenient.”

“Have they figured out how he got it?” Rachel asks.

“All the warden found was that the driver’s license of the cellmate’s most recent visitor was a fake. The number traces to an eighty-seven year old man living in a nursing home outside Frankfort. They didn’t dig too much after that, probably figured it wasn’t worth the effort. No one tends to get too worked up about dead felons.”

“Imagine that,” Tim mutters, probably the least worked up that Robbie Gates is dead.

“I want you two to drive down and find out what you can about the whole mess, have a chat with the cellmate, Mason Kimball. See if Gates said anything useful to him that we might be able to use, like how he managed to track down a federal witness.”

Marching orders received, they both nod and stand to leave.

“Tim?” Art calls him back, eyes narrowed.

“Yeah boss?”

“A feeb?”

Tim pulls a face and flips him the bird on his way out, and Art chuckles, pleased with himself for flapping the unflappable.

O.O.O

Tim was serious back in Art’s office. There’s not a shred of regret about Robbie Gates’ death; however, sitting across from Mason Kimball, Tim is forced to reconsider the saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ This is a man for whom the system can do no worse. He’s a lifer, been in long enough that the routine has picked away at him, that he craves something – anything – new, and the only new experiences to be had in prison center around violence.

Kimball tries to look bored at first, but a twitch in his knee that he can’t quite suppress gives him the lie. There’s alertness, like he’s waiting for them to trip up, let themselves be lulled into a false sense of safety by the shackles. Tim hasn’t been a marshal for very long, but he’s intimately familiar with the actions of desperate men.

“Girl,” Mason drags out the r for lascivious effect and smacks his lips.

Rachel doesn’t give him the satisfaction, just saunters over to the small window and picks at a nail. She’s way better at faking bored. Mason stares at her back, enjoying the challenge.

“You must be the famous Agent Carlan.” The famous Agent Carlan. “Robbie did say you was a cold bitch.” Fuck. “I’ll warm you up though. All you need is a –”

“I’m Deputy Marshal Brooks. And all you’ll get is a long vacation in solitary you don’t sit down and shut up.”
“Oh I’ll let you come with me.” Kimball leers, happy to have a player in the game. “I like it when they bite.”

“Then you’re really gonna love the feel of her boot up your ass. She’s good too, gets it way far up there. Might even give your lower intestine a bit of a tickle.”

Kimball’s face sours at the interruption, then decides he can still play a game. “You’re kind of a scrawny bitch. Robbie was also a scrawny bitch.” He leans forward, shoulders hunched aggressively. “Didn’t put up much of a fight.”

“Musta been real disappointing. My heart bleeds for you.”

Kimball gives Tim the look other men in bars give him when they’ve had a bad day and a bit too much and see the tattoo on his wrist. He’s short, solid enough for the jobs he’s had, but Tim’s no one’s stereotype of a jacked army Ranger. But one look at that tattoo and all of the sudden he may as well be six five and two hundred and fifty pounds. Everyone wants to be able to say they got in a fight with the biggest and baddest and won. Everyone who’s picked that fight with Tim realizes real quick that some fantasies are just that, fantasies, but when someone’s just one this side of drunk and has something to prove they tend to forget that. These days Tim tries to remember to wear long sleeves when he goes out to drink.

Rachel swoops in under Tim’s distraction and asks offhand, “Thought you two got along. Why’d you bother?”

He shrugs like she just asked him whether he preferred string or waffle fries. “It was somethin’ to do.”

“Seems like an awful lot of trouble just for a little entertainment.” She steps over and slides a photo across the table. “And even more trouble to get a weapon like that inside.”

Another shrug, less casual. “You know the right people, you can get anything.”

She places a single finger over the glossy image and drags it slowly back, dragging Kimball’s eyes with it. “I’d be willing to bet it was the other way around. You happened to be the right man for someone else.”

“I don’t get your meaning.” He scratches his thumbnail over the fresh tear drop tattoo on his cheek, the newest of three.

“Think about it like this.” Rachel returns the photo to its manila folder with unhurried confidence. “You go through the trouble of finding someone to bring you a knife, manage to sneak it past the guards, wait until your cellmate is asleep before stabbing him to death with it. A jury might see that as premeditated.”

“Prison’s a dangerous place. You gotta protect yourself. Everyone knows that.”

Tim raises his eyebrows, smirks. “You had to protect yourself from your scrawny bitch cellie who didn’t put up a fight?” He slaps his hand on the table, starts to rise, ready to get out like they got it all wrapped up. “You know, nice thing about Kentucky, everyone loves the death penalty here. They’ll get to it pretty quick. ‘Least you won’t have to wait.”

“Look, I didn’t even know the guy. Guards told me I had a visitor. He gave me the knife and said I could keep it if I did him a favor. Said if I didn’t do it he’d give someone else a knife to use on me.”
“How’d you get it past the guards?”

“They never searched me.” Tim and Rachel exchange a glance. Warden isn’t going to like their next conversation.

“Did Robbie ever talk about having visitors?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know who they were.”

“The group Robbie worked for who wanted him dead, they’re on the terror watch list. You killed Robbie for them. That’s conspiracy. Hell, who needs the death penalty when you have Guantanamo?”

Kimball snorts. “Yeah, like that’s gonna happen. Robbie worked for the Dixie mafia, and they ain’t no terrorists.”

Tim doesn’t have to posture to be menacing, just smiles like he enjoys playing with his food. “Why did Robbie call Agent Carlan a cold bitch?”

“Cause she fuckin’ waterboarded him.”

“You think the FBI does that? You think this is about the Dixie mafia?”

He can see the seed of doubt take root. “Only person he ever talked about coming was his lawyer. I swear. Alls he said was that he was gonna get rewarded and that that bitch shouldn’t never of shown her face ‘cause she wasn’t gonna be able to hide from what she had coming to her.”

o.O.o

Rachel pauses with the key in the lock, assessing him from across the hood of her Lincoln.

“She really water boarded him? Gates?”

Tim nods, still replaying their conversation with Kimball. *Shouldn’t never of shown her face.* Real problem wasn’t the face but the name. He shouldn’t have had the name.

“You knew?” The disapproval is loud and clear.

Another nod, this one more present, worried about trouble in front of him.

“Does Art know?”

“No.” There’s an unspoken request underneath that that things stay that way, and as Rachel ducks into the car she gives him an unhappy look with the unspoken understanding that, for now, they will.

o.O.o

Lena scans in a photo of another dead face.

“You’re the state bitch? Where’s your haji boyfriend?”

He’d called her ‘the state bitch’, and Sayeed had been a ‘haji’. Whoever he was, he wasn’t some rando thug GenCorp had sent after her. Americans who’ve never seen Afghanistan don’t say ‘haji’; they have other slurs. And he knew her as working for the State Department, a front she abandoned two years ago upon her return.
Lena passes the time impatiently scrolling through personnel files from GenCorp. She starts with mercenaries for hire and finally finds the face of her would-be murderer in the private security section. Chester Bonet. *Try denying your involvement now, you shady assholes.* Just to be safe she downloads everything GenCorp has on Mr. Bonet. There’s a hit off a couple of the scanned faces, and Lena looks up their names in the employee database and downloads those files as well. GenCorp are the sort who would try to delete or alter records to muddy the waters, and it’s best to cover one’s bases. The IT team will thank her later.

Her phone pings, but she ignores it, intent on the task at hand. Whatever Oona’s dug up can wait a few minutes. It pings again, then after a third it starts ringing.

Lena fumbles her over and swipes the green answer button without looking. “Jesus Christ, woman, what is it?”

“That’s funny,” a deep male voice full of mirth says on the other end, “I think I would have remembered getting a sex change.”

“John?”

“Unless you gave any other dashing, slightly bald middle-aged men this number.”

Lena smiles into the speaker. “You’re my one and only, John.”

“The hearing’s been moved up.” He doesn’t sound happy about it, and that worries her. She says as much. “Senator Stratford has pushed through some rearrangements, said something like that needed to be a priority.”

Stratford. The name sets a bell ringing in her mind, calling to a memory. “Since when is on the armed services committee?”

“Since a couple weeks ago.”

“Crap.”

“You know it’s so much more fun to just say ‘shit.’”

“You’re the reason I don’t have a professional filter. Also, Stratford’s office is the one that called the Marshals a couple weeks back trying to find Sayeed.”

“I know. We’re digging up as much as we can on him right now, but so far we don’t have a solid connection to GenCorp or Captain Brown or Private Welling.”

“What about the drug company? Chivera?”

“So far nothing there either. The plane will be there in two days with Dave.”

There’s a pair of bright sequined high heels on his porch when he drives up. Tim kills the engine and crosses his arms over the steering wheel, contemplating the woman wearing them. Lena sits on the steps, feet thrown out in front of her and leaning casually back on her elbows in a way that reminds him of their shared time at the coffee wall. She tosses him a wide smile and a flippant two-fingered salute. It was a sight that relaxed him then, and if he hadn’t spent the afternoon talking to Mason Kimball it might have done so now.
Right now he only sees the vulnerabilities – exposed skin, exposed position, clothes that’ll be shit in a fight or a flight. For fucks sake she’d been sitting alone in the dark playing with her phone, not paying a lick of attention to her surroundings.

Shouldn’t never of shown her face. But it was the name. There was only one person could have slipped up and given that out.

Instead of opening the door he rolls down the window and leans his head out. “Get in.”

Lena hops up off his steps and into the passenger side of the suburban. “Where we headed?”

“It’s a surprise.”

It’s a short drive to the range. It’s not his favorite – the guy behind the counter always tries to engage him in conversation in an attempt to pry out a war story – but it’s the closest indoor range, and he’s not in the mood to be picky.

Lena grins, her playful tone scraping against his nerves. “Marshal, did you get me a howitzer?” She notices he isn’t smiling, gives him a nudge. “Most people bring flowers on the first date, but nothing says romance like artillery rounds.”

His fingers itch, and there’s a static charge running through him fighting to get out. All he has is anger and a thousand worst case scenarios. He’s angry at her, angry at Gates, angry at the people who paid him. He squeezes the wheel, trying to ground the charge.

“Tim?” she asks, voice filled with innocent concern.

But there’s too much to dissipate, and it arcs towards the nearest target. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Lena stiffens, her frost clashing with his fire. “You can either explain yourself like a calm, rational adult or I’m calling a cab.”

Tim does explain, rational but not calm. “You told him your goddamn name, Lena. Robbie Gates told GenCorp that he was kidnapped and water boarded by Agent Lena Carlan of the FBI. That’s how they confirmed Sayeed was in Kentucky. All they had to do was wait for you to show up at the courthouse. Why did you fuckin’ tell him who you were?”

The stiffness in her spine turns brittle, cracks, and Lena runs a shaky hand over her mouth. “Shit.” She gropes behind her for the handle and pulls.

Tim throws open his own door and goes after her. When he catches up, she’s walking in a straight line to nowhere, eyes focused on nothing.

“Sorry.” It’s a faraway whisper. “I’m so sorry.” She’s walking on autopilot, and considering her footwear, surprisingly fast.

Most people get called on fucking up big time, they make excuses, fight you, try to gaslight their way out of it. He didn’t expect the stricken self-recrimination.

“She!”

