

A  
JACK EMERY  
THRILLER



STEVE P.  
VINCENIT

**FIREPLAY**

USA TODAY BESTSELLER

# **FIREPLAY**

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JACK EMERY 0.5

STEVE P. VINCENT

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Fireplay

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## CONTENTS

[Books by Steve P. Vincent](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sample of The Foundation \(Jack Emery 1\)](#)

[Also by Steve P. Vincent](#)

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[About the Author](#)

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*[State of Emergency \(#2\)](#)*

*[Nations Divided \(#3\)](#)*

*[One Minute to Midnight \(#4\)](#)*

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*[The Omega Strain \(#1\)](#)*

*[The Shadow Enclave \(#2\)](#)*

*[The Lazarus Protocol \(#3\)](#)*

*[The Capricorn Deception \(#4\)](#)*

*[The Azure Backlash \(#5\)](#)*

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## PROLOGUE

**A** flash of lightning illuminated the cell with pale light for only a split second, long enough for Hewad Ghilzai to see his friend on the floor. Positioned unnaturally, he hadn't moved since the American soldiers had left several hours ago. Hewad hadn't moved either. He was too scared. He'd been hurt too many times.

Hewad held his knees to his chest and kept his back against the wall. His mind was empty and his tear ducts were dry. Only his grief and the smell of human feces kept his attention in this world at all. He awaited the next. He'd taken the fight to the infidel and ended up in a place worse than hell.

He'd done everything right. Had Allah abandoned him? On most nights the stars provided enough light to see the outline of his bed, the latrine pail, and the grilled steel that penned him in, but tonight he couldn't see an inch in front of his hand. The world was as dark as the heart of his captors, except when lightning lashed at the mountains.

Footsteps approached and a faint light lit the corridor outside his cell. He instinctively hugged his knees tighter and his eyes shot towards the door. As he waited the footsteps grew louder and the light brighter. He whimpered as the heavy door unlocked with a clunk and opened with a squeal.

"Evening, haji." The soldier's drawl was unmistakable, even as the cell door slammed shut. "I thought you could use some company, what with the storm and all."

Hewad said nothing. He hadn't always been so passive and afraid. The blows from combat boots and rifle butts had started a conversion that mutilations and degradation had completed. He was a broken man, a spent soul trapped in a body that had nearly expired.

"Nothing to say?" The soldier sighed as he held the flashlight up to Hewad's face. "You had some spunk, haji, but now you're as lively as your friend over there."

Hewad lifted his hands to shield his eyes as the soldier laughed at his own joke. The light felt like another assault after so much darkness, though it was nothing compared to whatever struck him across the side of the head. It staggered him. He fell onto his side, curled into a ball, and tried to protect himself as best he could.

Blows rained on him and he felt himself starting to black out when he heard an earsplitting boom and felt an enormous shockwave. He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes, confused. The flashlight was on the ground, illuminating the chaos. The soldier lay still and half of the wall was missing.

Hewad blinked several times and his senses slowly returned. His pain was intense, but in the depths of his mind excitement sparked. He looked at the soldier for several minutes, waiting for him to move. Finally, he inched closer, paused, and then scurried over and felt for a pulse. None. Allah had delivered him.

He shoved the man. When the body didn't move Hewad's eyes widened and he clawed for the man's canteen, unscrewed the lid, and drank deeply. Some of the water spilled to the sand as he sucked at it, gulping and coughing as he fought to overcome the most incredible thirst.

When the water ran out he glanced at the soldier's sidearm. To take it would be to re-enter the fight, to forget the next life for the moment and take up arms again in this world. He stared at the weapon for several long moments and then looked at the hole that had been blown in the wall. He knew the will of Allah.

Hewad took the soldier's weapon and boots and then staggered to his feet. He walked toward the hole in the wall, where the lightning had struck the steel window grill and fractured much of the poor-quality wall. He hesitated briefly.

To step through would mean death if he was captured, but to stay would be to spit in the face of Allah's mercy. He spat on the soldier instead.

Hewad stepped outside.



Jack Emery smiled wryly and looked up from his laptop. He'd never faced such an odd juxtaposition before: Aussie rock blaring inside an American armored vehicle driving through the Afghan desert. It left him barely able to think or work as the squealing guitars threatened to pierce the sound barrier. In his experience, it was just how the marines liked it.

"Sound like home?" Lieutenant Daniel Ortiz laughed as he shouted over the music. "I told you bringing that thing along was a waste of time!"

Jack set the laptop aside and had to raise his own voice to be heard. "I thought I'd try to get some work done!"

"Sorry about that, buddy! You want to hang with marines you have to party with marines!" Ortiz grinned and then turned his head to look out the window.

Jack winced at the thought of all the work he had to do. He'd been embedded with the 8th Marines for three months, sending three reports a week to EMCorp and its affiliates. It wasn't a huge workload, but after so long it was getting hard to find interesting things to write about, given the war was now a simmering insurgency. In the last week he'd filed two stories about US troops building schools.

He looked out the front windshield and could see nothing but the desert and the dust kicked up from the Humvee at the head of the column. He shuffled back into the seat and struggled to get comfortable as the music switched to the next track. As a roaring drum solo kicked off the wailing electric guitars, there was a

massive explosion and the lead Humvee burst into a fireball.

“Fuck!” Jack gripped his laptop.

“IED!” Ortiz had to shout over the music.

As the Humvee ahead of them started to slow, ablaze and bleeding smoke, Jack reached for the overhead rail and the driver braked hard. The vehicle skidded and slid sideways, the road not giving the tires any purchase. The sound of the locked wheels skidding across the dirt and gravel was one of the worst Jack had ever heard. He wasn't a religious man, but he closed his eyes and prayed.

The vehicle stopped as Jack opened his eyes and reached for his video camera. He glanced right. The music had stopped and Ortiz had started to bark commands to his unit over the radio. Jack looked left, over his shoulder, where flames licked at the blackened husk of the unmoving Humvee. Nobody could have survived that explosion.

“Talk to me! Any movement?” Ortiz's voice was tense as he spoke into the radio.

Jack's mind started to speed up again as the other vehicles in the convoy reported no contacts. It was quite common for the insurgents to hit a convoy with one roadside bomb, but there had also been instances where a single blast had been the prologue to a greater assault. Jack followed as the marines climbed out of their vehicles and formed a perimeter.

Jack felt instinctively for the 'PRESS' lettering that covered his Kevlar vest as he followed Ortiz to the flamed-out Humvee. He kept filming as he drew closer. Even though he probably wouldn't use the video, he'd be able to get some stills to go with his report. It was hard to believe that four marines had probably been talking shit inside the vehicle just a minute ago.

“Fucking hell.” Ortiz spat in disgust. “How can you fight these guys?”

Jack kept silent. He doubted Ortiz was addressing him. He'd just lost friends.

Jack heard a shout. “Hey! LT! We've got a solo contact about a mile out.”

Ortiz snapped instantly from mourner to commander and started to jog toward the marines, who were taking cover behind the bulk of a Humvee. Jack followed, arriving a few seconds after Ortiz. He took a few deep breaths, trying

to stay calm. He'd been in combat plenty, but had never been on the end of an IED attack. There was a particular type of fear reserved for an enemy that you couldn't see.

