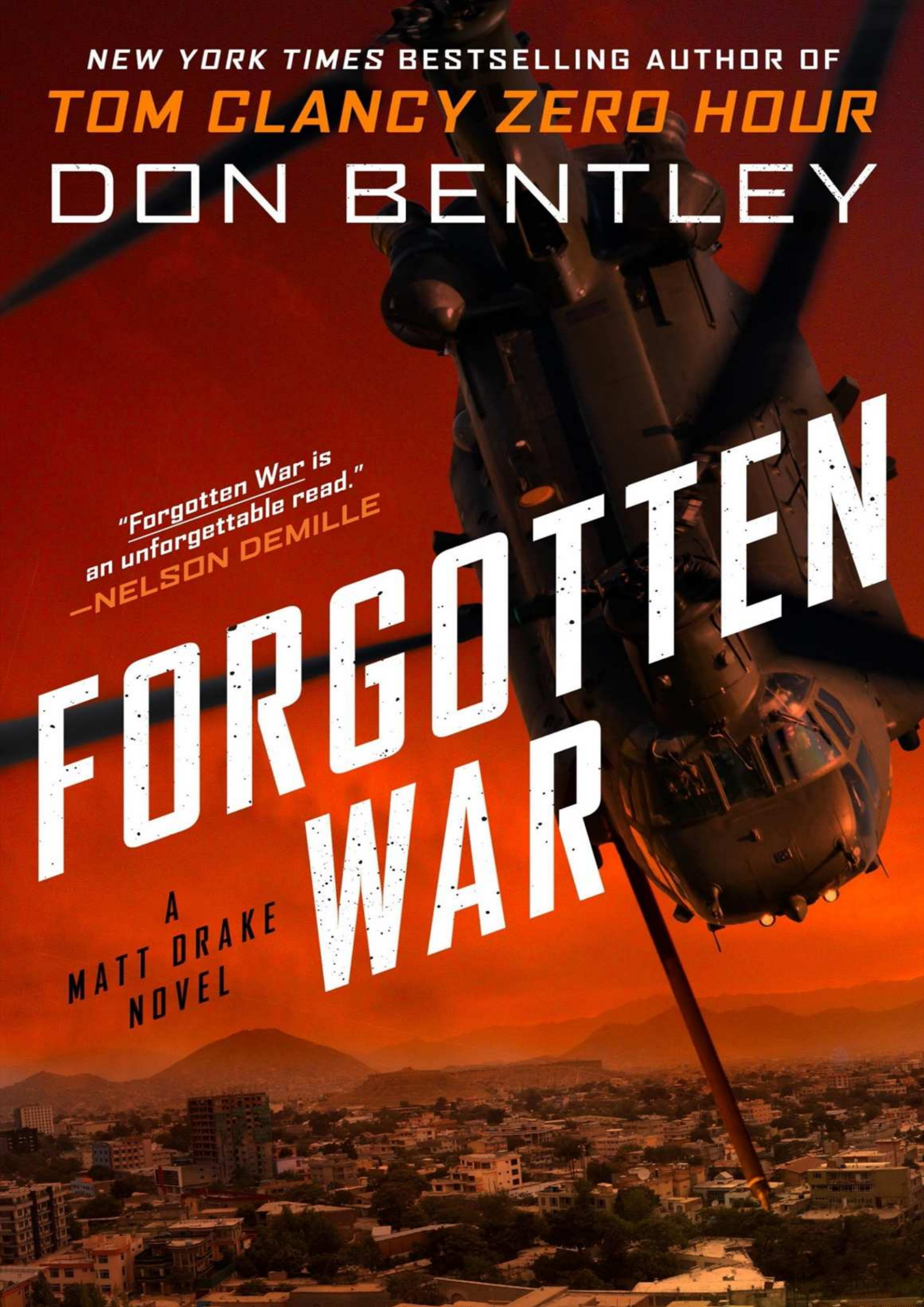


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DON BENTLEY

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FORGOTTEN WAR

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MATT DRAKE
NOVEL



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FORGOTTEN WAR

DON BENTLEY

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143303427

To the eleven Marines, one sailor, and one soldier who gave their lives on August 26th, 2021, at Kabul International Airport's Abbey Gate. You are the very best of us. May we who remain prove worthy of your sacrifice.