She stops abruptly, facing him, and Tim can see her pulling at the strings, trying to tug everything back into place. “I’m sorry. They would have known anyways, even without the name. He’d have told them about the crazy bitch who water boarded him, and they’d have known it was
me. Raylan was right, Jesus, FBI doesn’t do that shit. I should never have made him take me along. I was so angry. Shit. I’m sorry.” The words are pulling her along rather than the other way round, spewing forward. “You’re right. Shit. They could have gotten Sayeed. I nearly got him killed. Fuck, I thought yesterday…that they’d just camped to see, not ‘cause…I nearly got you all –”

“Lena, goddammit, you nearly got yourself killed. You put yourself in danger.”

“I’m sorry.” The phrase is a reflex at this point. That’s the thing she’s least sorry about. “I need to figure out…” she swipes the back of her hand across her mouth, staring past him, mind somewhere other than the dark lot they’re standing in. “The hearing was moved up. If they know where he is, then it’s going to be harder to move him, but…”

“Lena.”

Her awareness snaps back to the parking lot. “Why did you bring me here?” Christ.

“Can you shoot that?” He points at her purse where he knows she keeps her stolen pistol. Jesus, what FBI agent keeps their weapon in a goddamn purse.

“Better than I used to.” But she’s looking at the ground, so that’s where his expectations lie.

He makes her get a holster, something small to go under her coat. Lena buys the one he picks without argument or offering her own opinion. She’s punishing herself, and it irritates him.

Once they have a target, ammunition, and a lane assignment she stops speaking entirely, just listens and pulls the trigger. Lena’s practiced since they last did this – all the bullets hit the target – but she wouldn’t pass a weapons qualification. He calls out corrections, but her heart isn’t in it or she’s too frustrated or too distracted, so the whole thing is mostly an exercise in wasting bullets. Frustrated with her lack of visible reaction, his becomes harsher in his critiques. Tim doesn’t like this timid, self-flagellating version of her, and he tries to goad her into biting back. She never does, and by the end he just feels like an asshole.

With only a few rounds left, Tim takes the gun out of Lena’s hands, intending to cool his own head by firing off a few before realizing that that would just be rubbing salt in her wounds. He settles for the familiar motions of clearing the chamber and flipping on the safety. As an apology he puts it back in her purse.

“I have to clean it.” She’s not the mumbling type, but it’s so quiet that he barely hears her.

“Later.”

By the time they’re back at the house the car is carrying two miserable self-flagellating passengers instead of one.

She opens the door, but he stops her with a hand around her wrist, loose enough that she can pull away easily. “Lena, Sayeed’s fine. We’re all fine. And I don’t think you’re an idiot. I just –”

“It doesn’t matter what you think.” Quiet but clear. “You were right before. I messed up, and I’m lucky things didn’t go a heck of a lot worse. Now I need to go figure out a way to salvage this.”

Her wrist slips out of his hand and he makes a second grab. Lena looks at where he grips her but doesn’t fight it. He’s still not used to touching her and wonders suddenly if Lena’s uncharacteristic acceptance of the restraint is part of the flogging she’s giving herself and immediately lets go.
“Look…Back when I was first deployed…” Tim bites the inside of his cheek. He’s told this story exactly once. “I missed a shot. Sat on the guy for three days, but when the time came…I hesitated, he moved, and I fucked it up.” He gets it out fast, sticking to the bare necessities.

That day he’d walked out of the barracks and seen the boots and the rifles and the helmets all lined up and walked right back in and puked. Carter had crammed himself into the toilet stall with him and sat still and silent. He didn’t move except to put Tim in a chokehold when he started slamming his head into the concrete wall.

‘Alright fuckers, listen up. You’re going to get blood on your hands. You’ll probably be up to your goddamn elbows in it, enough to wash your faces in. It better be the right damn blood.’

That day it was the wrong blood. About a month later he went home on leave. First thing he did was walk straight into the first tattoo parlor he drove past and get the ink on his wrist. One shot, one kill. Don’t hesitate. Don’t fuck up. Don’t miss.

Lena slowly pulls herself back into the car, letting the door fall shut. “What? I mean why did you…?”

His shoulder twitches up in a half-shrug, a turtle retracting into its shell. “The guy was nice to a stray dog. No one likes dogs there.” He retracts further, wishing he really did have a shell. “And then that Friday he bombed a couple mosques that were too friendly with coalition forces, killed over a hundred people including a few soldiers.”

Tim can see her struggling for the appropriate response. ‘It’s not your fault.’ ‘You couldn’t have known.’ ‘Well thank goodness I didn’t fuck up as bad as that.’ They surface and then fall back under, but the one thing he doesn’t see is blame, just sympathy.

“I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t put it in the report.”

She falls back into the seat. “I need a drink.”

“No you don’t.” It’s weird being on the other end of that conversation. “Have you eaten?”

“I was going to grab something later. I have to make some calls, see…see what I can do.”

“I have some leftover chicken alfredo.”

Her eyes flick towards the rental she drove here in.

“If you clean your plate you can have one glass of the good bourbon.”

“I don’t want the good stuff. Wouldn’t appreciate it anyways.”

Lena follows him in, kicks off her shoes by the door and tucks herself into one corner of his couch.

She takes the plate he hands her, and Tim sets a bottle and two glasses on the floor next to himself, and flips on the TV, something easy to follow but enough to keep the mind occupied.

When Lena finishes he pours her the promised glass. She takes it but doesn’t drink right away, just holds it, thinking. After a little while of watching the internal debate play out on her face he takes it back and pulls her over to him instead. There is no internal debate for him – the image of a
line of empty boots and battlefield crosses sticks and won’t go away – and he drinks her glass and
the rest of the bottle on top. He would have gotten up for a second bottle, but Lena’s fallen asleep on
him, so he turns his face back to the TV and concentrates as hard as he can on tired jokes and shitty
laugh tracks.

o.O.o

When Tim wakes the TV is off and the room is dark. His head hurts, and when he climbs
above the fog bank of sleep he realizes the weight that was on his chest when he fell asleep is no
longer there. A human-shaped silhouette sits at the other end of the couch. It stays still for a while, so
he decides to prod it, reaching out to skim the tips of his fingers along her hip.

“Hey.”

She startles when he sits up, and again when his fingers touch her. The muscles in her back
jump, a fleeting movement that settles quickly, and she turns. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”
It’s too dark for him to see her face clearly.

“You’re up.” It’s an open-ended query, and he lets her consider it before prying further. Back
in the barracks no one ever asked, just stared until you either talked or lay back down, but she wasn’t
raised like him, so he prods her again. “Bad dream?”

“Eh.” She shrugs in a cheap imitation of casual. “I’m sure you’ve had plenty worse.”

“It’s not a competition.”

Lena’s silent for long enough that he thinks she may not answer, but then quietly, “I was
drowning.”

His fingers move from her hip up around her shoulders, but this time when he tries to pull her
against him he meets resistance. He can feel the goose bumps on her shoulders and knows she’s
punishing herself again. Tim pulls his old woobie blanket off the back of the couch and covers them
both. Deprived of her method of self-punishment, Lena leans back into him, and they shuffle around
until they’re both horizontal. He’d rather be in his bed, but somehow Tim knows that she’d insist on
sleeping down here. Luckily Lena’s small and the couch is big, so they’ll survive the night without
losing any limbs to loss of circulation.

He’s just beginning to drop back off when the vibration of her voice against his ribs calls him
back.

“After you hesitated…did that make it easier to take the next shot?”

“It made it simpler.”
Tim wakes up alone with cold feet and a hundred dwarves with pickaxes digging for gold in his head. When did only three quarters of a bottle start giving him hangovers? And this bad? Fuck, he feels old. For a fleeting moment he wishes he were seven years younger and back in the barracks so that he could wheedle a banana bag out of Clark. God, those were magic. But then he remembers why he drank that three quarters bottle of bourbon and why he’s not in the barracks and thinks maybe the best cure for a hangover is more.

He contemplates dragging himself off the couch, weighing the pros (aspirin and a glass of water) and cons (moving), but can’t quite gather the energy or motivation to do so. The house is quiet, so Lena must’ve gone and there’s no one to entertain, no need to move. Eventually the need to take a piss becomes urgent enough that he peels himself up and shuffles to the bathroom. There’s no aspirin in the downstairs medicine cabinet and climbing the stairs sounds about as appealing as hiking Everest with the flu, so he picks the next best thing – the kitchen and more liquor. He’ll just have to gargle a lot of mouthwash and limit himself to two glasses so he can drive.

Given the complete silence he’d woken up to, it’s a surprise to find Lena parked at the table with a laptop…his laptop. Tim frowns, uneasy. Last time a woman looked at his computer screen with that much intensity she’d been planning an ambush. It had been an attack based on faulty intel and, like all such attacks, the fight had been nasty. He doesn’t understand why she’s poking where she doesn’t belong, doesn’t really wanna fight about it either, but another part of him needs a distraction from worse things, so Tim latches onto that angry little coil in his chest and holds on, determined to drag himself out of a darker hole. Between that and the hangover he can has a chance at squeezing out the dregs of last night.

“What are you doing?”

Lena ignores his hostility with a breezy, “Something only slightly illegal.”

“Thought I turned that off.”

“You did.”

“…It has a password.”

“And I have a PhD in computer science. Passwords are weak.” She’s obviously pulled herself back together again.

“You could’ve asked.”

“You were sleeping,” she says, reasonable in a way he doesn’t want to accept. Lena turns around to face him, searching, gaze even the as the keel of a becalmed ship. “Does it bother you I didn’t ask or because you think I’m snooping?”

Well now that she says it like that, all calm and rational, he feels like an idiot, like a dog barking through a window at the cat outside, but the cat’s just enjoying the sun and doesn’t give a shit about his barking or whose yard it is.

“Tim, I’m not snooping. Well, only through the prison system, not your stuff. Cross my
It’s her voice, he realizes. That’s her trick. Maybe it’s her job, the need to always be in conversational control, that’s forged that even keel. It’s an obstinate calm only broken in the extremities of fear or passion. He once likened it to the rocks at the bottom of a river, unmoving and uncaring of the raging force of water flowing over them. Now he likens it more to the river, wide and slow, but strong, and the current tugs at him, pulling him away from the frothing edges at the bank and into the quiet center. It’s hard to have a fight when you’re the only one doing the fighting. It’s a good trick.

“The midget porn belongs to a friend. I’m just holding onto it for a few days.”

“So the Hungarian Jesus stuff is yours then?”

“Beats going to church.”

He wanders past and pulls out a mostly full bottle of Jameson and a glass.

“You haven’t even had breakfast.”

“In ancient Egypt this was breakfast. And lunch and dinner.”

“Nice try. That was beer.”

“Got some of that too.”

Lena’s eyes narrow, serious. “I will drink you under the table.” She’ll drink herself under the table.

Tim stares back and pours himself a glass. Her intentions may have been pure when she opened his laptop, but this is his home and his space, and he needs to put his flag on it. When he tosses back the glass she stands up, ready to make good on her threat, but Tim just smirks and screws the cap back on the bottle and puts it back on the shelf.

“Are those the security tapes from KSP?” He gets himself a glass of water and drags a chair over next to her.

“Yup.”

“The FBI can’t just ask?”

