

prologue

WHEN APRIL WAS GONE, DISAPPEARED INTO THE CENTER of the world, her voice in his head would still insist that he had planned everything—not just the night in Samarkand but all that surrounded it. It was in the Burling character, she said, using his name as she did in the third person, to engineer things according to his own mind, to will them into existence while keeping his distance at the same time. The problem, Burling thought, was people. He was never any good with them. Whether that failure was due to a flaw in his makeup, or just a hedge in case things went to hell, April—the tall, abundant woman with the narrowing gaze that seemed to hide a sly yearning that Burling, in the short time given them, had not been able to fulfill—never had a chance to tell him.

February 14, 1979: to this day no one marks it as significant. November 9, 1989, September 11, 2001, but not the last troubled months of the seventies, when the world we know was born. On that Wednesday, Wes Godwin, survivor of the Philippines, Korea, and the Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam, left the Embassy Residence in Kabul by the rear gate to attend a practice of the Afghan national basketball team, of which April's husband, Jack, was coach. Lucius Burling, deputy chief of mission and the Agency station chief, rode

with Ambassador Godwin in his dusty black car. Plush seats, smell of cigarette smoke, milky sun smeared across the glass. Their route took them through an unpaved lane along walls the color of sand, punctuated at intervals by ancient wooden doors that opened onto courtyards shaded by fruit trees, where dark-eyed children with *café-au-lait* faces played solemnly in the dust. Burling had been a starting forward at Princeton, at a time when that meant something, but in retrospect he had to admit that his success at basketball had more to do with his natural size and a determined drive than with any great skill as an athlete. Slow-footed but strong, Burling would wait for the quick ones to feed him the ball, then lower his head, make a halting feint one way or the other, and take it to the hole.

Bull, they called him, which was ridiculous and probably in fun.

“More like Ferdinand,” Amelia had teased him.

“I worked harder than they did, that’s all,” Burling said, a bit stung. At that time in their courtship, he was still getting used to her and couldn’t really tell if her tone was affectionate or cutting.

“It’s your big blond head, darling,” Amelia said, reaching up to touch his hair, “with all those big thoughts inside it. The thinking man’s bull.”

He was not much interested in basketball now, not in the kind they had going at home, anyway. He had taken his son to see Georgetown play, but John Thompson’s game had not appealed to him, partly because he knew he wouldn’t have lasted a season in that frenetic kind of scheme. The game in Kabul was not for him either, but some of Jack’s players had ties to the northern tribes, and Burling had a plan to go up there that was lately gaining traction at Langley.

“Going through with this, are you?” Godwin said, face still turned to the world outside the car. At noon the alley was deserted except for a street dog that lapped at the gutter and perked up warily at the sound of the Cadillac, springs complaining as it shouldered through the ruts.

“I don’t look at it that way,” Burling told him.

The ambassador faced him, lips the color of bricks. He still wore his white hair in a military cut, in spite of his civilian appointment.

“We need friends up there,” Burling said.

“He-ell.” Godwin drew two syllables out of the word. “The tribes aren’t anyone’s ‘friend.’ They know Taraki is weak and the Russians are just waiting for an excuse to come across.”

Burling watched him quietly, acknowledging the obvious. Godwin was southern military royalty and therefore, in Burling’s estimation, lacked nuance in the extreme.

“You’re not thinking far enough ahead, Lucius. What about the Chinese? You don’t think they aren’t already in there? Deng Xiaoping’s got his own Moslem problem, and this is his backyard. Mark my words, this’ll blow back, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not for twenty years.”

“By then I hope we’re all in a better place,” Burling said.

The Cadillac reached a crossing ten blocks from the compound. Across the intersection, wires hung from a rusted box mounted on a pole. The place seemed unnaturally quiet under the white sky, and Burling had a vague foreboding, like waking in the morning and not remembering what you’d done—something not in your character, apparently—the night before. Perhaps it was just a case of misplaced respect for a superior. Godwin was only ten years his senior, but the Second World War made the space between them feel wider. In spite of the ambassador’s greater experience, Burling was convinced that he, the younger man, was right.