Fortes fortuna adiuvat.

(Fortune favors the brave.)

—PUBLIUS TERENTIUS AFER

PROLOGUE

BAGRAM, AFGHANISTAN

Brother—you are free.”

Mullah Qari Wasiq blinked in the bright sunlight, his tired eyes watering as they struggled to adjust to the unexpected brilliance. Ten years. He’d waited ten years to hear those words, but at the moment when his freedom was finally realized, Qari found himself consumed with thoughts of something else.

The will of Allah.

Qari looked from the cloudless blue sky to the five mountaintops that surrounded Bagram Air Base. Though Bāgh Darē Ghar stood the highest at nearly twenty-four hundred meters, Kōh-e Tōp was by far the most prominent. These two peaks had kept Qari company for almost a decade, but the glimpses he’d stolen from the tiny window in his cell had not done them justice. Seeing the summits in their full unfiltered glory took his breath away.

“Brother?”

With a sigh, Qari turned from the mountains to the man standing before him.

The young man standing before him.

Ten years ago, Qari had been young too. But captivity in Parwan Detention Facility, Afghanistan’s most notorious prison, had aged him. His once luxurious beard was scraggly and streaked with gray. His hair was a patchy mess, his back feeble, and his eyesight poor, but Qari now had strength in a place that had once been a dwelling for weakness.

His spirit.

“What is the time?” Qari said, his voice raspy from disuse.

“Brother?”

“The time, boy,” Qari said. “What is the time?”

The fighter shook his head, but he pulled out a cell phone all the same.

“Ten a.m., brother.”

“Thank you,” Qari said with a nod.

Two hours before *Dhuhr*, or noon, prayers.

That was fine.

With a groan, Qari removed his outer tunic, revealing the emaciated flesh beneath.

The fighter sucked in a breath.

Qari wondered which affliction had caused the young Talib the greatest surprise—Qari's protruding ribs or the puckered flesh from the gunshot wound sustained during his capture? Or perhaps it was the faint web of lines that spidered across his abdomen? Maybe even the collection of shiny burns on his forearm. Scars delivered by guards who'd used his body as an ashtray.

Qari could mark the passage of time by the scars that now dotted his body.

Bending on wobbly knees, Qari arranged his tunic on the ground facing west, brushing away the dirt as he fashioned a makeshift *sajjada*, or prayer rug. Then he lowered himself to the fabric and began to pray. Each time his forehead brushed the cloth, he praised Allah for granting him a second chance. For purging his soul. For burning away his pride. For giving him new purpose in his humility. In many ways, Qari considered himself fortunate. Historically, Allah often used periods of isolation to shape his followers. Qari could have spent forty years wandering the desert like Moses, but he had not.

After the final *salat*, Qari stood and reclaimed his tunic.

Where there once had been but a single fighter, now a gaggle of ten stood. Ten warriors, one for each year of his imprisonment.

Allah was faithful and merciful.

"Are you Mullah Wasiq?"

This time the question came from one of the new arrivals. Unlike his boyish companions, the speaker had an air of gravitas. His beard was thick and stretched to the middle of his chest. His face was weather-beaten and his dark eyes glowed with intelligence.

This was a commander, not just another foot soldier.

"I am," Qari said, his voice already stronger.

"Praise Allah," the commander said. "I am called Abdul. We've been searching for you."

Qari nodded.

The guard had told him the truth.

Like all nonbelievers, the man had been weak, but as Qari had learned the hard way, Allah transformed weakness into strength. Many of the prison guards had grown friendlier as the fighting between the Taliban and pro-government forces drifted ever closer to Kabul. But this man had

shown mercy long before his brethren. When the sound of artillery fire had rolled over the jail's walls, Qari had taken the man into his confidence and given him a message.

A message for his Talib brethren who, Allah willing, would be his liberators.