“You know I’m not in the FBI, Tim. This is easier anyways.” Eyes on the screen, she holds up a finger to forestall his follow up to that statement. “Also, there had to be a guard in on this. These guys get searched after every visit, so someone let him keep that knife. I want the untampered footage.”

“The guard’s name is Gerald Duane.”

Lena’s head whips around, and Tim savors the moment, the smug shit-eating grin that always annoyed his instructors plastered unabashedly across his face. “Rachel went through the tapes yesterday and talked to him.”

“Oh. Dang.”

“Well I’d tell you all about how interdepartmental cooperation solves cases, but I don’t know if you’re with a department.”
“Nope, you don’t.”

Tim lays his head across the keyboard where she was typing and squints up at her with exaggerated suspicion. “You’re in the KGB, aren’t you?”

Lena rolls her eyes and nudges him off the keyboard, and even if the latter jostles a bit too much because of the hangover, he likes her hand on his shoulder. “I’m not in the KGB, Tim.”

“That’s exactly what someone in the KGB would say.”

“Ty poymal menya.”

“I knew it.”

“Vive la révolution.”

o.O.o

“Tim, Raylan.”

“Yeah, Art?”

“My doctor informed me last week that my blood pressure is too high, and now my wife doesn’t let me eat bacon in the morning. I have to eat turkey bacon. Turkey bacon. That’s a bleak existence.”

“Cryin’ shame,” Tim says, wondering why his boss has wandered outside his office to discuss his health problems but sure it’s a trap.

“Shame,” Raylan echoes uncertainly.

“I want you think about what your lives might be like if my blood pressure never went back down and I never got to eat real bacon again.”

This morning Art’s heavily laden looks are directed just as much at Tim as they are at Raylan. He’s positioned himself in front of them at the midpoint between their desks, and Art fancies their positions are not dissimilar to a principal counseling two miscreants. Given that Tim’s eyes are scrunched like the light bothers him and obviously hungover and Raylan’s still Raylan, it’s an apt analogy.

“Awful?”

“I’m guessing pretty bad.”

Neither miscreant seems to be properly cowed, so Art decides to spell it out in bright neon letters for them.

“If either of you do something monumentally stupid, I’ll take you out back and shoot you both.”

“What if just he does?” Raylan points a finger at Tim.

An unladylike snort comes from Rachel’s desk.

“I don’t think they serve bacon in jail, Art. Jail is where you go when you murder your employees by the way.”
“Hey,” Tim snaps his fingers, “I learned that at Glynco.”

“Funny you say that, I taught that at Glynco.”

Art gazes heavenward. “Maybe I’ll just save myself and the District of Columbia the time and trouble and shoot you both now.”

“Maybe you and Boyd Crowder can share a cell. You can swap stories about Raylan, compare notes on who he was more of a pain in the ass to.”

“Oh I won’t go to jail. Rachel will cover for me.” He turns to Rachel. “Won’t you Rachel.” She hums an affirmative without even looking up from her paperwork, like she’s been in on this plan for a while. “See? I’ll be fine. Now go do your job.”

“Traitor,” Tim grumbles across Raylan’s desk once Art’s disappeared back to his office.

“Go make me some coffee.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

o.O.o

“No dumbass, with a ‘C’, W-i-c-k-e-t, like in the sport.” Tim scribbles out the first line and rewrites the name under it. Lena may find it easier to break into others’ computers to get what she wants, but he finds that the FBI is pretty effective at getting what they ask for.

“What fuckin’ sport?”

“Cricket.”

“That’s a bug not a sport.”

“Just cause you can’t even throw a basketball –”

“It’s like shitty baseball. Or really complicated golf.”

“Whatsoever, do you want the name of the firm?”

“Yeah, shoot.”

“It’s Chadwick and Thompson, and since you’re an illiterate hillbilly, that’s Thompson with a Th.”

“Shit, is there a C in Chadwick?”

The first time Tim met Kelsey was in the middle of a bar fight she’d started. It was his first day back on leave during his second deployment, and she was some POG ass comms lieutenant who’d never been deployed. But despite being a POG and an officer, she had a mean right hook that had knocked out some dude and then that same dude into Tim, who lost half his drink all over the bar. For Tim, it had been lust at first sight. As the beer bottle in her hand had been broken in half, he’d gallantly offered to buy a replacement. She introduced him pointedly to her girlfriend. Turns out the whole fight had started over some guy making heavy handed passes at the girlfriend, Vera, and Kelsey, who has a temper and has never once passed up an opportunity to hit someone asking for it, decked the guy. Tim bought both of them drinks, and then a few more, and a few more after that he was drunk enough to ask Kelsey and Vera if they were ‘like lesbian lesbian’ or if they’d ever experimented with men before. Kelsey had poured Tim’s own drink over his head just to make a
point and then bought him another one to show there were no hard feelings. They’d been friends ever since.

“And since you don’t like hillbillies, I can always give that bottle of Kentucky bourbon to someone else and bring you a nice rosé.”

“I can always murder you.”

“That’s the second time today someone’s said that to me.”

“Have you tried not being an asshole?”

Tim hangs up and plugs the law firm of Chadwick and Thompson into google. In addition to the guard letting prisoners sneak in knives, Rachel had managed to get a still frame of the lawyer who supposedly brought the knife. The name in the log was Joseph McAddy, but after running the frame through facial recognition, Kelsey and informed him that the lawyer was actually Joseph Wicket, a junior partner at Chadwick and Thompson. Given that Chadwick and Thompson is a D.C. law firm, Tim is justifiably curious as to what Wicket was doing in Kentucky. It’ll be something to ask about when they’re in Washington in between guarding Sayeed and giving Kelsey her finder’s fee. Maybe they’ll like Raylan’s had and feel inclined to talk.

o.O.o

This time Tim is home before the pair of heels shows up on his front porch and has time to put all the plates on his coffee table in the dishwasher. Lena kicks her shoes off by the door and Tim pulls a couple beers out of the fridge. When he shuts the door, Lena’s taken down one of his photos to look at.

“Huh, I don’t recognize these three.” She says it absently, like she’s remarking on an outdated company photo with employees who’ve since moved elsewhere. She starts to hold it out, about to ask him to tell her who the three men are, but aborts the motion, suddenly contrite, and tucks the photo back under its magnet. “Sorry.” She looks around at the rest of the kitchen, finds a towel to pick at. “Still too used to being a nosy bitch. I forget to not be sometimes.”

Tim looks at Lena fidgeting with the towel, looks at the ring on her finger, the one with a roman numeral seven carved into it. He could have made her leave the night she showed up to his house uninvited and drank herself sick. It wasn’t that he was trying to be polite or spare her feelings – god knows he’s been an asshole plenty of times just to get people to fuck off. He’d tried to give her a good shove on a couple of occasions, not because he wanted her to leave, but ‘cause he expected it. But that was the difference with her – she has that ring, empathy, not sympathy. They’ve cleaned blood off each other. She’d smiled her calm smile, took his punches, and then just bulldozed right over them. She never blinked.

The girl before her, someone he’d stayed with right up until the deployment goggles and sexual privation had worn off, had laughed at the six tired, unwashed rangers grinning from the nose of a helicopter. “Didn’t y’all have showers over there?” Tim had thrown a half smile that was all mouth and no eyes and pretended to think she was funny. She’d liked his tattoos and his uniform. He’d liked her willingness to put out.

Lena saw the uniform at work, and she likes the man wearing it and his morbid yet juvenile sense of humor. He likes the woman who wears a piece of Humvee door as a ring and her unapologetic ridiculous streak.

“Here.” Tim hands Lena his beer bottle, and when he’s sure she’s got a good grip on it, picks
her up and sets her on the counter. Then he takes back the bottle and the photograph back off the fridge and jumps up next to her. She picked an easier photo; everyone in it is still alive. It was taken just before they all went home. He asks for her story next, the whole one this time, about her ring and how she got it. Lena’s told it before but not so many times that it runs smooth. Her fingers tense, and her voice goes a little tight, but he waits. Then he asks her about Meyer, and she grins, so goddamn happy that he cared to ask, and she tells him all about SOCM and how he passed Airborne School, and then with less enthusiasm about his upcoming deployment.

“Who’s he with? I mean what battalion?” he clarifies.

“Second.”

Tim snorts, and Lena looks affronted. “Don’t worry those guys are a pack of yahoos, but they’re solid.” He doesn’t say ‘he’ll be fine.’ That’s a fuckin’ stupid thing to say.

From there they tell each other stories of idiot childhood friends, full of affectionate memory. It turns into stories of her college friends, one who worked her way through a masters in physics as an escort; his army buddies, Caleb who couldn’t find Afghanistan on a map but who could make anything with an engine run as long as he had duct tape and a wrench.

Lena giggles at that, nudges him with her shoulder and steals his beer. “Oh my gosh, one of my friends from back in D.C. is like that. He –” she keeps talking, but his brain stopped listening four words back. He realizes he’s been standing in quicksand this whole time, hadn’t paid attention and now it’s got ahold and is dragging him down. ‘One of my friends from back in D.C.’ She’d unwittingly sprung it on him, as gently as dumping a bucket of frigid water over his head, reminded him that this moment here with her on the counter all cozied up and drinking his beer, that all his time with her is impermanent. She left once, his brain reminds him, only difference is now he can see it coming.

But he’s only human, and he’s thought about her and a moment like this for too long, and now here she is leaning against his shoulder, and maybe if he can have just a taste it will be enough and he can find his way out of the sand in the morning, and it won’t really be a mistake. The warmth of her body pressed to his is a siren’s call, and Tim ignores the wet sand trying to pull him under.

He slides off the counter to stand between her legs, takes the bottle from her hand and, with one last swig for courage, takes her face between his hands and kisses her firmly and with intent. Lena doesn’t seem to mind the abrupt end of conversation, just runs her fingers up his waist and around his shoulders and pulls him closer. There’s no danger here, just lust and need, but he can hear that clock ticking, so he presses in, gets her right up against the kitchen cabinets, and loses himself in taste and touch.

“I didn’t look at your porn,” Lena says between kisses, grinning into his mouth. “It was tempting though.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I wanted to see what you liked.”

“I could’ve just told you.”

Her tongue slips across his lips. “I was thinking you might show instead of tell.”

“I don’t know where we’re going to find a midget at this hour.”

She sticks her hand down his pants, and he forgets to be funny.
Tim has one last coherent thought as he undoes the buttons of her shirt and slips it off her and onto the floor. He finds he does like the way she dresses after all, how she’s always squared away and starched and ironed, everything in its place. He even likes how she watches her language and says dang instead of damn and fudge instead of fuck even though it’s silly. He likes all of that because he’s the only one who gets to take it apart and mess it about. He’s the only one who will hear her breath catch at the feel of his tongue between her breasts, hear her cuss when he bites. He’s the one who gets to take off her clothes and throw them in a messy pile on his kitchen floor. And when his fingers smooth up over her thighs and under the edge of her skirt, he’s the only one who gets to see the calm crack and fall away.