"Report." Ortiz's voice had an edge that Jack hadn't heard before. He'd just lost a quarter of his convoy in the blink of an eye.

The marine who'd reported the contact lowered his binoculars, handed them to Ortiz and pointed out into the desert.

Jack squinted. Though he thought he could see an individual drawing closer, he knew the desert played tricks on the eye. His heart pounded. He wanted desperately for it to be a lone individual and not a Taliban or Al Qaeda attack. He didn't fancy being in the middle of a firefight this far from friendly backup. He kept filming as the unidentified man drew closer.

"One guy, hands in the air and with no visible weaponry." Ortiz exhaled loudly through his nose. "What's his game, I wonder? The bomber?"

"Or a suicide bomber?" Jack spoke before he'd realized it.

Ortiz shook his head. "Nah, we shoot long before they get close enough."

Jack nodded. As several of the marines kept their rifles trained on the approaching man, Jack stood back a few yards and watched. Ortiz stood still until the Afghani closed to within fifty yards. At that point he used the interpreter to order the man to stop, take off his outer garments, keep his hands in the air, and drop to his knees. The man did it all without hesitation or protest.

"Something isn't right here, LT." One of the marines protested.

"Shut the fuck up and move in, Hills," Ortiz snarled. "If I want you to check your grandmother's Ouija board to make sure things are safe, I'll be sure to ask."

Jack followed Ortiz and five other marines as they approached the man, leaving the others behind to guard the vehicles. Despite having so many weapons trained on him, the man said nothing and stayed still. His body was covered in sores, scars, and bruises. Once the man had stripped the only thing he wore was underwear and a pair of tan-colored boots.

"What's your name?" Ortiz waited for the translator to finish. "Did you plant the bomb that blew up my vehicle?"

"My name is Hewad." The man's voice was calm, even spiritual, as he spoke

in his native tongue and the translator gave it meaning. “Yes. I did.”

“Hewad what?” Ortiz took a step closer. “I need your surname.”

“Hewad Ghilzai.”

Before Ortiz could reply, the marine who’d been pawing through Ghilzai’s pile of clothing spoke. “There’s a marine sidearm here, LT, and those are marine boots.”

Ortiz’s gaze flicked back to Ghilzai. “Where did you get the boots and weapon?”

“Camp Navitas.” Ghilzai smiled. “God delivered them to me. Now I must go.”

Jack kept filming as Ghilzai tried to stand with a smile on his face. Gunfire roared all around as the marines took no chances. Ghilzai’s body slumped to the hot sand, his blood completing a horrible scene. Jack filmed closely until Ortiz came close and put a hand on his shoulder. Jack took the cue and flicked off the camera. He had what he needed and these men had been through enough.

“What now?” Jack’s gaze flicked back and forth between the body, Ortiz, and the other marines.

“We go pay a visit.” The fury in Ortiz’s eyes was matched by the edginess of his voice.

Suddenly, Jack felt he might have something to write about.

\* \* \*

“AS YOU CAN SEE, Mr Emery, the facility we’re running is top notch.” Major Brad Brinson waved a hand out over the yard where, on the other side of the chain link fence, inmates were playing soccer or chatting in small groups. “I trust your story will say as much?”

Jack ignored the threat in Brinson’s words. Any journalist worth their salt was subject to threats, bribes, intimidations, and warnings on a weekly basis. He couldn’t help but think that Brinson was feeding him horse shit. He shrugged. “The Press Corps will have right of refusal, as always.”

Brinson frowned but said nothing. He turned away and resumed the walk

along the path, where marines armed with rifles kept watch over matters. On the surface, Jack had to admit that the facility looked fine: well run, adequately staffed, and with inmates cared for in basic but suitable conditions. But deep in his gut he felt like it didn't stack up.

After Ortiz had radioed the attack in, they'd waited for a few hours for a relief convoy to arrive to take care of the cleanup. The delay had given Ortiz and the other marines some time to grieve and to think through the shooting of Hewad Ghilzai. That time hadn't provided clarity, however. Jack was still confused about those chaotic five minutes. He couldn't understand it, but knew there was a story.

While Jack had never heard of Camp Navitas, Ortiz had told him it was a small marine outpost in Helmand Province that doubled as a small prison. While they waited for the cleanup crew, Ortiz had made a request on Jack's behalf and approval had been granted. They'd arrived and been greeted by Brinson. After a quick tour, the major clearly expected them to leave.

"Just one more question, if you'll indulge me?" Jack pushed his luck. He'd only get once chance. "Tell me about Hewad Ghilzai."

Major Brinson stiffened. "Not much to tell. The little shit got lucky. Lightning struck the bars of his cell a few weeks back. The shockwave took out one of my men and weakened the wall. He grabbed a weapon and made a run for it. Given how many of our boys he's responsible for killing, I'm glad he's dead."

Jack wasn't satisfied with the explanation or the tour. He wanted to know more and to see more. He looked at his watch. "Gee, it's getting late."

Brinson smiled like a mouse that'd triggered the trap but made off with the cheese. "You guys better be off. Don't worry, there's not much else to see."

Jack hesitated. He looked over to Ortiz, who stood off to the side with his hands in his pockets and his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. A slight raise of the eyebrow was the only sign Jack gave to Ortiz that he was after some support. He turned back to Brinson and was about to speak when Ortiz spat on the ground and stepped forward to join them.

"Too late to move out now." Ortiz looked up at the sky and rubbed his chin. "It's too far back to Leatherneck. We'll need to billet here until dawn, Major."

The smile vanished from Brinson's face. He glared at Jack, Ortiz, and the other two marines as if they were annoyances. "Impossible, we don't have room."

"I hear a space has just opened up, Major." Jack smiled. "One of your prisoners was shot dead a few hours from here."

Brinson glared. "I don't appreciate –"

Ortiz sighed. "Do I need to get the colonel on the line? It's 104 degrees, major, and the orders were clear: every possible courtesy and all that."

"You're out of line, Lieutenant." Brinson's voice had menace.

Jack tapped his tape recorder, which was still going. "It would let me start on the story and I could give you a look before we head off tomorrow."

Brinson's eyes narrowed. He was clearly weighing up something and Jack wondered again what he had to hide. To have the chance to find out, Jack had to hope the potential to shape his story and the threat of escalation to Colonel Williams would overcome Brinson's displeasure at the idea of them staying. Jack needed time to snoop around.

"Okay." Brinson nodded. "But I hope you like bunk beds, Mr Emery. One of my guys will sort you out."

Ortiz saluted and waited as Brinson returned it lazily and then stalked off. As they waited to be told where to go, Jack and Ortiz leaned against the chain link fence and watched the inmates play. Jack looped his hands through the fence, and then winced as he cut himself on a rough strip. He looked down and saw blood and then glanced up at the inmates. It struck him then how many had scars and bruises.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Jack." Ortiz spoke softly. "I'm going to be in a shit ton of trouble with the colonel."

Jack grinned. "This is what I do."

\* \* \*

JACK PRESSED AGAINST THE WALL, hoping that the cold stone might somehow hide him from the beam of light that snaked towards him, left and right, ever

closer as a marine approached with a flashlight. After all of his effort to stay at Camp Navitas overnight, he'd barely made it out of his room and now it looked like the gig was up. Ortiz wouldn't be impressed if Jack was busted, nor would Jack's editor. He took a deep breath.