"The guard found you?" Qari said.

"He did," Abdul said. "We discovered the building just as you described."

The commander pointed toward one of the men, and for the first time, Qari realized that his former captor was standing among his liberators.

Qari stared at the man, taking in his frightened features and lack of a weapon.

"Did they mistreat you?" Qari said.

The jailer shook his head. "No, sir," the man said. "They honored our agreement."

"Good," Qari said. "And the technician . . . he is still here?"

"Yes, brother," the jailer said.

"Find this man and bring him to me," Qari said, turning his attention back to the Taliban commander. "The knowledge he carries in his head is vital."

Already his confidence was returning as the crushing helplessness of the last ten years faded like a mist burned away by the rising sun. Qari pushed back against this feeling. He was no longer the arrogant commander he'd once been. Allah had reformed him, reshaped his life's purpose.

He would not forget his transformation so quickly.

"The brothers have finished loading the equipment," the commander said. "We took appropriate precautions, but you may inspect our work if you please."

Qari shook his head.

He was probably the least qualified to judge the quality of their work. Qari hadn't been the most technologically savvy before his imprisonment. He could only imagine how much things had changed since. While he understood the value of the information housed in the building, the electronic medium on which it was stored might as well have been taken from another planet. This was why he needed the technician. Besides, Qari's faith did not rest with electronic boxes or flashing lights. Allah had brought this moment to fruition. Surely he would not let it be undone by the very men he'd enlisted to his purpose.

"No," Qari said, "but I require a phone."

The commander reached into his pocket, withdrew his cell, and handed

it to Qari.

“Thank you,” Qari said, even as he began punching in the number he’d carefully memorized. He’d recited the digits daily, each time he finished his prayers. He’d been uncertain that he’d ever have the opportunity to dial them, but neither could he abandon the hope they’d represented.

No, Qari mentally corrected himself. That wasn’t right. His hope, like his salvation, was in Allah. The phone number, as with the computers in the building, was a tool.

Nothing more.

Victory did not reside in flesh and blood or the things they created.

“Pardon, brother,” the commander said, interrupting Qari’s efforts. “What should be done with him?”

He pointed a dirty fingernail at the cowering jailer.

Qari studied the man’s face even as he hit the dial button.

“Kill him,” Qari said.

“Wait,” the jailer said, his voice pitiful. “You said you’d be merciful.”

“Mercy belongs to Allah,” Qari said, “not men. But you are correct. Allah has seen fit to grant you mercy. Your family will not also bear the cost of your sins, unlike your fellow jailers.”

The man let loose with a pitiful scream, which was quickly silenced by a gunshot.

Qari didn’t pay attention to either sound.

He was too busy listening to the ringing phone.

ONE

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Today was supposed to be a good day.

A day for celebrating new beginnings and old friendships. Few places in the world were better suited for celebration than my home city of Austin, Texas. While the self-proclaimed home of the weird wasn't anyone's idea of paradise in August, the city offered many ways to mitigate the stifling heat and suffocating humidity. It was four o'clock in the afternoon on a Thursday, and by now the three-acre Barton Springs Pool was undoubtedly crammed full of swimmers. The spring-fed water offered both refuge from the sun and a chance to meet the elusive and federally protected Barton Springs salamander, which lived in the pool's rock-lined bottom.

If the spring's year-round sixty-eight-degree water wasn't your cup of tea, the good folks over at Deep Eddy Pool would probably let you in a little early while they prepared for another nightly showing of *Jaws*. You read that right. Hundreds of people would soon be floating in inner tubes as they watched the scariest shark movie ever made. If experience was any guide, an illicit flask or two filled to the brim with the Austin-based Deep Eddy Vodka would be circulating among the audience.

I was partial to the Ruby Red variant.

This was Austin at her eccentric finest.

Though I loved my home city's eclectic summer offerings, I was seeking sanctuary somewhere more befitting a man of my low stature.

A bar.

But not just any bar.

The establishment in which my two companions and I found ourselves had no equal.

At least no modern equal.

