

“Ragheads dragged the driver out of the vehicle and took him away,” the sergeant told the lieutenant, who was sitting in a Humvee. “They shot the woman in the car. She’s still in it. Iraqi grunt says she’s alive but the assholes put a bomb in the car. They’re using her as cheese in the trap.”

“Shit,” said the lieutenant, and rubbed the stubble on his chin.

The day was hot, and the chatter of automatic weapons firing bursts was the musical background. The column of vehicles had ground to a halt in a cloud of dust, and since there was no wind, the dust sifted softly down, blanketing equipment and men and making breathing difficult.

U. S. Navy Petty Officer Third Class Owen Winchester moved closer to the lead vehicle so that he could hear the lieutenant and sergeant better.

He could see the back end of an old sedan with faded, peeling paint sitting motionless alongside the road about fifty yards ahead. Three Marines and three Iraqi soldiers were huddled in an irrigation ditch fifty feet to the right of the road. On the left was a block of houses.

“Let me go take a look,” Winchester said to the lieutenant.

“Listen, doc,” the sergeant said, glancing at Winchester. “The ragheads would love to do you same as they would us.”

“I want to take a look,” Winchester insisted. “If she can be saved...” He left it hanging there as distant small-arms fire rattled randomly.

The place was a sun-baked hellhole; it made Juarez look like Paris on the Rio Bravo. The tragedy was that real humans tried to live here... and were murdered here by rats with guns who wanted to rule the dungheap in the name of a vengeful, merciless god, one who demanded human sacrifice as a ticket to Paradise.

The lieutenant had been in Iraq for six months and was approaching burnout. The wanton, savage cruelty of the true believers no longer appalled him—he accepted it, just as he did the heat and dirt and human misery he saw everywhere he looked. He forced himself to think about the situation. A woman. Shot. She would probably die unless something was done. So what? No, no, don’t think like that, he thought. That’s the way they think, which is why the Devil lives here. After a few seconds, he said, “Okay. Take a look. And watch your ass.”

The sergeant didn't say another word, merely began trotting ahead in that bent-over combat trot of soldiers the world over. With his first-aid bag over his shoulder, Winchester followed.

They flopped into the irrigation ditch directly opposite the car, where they could see into the passenger compartment. There was a woman in there, all right, slumped over. She wasn't wearing a head scarf. They could see her dark hair.

Fifteen feet from them was the rotting carcass of a dog. In this heat, the stench was awe-inspiring.

An Iraqi soldier joined them. "She has been shot," he said in heavily accented English. "Stomach. I get close, see her and the bomb."

"How are they going to detonate it, you think?" Winchester asked, looking around, trying to spot the trigger man. He saw no one but the Iraqi soldiers and Marines lying on their stomachs in the irrigation ditch, away from the dog. The mud-walled and brick buildings across the way looked empty, abandoned, their windows blank and dark.

"Cell phone, most likely," the sergeant said sourly. "From somewhere over there, in one of those apartments. Or a garage door opener."

"Saving lives is my job," the corpsman said. "I want to take a look."

"You're an idiot."

"Probably." Winchester grinned. He had a good grin.

"Jesus! Don't do nothin' stupid."

With that admonition ringing in his ears, Winchester ditched the first-aid bag and trotted toward the car. From ten feet away he could see the woman's head slumped over, see that the door was ajar. He closed to five feet.

She wasn't wearing a seatbelt, and a bomb was lying on the driver's seat. Looked like four sticks of dynamite, fused, with a black box taped to the bundle. The woman moved her head slightly and he heard a low moan.

Winchester ran back to the ditch, holding his helmet in place, and flopped down beside the sergeant.

“There’s a bomb on the driver’s seat,” he told the sergeant, whose name was Joe Martinez. “And she’s still alive. I think I can get her out of there before they blow it. Takes time to dial a phone, time for the network to make the phone you called ring. Might be enough time.”

“Might be just enough to kill you, you silly son of a bitch.”

“The door is ajar and she isn’t wearing a seat belt. I can do this. Open the door and grab her and run like hell.”

“You’re an idiot,” Sergeant Martinez repeated.

“Would you try it if she was your sister?”

“She ain’t my sister,” the sergeant said with feeling as he scanned the buildings across the road. “What do they say? No good deed goes unpunished?”

“I will go,” the Iraqi soldier said. He laid his weapon on the edge of the ditch, began taking off his web belt. “Two men, one on each arm.”

“She’s my sister, Joe,” Owen Winchester said to Martinez, and grinned again, broadly.

The sergeant watched as Winchester and the Iraqi soldier took off all their gear and their helmets, so they could run faster.

“You fuckin’ swabbie! You got balls as big as pumpkins. How do you carry them around?” Martinez laid down his rifle, took off his web belt. He tossed his helmet beside the rifle. “I’ll get the door. You two get her.” He took a deep breath and exhaled explosively.

“Okay, on three. One, two, threeeee!”

They vaulted from the ditch and sprinted toward the car. The sergeant grabbed the door, jerked it open as the other two men reached in. Winchester got one arm and the Iraqi the other. They pulled the wounded woman from the car, hooked an arm under each armpit. Joe Martinez picked up her feet and they began to run.

They were ten feet from the car when the bomb exploded.

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