"Hey, Mike!" a voice shouted. "Major Brinson wants you posted outside the journalist's door."

Jack closed his eyes. He hoped the new voice was calling out to the guy holding the torch.

"I'm rostered on to B wing." Another man, closer to Jack, called back and then let out a long sigh. "I wish he'd make up his mind. Who's taking over from me?"

"Nobody. Now get moving."

Jack's eyes shot open and locked onto the beam of light. It had stopped moving towards him. He heard another sigh and then watched as the light shifted direction. The marine's boots gave dull thuds as he walked away, the sound growing fainter with each footstep. Finally, after going so close to being exposed by the guards, Jack was alone in the darkness.

He took a couple of deep breaths and then pushed himself off the wall. He stuck his head around the corner and then moved down the hallway as quietly as he could. At the end of the corridor he turned left and made his way toward one of the three detention blocks he'd been walked past but not allowed to enter when Brinson had given them the tour. Brinson had told him that each block housed twelve detainees.

He reached the heavy steel door that barred the way into the cell block. Luckily, it was more focused on keeping inmates in than snooping reporters out, meaning he could open it with the turn of a handle. He walked inside and closed the door behind him. No guards were posted inside, but there was always a chance one would happen along. Whatever he was hoping to find, he had to find it quickly.

The light on his cell phone was all Jack could use to search. It was hard to get used to walking around in the dark, but many American firebases and camps on the fringe of insurgent territory went dark at night. Navitas was no different.

As he walked deeper into the cell block, the smell was the first thing he noticed, followed by the cries and whimpers of broken men from behind simple but effective grilled steel cell doors.

He hesitated and then decided that if he was going to trespass he may as well go the whole hog. “Hello? Does anyone speak English?”

He was met with silence, though the whimpering stopped. He tried again. “I’m an Australian reporter. I’d like to talk about Hewad.”

He stood still as some of the inmates chatted amongst themselves in Pashto or Dari – Jack wasn’t sure which. It was a long shot that any of them would be able to understand him, know Ghilzai, and be willing to speak with him, but he had to try. The alternative was to search aimlessly through the camp and risk getting caught with no guarantee of a story.

The chattering increased and, finally, one of the Afghans approached the door to his cell. He gripped the bars with his hands and spoke. “You know Hewad?”

Jack flashed the light towards the man. “I met him. He’s dead now. He blew up an American vehicle and they shot him.”

“Trust him to do something like that.” The detainee’s English was patchy, but good enough to understand. “We thought he was crazy.”

Jack’s mind started to fire, but he kept calm. The surest way to scare off a source was to jump too excitedly at a lead. “You knew him well?”

The other man laughed and then suppressed it, as if he’d momentarily forgotten where he was. The few teeth he had left were rotten. “I should. He married my sister.”

Jack smiled. He shouldn’t take a liking to the man, but it was hard not to. “Hewad had American boots and a weapon. He told me if I came here I’d find answers.”

The prisoner laughed. He took a step back, pulled his tattered shirt over his head, and turned around. Even in the pale light offered by the phone, Jack could see fresh wounds alongside scars. He could see welts and burns, angry and red, and bruises as dark as the night. The man’s whole body was broken and wounded. Jack had seen combat injuries before, and these weren’t that. This was



something else.

“How long have you been here?” Jack kept his voice low, feeling as if the man’s revelations made his snooping even riskier.

The prisoner shrugged. “Many months. Nearly a year. Who knows? I’ve been here the longest though.”

So the wounds could only have been caused by one thing. “And they mistreat you?”

Another shrug. “They do what they do. To me and everyone else until we die. Except Hewad. He was the most devout. God freed him and he struck back.”

“Do you mind if I take some photographs? I’ll report this to the world.”

“Do what you want. I’m a dead man anyway.”

Jack spent a few moments photographing the man’s injuries with his phone. The shots weren’t great, but they’d suffice. Jack was surprised when the prisoner called out to other detainees to show him their wounds. He gathered dozens of photographs of the nine men before deciding he’d pushed his luck – and that of the prisoners – far enough. He noted down the names of each prisoner and then moved to leave the cell block.

On a whim he paused and turned back to the prisoner who spoke English, still standing at the bars of his cell. “Which cell belonged to Hewad?”

The man pointed. Jack walked over and flashed his light inside the cell. Not surprisingly, it was empty, though there was an enormous bloodstain on the sandy floor of the cell. He looked up and saw clearly how Hewad had escaped, through the giant hole in the wall. He took some more snaps and started to piece it together in his head. Camp Navitas was a giant torture chamber.

He’d risked enough and had enough for a story. There was nothing else to be gained, but plenty to be lost by sticking around. With one final glance at the prisoners he cut the light on his phone, left the cellblock, and then snuck back toward his room. No marines interrupted his journey, though Jack did pause around the corner from his room.

He pulled the phone out of his pocket and undid the button on his brown chinos. Within a few seconds, he had the phone in between his ass cheeks. It wasn’t the nicest part of his job, but if Brinson was worried enough about what

was hidden in his facility to put a guard on Jack's door, then there was a chance they'd search him. He turned the corner and approached the door.

The marine on the door nearly had a kitten when he saw Jack walking toward him. His flashlight switched on and pointed at Jack. "I hope you can explain this, sir."

Jack smiled and raised his hands in the air, trying to lighten the mood. "Just ducked out for a walk. Sorry."

"I've been here for thirty minutes, sir." The marine didn't sound convinced. "I believe the major was clear about the rules of you staying here overnight."

"I'm Australian, mate. Rules are optional for us." Jack laughed and patted the marine on the shoulder. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him, will it?"

The marine sighed. "I'll need to search you quickly."

Jack clenched his cheeks. He doubted the guard would look too closely.

The departure from Navitas hadn't gone as Jack had expected. Major Brinson hadn't even been there when, early in the morning, Jack had climbed into the Humvee with Ortiz and the other marines and set off for Camp Leatherneck. He'd expected bluster from Brinson – threats about his story and chastisement for wandering from his room. Instead, he'd been given a sandwich.

“So did you get anything worthwhile?” Ortiz shook his head as they raced along the road. “Those were some cranky motherfuckers.”

Jack looked up from his laptop. Tellingly, the other two marines in the vehicle were nodding at Ortiz's words. They knew something was up. “Well, I...”

Ortiz interrupted and pointed to the driver and front seat passenger. “If you're worried about these two, don't be. They've been through hell with me.”

Jack still hesitated. The story he was writing to go with the pictures he'd taken would rock America and the Marine Corps. Though allegations of torture had surrounded the CIA for years following September 11, the military had mostly kept its hands clean with the exception of Abu Ghraib. From what Jack had seen, this was as bad – systematic and at scale. It angered him.

He knew that the minute he spoke about the story it would take on a life of its own. Though he'd spent the last few months embedded with Ortiz and his troops, and he was confident that most men and women in uniform would be as

appalled as he was by the torture, there was no guarantee. Jack closed his eyes, reached up, and scratched his forehead. He opened his eyes and Ortiz was staring at him.