The bar was small, dimly lit, and adhered to strict rules. Rule number one—booths must be reserved. Reservations were for a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three. Rule number two—no mobile devices and no obnoxious behavior. Despite, or perhaps maybe because of, its prime location, the bar's capacity probably topped out at about fifty. The

customers sat in a row of booths that flanked a single walkway that led from the entrance to the employee area in the rear. Obnoxious behavior in the form of drunken carousing or endless electronic scrolling detracted from the bar's atmosphere.

And atmosphere was king.

The bar's history was both sordid and long. At different points it had served as a brothel and a speakeasy among other equally less reputable businesses. Now the establishment was a fixture on Austin's infamous Sixth Street. An island of calm in which the Austinites who actually paid for the city's expenses via ever-increasing property taxes could enjoy an evening apart from the throngs of college students who regularly mobbed the street. If there was an establishment in Austin custom-made for private celebrations, the Twilight Wrangler was it.

And we were here to celebrate.

Assuming our missing party eventually joined us.

"You sure you told her the right place?"

The question came from a slightly built African American man seated across the table from me. When we'd first met, he'd been one of the deadliest human beings I'd ever encountered. His physique had always skewed more toward endurance than strength, but his ropy muscles and prominent tendons could have been crafted from steel cables and iron ingots rather than flesh and blood.

Now he was a shadow of the fearsome warrior he'd once been. While we were operating together in Syria, an explosively formed penetrator had sheared off his left arm at the elbow and ruined his left leg. He'd recently had the mutilated leg amputated just below the knee so that he could be fitted with a prosthesis. Rehab had gone well, and the procedure had given him an exponential quality-of-life improvement.

Even so, I couldn't look at him without seeing the man he'd once been.

Though his given name was Frederick Tyler Cates, everyone called him Frodo, including his fiancée, Katherine, who was seated beside him. Their recently announced engagement was one of the reasons we were here to celebrate. I was ecstatically happy for the couple. I knew Katherine well, but my relationship with Frodo ran much deeper. He was my confidant, coworker, and, most important, best friend.

I treated him accordingly.

"Of course I'm sure, ya jack wagon," I said. "She's my wife."

While the girl in question was most assuredly my wife, I was less certain about the first part of my statement. My wife wasn't late. Ever. Since it was now fifteen minutes past the time we'd agreed to meet, there

was a better-than-even chance I'd given her the wrong address.

But I wasn't about to admit this to Frodo.

"Maybe she's looking for parking." Katherine's statement was infinitely reasonable.

Like Frodo and me, Katherine had spent time in the military before taking her current role in the NSA, but she'd inhabited an utterly different world. The slim African American woman with warm eyes, shoulder-length hair, and a contagious laugh had been an aviator—a Black Hawk pilot, to be precise. And while helicopter pilots were a breed unto themselves, Katherine and her fellow aviators could on occasion admit when they were wrong.

This was not the case for men like Frodo and me. We hailed from organizations within Special Operations Command that viewed being wrong as only slightly better than being last.

Or maybe that was just me.

In any case, there was no way I could acknowledge the slim possibility that I'd texted my wife the address of our favorite watering hole on Rainey Street rather than that of the Twilight Wrangler. But I was beginning to get worried. Laila was not looking for parking because she wasn't driving. My wife excelled at a good many things. Battling Austin's homicidal motorists for the one remaining parking spot this side of Lady Bird Lake was not one of them. Laila was Ubering, which meant that her tardiness was not due to parking.

This was concerning.

"Everything okay, Matty?" Frodo said.

His earlier levity had vanished.

I'd organized this meeting at Laila's request, and she'd been adamant that its true purpose remain a secret. Katherine had taken this condition in stride, but Frodo had done everything he could to worm the topic of discussion out of me ahead of time. He'd grown more and more annoyed the closer we'd come to the appointed hour as his attempts to interrogate me continued to fail. Now his concern had a different target. Unlike our fellow patrons, Frodo and I did not have vocations in which a wife's absence could be taken lightly.

