

Brady Harrison
Gone to Ground

I.

They moved quietly, avoiding the endless switchbacks up and down the steep pitch, wary of landmines and patrols, dropping their night vision into place when the cloud cover obscured the stars. The air was thin and cold and Cal could hear the labored breathing of the others as they climbed without break, struggling for footing when the terrain became particularly sheer or strewn with sand and scree.

When Barrett fell back from point, signaling that he had to piss, the LT motioned for Cal to take the lead and he pushed ahead, his heart pounding, lungs rasping, remembering that the first time they'd had to climb a mountain and then bushwhack across it before dropping down to their target he'd had a blistering headache and kept retching—as silently as possible—even though his guts were long empty. His hands had become so swollen that he could barely close them, and he couldn't remember the name or the number of the mountain or the target. Then, as now, there was no turning back. The target and extraction point were ahead and unless one of them started blacking out or their lungs filled with fluids the LT would not call for an evac: the target would learn of the intrusion, and slip away and it could be months or even years before they found him again, if at all. Now, the altitude didn't bother him.

They had been climbing since just after sunset, and had, at least according to the altimeter in his watch, about another fifteen hundred feet to ascend before turning and circling to the west and then north in order to arrive above the village and then descend into it, on the hunt, just before dawn.

As he brushed past, Cal recalled Barrett's aside from a few briefings ago:

—Village? Three huts and a cave? It's five thousand years ago in this country. And you see how they treat their women? Worst people on the planet. The only ones who come close are the Pukeistanis—acid in the face, cutting off noses and heads, marrying little girls to ancient creeps.

Cal had nodded to himself—it was difficult to like the Hajjis—but then M&M had said:

—I know, right? It's like locking your sister in a room with football players and hoping she'll be all right.

Barrett had muttered that he didn't find M&M all that funny, but he laughed, anyway.

Cal heard the LT whisper for a halt and he dropped to one knee to allow the rest to close on his position. Once gathered, the LT double-checked his watch against theirs, took a GPS reading, and verified it on a topo. He shook his head:

—We're moving too damn slow. We're at least half an hour behind.

The way ahead looked to be even steeper than the terrain they had been covering.

—I'd just as soon not get stuck out here in the daylight.

The LT looked from one to another, and the three nodded in turn. He passed around a Ziploc filled with jerky:

—Cal on point. Keep hydrating, and keep on the look-out for bad guys.

By the time they had reached their marker to begin traversing to the west, they had gained back some of the time. Climbing above a path that ran both east and west from a short switchback, they spread out, Cal in the lead, moving quickly, trying not to dislodge rocks and

send them tumbling and echoing downslope. They had nearly a four mile hike around the mountain until they arrived above the village, and Cal set a blistering pace: better to have lots of time to scout the descent than to be rushing as they closed on the target. Keeping the trail about twenty yards below him, he zigzagged up and down as the terrain necessitated, skirting boulders and climbing above abrupt ledges and fields of clanking talus. They were well above twelve thousand feet, but his legs felt strong and elastic, and he enjoyed the scrambling. Gaining back the lost time, and then some, they pressed on without stopping until they were forced to slow as the slope became more and more sheer. Holding his position, Cal waited for the LT:

—Try to climb above this face, or drop to the trail?

They lowered their night vision into place. The crag seemed to rise five hundred feet or more, and the path below turned into a wide ledge that bent around the base of the jagged, weathered escarpment. They knelt for several minutes, listening intently, but neither heard anything beyond the wind and the occasional clack of shifting stone.

The LT signaled for Cal to cut down to the path:

—Let's keep moving.

Slipping and sidestepping his way down the steep drop, Cal reached the track and moved as silently as possible, staying near to the scarp. As he rounded the corner, he almost bumped into two men. Automatically, he dropped to one knee, simultaneously raising his rifle. The men, as shocked as Cal, stopped abruptly. Seeing no weapons at the ready, Cal hesitated.

In that instant, he realized his error. He heard the LT curse softly.

Even as the men began to raise their hands, Barrett swept past the LT and Cal and struck the nearest man in the neck with the heel of his hand. The man crumpled and, without losing a step, Barrett stepped over the falling man and struck the other in the temple with his fist. The second man staggered backwards, almost losing the trail, and Barrett swung around behind him, his right arm around the neck, and choked him into unconsciousness.

In a few seconds, M&M had zip-tied their arms behind their backs and gagged them with tape. When the first man began to stir and moan, Barrett let him lift his head from the rock and then stomped it back into the ground. Blood trickled from the man's nose and mouth, but he did not move.

The Rangers looked from one to another, and Cal looked down.

They all knew what had happened only a few weeks ago to a SEAL team operating on the Pakistani border. They had run into three men and, not knowing whether they were Taliban or simply villagers, had given them the benefit of the doubt and let them go. The freed men immediately returned with their buddies and had blown away all the SEALs save one who had been thrown into a crevice by an RPG and hidden by debris. Since the reports came back, the LT's squad had hedged around the question and, in not so many words, had made their call.

M&M whispered what they all were thinking:

—Now what?

They looked down at the two men at their feet. One was older, perhaps in his fifties, his long beard mostly gray; the other could have been his son, a younger man in his twenties or thirties. They were carrying AKs, but lots of Afghans carried AKs, especially in the mountains, and they could be from the clans or Taliban or Al-Qaeda. The squad, like the SEALs before them, had no way to tell.

Cal looked from his boots to the sky. The stars were bright and clean, distinct, blue, and only began to waver as he stared. Occasional, tattered clouds ribboned past, pushed by the icy winds aloft. He lowered his gaze to the horizon, and saw ridgeline after ridgeline, mountain peak after mountain peak reaching all the way across the frontier and into Pakistan. Below them, the valley was narrow and remote and lost in black shadows. He supposed the terrain was stark and beautiful, but it was also stark and ugly, treeless and parched, and sand and chips of rock seemed always to be pitting against his clothes and helmet and face.

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