“Look, Jack.” Ortiz’s gaze didn’t waver. “Whatever happened at that camp contributed to the death of four of my men. Shit happens in war, but if someone screwed up I want to know before you put it on the front page of the *Standard*.”

“Okay.” Jack sighed. Suddenly, he felt bad for questioning these men. They’d welcomed him, protected him, and shown him around the country for months. He handed the laptop to Ortiz. “Check it out.”

Jack watched as Ortiz took the computer and worked his way through the story. The marine’s facial expression shifted from curious to concerned to angry. By the time he reached the end of the story he’d seen Jack’s claims and the photos that backed them up – the beatings, the burnings, the electrocution, the rectal abuse. The detainees hadn’t held back and neither had Jack.

“Fuck.” Ortiz handed the laptop to the marine in the front seat. “I thought we’d learned from Iraq.”

“It’s an important story.” Jack shrugged. “But it’s going to cause a firestorm. I’ll keep your names out of it.”

Ortiz grunted. He seemed satisfied by Jack’s concession, given nobody in the Humvee was guilty of anything. It was only by sheer chance that they’d been the patrol to trigger Ghilzai’s bomb and then been able to question the man enough to get a lead before he’d been shot. What shocked Jack most of all was the scale of the abuse at Navitas – at least thirty detainees and a dozen marines were involved.

The driver interrupted Jack’s thoughts. “Hey, LT? We’ve got company. A couple of ANA hummers and a truck.”

Jack was confused about why an Afghan National Army convoy would be tailing them. Ortiz and the driver shared a look in the rear vision mirror, after which the Humvee started to speed up. Clearly the marines were nervous too. Whatever beef the Afghans had could be sorted once they reached Leatherneck and were safely under the watchful eye of a few hundred US guns.

Ortiz picked up the radio receiver. “Lizard Four calling Leatherneck Actual.”

As he listened in and waited for a reply, Jack turned around in his seat and peered out the back window. Their pursuers were definitely gunning their engines to catch up, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake. He turned back around in his seat. The other marines were tense, readying their rifles as they waited for the response over the radio.

The radio crackled. "Lizard Four, this is Leatherneck Actual, report."

"We're en route from Camp Navitas to Camp Leatherneck and we've got ANA vehicles riding our six pretty hard." Ortiz paused. "Was it scheduled?"

"Standby, Lizard Four."

Jack grabbed his laptop from the marine in the front seat. He had a feeling that things were about to go south as he plugged in the satellite internet dongle. As he waited for it to connect, he looked behind them again. The convoy was closing even though the driver of the Humvee had stepped on the gas. He turned to the front and saw a speck in the distance.

"What's that?" Jack pointed. It looked like a tank.

Ortiz looked up from his weapon. His eyes widened. "It's an old T-62."

The driver laughed. "It's a museum piece, LT."

Ortiz wasn't amused. "It's still got enough to split us open like a melon."

Jack inched forward in his seat. "They want us to stop. They want my photographs."

The radio crackled again. "Lizard Four, ANA liaison reports no vehicle convoys within fifty miles of you at this time. Act at your discretion. Over."

Ortiz's eyes narrowed and he cursed. It was the first time Jack had felt scared in his marrow since being in Afghanistan. Through all the firefights, incidents and even the explosion of the IED he'd been in friendly hands. Being surrounded by a whole lot of marines was like a condom for an embedded reporter. It felt good to know you're covered. This situation felt a bit more precarious though.

"They're getting closer!" The driver looked back in the mirror. "What do you want to do, LT?"

"Pull us over. Whatever is about to happen, I'd rather do it away from that tank." Ortiz turned to Jack. "Whatever you're doing, you've got thirty seconds."

Jack nodded and looked back at his machine. He tried not to think about the

approaching convoy and focused on uploading some of the more significant photos to his Dropbox account. He also uploaded the story he'd been writing. As the Humvee slowed and then stopped and the convoy pulled to a stop behind them, the upload finished.

"Done!" Jack cleared his browser cache, deleted the photos and documents from his hard drive and then yanked out the satellite dongle. He threw the camera SD card and the dongle underneath the seat. "What now?"

Ortiz climbed out under the watchful guns of the ANA troops who'd surrounded the vehicle. Jack couldn't hear what was being said, but there was lots of pointing and gesturing. The leader of the Afghan group also seemed fond of waving a piece of paper in Ortiz's face. The whole situation was an open powder keg with a match held over it.

Eventually, Ortiz opened the door with a look of fury etched onto his face. "These gentlemen are taking you into custody. They also need your computer."

Jack nodded and unbuckled his seatbelt. "What's the charge?"

"All sorts of stuff. It's just to scare you." Ortiz smiled. "We're going to tail the convoy and we'll be with you all the way to Lashkar Gah. You'll be fine."

"Okay." Jack opened the door and climbed out of the vehicle. He let himself be handcuffed. He was scared, but had no choice. "Lead the way, fellas."

\* \* \*

THERE WASN'T a lot to be said about the room that Jack found himself in. He'd sat for hours at a small table, swinging on his chair and thinking about the defense he'd have to mount against the charges. Once that got boring, he'd simply stared at the wall. He'd been told through a translator that he'd have to wait a short while, but Rome had been built quicker than this.

He was happy that the images and the start of his story were safely stowed in his Dropbox account. Whatever was to come, they'd be waiting for him whenever he was freed. He was also confident that he'd covered his tracks with the computer and the SD card to a basic level. His efforts wouldn't hold up to detailed forensic examination of his computer, but it would satisfy a passing

glance.

The story was a bombshell and he was certain that neither Brinson nor the ANA had any idea what he'd managed to learn. Short of such an examination of his computer, or them torturing the information and the Dropbox login out of him, it was hidden like a dormant virus ready for him to trigger. He was excited by the potential and was sure that his editor would be as well.

Eventually, the steel door creaked open on its hinges. Jack turned his head in time for the door to hit the wall with a loud bang as two Afghani men in military uniforms walked into the room. A third man – a Westerner – followed them in, wearing civilian clothes and half-framed glasses. He was too small to be military, which meant he was either a diplomat or an intelligence officer.

Without a word, the two officers sat in the chairs directly opposite Jack, while the Westerner sat to Jack's left. The two military men started to lay some papers out on the table. Jack leaned forward in his chair, ready for his eyes to feast on what was in front of him. He wanted to learn what they had and what they intended to hit him with. He was disappointed that he couldn't read any of it.

“Mr Emery.” The officer on the left was all business. “I'm Major Gholem-Ali Jafari, Afghan National Army. My colleague is Lieutenant Doost Mohammad. We're here to dissuade you from reporting on classified material.”

Jack said nothing. He wanted to figure out who was the good cop and who was the bad cop. The major spoke excellent English with an Oxford accent, probably the brother of a local warlord parachuted into a position of authority. The lieutenant kept his face expressionless. The Westerner was the real mystery. He had his arms crossed and his eyes locked on Jack. He was the threat.

Jafari continued. “You have no right to silence here. You're facing serious charges and if you find yourself before a judge you'll spend the rest of this decade in prison. I suggest you start talking, Mr Emery.”

They didn't beat around the bush – accusations and the threat of long-term incarceration. Jack turned to the Westerner. “Who're you?”