And when she takes his hand to lead him up to the bedroom but she’s too wound up on him and they end up falling onto the couch in a messy tangle instead, when he looks down at her mouth sucking around his cock, her lipstick no longer colored between the lines but all over both of them, when she climbs up on his lap and down on to him, loud and wild with everything else peeled away, that’s all his.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Banana bag – IV bag (insta-sobering hangover cure); ‘Ty poymal menya.’ – Russian for ‘You got me.’ ; POGs – people other than grunts (infantry).
‘Making love.’ It’s a dumb phrase, something men say to women instead of ‘have sex’ or ‘fuck’ so they have a better chance at it, something women accept because it doesn’t make them feel slutty. Tim’s always hated that saying. It’s for the saps and naïve suckers (or dumbass privates who’ve just gotten hitched to a stripper for the extra deployment pay), and anytime he hears someone say it, they’ve got blinders on and fallen too deep too fast, and it burns hot as a firework, and the excitement’s over just as quickly. Then it’s all downhill from there. It’s a dumb phrase.

They’re still sticky, the sweat only half dry, and he’s lying atop her, in her, unwilling to give up the intimacy of it. He’s likes it here, and she’s happy to keep him. Her fingertips skim in random patterns along his back, and he plants another kiss on her already bruised throat. It’s a wonder how she hid anything from her parents in high school when the barest touch leaves such an obvious mark. Lena just laughs at that. She’d endured plenty of teasing. Occasionally it was a tactic for avoiding Sunday dinners at her grandparents’ house.

They’ve spent the time recuperating talking about everything and nothing, filling in the gaps of the last two years, low voices occasionally broken by bouts of laughter or kissing, sometimes both at once.

“Stay,” he whispers into her collarbone, lips wandering in an indirect path towards her shoulder, and he doesn’t care to examine if he means for the night or a while longer.

She chuckles sleepily, sated. “You’ve tired me out, Marshal. You’re stuck with me tonight.” One hand leaves his back to run her thumb along his lips.

He catches it in his teeth, and her eyes light, thighs tightening around his hips. Encouraged, he slides up and forward, testing, hoping to tire her out some more. “It ain’t bedtime yet.”

“Oh? Well I guess it’s a good thing we aren’t in a bed then, huh?” They’d made it as far as the couch before his clothes were on the floor; hers hadn’t lasted out of the kitchen. His ankle was still caught in a pant-leg when she’d pushed him down and straddled him. Tim hadn’t noticed until later, attention entirely caught up by her lips on his and the bare flesh under his hands.

“We could be.” He thrusts again, shallow, teasing, a promise of what will happen once they reach his bed, and her breath catches in a moan that dissolves into a chuckle. He likes that she doesn’t look away, lets him see what he does to her.

“Well then, Deputy,” Lena digs her heels into his ass and rolls her hips, pulling him down and into a kiss that lasts longer than intended. The devil himself could not conjure more mischief into a grin, “I guess you’d better take me to bed.”

He means to do just that, but her teeth pulling on his earlobe and her hands squeezing his ass encourage him to stay right where he is, and she takes him on the couch again for a second time that evening; the bed can wait.

However much Lena holds herself physically apart in public, she’s insatiable in private. When he does get his ankle out of his pants and her up to his bed, she drapes herself over him like a warm human blanket with his shoulder as her pillow and an ankle hooked around the back of his knee.

Tim slides his hand down to find hers and he lifts it up, kisses each finger one by one.
“I hadn’t taken you for a romantic.” She smiles playfully and pokes him in the lips. He bites down on the offending digit, preventing it from further misbehavior. She likes it when he does that.

“What did you take me for?”

“Well,” she shifts against him, suggestive-like, “I think I’ve taken quite a lot of you this evening.”

He bites down a little harder on the finger in his mouth, and she yelps and digs her free fingers into his ribs looking for a ticklish spot. Her strategy works, and Lena pokes him in the mouth once more as victory lap.

“You ever been to D.C.?” she asks.

“Just once.” He kisses her before she can ask how he liked it. The only part he saw was gravestones.

“You ever been to Little Serow? Thai place down on seventeenth street?” Tim looks up at her, feeling the quicksand pulling at his ankles. He doesn’t want to think about her and D.C. either.

“No.”

“I could take you sometime.” He slips a hand back down below the sheets, knows he’s found the mark when she shivers. “Is that a yes?”

“Is it spicy?”

“I saw a kid cry once.”

“I guess I could give it a shot.” The hand under the sheets moves with more purpose.

“Our flight’s at 8 a.m. you know.” She tries for accusing, can’t pull it off.

He doesn’t stop, intent on coaxing her into round three. “So sleep on the plane.”

Lena leans on the horn. She did not miss the traffic. Or the speed limits. The cops who feel the need to enforce the speed limits. The jackhole in front of her actually going the speed limit. Lena continues complaining inwardly to herself about all the petty unimportant things that bother her about D.C. She keeps her eyes on the road and off the rearview reflection of a pair of very perfect, very talented lips that belong to a very handsome deputy marshal who’s sitting next to her very in-danger witness. Very in-danger witness. Lena latches onto that and holds it like a shield between her and the rearview mirror.

Dave and Suki are in the dark SUV behind them, and even though it’s a short drive with tight security, Lena takes the long route with all the extra twists and turns to make sure no one’s following. For giggles Suki had arranged for them to take a few British consulate vehicles with diplomatic plates and the little flags on them just to muddy the scent. Whether that worked or they were lucky, their little convoy didn’t seem to have attracted any unwanted followers. After a quick stop at the embassy to change cars they continue the meandering, switchback route to the safe house.

While it might be against protocol and traditional common sense, they’re using Lena’s house. “Oh, but that’s why it’s perfect.” Lena reminded John that that was what she thought about keeping
Sayeed in Kentucky in the first place, and look how that turned out. “Seems like it turned out just fine though, hm? And you have gates and alarm systems and neighbors who don’t like outsiders. What are they going to do? Invade fucking McLean? No one can poison your food and hide a gun in the room service cart. Didn’t you ever see The Boondock Saints? Hotels are not safe.” “What about the rooms at work? What are they going to do? Invade effing Langley?” “No, but they’ll be watching it, which is why we already have a convincing decoy set up there.” She’ll just keep everyone in the basement where there aren’t any windows. Or she’ll do whatever the marshals and Dave and Suki tell her to do and deal with everyone tromping through her house with their shoes on like an invading barbarian horde.

When they arrive, the long curving driveway is already packed with cars. Part two of John’s Spectacular Grand Plan involves the team putting on the charade of a house party. This, Lena agrees, is at least useful for gathering everyone in one place for the meeting, though it’s surreal seeing everyone dressed up like the Stepfords.

Really surreal. “Holy crap, Oona, are you wearing a dress?”

Oona bypasses Lena completely – okay, great, missed you too, sweetheart – and makes straight for Tim.

“Are you that Ranger-marshall?” Finger in his face and everything. Fudge, she probably looked up his driver’s license photo. Tim has to crane his head up to look at her. Oona’s six-one Amazonian Swedish frame in five inch heels is a sight to behold. It would be hilarious if Lena didn’t mind her private business being dragged out into public and especially in front of all her colleagues. “I’m going to warn you right now –”

Tim’s face shuffles between bewildered and amused; Lena’s is settled firmly into mortification. “Oona, I got your reports.” Her angry Swedish assistant-cum-father-with-a-shotgun is one and a half times her size, and dragging her away from Tim and towards the house is a Herculean effort. She fleetingly wonders why the Ducati is in the driveway rather than the garage, but curiosity takes a back seat to more pressing issues. “Really thorough, thank you. Nope, keep walking. Nice dress by the way.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m being entirely serious.”

“Can it.”

Everyone trundles into the house behind Lena, Dave and Suki and then Sayeed with his back covered by Tim and Raylan, more security, and the rest. She takes the first familiar breath of home – pine and mint – and is just starting to sink into the cocoon of safe, the weight of the mission and the drive beginning to dissolve, but then she trips over a pair of motorcycle boots, and then there’s panic, but it’s a different sort, and before she can say anything to the people behind her, a slap-happy voice that has never learned not to talk with its mouth full comes from the kitchen and into the hallway carrying a jar of peanut butter and a spoon.

“Lena! Dude! You’ll never guess –”

About ten pistols come flying out of their holsters, and the spoon drops with a loud clatter, splattering peanut butter everywhere.

“Whoa!” Lena jumps in front. “It’s fine!” She turns around. “James, it’s fine!” Back around. “Everyone put down your fucking guns!” They do, and Lena prods herself with a quiet ‘fudging
“Lena?” James’ eyes stay locked on the crowd in the entryway, still frozen in place.

“Guys, this is my brother. James, these are some people from work.” She reaches out for a potted tree, but it’s too small to support her leaning, and she stumbles. “Jesus, I thought you were gone until next month.”

With half an eye on the suits with holsters, James reaches for the spoon, swipes at the sticky brown splatters on the tile. Distraction only makes the problem worse, and the splatters become smudges. “Surprise.”

John’s calmer, more pragmatic voice chimes in behind them. “Let’s talk about this little hiccup once everyone’s inside, shall we?”

---

After everyone is stuffed into the basement and quarters are assigned to those who will be staying overnight, Tim decides to prowl around the kitchen. His and Raylan’s part of the meeting is over. They won’t be needed for anything aside from guard duty, and the rest is above their clearance. He thought about prowling around the rest of the house – Raylan is probably trying to find a way into the garage – and stood a good five minutes staring down a hallway before deciding his motivations were less than professional and slunk into the kitchen.

“Hey.” Lena’s brother looks up from his phone and more closely at Tim than he’s used to being looked at by another guy. “You armed still?”

“Yup.” With the basketball shorts and color-coordinated sneakers the dude looks like a wannabe fitness model who spends all his time at the gym and whose only conversational topics are what protein supplements he’s taking and how much he can bench. He’s also at least six-five and the most ginger-ass motherfucker Tim has ever seen, a surprise considering Lena’s a short brunette.

“Any chance you’ll be not armed at any point in your stay?”

“Nope.” Even if he were here for purely non-professional reasons, he’d probably still be armed part of the time or at least have a gun within reach.

“Have you ever accidentally…had an accident?”

Tim crosses his arms and only half-tries to repress the smirk trying to crawl out. “An accident,” he deadpans, feigning ignorance.

“Yeah, like you miss and accidentally shoot the wrong person or whatever?”

The smirk succeeds in its quest for escape. “I don’t miss.”

James opens his mouth, a knee-jerk response of disbelief on the tip of his tongue, but he reverses direction with a slight head movement. “Are you Tim Gutterson?”

James straightens, leaning forward, and Tim gets the impression that James-the-ginger-ass-wannabe-fitness-model-who’s-scared-of-guns has transitioned into James-Lena’s-brother. It’s not even a little intimidating, but the look of appraisal he gets raises Tim’s hackles. He can’t stand pissing contests. Yeah, I had sex with your sister. Three times. And she liked it. And maybe if everyone makes themselves scarce enough I’ll have sex with her again right here on this giant ass kitchen counter where you’ll be eating your breakfast tomorrow. “Yup.”
If he hadn’t seen it coming from the front his first reaction would have been violent. As it is, it’s still startling as shit when James comes around the center island and sweeps him into a bear hug. His toes spend a second dangling in space. “Thanks, man.” Tim barely has time to wonder what the fuck before he carries on with, “You hungry? Actually, no. Fuck it. I’m making you dinner.” The pale muscular arm still around Tim’s shoulders pulls him over to a barstool. “Do you like Italian?”

“Oh, yeah.” He’s still got whiplash.

