

NICK JONES'S FELLOW soldiers were lying to him. They'd never done it before, and Nick knew that for one simple reason: because he wasn't dead. He could rely on one thing out there in the desert in Afghanistan, and that was the word of his teammates. Without that trust, without a team behind him, promising to protect him, Nick was alone. And a soldier alone was just waiting to catch a bullet in the brain.

On a dark roadside somewhere between Bagram City, the US Army outpost, and the distant ceiling of a billion stars, Nick stood and watched Staff Sergeant Roger Dorrich draw a map on the dusty hood of the tactical vehicle with his stubby finger. As he spoke, the older soldier shattered Nick's trust one word at a time.

"We're abandoning tonight's routine quadrant patrol for a quick mission into a village just ten clicks past that hill," Dorrich said as he drew vast, confident lines in the dust of the JLTV.

Three large boxes, a smaller box, a snaking boundary. “We’re going for the third house on the right, here, after the goat pen.”

It was around the time Dorrich took out his cigarette that Nick realized what he was hearing was deception. Just like when he was trying to bluff a good hand at poker, Dorrich put the cigarette between his lips and bit down on the tip, chewing it flat, so it was impossible to draw through.

Nick had started to feel uneasy the second Dorrich said “Change of plans, team,” and pulled off the side of the road. Now he was downright scared. That useless cigarette jutting from between Dorrich’s lips bobbed up and down as he lied.

“We got two entry points,” Dorrich continued. “Front and back. Two expected hostiles inside the dwelling. This is not a grab-up, ladies and gentlemen. We neutralize the targets and exit immediately. Back on patrol by 2300.”

Nick waited for his two other teammates to ask one of the dozens of questions that immediately rose in his mind. Neither did.

“Sir, who’s got eyes on the site right now?” Nick ventured.

“Nobody. It’ll be just us out there,” Dorrich said.

“But . . .” Nick shook his head, tried to comprehend. “Sir, how do we know . . . I mean, what’s the situation? Are they hot?”

“We’re going into this blind, Jones.” Dorrich narrowed his eyes at Nick, challenging. “You got a problem with that?”

“Sir. No, sir. But—”

“You want to know something about the targets. Should I break them down for you? What they ate for breakfast? Where they went to school? Boxers or briefs? Should we sit down, have a little discussion about whether they deserve to die or not?”

“Sir. No, sir.”

“Maybe we’ll just get on with it then, huh?”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

Nick felt a tingling sensation creep over his scalp. This wasn’t right. He glanced at Karli Breecher, who was tightening the straps of her helmet over her closely shaved skull, eyes on the map, nodding like she’d done a hundred spur-of-the-moment, blind, completely solo kill runs before. All routine. Rick Master, the fourth member of their team, was shuffling from foot to foot, blank-faced. It seemed to Nick suddenly that nobody would look at him. That nobody else smelled the lies in the air.

And that was a problem. That was deadly.

Because on deployment, Nick couldn’t be sure that setting out on any road meant he was going to arrive where he intended. The yawning, searing desert was inclined to throw something at him. IEDs. Bandits. Sandstorms. Goddamn locust plagues. On any given day, Nick couldn’t trust that he’d get food. Or water. Or ammo. Or sleep. Hell, sometimes it even surprised him that the sun came up in the morning out here.

But he could rely on Dorrich, Master, and Breecher.

At least, he’d thought he could.

Nick climbed into the JLTV anyway. He had no choice. They rolled out into the blackness, silent.

*Just following orders*, Nick thought.

Master must have felt his anxiety, because he reached over and slapped Nick’s arm.

“Cool it, man. The hajjis hit Romeo 12 company last night,” Master said. “It’s got to do with that, for sure.”

“What?” Nick said. “R12 got hit? When?”

“About 0100,” Breecher said. “Northwest of the outpost. R12 went out alone to recover a piece of drone that fell into a valley

out there. Two local idiots stopped them, took their weapons and the piece of drone.”

“Why didn’t I hear about this?” Nick asked.

“Gee, I don’t know—because it’s embarrassing as all hell?” She smirked. “Romeo 12 getting their asses handed to them by a couple of teenage goat farmers? No wonder they’re keeping it low-key. And they’re sending in the professionals to clean up.” Breecher bumped Nick with her shoulder. “Now stop chewing your nails. You’re making me nervous.”

Nick fell quiet again. His gear was hanging off him. In the front, Dorrich’s cigarette had become a cylinder of ash. Nick let the vehicle rock and jostle him on the desert. It was pure craziness to think that Romeo 12 would ever go into a recovery mission like that without air support and a convoy. Crazier still that the outpost’s best and deadliest team could possibly be held up by two kids. Beyond crazy that Nick, Dorrich, Breecher, and Master would be sent in without a brief and also without backup, as a response.

They stopped in the moon shade of a rocky outcrop and slid out of the vehicle. The uneven ground on the run to the village boundary felt to Nick like it was moving. He crouched in the spiny grass by a low mud-brick wall and waited while Breecher and Master got into position. There were lights on in the tiny, sun-scorched house. Nick was close enough that he could see the outline of blue flowers on the faded curtains in the windows. Goat shit tainted the breeze.

Breecher signaled him from the road at the front of the house. Nick rushed forward, felt Dorrich at his heels, the shorter, thicker man’s footfall louder than his own. He flattened against the side

of the house and shouldered his rifle, winced as Dorrich kicked in the door.

Nick inhaled.

At first, he thought a bomb had gone off. Nick's bootcamp company leader had detonated an IED in front of his platoon once, just to show them how much damage a school lunchbox packed with ammonium nitrate and fuel and roofing nails could do. The same sudden white light burst against his eyelids now as he rounded the doorway into the little house in the desert. His eardrums pulsed. His brain rattled in his skull. But the noise and light and vibration didn't stop, and Nick soon realized that it was Dorrich's gun, not a bomb, ringing out in the night.

Nick stood stricken in the doorway as Dorrich sprayed the family sitting on the rugs on the floor with bullets. He looked up from the carnage in time to see a woman running across the doorway to the dwelling's second room. She was just a flash of black hair and thin arms, before Master passed after her, his gun out in front of him. Nick felt the percussion of the gunshot in the other room reverberate through the center of his chest.

The whole family was dead before Nick could exhale.