“My name is Sonny Vacaro.” The Westerner spoke with a southern drawl as he tapped his thumbs on the table. “I just – ”

“Where are you from, Sonny Vacaro?” Jack wasn’t sure interrupting was the best idea, but he had to get something of a handle on the situation.

“Alabama.”

Jack persisted. “And your professional home?”

“Classified.” Vacaro smiled like a shark.

“Right.” Jack sighed. ‘Your name isn’t Sonny Vacaro, either.’

“Classified.”

Jack snorted. “Right.”

“Look, Jack.” Vacaro uncrossed his arms and leaned forward. “We’re the only thing keeping you from an Afghan prison cell with a dirt floor and pit latrine.”

“Okay.” Jack swallowed hard, trying to resist the urge to press Vacaro’s buttons further. “I’ve done nothing wrong. Ask what you want.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” Vacaro waved a hand lazily towards the documents on the table. “A number of Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners have confessed that you recorded their lies and took photos of some of the injuries they suffered prior to capture. I’m concerned you have the wrong picture, Jack.”

Jack scoffed. The ANA officers and Vacaro were throwing around threats like candy and there were some documents he couldn’t read on the table. He’d had tougher shits than this and he’d heard more compelling narrative out of *New York Standard* interns. It was time to test what they knew, what they suspected, and what they had no idea about.

“Look, this feels a bit like amateur hour at the Comedy Club.” Jack reached up and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t *have* a story, so you’ll need to piece it together for me.”

Vacaro bit his lip as if lost in thought. After a moment he nodded and spoke again. “Did you record a conversation with Hewad Ghilzai when he was under guard by members of the 8th Marines?”

“Sure, the recording is on my computer, which you have.”

Vacaro nodded, shared a look with the ANA officers, and then continued. “Good. Now, did that conversation lead you to Camp Navitas where, after a tour from Major Bradley Brinson, you arranged to stay the night on a thin pretext?”



“I’d dispute that – ”

Jafari cut in. “You then snuck around the camp and spoke to nine dangerous criminals and terrorists. They fed you lies and you also took photographs.”

Vacaro didn’t seem thrilled with the interruption. He glared at Jafari and then turned to Jack. “I think what my colleague here is trying to say is that, in a vacuum, whatever you heard there may sound damning. But you need to be careful here, Jack.”

Jack smiled. “I’d dispute that too. The only thing you’ll find in my possession is a recording of my discussion with Ghilzai. I have no testimony from any prisoners and I have no photos.”

Vacaro sighed. “You’re not an American, Jack. If you were you’d have more protection in this room. I don’t care if you trespassed. I don’t care if you spoke to some Afghans. I do care if you’re going to parlay those facts into damaging lies.”

Jack inched forward in his seat and placed his hands, palms down, on the table. He glanced in the direction of each man for a few seconds, using the time to collect his thoughts. This was the crossroads: he could deny everything or come clean and promise to keep quiet. Both options had risks, but despite his unease there was only one choice for him to make. He was a news man.

He smiled. “No comment.”

“Are you sure you want to walk down this path?”

Jack shrugged, despite the tinge of doubt he felt. “I’m a pretty well-known reporter who works for the largest media conglomerate on the planet. Are you sure?”

“Very well. We’ll see if a few days in that prison I mentioned changes your mind. I don’t care about you, Jack, but I can’t have you reporting falsehoods.”

Jack sat back as Vacaro nodded at the lieutenant, who appeared to be little more than a prop. The junior officer stood, walked towards the door, and bashed on it twice with his fist. The heavy sound rang out like the death knell on Jack’s freedom. He was fearful of what was to come, but he couldn’t abandon this story so easily, especially after the interest Vacaro had shown in burying it.

The door swung open and two uniformed ANA soldiers stepped in, joined by

a pair of marines. Jack's eyes widened. It was a surprise to see the two militaries working so closely together to bust this story out of him. As they walked closer, stood him up, and cuffed him, he felt like he was floating above his body. His mind started to recalibrate. This was more than Brinson and some dodgy marines.

This was big.

\* \* \*

JACK'S THROAT felt as if it was tearing open as he screamed out in agony. He tried to pull his hand back, to protect it, but the restraints kept it where it was – flat on the table and palm up, an easy target for the rod that had just come down on it hard and sent fire burning up his arm. He bucked against the chair, trying to free himself and screaming insults at his captors.

His nostrils flared and his eyes blinked quickly as the pain receded. His hair was soaked with sweat and stuck to his forehead. Rivulets of sweat rolled down his face, stung his eyes, and filled his mouth with salty moisture that seemed to mock his thirst. He wanted to see them, but a hood covered his head. They waited for the answer. Sure as death they'd ask it again in a minute, he wouldn't answer, they'd hit him and ask again.

Best he could tell, he'd been in their custody for nearly two days, and the attention they'd given him was a painful exclamation point on the interview with Vacaro and the ANA officers. Their treatment had been harsh and had left him in no doubt that they wanted him to give them everything he knew. He was determined not to tell them about the Dropbox dump.

It had been easy to handle at first – no food and little sleep. Every time he'd started to doze off, they'd beam the lights down on him. That had graduated to not being able to use the bathroom and, when that had failed to garner answers from him, they'd started to hurt him. Fists and boots, followed by the rod. He'd had enough already and it had barely started. He wondered how any of the Afghan prisoners took much more than this.

An American voice punctuated his thoughts and his pain. "Tell us how to

access the photographs you took and this all ends, Jack.”

His head slumped. He didn't want to tell them about the photos, but he couldn't endure this. He hadn't filed the story and he didn't have any sources to protect. The only thing he had to lose was a good story, but it wasn't worth his freedom or his life. He wanted to hold out but they'd break him eventually. From what he'd seen in the cells at Navitas, there was a lot worse to come.

“I feel like you want to tell me something, Jack.” The voice persisted.

Jack raised his head. “I – ”

Jack was interrupted by pounding against the interrogation room door. He jerked his head toward it, even though he couldn't see anything from underneath the hood. He heard a deep sigh from one of his interrogators and then the clicking sound of boots on the concrete floor. Jack didn't think much of it until he heard several low, angry voices speaking.

He couldn't hear what was being said, though the anger of his interrogator was clear. He shook his head and clamped his teeth together, determined now to hold out after his moment of weakness and his near betrayal of the photos and the story. After a few moments of back and forth conversation near the door, the voices grew louder and several new footsteps could be heard.

The light burned Jack's eyes and he squeezed them shut as the hood was pulled off his head. His mind screamed with confusion. He could hear voices but couldn't process what they were saying, until slowly everything returned to normal and he started to regain his senses. He opened his eyes and looked around, confused by the five men who surrounded him.

The only man not wearing a military uniform spoke. “Mr Emery, my name is Keith Baird, I'm a staffer at the Australian Embassy in Kabul.”

Jack blinked a couple of times and tried to lift his hands, but they were still bound on the table. “What do you want?”

“I want you, actually.” Baird smiled sadly. “I'm just sorry it took me so long to hear about your... predicament. Sorrier still it took me so long to get here.”

Baird waved a piece of paper at the soldiers. “This is an order from the Afghan Justice Minister ordering you to release this man into my custody.”