“Fish? Actually, no, you’re military; you need something hearty.” Tim lets James continue their conversation alone. It’s been hours since he’s eaten, and frankly that jar of peanut butter would satisfy just fine right now. “You’re gonna love this.” James whips open the fridge door, and Tim can hear drawers opening and closing. His head comes back out for a moment and he waves a package of something in Tim’s direction. “You know what? I’m gonna make you…no, that’ll take too long…” more rifling, “veal alla Saltimbocca, but not veal – we don’t do that in this house – but no worries; it’s going to be awesome. But for now,” James throws a pile of ingredients on the counter, tears open a few of cheese and sets them on a plate in front of Tim along with some bread and a pretentiously ornate blunted knife. “This one’s brigantaggio, and this is caprotto fiorito.”

The basketball shorts had said spaghetti and meatballs from a jar. If the cheese is anything to go by, the veal-but-not-veal alla Saltimboca is going to be sex on a plate.

“Hehehe, you thought I was gonna kick your ass and bust out the shotgun, huh?”

“I was expecting you to try.” James hears the distinction, the slight drawl on the last word.

“Nah, it’s her ‘work friends’ you gotta watch out for.”

“Yeah, I’ve met Xena Warrior Princess.”

He watches Tim scoop cheese onto a piece of bread. “Seriously, thanks for keeping her safe.”

It’s weird to hear from a stranger, and because bright light casts equally dark shadows, it’s also a harsh reminder of the opposite tally on his board. There are others who are not strangers that will never thank him. He deflects the way he always does. “Woulda been easier if she hadn’t insisted on dressing like Malibu Barbie.”

“She did say you were kind of a nag.”

“She also said the torture spikes on her feet were shoes, so you can’t believe everything you hear.”

“You really let her fire a Howitzer after asking her if she was pms-ing?”

“Yup.”

“Then I’ll believe anything.” James shakes the knife he’s slicing beef with at Tim. “Just don’t go giving her a real gun.”

The good news is that GenCorp is going to burn, and Lena will gleefully dance through the cinders.

The bad news is that there’s nothing but the thinnest circumstantial evidence tying Chivera to any of this, and she hasn’t the barest shred what Senator Stratford’s interest is. He has no connection to GenCorp or Chivera either socially, politically, or business-related. And yet he has a clear interest in mucking about with Sayeed’s hearing. Three days. The hardest part will be done in three days. Sayeed will testify, and at least one chunk of the feckless fucks responsible for this will be prison-
bound, and then she can go about getting the rest. For now she has Dave and Suki’s team and the marshals crawling over her house and yard. And James is under house arrest. ‘Why, dear sister?’ ‘Oh sorry, dear brother, can’t tell you.’ That’s going to go over real well. He still thinks she works at the State Department.

Lena drags herself up the basement stairs wondering if she should try to get him drunk before or after delivering the news. Crap, the first floor smells like sizzling meat and heaven. Oh lord, he’s cooking for her. The guilt just keeps piling on. Lena does a quick about face at the top of the stairs and goes back down to the basement and digs for a good bottle of wine to pacify him with.

She’s busy rehearsing explanations in her head, trying to parse together something that will make some sense and almost misses the second person in the kitchen.

James already has a bottle of wine, and he’s sharing it with Tim along with whatever he was cooking.

Well, he’s feeding him at least. That’s a good sign.

Lena takes a cautious step forward, and James whips his head up, and with the best impression of their grandfather he’s done so far, fork aggressively stabbing the air and everything, asks, “Young lady, did you seriously filch weapons from the U.S. army?”
The thing

Chapter Notes

There will not be an update next week because I'll be out of town (I feel like I've been doing that a lot), so I'll see you all the week after!

“You think it's like the Washington D.C. version of driving a lifted truck?”

“I don’t think you could actually fit this in a truck. They’ve one-upped the truck.”

Tim and Raylan regard the floor to ceiling portrait with unconcealed disdain. A passerby might think they’d just crossed paths with the town mental case exposing himself in public, unsurprised yet still disgusted with the display. The receptionist in her pleated, high collar blouse and thick-rimmed glasses that are for show instead of function casts a judgmental look at the two, like the dick-stroking monstrosity of a painting deserves more reverence.

“You ever seen American Psycho?”

“We’ve all met Boyd Crowder, Raylan.”

“No, I mean I bet it’s like the business card thing. Yours has to be better than everyone else’s. It’s just a fad that got out of control.”

The law offices of Chadwick and Thompson sit at the top of an upscale building in the West End. It’s uptight upscale though, not the fun sort that wears basketball shorts and cooks fancy Italian or gets adorably tipsy on wine over dinner. Everything from the dark leather and wood furnishings to the over the top décor is meant to impress, to intimidate. It’s a lot of bark, which for Tim is unimpressive without the bite, and he makes a game of tallying up all the Freudian symbols of compensation he can find.

“Mr. Wicket will see you now.” The receptionist gives them one last glance of disapproval as she ushers them down a thickly carpeted hallway. Tim’s first thought is that murdering someone would be easy here. The floor’s so soft you’d never hear the body fall. He wonders if Miss Priss with the fake glasses has ever tripped over her big high heels walking through here.

Like the reception area, Joseph Wicket’s office embodies the same soulless sterility, no family photos, just diplomas and awards. Wicket himself stands in contrast to the somber atmosphere. He greets Tim and Raylan with the wide, slick smile of a man confident in his own shoes. After he waves them into chairs across from his desk Wicket takes his own, reclined and relaxed, an attitude of polite condescension studiously applied to his expression. It’s the sort of asshole vibe that says ‘I’m better than you, but aren’t I great for letting you sit at the table.’ He reminds Tim of a chaplain in Fort Benning who always took himself too seriously, and Tim leans back comfortably, a foot casually resting on his knee like he’s the one who ought to be sitting on the other side of the desk.

Wicket’s eyes flick once over them both, and Tim stares back, waiting. He might not like pissing contests, but he doesn’t lose them. The first question is directed at Raylan with an air of mildly interested confusion. “What can I do for you gentlemen? We generally handle business matters, not the sort of things you’d expect to find the Marshals involved in.”
Tim answers, ploughing through the bullshit and straight to the point. “What business did you have with Mason Kimball?”

Wicket’s brows come down, confusion deepening, but nonetheless unconcerned. “I’m afraid I don’t know who that is. He’s not on our client list.”

Raylan pulls out the still taken from a KSP surveillance camera, the one of Wicket at the prison, and slides it across the desk. “Ring a bell?”

He passes it back towards them. “That’s a bit grainy, deputy.”

“Good enough for the FBI to identify you.”

“And when was I supposed to have been visiting this Mr. Kimball? And also why? As I said, we handle taxes and business deals; we’re not a defense firm.”

“Kimball said eight days ago you coerced him into murdering his cellmate, Robert Gates. Why would you do that?”

Mr. Wicket looks amused at the idea. “That would be a Saturday, which means I definitely couldn’t have been there because I was at the Smithsonian gala that night. Plenty of witnesses and plenty of photos.”

“This footage was taken in the early afternoon. That’s plenty of time to get back and go to a gala.”

“So you think,” Wicket nods his head from side to side as if muddling through a hard problem, “that I flew all the way to Kentucky to meet with an inmate – this Mason Kimball – to make sure he killed his cellmate, and then I flew back in time to go to a gala dinner so I’d have an alibi?”

Raylan grins. “Hey look at that, he’s starting to catch on.”

“Maybe if he’d gone to Harvard instead of Yale, he’d have caught on faster.”

“I don’t even know a Robert Gates. Why would I want some random hillbilly who I’ve never heard of killed?”

“Maybe if the shit came out of your ass instead of your mouth people would be inclined to believe you,” Tim says evenly, “See what I was curious about was why you bothered with the knife. You could have just made him strangle Gates in his sleep or something. Would have been a lot easier, left less of a trail.” This is the first point in the conversation that seems to have Wicket stumped.

“Vulgar language is the sign of a weak mind, deputy.”

“So is planning a murder based on the movies. A shiv isn’t the only way to kill someone in prison. Then again, what do I know. I’m just some hillbilly from Kentucky.”

“Gentlemen.” Wicket says it the way cops say ‘sir.’ “I have more pressing matters to attend to today, and as you have zero evidence to back up the outrageous claims you’ve made, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Tim makes sure to smile real wide and friendly on his way out. “So if we had more evidence, you’d ask us to stay?”
He gets a thin, unamused nose wrinkle. Tim decides the best thing about leaving the military is getting to be as ornery as you want to anyone you want without fear of disciplinary action.

“Well that was fun,” says Raylan once they’re waiting for the elevator. “You think all lawyers are dicks?”

“I dunno. Between your divorce and shootin’ everyone who bothers you, I feel like you’d be more qualified to answer that than me.”

“Are all ex-Rangers dicks?”

Tim ignores the jibe. “You notice how Wicket was the only one who put Kimball in Kentucky?”

“Yeah, we never said that. Interesting coincidence there, huh?”

The elevator dings, but Tim holds out his arm to block the way. “Well?”

“Well what?” Raylan slides his hands along the brim of his hat, raising a brow. For Raylan, the innocent act is a transparent veneer over mischief.

“Well are you gonna do the thing?”

“The thing?”

“Yeah, the thing where I say ‘Oh no, don’t be a dumbass’ and you say ‘It’s fine, what could possibly go wrong’ and then you do whatever dumbass thing you’re thinking of doing right now.”

“Why do I sound like a prepubescent teenager in this scenario? And seeing as I’m not doing anything aside from thinking about lunch, I resent that implication.”

“And I resent all the time I’ll never get back from chasing you through Harlan.”

“You gonna make awkward comments about your erection?”

“If I get one. You gonna do it or not?”

Raylan sets his hat back on his head. “Does it feel warm in here to you?”

First rule of improvisation is agreement. “Like a whore’s crotch in church.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“I’m just trying to be supportive.”

“Go do it somewhere else.” Raylan takes a step to the side and casually rams his elbow into the fire alarm.

o.O.o

They wait in the elevator bay until everyone is out and down the stairs before making their way back to Wicket’s office.

“Shit it’s locked.” Either Wicket kept his file cabinets locked all the time or he’d done so before he’d left his office.
“Great plan, Gutterson.”

Tim grabs a couple paperclips out of a desk drawer and twists them into a usable shape. “You could be more supportive.” He jiggles the paperclips around until the lock clicks and the drawer slides outward.

“Shit you think you could do that with Art’s safe?” They each pick a drawer and start rifling through folders.

“You got a death wish or something?”

“The Pappy’s worth it.”

“I’ll drink some at your funeral.”

“Hey, I got something.” Raylan hefts a thick file out and opens it on the desk. “Lena and Art were talking about Senator Stratford nosing around looking for Sayeed.”

Tim pulls his phone out and starts snapping photos of each page as fast as he can. “It’s paperwork for a trust fund.”

He’s about to put down his phone and keep searching when Raylan turns the page and lets out a whistle. “Huge fuckin’ trust fund. You got an erection yet?”

“There’s no need to be crass, Raylan. It’s a sign of a weak mind.” Tim snaps another photo. “Nine million a year? You think he’s looking to adopt?”

“Maybe. Kid doesn’t even have the same last name. What do you think? Illegitimate child?”

Tim shrugs. “He is a senator.”