“How’s your bride feeling?” Godwin asked.

“Better, thanks.”

The ambassador rearranged himself uncomfortably and chuckled deep in his chest. “Some women aren’t made for this life. Doesn’t appeal to them.”

Burling’s heart had begun to flutter. He was aware that he was about to reveal more than he should. “Sometimes I think I wasn’t meant to be married, Wes. I seem to enjoy isolation more than . . .” Lately Burling had begun to leave sentences undone, as if his own thoughts could be read aloud. The habit worried him. “More than the alternative, I guess. At one time Amelia thought she wanted this.”

“Women are changeable. Worst mistake you can make is try to stand in their way.”

“You take Jack’s wife,” Burling began.

Godwin laughed aloud. “No, you take her, man. Too much trouble for me.”

Burling smiled involuntarily, and a deep flush came to his face. Two nights before, in the Residence garden after drinking red wine at a dinner, he had done just that. Or not taken her, exactly, in the way that Godwin meant. The logistics of that he could not imagine. But he had kissed her, surprising himself if not, apparently, April. At first he had stammered an apology, but she had smiled at him as if he were a boy, then kissed him back, one palm placed tenderly against his chest. He couldn’t tell if she was stroking him or pushing him away, and he was trembling slightly as she drew toward him, lips parting on his; he could feel the cleft of her lower back beneath his hand.

“It’s almost as if this country makes sense to her,” he said.

Godwin’s face compressed in a wolfish expression, concentrated around the eyes. A lot of things seemed clear to April, dimensions of how people lived in the world that for Burling were surrounded by a haze of uncertainty. That seemingly amused capacity for taking things as they came was what had drawn him to her. And he was, he realized now, deeply attracted, on a level and in a way that had been working in him since she and Jack had arrived in Afghanistan more than a year ago. “She’s a hippie anthropologist, Lucius. *The Wretched of the Earth*, all that. I’ve seen her type before in Vietnam. Comes over for the soft stuff, but what she really wants is to get in the shit.”

The prospect thrilled and terrified him.

“You should take her up north, Lucius. Involve her in your little scheme. She’s the one who speaks the languages.”

A sound like a rock hitting glass caused both men to strain forward into the deep space between the seats. A star had formed on the windshield, and Godwin’s driver—a thin, graceful Afghan with delicate fingers that could palm a basketball—slumped against the wheel. Slowly, with a smooth motion, the car rolled across the

intersection, and its hood rose up, the radiator exploding behind it, emitting a wicked hiss of steam.

“Holy shit,” Godwin said, sounding deeply perturbed.

Men in police uniforms were grabbing at the handles, and Burling fumbled with the strap of white vinyl on his own door, fighting to keep it shut. Behind him they pulled Wes Godwin from the car. Burling heard the singsong of Pashto or Dari—he couldn’t tell which. The man at his window was gone, and he whipped around, expecting a blow from behind. Through the opposite door he could see Godwin’s midsection, the starched white shirt and navy tie too short on his belly, his naked arms grappling with the men. His sleeves were rolled at the cuffs, and his hands tried to keep his assailants away from him, bobbing like a fighter, grasping at anything. The street outside was bright.

“We’re going to the Serena,” one said in heavily accented English, referring to the Kabul Hotel. “You are going to give us the *mujahedin*.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Godwin told them, breathing hard now, still fighting. “We’re not holding any soldiers of God.”

“Wes,” said Burling. “It’s a kidnapping, an exchange.”

“Hell with that.” Bullets began to hit the car again.

In spite of his position, Lucius Burling was a peaceful man. An intelligence analyst, not an ex-soldier like Godwin, or Jack Lindstrom, spoiling for a fight. He had come to this country, as he had more than a dozen years before to Vietnam, to assess the situation and to offer help, a way forward. A man had a few things to lean on or comfort him in life, and the integrity of this position was one of Burling’s.

“Get down, Wes!”

Burling ducked, and the back window shattered. One of the kidnapers’ bodies was flung against the trunk. Automatic fire came from three sides, and the men dressed as police crouched down and returned it with pistols and shotguns. Burling began to crawl across the seat, intending to pull Wes to safety. He was unprepared for how loud the firing was at close range. The man who had struggled with Godwin was hit in the back and thrown against the tufted leather of the door, his chest ripped open like a suitcase.