Just like that, Jack nearly cried as the four military men – three American

and one Afghani – worked to free him from his restraints. He didn't get his hopes up until his hands were free. He felt his wrists and rubbed his raw, abused palms against his legs. He stood, resisting the urge to take a swing at one of the soldiers and then walked to stand behind Baird.

In less than five minutes he was out of the compound and riding in a black SUV with Baird towards Kabul. They sat in silence in the back seat, as if Baird was waiting for him to speak. The soldiers had watched them leave, their expressions blank. Jack had wanted some sign that his departure meant something to them, but he received none.

Finally, once they'd been driving for a bit, Baird spoke. "Tell me where you want to head from here, Jack? Once we're back in Kabul, I mean."

Jack continued to stare out of the window. "I need to spend some time getting to the bottom of a story."

"Anything you need. You'll have a room at the Embassy for a few days to tidy up loose ends and then we'll see you safely to the airport." Baird patted him on the shoulder. "I hope it's a good story. You've caused a huge stir. The Australian Foreign Minister had to shout a bit to get you out of there."

Jack turned to face Baird. "It concerns the torture and abuse of Afghan prisoners by United States Marine Corps troops. It's organized and I have proof."

Baird whistled. "I guess I better get ready for the flurry of diplomatic protests. But that's no matter. If there's a story you need to tell it."

"Thanks." Jack nodded and turned back to look out of the window.

Jack exhaled deeply as he swung back on the office chair and stared up at the ceiling. He reached up and rubbed his eyes, wishing again that the Embassy had some real coffee. He'd been burning the candle at both ends to get to the bottom of the story for three days and this, combined with the lack of sleep he'd had while in prison, had him slow on his feet. He knew he should stop and rest, but the story was too important.

He sighed, leaned forward, and resumed tapping away on his laptop. He'd spent his time at the Australian Embassy in Kabul digging as deeply as he could into Brinson, Navitas, and the role of the US Marine Corps in torture and prisoner abuse. Though Baird and the other staff had stayed out of his way, he hadn't found much online and the few sources he'd reached out to hadn't been much help.

The only thing of use had been some media coverage about pressure on the CIA to wind-down the extraordinary rendition program – the extrajudicial transfer of prisoners to other countries that had become a means of torture by proxy by the United States. It seemed that the high point of pressure on the Agency had coincided with the opening of Navitas, which Jack assumed had been torturing Afghans from the day it opened.

Though it could just be a coincidence, he didn't feel like it was. The attention he'd received – the detention, the beating, and the diplomatic pressure that Baird said was being placed on Australia to hand him over – all spoke to something

important that influential people felt it vital to cover up. It was more than some rogue Marines kicking some Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters around.

He'd called Josefa Takaloka, his editor at the *Standard*, who'd pressured Jack to just write the story as it stood. Jo had thought the story good enough to run and didn't want to risk Jack's safety by digging deeper. Jack had stalled and asked for a few more days to uncover something that proved his hunch – that this was a far deeper cancer than a single camp.

His phone started to buzz on the table, breaking his reverie. He looked down and was surprised by the name flashing on the screen. He answered. "Jack Emery."

"Jack, it's Dan Ortiz." There was a pause. "Where are you? I've got some information to share with you but I can't talk over the phone."

"I'm at the Australian Embassy. It's the only place I'm safely able to work at the moment." Jack hated saying it aloud. "I'm sorry, Dan. I can't risk it."

Ortiz laughed. "And what do you think I'm risking even by calling you? You're going to want to hear this."

Jack thought about it. While Ortiz had given Jack no reason to be suspicious of him, he did work for the same branch of the armed forces that Jack was investigating. On the other hand, he knew he had barely any time left to close up his story, with the patience of his editor, the Australian Embassy, and the Afghan Justice Minister growing thin. Everyone wanted him out of the country. Each extra day was a risk.

Besides, the business of a reporter was out in the field, not hiding inside a government compound. He lifted the phone to his mouth. "Okay."

"Great." Ortiz seemed relieved. "Where should we meet?"

Jack didn't hesitate. "Faisal Market. North entrance. One hour."

He terminated the call and gathered his things. He walked out of the small office and asked a staffer to organize a car, ignoring the protests that he stay inside the compound. The location of the Embassy was classified and he was a guest, but he was still a free man. It was made clear to him as the car pulled up that once he left the building he was on his own until he returned. If he returned.

Fifty minutes and some traffic later he was at Faisal Market. He grabbed a

kabob from a street vendor and waited slightly away from where he'd told Ortiz to meet him. He wanted to be sure what he was getting into before he committed. As he ate, he kept his eyes peeled for any sign of trouble, but as the minutes ticked by he felt more comfortable. He trusted Ortiz.

Finally, Ortiz came into view. He was disguised in chinos, a white cotton shirt, and dark sunglasses. Importantly, from what Jack could tell, Ortiz was alone. He watched as Ortiz stopped in place, raised his glasses, and looked around. After a few minutes Jack threw the remains of his food in a bin and walked over to Ortiz.

He walked up behind Ortiz. "Hi, Dan."

Ortiz turned around and flashed a smile. "Your field craft is good, Jack."

Jack grinned and shrugged. "You spend a few years in the White House Press Corps and you learn a thing or two about stalking prominent Americans."

Ortiz gave a small laugh and then his expression darkened. "I need your phone, Jack."

"What?"

"Your phone. I need it. I can't talk to you without it."

Jack hesitated, then reached into his pocket and handed over his phone. "Please don't break it."

Ortiz took the phone, opened the back, and removed the battery and the SIM card. He then handed them back to Jack. "Now you can't be listened to, but they still know you're here. We only have a couple of minutes."

Jack nodded. "I'm in danger every second I'm in this country, Dan. It's clear to me that I've kicked over an ant hill, but I'm not sure how deep below the ground it goes. Or how nasty the ants inside are."

"It goes real deep and they're nasty fuckers, Jack." Ortiz turned and gestured for Jack to follow. "Walk with me."

Jack followed. They walked inside the Faisal Market, immediately overwhelmed by smells and hawkers competing for their attention. "So?"

"So." Ortiz twisted his head to face Jack, even as he walked. "You know about the CIA rendition program?"

"Yep."

“Well, turns out all that public attention on the Agency has forced them to shut down some of their more ambitious programs.” Ortiz paused to look at a wallet. “It’s expanded to include the Marine Corps, among other agencies. Smaller scale. Less visible.”

Jack’s eyes widened. He’d thought the timing was strange, and now Ortiz was confirming it. “Can you substantiate this?”

Ortiz’s brow furrowed and he nodded. “Sure can. I made some inquiries after our run-in with Brinson. A friend I went to Officer Candidate School with figured out what I was looking into and had a word in my ear. He disagrees with what’s going on and can provide the proof, but the kicker is that you need to be out of the country before he releases it.”

“But – ”

Ortiz patted Jack on the back. “No plane, no proof. It’s that simple, Jack.”

Jack nodded. He could deal with this. Once he was out of the country he’d contact Ortiz and get what he needed. If it fell through for whatever reason, he had enough in his pictures and the testimony of the tortured to run a story anyway. At worst, it was a bombshell. At best, it was nuclear. He had to get back to the Embassy for long enough to collect his things and book a flight before he could leave this desert.