Somewhere down the hall a door slams, and the two Marshals take their cue to get the hell out of dodge.
Without a hitch

The trip to Capitol Hill for Sayeed’s hearing goes smoothly, so smoothly that, in Oona’s crass yet accurate words, you could have lubed up a dozen Hustler girls and let them work all day long without going dry. The only person to snort at that colorful bit of imagery had sounded like Tim, and Lena is unsure if that hurt or helped his standing with her assistant. His standing was at first helped by his and Raylan’s uncovering of the suspiciously large trust fund paid out by Senator Stratford and then took an immediate downturn when Lena had asked Oona to stay behind and investigate it instead of attending the hearing. James had gamely offered to make her lunch and commiserate over their confinement to the house.

Everything had all gone without a single hitch. No one had followed them, no one was waiting for them when they arrived, and no one so much as glances the wrong way when they enter the hearing room. The whole thing had gone so well that were Lena not convinced everything was about to go horribly wrong, she’d have felt silly for the amount effort and artifice they’d all put into getting Sayeed here in the first place. It’s not that someone followed and they didn’t see it or that they’d followed the decoys instead, it was that they simply hadn’t bothered. And after all the crazy crap GenCorp and their conspirators had already pulled to keep Sayeed from testifying this doesn’t make a lick of sense, and Lena’s nerves are frayed as an old rag.

Sayeed sits sandwiched between Lena and John, Dave and Suki in the front and back. He’s the only one staring ahead, still except for the periodic movement of his thumb over the outside of his pocket where he’d tucked his Misbaha prayer beads. Tim and Raylan stand on either side of the room, their purpose made obvious by the bulletproof vests proclaiming US MARSHALS in large white letters. Lena checks her phone again, both waiting for Oona to provide conveniently timed damning evidence about Stratford and to check the time. It’s five after ten. Senators Karrigan and McMaster are late. Lena purses her lips and tamps down on her annoyance, glancing toward the front panel where Senator Johnson is conversing with one of his aides. She stares, waiting to catch his eye, hoping he can provide some sort of non-verbal clue as to where the heck his colleagues are and when they plan on gracing everyone with their presence.

Her patience is not rewarded. Johnson continues to focus on the conversation with his aide and continues to look more and more annoyed. Lena shifts restlessly and smiles reassuringly when Sayeed glances sideways at her. Senators. Arrogant bastards, thinking the whole dang world revolves around them. Another glance at her phone. Still nothing from Oona, and ten more minutes have passed. She debates texting her long-suffering assistant for a progress report but resists with the rationalization that asking isn’t helping and all she’s likely to get out of it is snark and no substance. She hopes James hasn’t gotten super bitter and broken open the wine cellar so that the two can drink away their woes. Maybe a check-in text isn’t a bad idea. Lena’s tapping out a message when the crinkling static of a microphone breaks through the restless buzz of the hearing room.

“If I could have everyone’s attention…” Lena’s head snaps up at the sound of Stratford’s voice. “Senator McMaster and Senator Karrigan have been unavoidably delayed and are unable to attend today’s hearing. Given the serious nature of the charges being brought, it would be best to have all members present, and I motion to reconvene at a later date.”

You fuck-dick sack of shit. One glance at Johnson shows professionally muted rage. Stratford had been the one to push for an early meeting, and now he’s unnecessarily putting it off. There are twenty-seven members on the Armed Services subcommittee, and Karrigan and McMaster’s absence – while annoying – isn’t a reason to reschedule. But before anyone with an ounce of common sense can point out this fact, Senator Cranahan has already seconded the motion. No consideration, no
argument, no ‘sorry for wasting everyone’s time’, just ‘hearing date delayed k thnx baiii.’

“Let’s go. Now.” Dave’s suddenly on his feet and casting a tense shadow over Lena and Sayeed. The worry in his voice turns Lena’s anger to fear. Suki’s already got a helmet over Sayeed’s head and is pulling him towards the door. Dave has a hand around John’s arm and is glaring at Lena to get with the program. **Oh that fuck-dick sack of shit.**

Stratford never cared about getting the hearing over with early. Of course no one bothered trying to tail them to the Capitol. All they had to do was get Sayeed to show up, cancel the whole thing so he couldn’t testify, and then follow him out. Tim and Raylan move in to flanking positions, making a diamond formation with Dave and Suki. Lena and Sayeed and John are manhandled to a back entrance whilst Suki barks orders into a cell phone. She tries to peek out a window only to be yanked back by Dave, who gives her another ‘get with the program’ glare.

Lena nervously turns the ring on her middle finger. It’s a fifty-yard dash down to the road over exposed lawn, and although Lena’s made the wise decision to wear sensible shoes, a lot can happen in fifty yards, and neither she nor John is wearing a vest, and even Sayeed’s can’t stop everything, and the vest and helmet don’t cover his legs…

“You’re not dead till you’re dead.”

*And you ain’t dead, dollface. Breathe.*

Apparently, that bit of worry was for naught because ninety seconds later two SUVs come barreling over well-manicured grass and right up to the steps. Some landscaper is going to have a very bad day. A firm hand on the back of her neck shoves her lower to the ground and out of the line of sight as they make the much shorter three-yard dash down the steps and into the vehicles.

o.O.o

Sayeed and Lena go into one SUV with Dave and Suki, who Tim assumes also ‘work for the State Department’, and he and Raylan pile in the other with Lena’s boss, John. Raylan pulls out a cellphone and swipes the screen to begin dialing.

Both their driver and John immediately object. “Turn it off or get out of the car.”

Raylan looks like he’d rather hit the both of them, but does as he’s told.

“Actually, wait.” John turns back to the two Marshals. “You showed your badges around. Give me your phones. Now.” He barks the last word when they don’t comply quickly enough.

John cracks the window, “I’ll buy you both new ones later,” and tosses each phone out of the car.

Tim winces. Raylan follows the arc with his eyes, turning back with a deep breath after it shatters on asphalt. “I had photos of my daughter on there.”

“Then take some more next time you see her.”

Raylan’s jaw tightens, and Tim can see the mental countdown from ten happening in his head. He decides he likes seeing Raylan have to roll over for someone who as zero mercy or sympathy.

Tim’s smirking to himself, reveling in karma finally providing Raylan’s just comeuppance, when the right rear tire of the SUV in front of them explodes, lifting it off the ground and tossing it
sideways to slide across the median in a scraping spray of concrete chunks and gravel.
Hey guys, I know the chapters are kinda shorter than I've been doing. Life keeps happening. In other news, we are wrapping up. The next chapter is the last. It's been a ride! It may also be a week later. Because life. And I'd like it not to suck.

Lena had always thought if this happened again it would have happened back in Afghanistan two years ago. Here, she’d expected bullets.

The world is oscillating back and forth, not spinning exactly, just rocking unevenly, gyrating. Closing her eyes doesn’t do much to help the roiling in her stomach. Something else hurts too. Or maybe a lot of her hurts and she just can’t zero in on any one thing. Lena wonders when the bullets are coming. Last time had been an explosion and then bullets. Fighting her stomach’s insistent need to heave distracts momentarily from the ‘and then’. It’s all tumbling together and swirling around, the bang, being tossed, her stomach, the anticipation and dread…


Suddenly there’s a hand gripping her leg, and she startles, jumping, more of a convulsion. Beset by a surprise attack on a new front, Lena loses the battle with her stomach. Some of the puke runs back towards her face, and for the first time she realizes that her head is lying against the cold glass of the side window.

“Lena! Move!” Suki?

The hand scrabbles at her waist, and Lena scrabbles against the hand before she realizes that it’s Sayeed’s hands and if anyone is planning on murdering her, it’s not him.

His hands are on her face, turning her head this way and that. Her stomach doesn’t appreciate the attention. He probably doesn’t appreciate the vomit on his fingers. “Lena!” The ‘a’ in her name is lost at the sound of a bullet, the expected ‘and then’. This gets her up. Or rather this gets her brain to send out a ‘get the fuck up and run’ impulse. Her body doesn’t quite rally how her brain had hoped, and even then she’s still in a heap against the window, which now serves as the ground.

Together they manage to get her out of her seatbelt and reoriented, but the sound of bullets thwacking into the armored exterior doesn’t leave them with many options. They sound like they’re coming from multiple directions, and Lena sits frozen in place, no way out, dazed and panicked, waiting to be struck. They’re trapped. Another grenade or rocket or whatever it was could be coming their way any minute, but they’d both die before they even managed to get out.

She forgets to breathe, clenching her stomach muscles instead, and dry heaves.

A muffled groan and some shuffling that sounds like crunching glass comes from the front seat. Lena’s ability to concentrate, limited by the crash to the immediate present, snaps forward. “Dave?” and following the association train, “Aaron?” Aaron was driving. Now neither of them are visible. Suki shoulders her way over Lena and under and between the front seats.
A shadow moving overhead grabs her attention, and suddenly there’s a barrage of gunfire up close and loud enough to further muddle the foggy haze of adrenaline controlling her mind. The sensation of being cornered and need to run become immediately overwhelming, but there’s nowhere for her body to go, and all she can do is hunker down further, not caring that her right side is covered in her own puke.

Light comes back to the sound of wrenching metal, and the person leaning in the open door above them barks a short, no-nonsense, “Let’s go!” in a twangy Kentucky drawl that sends a flood of relief ricocheting through her system.

Raylan pulls Sayeed out first before hauling Lena up and over the side. Suki, Dave, and Aaron crawl out the front windshield. Dave’s nose is very crooked and his face is covered in blood, but the moment he’s out his weapon is too, all three of them firing up at a rooftop to the right, and Lena wonders how in the hell any of them even know who or where to aim at.

Her wondering is cut short with Raylan’s hand around her bicep steering her forcefully into the back of the second SUV. With all of them in one it’s a tight squeeze. The displaced occupants of the first car have been put in the way-back behind the back seat, and Lena thinks it’s a terrible idea for so many people to be crammed in without a seatbelt because if this one flips too, they’re going to be pulling out bodies instead of people. Pieces of bodies. Mangled bodies. She edges over to the side where she can grip a handle. Whoever’s driving must have the same idea because they turn on sirens and press the gas pedal flat to the floor, and nothing short of a cruise missile could catch up with them. A sharp turn rattles her stomach causing her to throw up again. She glances around apologetically. At least it wasn’t very much.

A firm hand grips her jaw and pulls her head around. “Follow my finger.” The only sign of Sayeed’s worry is his starting out in Pashto rather than English.

“Lena?” A different drawl is speaking over the back seat, and Lena tries to turn towards it.

Sayeed’s hand holds firm. “Not now deputy.”

“Is she ok?”

“Dave’s nose is broken,” Lena points out, both literally and figuratively.

“She has a concussion,” Sayeed replies in his ever-calm rhythm, and to Lena, “I am not going to try to push his nose into place until we are stopped.” Lena wonders for a moment at his lack of fluster, at how steady his finger is as it moves back and forth across her field of vision. He’s too used to this, she realizes.

“I’m fine,” she murmurs, suddenly feeling intensely guilty.

Sayeed ignores her and moves his finger up and down and then around in a circle. “Someone give me a phone.” Serious mode Sayeed, she thinks, issuing orders. It’s comforting in its own way. It also helps her focus. He’s focused, and as his protector it is her responsibility to be even more so. Game face, dollface, put on your game face.

There’s some grumbling from the back seat. “If only I had a phone.”