Frodo had not earned his nickname because he resembled a hobbit or had a penchant for second breakfasts. Prior to becoming a double amputee, Frodo had been a member of an organization known as the Unit to the special operators skillful enough to be listed among its members. As was the custom with newly minted assaulters, Frodo had been awarded a call sign.

Whether or not he liked it was immaterial.

I, on the other hand, had spent my last military assignment as a company commander in the vaunted Ranger Regiment. Jumping out of airplanes and kicking in doors alongside the finest infantrymen God had ever created had been a fine way to earn a paycheck. Those years did not hold a candle to my current vocation. Case in point, I'd once engaged in a shoot-out with a team of Iraqi hitters just a few blocks from where we currently sat.

Unexplained absences made me nervous.

"She's Ubering," I said, fishing my phone from my pocket. "Should be here by now."

The change in Frodo was subtle but recognizable. At least to me. One moment the fingertips of his remaining hand were resting on the stem of his fancy cocktail glass. The next, the calloused brown digits were nowhere to be seen, which probably meant they were hovering in the vicinity of his concealed SIG Sauer.

But it was more than just the location of his hand that signified a change in my best friend. Frodo's narrow shoulders now presented sharp edges against his button-down shirt, and his eyes projected hyperalertness. Frodo might have been a double amputee who walked with the aid of a cane, but dismissing him because of his injuries would have been a mistake.

A lamed wolf did not somehow become a sheep.

"Y'all need something?"

Our waitress had approached with a broad smile—after all, who wasn't happy to be working at a gourmet cocktail bar—but her grin had steadily evaporated the closer she came to our table. She had the bleached blond hair and requisite septum ring and sleeve tattoo required of a hip Austin waitress, but now her laughing eyes communicated something else.

Concern.

"We're fine," Katherine said, trying to warm up the sudden chill. "Right, guys?"

I was about to agree when my phone vibrated.

After reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the offending device.

The waitress took a step backward.

Maybe Frodo wasn't the only one who looked ready to brawl.

At six feet and one hundred eighty-five pounds, I wasn't physically insignificant, but neither did I inspire an automatic *Oh, shit* when someone drunkenly spilled beer on my boots. This was by intention. In my line of work, it was better to go unnoticed. To be the proverbial gray man. Accordingly, I was sporting what Laila playfully termed my ragamuffin

look.

At least I hoped it was playfully.

My hair was long and my beard scruffy, but my Wrangler pearly-snap shirt framed the wide shoulders and broad back of a person for whom physical fitness was more than just a passing fancy. Even so, I still worked to project the just-another-guy-enjoying-a-drink vibe.

Except that, like Frodo, sometimes the real me peeked through.

“Right,” I said, trying to add a reassurance to my voice I didn’t feel.

The Glock 23 tucked into my Don Hume inside the waistband holster pressed comfortingly against my right hip even as the pulsing phone reminded me that there were some problems that a trusty .40-caliber pistol couldn’t solve. Yet another reason I missed having Frodo watching my back with his eye pressed to a SIG Sauer TANGO6T optic mounted to his HK 417. A 7.62mm projectile traveling at a speed of twenty-six hundred feet per second wasn’t the answer to all of life’s problems, but it certainly solved many of them.

I unlocked the phone to see a text message. The originating number consisted of the digits 911 repeated over and over. The person responsible for sending the text was a former master sergeant from 10th Special Forces Group named James Scott Glass. He was also my boss. Subtlety wasn’t his thing. Across the table, Frodo reached for his own phone. I had a feeling that not all was well in our world.

The text confirmed my suspicion.

CHECK OUT THE NEWS. NOW.

“Can you turn that to a news station?” I said to the waitress, pointing at the flat-screen mounted to the wall above the bar.

She slowly shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” the waitress said. “The manager says it ruins the ambience.”

“Please,” I said even as I peeled a couple of twenties from my money clip. “It’s important.”

“No need for that,” the waitress said, refusing the offered bills. “I’ll see if I can find the remote. But only for a minute or two. Okay?”

“Sure,” I said.