Ortiz reached into his pocket and pulled out a pager. “You’ll get a message on this when I know you’re out of the country and my man is ready with the information.”

“Okay.” Jack took the pager and pocketed it, struggling not to laugh at the low-tech approach. “I’ll keep it close.”

Ortiz walked away and Jack watched him leave as the bustle of the market continued to move around him like a rising tide against a small island. Once Ortiz was out of sight, he took one final look around and exhaled deeply. He took his cell phone out of his pocket, reassembled it and started to dial his Embassy contact. He stopped dead when he felt something press into his back.

“Hello, Jack.”

\* \* \*



JACK'S EYES were squeezed shut as he tried to move his head away from the cold steel barrel pressed into his temple, but Brinson simply pushed the pistol against him harder. He was afraid of the lengths Brinson would go to in order to protect his secrets, even as his mind cursed his stupidity. He'd walked right into Brinson's grasp.

He was bundled into the back of a car with Brinson in the back and two men in front. As the black sedan roared forward and Jack was pushed back in his seat, his eyes flicked between Brinson and the world outside. They were leaving Kabul and the relative safety he'd enjoyed. US and Afghani authorities alike would do nothing to help him, and he was in the hands of a man who had every interest in silencing him.

"Please, just let me go." Jack's voice wavered slightly and the barrel pressed ever harder. "I won't report the story. I won't report *anything*."

Brinson laughed. "You had your chance. You didn't have to snoop around Navitas. You could have given up your story. You could have gone home."

"But –"

Brinson pressed on. "Instead, you kept digging and asking questions. I'm not going to hurt you, but you can't be allowed to live. Goodbye, Jack."

Jack cowered away. He clenched his muscles and gritted his teeth as the pistol clicked and gave a slight kick. A second after Brinson pulled the trigger, however, he still seemed to be alive. His nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply. He swung his hands around and clubbed Brinson, despite the handcuffs, over and over again. The other man just laughed as he weathered the blows. His laughter only grew louder.

"You're a bastard." Jack fumed, as he took a deep breath and placed his hands back on his legs. It wasn't smart to antagonize a guy with a gun. "A fucking bastard."

Brinson lowered the pistol and laughed. "That's what I like about you, Jack. You've got fire. I wish my men could have some fun with you. Unfortunately, your fate is sealed."

"Why?"

Brinson shrugged. "We were just a small outpost amongst the sand until you

did your best Lois fucking Lane impression and stumbled into danger. I'm not a bad guy. We tried to get you to back off, Jack. But you just wouldn't fucking listen."

"My wife accuses me of that all the time."

Brinson grunted and sat back in his seat. The conversation had clearly finished for now. Jack had no idea where they were taking him but he assumed it was back to Navitas, where they'd kill him and quietly make his body disappear. He figured he had about eight hours to live. What irked him most was that he'd told nobody about the Dropbox account. Josefa knew there was a story, but not how to unlock any of it.

He closed his eyes and settled into the drive, racking his brain for any possible way to escape. It was useless. Brinson had frisked him and taken all of his gear. His hands were cuffed and he had three marines sitting within six feet of him. While he hoped that Ortiz or the Embassy would help, Brinson was right. He was screwed.

He must have fallen asleep, because when he woke there was no sign of the city, just desert on either side of the road. Jack looked to his left, where Brinson was staring out the window with the pistol still in hand. Somewhere along the way they'd picked up an escort: a pair of ANA Humvees in front of them and another behind. He sighed. Any chance of escape had fallen from minimal to zero.

Jack turned to Brinson. "I need to use the bathroom."

Major Brinson sighed. "Really? You'll be dead in two hours, Jack."

Jack nodded. Brinson sighed again, told his men to pull over, and then dug around in the bag at his feet for some toilet paper. He tossed it to Jack as the car moved onto the gravel shoulder of the road and ground to a halt. The Marine riding in the front passenger seat climbed out, opened Jack's door, and jerked him roughly out of the car. Jack marched a hundred feet away and squatted.

As he shat, Jack looked back to the convoy. Only the man who'd pulled him out of the sedan was watching Jack. The marine leaned against the vehicle with apparent impatience. He had a sidearm with him, but no rifle. The other marines had stayed in the vehicle and the ANA Humvees showed no sign of activity as

they idled with their troops inside.

Jack exaggerated the time it was taking him to finish as his mind raced. This was likely his one chance to escape, even though the possibility of any attempt succeeding was nearly zero. There were a dozen or so armed men less than a football field away, he had no weapons or supplies, and there was nothing but desert ahead.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He thought of his wife, Erin, waiting back in New York, oblivious to the danger he was in. She'd be the most upset by his death or, more likely, his unexplained disappearance. He doubted the marines would be in a hurry to release details about his fate. He'd be another anonymous body claimed by the sand.

He opened his eyes again. He'd decided. This was his only chance. He kept low as he wiped his ass and pulled up his pants, keeping his eye on the convoy. Nobody was paying him more than the loosest attention. As best as he could tell, he might get another fifty yards away from them before they noticed what he was doing and the bullets started to fly. But he had to try.

He stood at his full height, turned, and sprinted off into the desert.

\* \* \*

JACK GRUNTED as he hit the ground hard. His face burned as it skidded across the gravelly sand, as if a hundred little needles full of molten lava had been injected into his face all at once. His hands and feet flailed as he struggled to get to his feet again. His mind was screaming at him. He had to keep running. Keep moving. Keep trying to escape. He'd gained more distance on them than he'd hoped, but they'd be closing.

He climbed onto his hands and knees and shook his head, trying to clear some of the fog. He did a quick stocktake of his limbs and everything appeared intact. He struggled to his feet and resumed his run, not knowing where he was going but needing to escape. He focused on turning his legs over, clearing his mind, ignoring the pain and the threat behind him.

He made it another hundred yards and then he turned around to look. He

could see a few men running three hundred yards back. One of the ANA Humvees was also pursuing and would be on him in a few moments. He turned and kept running, confused by the low hum he could hear in the distance. The hum turned into a buzz, then into a roar. He didn't dare look around. He didn't have the time.

The amount of sand the pair of helicopters kicked up as they roared overhead was impressive, and they did little to help Jack's attempts to remain upright. His heart sank with the knowledge that Brinson must have called in air support. His run slowed to a jog, despite his pursuers. With helicopters in the air there was no point running.

As he slowed to a walk he realized, deep in the recesses of his mind, that there was no way helicopters could have arrived in the short time he'd been running. He heard the chattering of machinegun fire. He turned around and watched as tracer rounds spewed from the side of one of the helicopters toward the convoy. The other helicopter added rocket fire to the carnage.

He turned around and ran again as the choppers rained death upon the convoy. They had US Marine Corps markings, which confused him further. He didn't know what to think any more, but he figured he couldn't go wrong with getting away from all of it. He started to run again. Ahead of him, another chopper had appeared and started to descend. In the door, Ortiz waved.

Jack didn't know if anyone was left on his tail as the choppers behind him did their work, but he didn't look back. He just ran as hard as he could towards the door and hoped like hell that he didn't take one in the back before he got there. The distance closed as the chopper touched down and kept its rotors spinning. Forty yards, then thirty. His lungs burned hot as he pushed himself on.