“Stop being a little bitch, Raylan.”

One is eventually passed back, and Lena squints and flinches when Sayeed flips on the flashlight and shines it in her eyes. “Don’t drink alcohol, and don’t sleep for the next six hours. Understand?”
“Yes.”

“You should see a doctor tomorrow.”

“You’re a doctor.” He pulls a face, but there’s a hint of smile under it all.

“Is she ok?” Tim’s leaning over the back seat still, annoyed.

Lena says, “yes,” at the same time Sayeed repeats his instructions in English. Tim continues to stare, searching, and Lena puts on a smile. It's semi-convincing. Her head hurts.

“Are you carrying?”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t come out of your holster unless I say.”

She nods.

With Sayeed’s examination over, Lena lets her head rest against the back of the back seat. It’s not terribly soft, but it beats holding her head up on her own steam. Focus.

Whoever’s driving is good. That turn was jarring, but the tires barely skidded, and there was no fishtailing. Whenever they get where they’re going she’s…

“Hey, where are we going?”

No one answers. Sirens that aren’t theirs, accompanied by blue and red flashing lights that also aren’t theirs drown the question when they abruptly pull out behind their SUV.
Okay, I’m an asshole. This is a week late, but it’s still here, so I hope you can forgive me. This story has been fun to write, and I’m so happy it has found such an enthusiastic audience. Thank you all for reading. For those who have, thank you for leaving your thoughts and reactions; it makes me smile to read them. :-) I already have a few pages of thoughts and notes for a new Tim story. Don’t hold your breath. It’s gonna be a long while. On a related note: someone else needs to write some Tim.

John bites out a caustic, “The fuck are they doing?” at the squad car moving up beside them and turns around, craning his head, phone out. “One of you get those plates.” Lena has grown more cautious over the years, a consequence of nearly dying, but it’s been little things – taking longer to look both ways before crossing the street, being extra nervous for the children climbing trees in the park. The level of suspicion with which John treats everyone and everything has always been downright paranoid in her book, but now Lena regards the flashing lights nervously and wonders if becoming like him is inevitable.

After a moment Suki reads the plate number back to John, who repeats them into his phone. “Alright, put me through to dispatch, and Jensen,” he snaps at their driver, “toss me that scanner.” The radio scanner is tossed to John who passed back to Suki with instructions to listen to whatever the car behind them is up to.

“They’re not saying much, just seem to be wondering who we are. They’ve marked our plates as government.” A pause while she listens. “They must have got the call about the shots and the rolled car,” and after another moment, “We could use them. Either way, we can’t go back to headquarters yet.”

John doesn’t say anything for a moment, looking around out the windows. “Get their badge numbers. If they check out then have them follow us. Head there.” He smacks Jensen on the shoulder and points ahead to a construction site in the distance, empty and finished enough that it’ll provide some nice, anonymous cover, and then back to Suki, “Can you get them on the radio?”

The construction site is a half-finished high rise, and they pull cautiously into the attached parking garage, stopping in the corner near a stairwell. Tim glances apprehensively at the half wall. A half wall is only a half shield, which isn’t much of a shield. It would have been better if Sayeed and Lena stayed in the car, protected by bullet proof glass and armor, but she’s the one with the FBI badge, so she stands just ahead, next to her boss.

The police officers pull in alongside them about fifteen yards away. One of them finishes talking into a phone before hanging up and giving them all a once over. The phone instead of a radio strikes him as strange.

Lena swipes her hair to the side – a move which does fuck all to mitigate her roughly up appearance – and pulls out her badge. The two men in the squad car wait a beat, as if sizing everyone up, looking for a threat, before opening their doors.
It’s more of a gut feeling, a split-second spike in his heart rate before he consciously recognizes the familiarity of danger. Maybe they didn’t look curious enough as they stepped out of the car, or maybe it was too much self-assurance. Maybe it was the look the two men wearing beat uniforms shared across the top of the car – like a ready signal. It’s nothing more than a series of rapid impressions followed by fast, half-acknowledged reactions, and before he’s conscious of the reason enough to properly justify the feeling, Tim knows, certain as the sky is blue and the grass is green and shit stinks, that these men didn’t come out today with the intent to protect and serve.

He’s done ambush before, some variation of this same situation too many times for fear to be the primary impetus for action. Instinct has Tim’s pistol out of his holster and aimed forward in half the time it takes to blink. It’s almost a relief, to face a threat directly rather than sitting in the back of a car waiting for it to take the next shot. Combat is goal-oriented, binary. It’s about efficiency. Efficiency of killing. Efficiency of evasion. Dave and Suki understand this efficiency. Like Tim, they’re already reaching for their weapons. Raylan understands it too to a large extent. To Tim’s surprise, John reacts rather than freezing. He didn’t expect the balding, polo-wearing soccer dad-imitation to move so quickly, but he does, ducking down behind a concrete pillar a bare split-second after Tim gets his pistol up.

Lena and Sayeed do not have the same instincts, the same knee-jerk reactions. The guns coming out startles them. They recognize the danger, but freeze. Deer in the headlights, Sayeed half-rises his hands as if to demonstrate his unarmed state. It’s an instinct honed from a different environment. Lena flinches, turns, reaching for Sayeed.

Even as a backseat, logical piece of him knows he ought to be concerned first and foremost about his witness, his brain zeros in on Lena, who is standing in easy sight and range of bullets. Nor does she have a vest. At least Sayeed has a vest. She’s a few yards ahead, out of his direct reach. Tim kicks her. A quick shuffle up and to the left and a quick jab in the meat of her thigh just below her hip and she stumble[s] sideways onto the ground. It probably gives her whiplash, maybe a skinned knee, definitely a couple bruises, but she’s a step closer to safe, so for now he doesn’t give much of a shit.

A crack of a gunshot and Tim stumbles, spinning in an involuntary half-circle to his left. If Lena weren’t on her hands and knees on asphalt the bullet would have hit her instead, probably killed her. Jesus fucking Christ. He’s recovering his axis, swinging the pistol back up to aim, moving more slowly than he’d like because of the sharp ache in his chest, when another bullet slams into his back, knocking him forward and towards the ground with far more force than the first knocked him back. Jesus fucking Christ. That was not from a handgun. Tim feels at least one broken rib, and instead of standing he lets himself fall and roll sideways, the animal part of his brain knowing it’s the smart thing to do even if he’s still trying to take aim at the two men coming towards him.

Breathing hurts. Deep breaths feel like being stabbed. Class four vests can withstand a couple high caliber rounds before breaking, but just because the bullet doesn’t get all the way through doesn’t mean it won’t fuck you up if you stand there and take the hits.

Some things aren’t easy, but they’re familiar. He can’t forget the pain in his ribs, but he pushes past it. Bigger problems. That phone call before they stepped out of the car must have been to someone else, alerting them to their position, and that someone has a long-range, high caliber rifle. The others have already found cover – spread out between cars and concrete – so he hand-crawl-sprints between the SUV and a pillar.

“Tim?”

Lena’s looking at him, eyes a little too wide, hands a little unsteady, but she only stutters once. A few
bullets thunk metallically into the side of the car, harmless, but she flinches and edges closer to the wheel well. This should be easier, considering their numbers, but no one wants to risk putting themselves in the sniper’s line of fire. From the sounds moving closer and in stereo he can tell they’re being flanked.

“I’m fine. You still got that Glock?”

She nods and raises one hand, showing him the pistol. Lena didn’t wait for his okay before drawing it.

Tim gets up off the ground and squats, balancing on his toes. “When I say, lean down and fire under the car. Doesn’t matter if you hit anything. Just make noise."

She nods, chambers a round, and flicks off the safety before lying back and aiming under the car.

Another couple rounds hit the SUV – cover fire from both the men on the ground and from the anonymous sniper as the two “police officers” continue moving closer – and Tim taps Lena’s ankle. “Go.”

She fires, and he pushes up to aim over the hood in the direction his ears told him to. His ears heard right; it’s just a small adjustment to the left and Tim squeezes the trigger, putting a neat hole through one fake cop’s cheek just under his eye. Efficient. “One down!”

Lena, who has taken his orders to heart, is still firing under the car. He realizes belatedly that he should have specifically told her to aim for something harmless, like the squad car or a wall. Tim grabs her ankle and gives it a shake. She startles and nearly points the gun at him before catching herself.

“Two down!” another voice calls. Dave, he thinks.

It’s silent a moment, and then there’s a quick alive check. Her boss, John, can be heard on his cell phone calling for back-up. “Anyone know where asshole number three is?”

No one moves out from cover. Given that asshole number three is still alive and armed with a rifle, there’s no choice but to stay put, though Lena tries to crawl farther under the car to peek, and Tim claps another hand on her ankle. She doesn’t startle this time and crawls back towards him.

“Put that away.” Lena hesitates, and in a compromise he didn’t agree to, flips on the safety instead.

Tim would cut of his left nut with a rusty razor blade and no anesthetic right now if it would get him his rifle back. With everyone ducked down, the third shooter is taking a break, and while he’s happy not being shot at, it gives him no real information about their location. If he had a rifle and a scope this would be easier.

He was facing east when he was shot in the back, so their shooter must be somewhere west. There’s another parking garage there, the twin to this one, though less finished. Tim relays this bit of information to John before standing to lean sideways in a half crouch. He clutches the side mirror, keeping his lower half behind the engine block and his torso protected by glass so he can look around. It wrenches his ribs painfully, and he drops back down with a grunt.

“Tim?” Lena’s eyes have gone wide again, and she’s crawling back over. “You said you were fine.” It’s the same accusatory tone he leveled at her in the truck stop bathroom.

“It is fine, just a couple ribs, no holes.”
“And you tell me I’m the one who needs a dictionary. I bet you fifty bucks the word fine does not cover broken ribs.”

Oh, now she wants to argue about the definition of fine. “And I bet you fifty bucks it does cover not being bullet swiss cheese.” If he can just make it over to the abandoned squad car, he bets –

Lena’s hand snags his cuff. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“I need a rifle.”

“Oh no. Nonono. No, because if you die, then I’ll steal your dog tags and make a ring out of one of them and wear it around until I’ve killed whoever killed you, and John will be pissed off that I’m running around killing people instead of doing my job, and I’ll be fired and then because I’m shit at killing people and I stole government property I’ll go to jail and rot there, and is that really what you want for my future ‘cause that’s fucking selfish, and I really don’t see why you have to –”

Her whisper rises in pitch and volume with each word, and Tim claps a hand over her mouth. “Lena.”

She takes the mature route and licks his palm. “Stop swearing.” She licks his hand again. He too takes the mature route and makes sure to wipe his palm off on her face as he releases her.

“Jackass.” He’s not sure if that’s an ornery reaction to his telling her to stop swearing or because he wiped her own saliva across her face. Maybe both.

“Tell Sayeed to give you his helmet. Say it in Pashto and make sure no one who’s over there,” he jerks his thumb vaguely west, “can see it.”

He can almost see her think Not until you tell me what it’s for, but in the end she doesn’t argue. Later, when he thinks back on this he’ll appreciate her trust.

“Sayeed?” Lena calls softly, and when he responds, a short phrase, and then a helmet is sliding and rolling towards them. Lena holds it out.

“You’re gonna make that a distraction. Just hold it up and move it like you’re a person moving. They’ll shoot at that, not me.”