“What’s this mean?” Frodo said, flashing me his phone. The same message glared from his screen.

“We’re about to find out,” I said.

The waitress pointed a black remote at the TV and the display glowed to life. It was tuned to MSNBC—we were in Austin—but I didn’t care about

the station's political leanings. I was too busy focused on the video playing over the anchor's shoulder.

"Holy shit," Frodo said.

"Can you turn it up?" I said. "Please."

The waitress shot me a look but obliged.

A moment later, a cultured voice flooded the room.

"This is unprecedented," the newscaster said. "The Taliban now control Bagram Air Base."

"Holy shit," Frodo said again.

Mom loved to remind me that foul language was evidence of low intelligence. That might be true, but in this case I didn't agree. Though he'd joined the Army straight out of high school and had never darkened the doorway of an institution of higher learning, Frodo was one of the most intelligent people I knew and he had a vocabulary to match. He wasn't swearing because he was too lazy to think of better words. He was cursing because he was shell-shocked.

So was I.

"Why is that on, Hannah?"

The tone carried just enough indignation to indicate that the man asking the question was the bar's manager. He was standing at the far end of the room, hands on his hips and glaring at our waitress. Like Hannah, the manager was dressed in black slacks and a white dress shirt. The top several buttons were undone and his shirtsleeves were rolled, exposing portions of a tattoo that seemed to traverse his entire torso. While Hannah's nose ring and ink seemed somehow charming, the effect wasn't nearly so endearing on this joker. My assessment probably had something to do with the tone of voice he was using with Hannah.

"Hey," I said, waving to get his attention, "my fault. I asked her to turn it on."

The manager could have taken the off-ramp I'd provided.

He didn't.

"Thank you for apologizing, sir," the manager said, "but Hannah should have known better."

Crossing the bar in three quick strides, the manager snatched the remote from Hannah and pointed it at the TV.

"Stop," Frodo said.

My commando friend didn't shout, but the manager still jerked.

I understood why.

Authority radiated from Frodo's voice.

"I'm sorry?" the manager said, turning toward Frodo.

“Don’t be sorry,” Frodo said, speaking with a drill sergeant’s crisp cadence. “Just leave it on.”

“Until the station break,” I said. “Please. We’re Afghanistan vets.”

“I’m grateful for your service,” the manager said in a tone suggesting otherwise, “but our policy is clear.”

He extended the remote toward the TV.

“Don’t. Touch. It.”

Frodo’s words cracked through the air, each one landing like Rocky Marciano’s mighty right hand. Images of carnage and rioting shone from the screen, but at that moment, Afghanistan didn’t have anything on the violence Frodo’s tone promised.

“We don’t mind if you leave it on.”

The comment came from a couple seated at the table catty-corner to ours. The man was the one who spoke, but his date vigorously nodded. The man’s earnest expression suggested that he genuinely wanted to help, but I was betting he would have the opposite effect. Maybe the manager might have backed down before, but now his face-saving off-ramp was gone. Petty tyrants are the same the world over whether they run a bar or a country. A man who isn’t secure in his own authority will always view differing opinions as attacks.

“Sorry,” the manager said, stabbing the remote.

The TV winked off.

The manager turned from the TV to Frodo, a self-satisfied smirk stretched across his face. Like the television, the manager’s smile died a quick death. The average person’s concept of violence is formed by action movies or schoolyard shoving matches. This naivety leaves them wholly unprepared for the visceral nature of actual combat.

To be fair, few human beings have meted out violence on the scale practiced by Frodo. Comparing the squabbles of day-to-day American life with the world that Frodo and I inhabited was the equivalent of calling a house cat a mountain lion. Sure, the two felines shared similar qualities, but someone who’d seen both would never confuse one for the other. The look on the manager’s face suggested that he’d just stumbled upon his first lion.

I made a grab for my best friend but needn’t have bothered. A half second earlier, I’d been convinced that Frodo was a heartbeat away from thrashing the arrogant manager with his prosthesis. Now something else demanded our collective attention.

The door to the bar slammed open, and two people entered.

People with guns.