He staggered forward another few inches. He wanted to live, but he couldn't run anymore. He was spent, he could barely think straight, and it was difficult to keep putting one foot in front of another. After another few steps toward the now-grounded helicopter, he fell to his knees and then onto his hands. He sucked at the hot desert air, struggling to breathe.

He stared at the sand, his lungs heaving for air. He wanted to slump into it but he wasn't sure how long the rescue chopper would wait. He took one more

deep breath and then steeled himself for one more try. He wanted to live. As he was about to try to climb to his feet, he felt a hand grip his arm. He looked up and saw Ortiz smiling down at him.

“Come on, Jack.” Ortiz yanked his arm and helped Jack to his feet. “We’ve got thirty seconds before people start to notice that the birds have stopped.”

Jack staggered to his feet and let himself be guided towards the open door of the chopper. Once he was seated safely inside, Ortiz slid the door shut and they were airborne in seconds. Jack slowly caught his breath and started to breathe normally. Only then did he start to sob. It was uncontrollable. The stress of the last few days had finally overwhelmed him.

“No shame in it, Jack.”

He looked up at Ortiz. “What?”

Ortiz smiled. “No shame.”

Jack nodded. He wasn’t sure if Ortiz was saying what he really believed or was just trying to make him feel better, but he appreciated the effort. He felt a bond with the man like few he’d had in his life. He slowly calmed down and settled back in his seat. He watched as Ortiz reached into his combat vest, pulled out a packet of smokes, and started to hand them around.

“Give me one of those.” Jack reached out and plucked a cigarette from the packet.

“Knew we’d make a deviant out of you.” Ortiz grinned as reached out to light Jack’s cigarette.

Jack took a drag and coughed. “How did you find me, Dan?”

“The pager had a tracker. Turns out some Corps brass weren’t thrilled about being sucked into the rendition program and we thought it likely that Brinson would make a move on you. As far as anyone will know, Brinson’s convoy was hit by Taliban and the helos were on patrol.”

Jack’s eyes widened. He had no idea that politics within the Marine Corps ran so deep. “What about my story?”

Ortiz smiled. “Once you get back to the States you’ll have your information, Jack. Unfortunately Major Brinson, the brainchild of the program, was killed on a patrol.”

Jack nodded. He understood. He was being given his life and his story in return for keeping his mouth shut about the Marine Corps cleaning up their mess. He didn't know what politics were playing out between the Marine Corps and the CIA, or even what else would occur in future, but all he knew was that he wanted out of Afghanistan. He'd had enough of the country's hospitality.

Jack closed his eyes. The sound of the helicopter's rotors slicing through the air was rhythmic, and no further words were needed between the two of them. He took another deep drag of the cigarette, exhaled, and coughed only lightly. He'd never smoked before and had no intention of starting, but it seemed a fitting way to end the week from hell.

As soon as he was home he was going to have a whisky, sleep next to his wife, and wake up only for bacon. The story could wait a day or two.

## EPILOGUE

**P**ulitzer Prize winner.

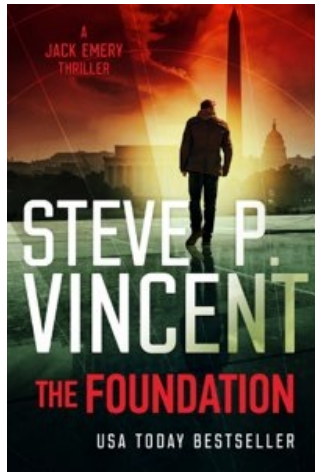
Jack was still getting used to it. He smiled as he killed the ignition, put the car into park, and lifted the handbrake. The light in the main bedroom was on, spilling through the small cracks at either end of the curtain. He hadn't expected Erin to wait up for him, given how sick she'd been earlier in the day. That she had was a pleasant surprise, the final flourish on a night of celebration and recognition. He hefted the Pulitzer – still surprised by its weight – and climbed out of the car. He couldn't wait to show Erin and to go into work on Monday.

Things were on the up.

\* \* \*

*I hope you enjoyed Fireplay. The story continues in **THE FOUNDATION**, the first full-length Jack Emery novel.*

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## **SAMPLE OF THE FOUNDATION (JACK EMERY 1)**

**C**hen Shubian cursed under his breath at the old Hewlett Packard as it whirred to life. He was seated at the rear of a little internet café on the outskirts of Taipei, watching the light in the middle of the case occasionally flash with activity. He was losing patience and about to force a restart when the Microsoft logo appeared.

Chen shook his head. “Vista.”

He dug a small envelope from his pocket and tore it open. Inside was a piece of paper with an alphanumeric code, meaningless to most people. It was Chen’s key to the private server set up by his employers. They’d found him on the Darknet, a refugee searching for his vengeance, and brought him to their community. Now, the private server allowed them to conduct business outside the view of the authorities.

The code wasn’t all that was required to access the server. He plugged his Hello Kitty USB into the front slot of the computer and tapped his fingers on the desk as the ancient machine whirred some more. He typed the code into the black command box that appeared on the screen and hit enter. The black box was replaced by an ordinary-looking web browser.

Chen clicked the only bookmark on the browser, which took him to a message board where likeminded people connected to chat about politics, sport and blowing up international infrastructure. A message at the top of the screen reminded users to ensure the security of the network, lest they end up in

residence at Guantanamo Bay.

Chen searched his pockets again and found a small photo. He put it below the computer screen and stared at it for a few moments. His mother and father stared back at him, standing on either side of a slender fifteen-year-old boy with straight, shiny, black hair. The photo had been taken the last time Chen and his parents were all together.

Chen's life had changed forever when his father—an employee of a large American investment bank—had been arrested on a routine business trip from Taiwan to China. He had been charged with espionage and executed after a show trial. In grief, Chen's mother had taken her own life soon after the death of her husband.

Chen blamed China, but he also blamed the American bank that had left his father to rot. They'd obviously determined that their business interests in China were more important and had done nothing to help his father. The thirst for vengeance against China had guided Chen's life ever since: from school, to university, to the Taiwanese Army and then its Special Operations Command. It had honed his anger and his skills.

Though the attack he planned would rock China, his employers assured him that the act would also cause great heartache for the United States. It was a happy coincidence.

He smiled with pride as he browsed the thread, which connected him with others slighted by China and united them all under one cause. He left a message for those who would help him undertake the attack, confirming the final details. He typed another to his employers in the endeavor, noting that their funding had been received and confirming the details of their meeting in a few days' time.

When he was finished, he ejected the USB and all signs of the message board vanished from the screen. Chen left the internet café as anonymously as he'd entered, satisfied that everything was in place for the attack. He had no expectation that he'd bring down the Chinese Government, though he did believe that a heavy enough blow could cause a fracture in the monolith. He felt a small degree of guilt for the innocents who'd die, but their lives were the price of vengeance.

Men of decisive action changed the world, and if it had been good enough for Mao, who'd driven Chen's ancestors from mainland China to Taiwan, then it was certainly good enough for him.

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Steve P. Vincent is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the Jack Emery and Mitch Herron conspiracy thrillers.

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