“Raylan?”

“Yup?”

“In about five seconds, I need you to shoot west. Don’t hit me. I’m gonna get whatever’s in the trunk.”

“Think they got a rifle?”

“I’m hoping.”

Tim waits four seconds, gives Lena a quick nod, and sprints.

Over Raylan’s firing there’s a shot, a near simultaneous clang, followed by a yelp, followed by a fuck ton of swearing. The swearing is a comfort. Mostly. “You good?” he calls. Keep swearing, keep swearing.

A “yeah” comes from behind the SUV. “Just surprised.” Tim lets out a breath he’s only now
aware of holding and turns to the car, leveling his gun at the trunk lock.

“Hoo, whoa, whoa.” Apparently, Raylan had taken Tim’s request to provide cover as an invitation to join him. Raylan loves reinterpreting requests. “Try keys first.”

There’s not a rifle in the trunk.

“Hoo-eee.” Raylan lets out a low whistle. “Who needs a gun when you have a rocket launcher?” He reaches inside, but Tim bats his hand away.

“That’s a missile launcher, and if you don’t know what it is, you don’t get to fire it.”

“Well, I know what it is now.”

Tim would prefer the rifle, but in this case, he’s inclined to agree with Raylan’s earlier statement. This’ll do just fine.

Tim hefts it onto his shoulder before Raylan can voice further protest, and with the words all young enlisted dread hearing from a master sergeant, says, “Hey, watch this shit.”

A common misconception – all Hollywood’s fault of course – is that explosions come with a big fireball. Really they’re just a big puff of smoke and sound.

“Holy shit.”

The fire ball is a bit of a surprise. “Must have been a full gas tank.”

“I don’t suppose there’s another one in the trunk is there?” Raylan’s expression turns from delighted hope to something that bodes ill, gaze locked over Tim’s shoulder. Before Tim can turn, he hears the roar of multiple loud engines approaching.

o.O.o

“FBI! Come out with your hands up!”

“I am not falling for that again,” Raylan mutters. No one moves, and there’s another call repeating the instructions.

Dave leans forward a fraction, poking his head around the corner. “Well there’s no way out except through…six cars.”

“If you don’t come out,” the voice starts again.

“One of you toss us a fuckin’ badge!” yells John.

“You can see one when you come out with your fuckin’ hands up,” is the response.

“Feebs,” Raylan mutters, “assholes in every state. Art was right. It must be in their job description.”

“It’s a badge, not a security blanket!”

A little black flip cover with FBI creds lands near them with a scuff, and with a furtive look at the besieging agents John picks it up and types at his phone. “Back up is five minutes out,” he says more quietly to the rest of them, “we just have to stall until then.”
Someone must pick up because John suddenly looks away and starts reading off the badge number.

Tim doesn’t see the point given how well that worked out last time, but his head snaps up when John reads the name. “Wait, did you say Kelsey McCoy?”

John looks at Tim and then into space as he chooses to pay attention to the person on the other end of the line instead. Tim decides not to wait for an answer and creeps forward. The light is making silhouettes out of everyone, and identifying faces is near impossible. Another reason to have a rifle with a good scope – a scope would make this easier. Not that pointing a rifle at a group of jumpy and possibly hostile feeb would be all that helpful.

He edges a little farther forward, staying behind a pillar just in case this gamble doesn’t pay off. “Hey!” Tim calls out, “Is Chadwick spelled with a ‘C’?”

“Holy shit, Tim?”

O.O.o

Lena gets the phone call while she’s cooling her heels in Agent McCoy’s office in FBI headquarters, swinging her feet from a swivel chair. The actual FBI had sent their counter-terrorism team to investigate when a car blew up in the middle of the city. After waiting for the CIA security team to show up, they decided the Bureau’s headquarters would be safest. They’ve been kind enough to offer them crappy coffee and order take-out, but she wishes she were back in her own office. The CIA has better chairs. This one sags a bit sadly.

Her phone sings a merry rendition of ‘God save the Queen’. “Oona?”

“‘Eyyyy, boss’lady.” The appellation runs together to form a single word heavy on the ‘sssss’ and the ‘yyyyyyyy’. Lena closes her eyes and mentally makes a note to murder her little brother.

“You didn’ even ask if’m actually drunk.” As if it’s not obvious.

“Tell James he’s in trouble.”

“Now that’s not fair. He…” There’s a protracted silence, and Lena checks the phone to make sure there’s still a connection. “He gave me two very delicious bottles of wine to make me feel better. I got one of each color.” Lena digs a palm into her left eyeball as she hears James’ aggrieved voice in the background (‘It’s called Cote de Nuit!’), and if Oona actually drank all two of them, she’s not really going to be feeling better tomorrow.

“How lovely. Oona, is there a reason you’re calling?”

“Oh yes, do you remember Angeliano? That lovely little pharma company in Ancona those janky fucks are using to smuggle opium?”

“Y–”

“Speaking of Ancona, James here was telling me all about this fabulous little town called Portonovo to the south of with all these amazing beach restaurants –”

“Oona.”
“And this one where they literally catch your dinner right –”

“Oona.”

“I ‘ave no idea why you’re not as excited about this as I am.”

“Oona.”

“He also said he has this friend, Peter, who’s a,” Oona lowers her voice, affecting a drunken Scottish accent, and given the amount of alcohol she appears to have consumed, it’s not all that far off, “‘feckin’ good mate an’ good fer a lark’ that he’d be happy to introduce me to.”

*Jesus Christ in the trunk of a car with a dead hooker.* Lena rests her forehead against the earpiece and takes a steadying breath. “Oona. Angeliano. Opium smuggling. Focus.”

“Ugh, Jesus, Stratford’s trust fund is for the kid of Angeliano’s CEO, who by the way is alive and breathing and all those things that shit-eating drug smugglers like to do, so why would his kid need a trust fund from another dude, right? Anyways, all that money is coming straight out of the kid’s account and right into daddy’s, so you betch’er bottom dollar that those fuckers are in cahoots. Don’t worry, he’ll be arrested sometime around noon tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What’s wrong with right now?”

“Dude, he’s got this fancy luncheon thing tomorrow for his upcoming campaign. Lots of donors and shit. It’ll be way more hilarious if we do it then. GenCorp fuckers have already been picked up though.”

Lena grins into the phone. “Oona, my life would be terrible without you.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

o.O.o

Tim waits until she’s off the phone to open the door to Kelsey’s office. Kelsey herself is with the rest of her team trying to get answers out of John. Lena’s boss was enjoying being disappointingly vague. Tim and Raylan were enjoying watching the feebs being disappointed. It’ll give Art a good chuckle when he hears about it. He’ll send an extra bottle of bourbon to Kelsey to make up for everything later.

“Oh!” Lena leaps out of her chair to take the coffee he’d brought for both of them, and tries to wave Tim down into it. Out of a need to be obstinate, he declares he’s fine and sets himself on the edge of the desk instead.

“You need to go to a hospital,” she states, undeterred.

He takes her hand, gives it a gentle tug. “You promised me Thai food.” Nothing’s sticking into a lung, so he took six Tylenol, promised Kelsey he wouldn’t drink (too much), and called it a good day to be alive. There are other things he’d rather be doing in an empty office than arguing.

Lena glares. “You’ll get it after you’ve seen a doctor.”

“Sayeed said I’m fine.”

She opens her mouth, closes it, and gives in to his tug. Her head hits his shoulder, but there’s no weight behind it. “Please tell me this is the most exciting thing you’ve done as a marshal.”
“Well there was this one guy hopped up on bath salts who –”

“Tim.”

He still doesn’t know what to do with this, all this concern and worry and the way her fingers curl into his shirt with a sense of urgency. “It’s not nearly as interesting as Afghanistan.”

She huffs a warm breath against his collar. “I’d hope not.”

“I am good at my job, you know,” he says after a little while.

She pulls back, and he can see her rub her thumb across her ring. There’s still a patch of shadow there. “Yeah, so am I.” Somehow, he knows that even though this is all over she’ll keep wearing it.

Tim takes one hand, then the other, and pulls her back in. “If the second most exciting day of this job was watching a dude high on bath salts wearing a sheet for a cape and waving his dick at us like a helicopter, you don’t have to be too worried. The night shift at McDonald’s sees crazier shit.”

He gets the laugh he was looking for.

“A helicopter?”

“Yeah.” But there are other things he’d rather do in an empty office besides talk about the job – or talk at all – especially when he’s hyperaware of being alive, so when Lena steps closer, slipping her arms carefully up around his shoulders, he does the same and forgets about talking or thinking or anything else that isn’t right in front of him.

o.O.o

“Art, it’s fine.”

“A missile.”

“No one died.”

“From a missile? You don’t even have to aim.”

“No one who didn’t deserve it died.”

A longsuffering sigh. “I’m really going to miss bacon.” There’s a pregnant pause that sinks Raylan’s stomach. “Have you ever been to India, Raylan?”

“No.”

“Well my second keeps bothering me about it, says she wants to study abroad there. Says it’s where Buddhism was founded. Do you know anything about Buddhism, Raylan?” From the slow way Art’s coming to the point and the way he keeps repeating his name, Raylan expects it to be sharp.

“Some.”

“It’s a religion of peace.”

“Yeah,” he says, wishing the axe would just drop so he knew which way to jump.

“Well maybe with all the leave you’re about to have you can go see the sights, learn about
Oh, come on, Art.”

“Raylan, as much as you tell me you hate taking vacation, I’m inclined to think you’re lying to me. Because a person who fires missiles at buildings would only do so because they’re hoping to take leave.”

“That was all Tim.”

“You two can go on vacation together then. Hand him the phone. I’ll tell him all about it.” Art sounds both gleeful and put upon at the same time.

While Raylan trudges down the hall, phone in hand, he pours his mental energy into thinking of ways to wheedle down his ‘leave’. Not that all this hadn’t been a nice holiday from dealing with Boyd and Harlan, but he has plans that –

“Uh, he’ll call you back.” And Raylan hits ‘end’, belatedly remembering that hanging up on one’s boss is not the best way to convince them to shorten your suspension.

He’d always wondered about Tim. From the occasional side-eye, he knows Art’s wondered. If the dude had any kind of sex life he never talked about. Or at least never with Raylan, which is fine by him. He makes a point of avoiding that sort of office gossip, mostly a result of his personal life making a frequent appearance in it. He prefers to live and let live in privacy. If anyone actually knew anything it would be Rachel, but Rachel is the last person who blabs, so everyone else, is forced to wonder or nut up and ask. For his part, Raylan had always just kind of assumed…only time he ever saw Tim with someone was at the country bar on the edge of town he took Winona to when they were still being discreet…and it had seemed like Tim was being discreet…with a guy…Well.

Raylan turns around to head back down the hall to the conference room. Not that he had any investment in Tim’s love life, but after seeing him tonguing Agent Carlan, any lingering uncertainty was definitely cleared up. Hopefully they close the blinds before they get too much more involved. Hands were reaching for inappropriate places as he started his retreat.

Raylan runs into one of the agents who picked them up coming the other way towards him. “Hey, you seen Tim?” The request is actually lighthearted and polite, a bit jarring in asshole central. He should probably feel bad about lying, but he’d feel worse if he ratted Tim out.

“Think he’s taking a shit. Try the bathroom down the hall.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!