Wes was unprotected now. Burling watched him trying to push the dead man off his legs, but he couldn't do it without leaving cover. Godwin turned a quarter of the way toward Burling; his shirt bloomed red, and he fell on his side across the seat. Burling's ears were plugged. The rattle of gunfire sounded far away. A bearded face in a *keffiyeh* appeared in the space where the windshield had been. Burling thought briefly of Amelia, and a great, lonely sadness overwhelmed him. That he would die now, could die, with so much silence and distance between them. I really didn't know this could happen, he thought.

Wes Godwin's life left his body in a spasm.

Burling swallowed and his hearing returned to him, like a train approaching from far away. The broken car was running with a tick, then a rasp. He closed his eyes to squeeze out the water. When his vision cleared he realized that he was alone.

IN THE DAYS AFTER THE KILLING, THE ORGANISM OF THE CITY broke down and its hungers were exposed. Kabul came under siege. The city lay in a pale bowl of light, and every movement seemed magnified. April insisted it was a troop of Jack's basketball players who attacked the compound wall one windy, hot afternoon, but Lindstrom said they'd disappeared.

"Gone up north to fight the Russians, just like they told me they would."

Jack was sitting in the garden late that night as Burling returned from his office to the Residence, where all remaining personnel had retreated in precaution. Lindstrom spoke up as Burling approached, answering an unasked question from the darkness of the overhanging branches above a bench.

"They killed the American ambassador," Burling said, "so they ran."

From the tip of a brass pipe the shape of a cigarette, an ember glowed in front of Lindstrom's face. "Keeping you up, is it?"

"I'm the guy that's left behind."

“Me, too,” Lindstrom said, exhaling a plume of blue smoke. He stood up slowly, a head shorter than Burling but possessed of a taut strength, like a wrestler. Burling saw that he was wearing a sidearm, as if in the aftermath of the attack he had returned to his former life as a marine. He peered up into Burling’s face. “You know what I’m talking about?”

Burling took a step backward on the uneven path. “I need to get back to Amelia.”

“The *mujas* didn’t kill Wes, your buddies in the government did.”

“I was there, Jack.”

“Then you should have seen it for what it was: a cluster fuck.”

“The *mujahedin* wanted to grab Godwin. Taraki’s people tried to stop it and shot him by mistake.”

“You don’t wonder how the government forces knew what was about to go down?”

“I wonder about a lot of things. Apparently you have a theory about this one?”

“It’s just stoned thinking, Lucius. You go on back now. Tonight might be your last chance for a while.”

Burling stared uncomprehendingly at him in the dark. Strangely, there was no sound of birds or bugs here at night. The dry air was luminous and still. Far away he heard the pop of gunfire. “Why, what’s happening tomorrow?”

“I’m a married man, too,” Lindstrom said, “so I know how it goes. The mysterious rhythms.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Man, you really don’t, do you? You don’t keep track of that shit at all.”

From an open window of the Residence came the sound of a television, the volume unnaturally loud. An American newsman was talking about hostages. “What are you smoking in that thing?” Burling asked.

“Thai stick. Grass soaked in opium. Very mellow, but I wouldn’t recommend it if you want to make love to your wife.”

Burling tried to hide his astonishment, but the effort made him seem prim. Lindstrom's vaguely Asiatic eyes held two counterimages of the match, like tiny blazing question marks, as he lit the pipe again.

"We've been married for twenty years," Burling told him. For some reason, the contemplative menace in Lindstrom's face made Burling want to reach out to him. Or maybe, he thought, it's because we have April in common. "There's just not the urgency now."

"Between the two of you, no."

"What's happening tomorrow, Jack? I really want to hear."

"Half of the staff won't show up," Lindstrom told him, squinting as he waved the smoke away with his hand. "The masons you ordered from north of the city won't come to fix the wall."

"Your players told you this?"

"A month ago or more."

"And you neglected to pass it on."

"You didn't want to hear it. You were so sure you had this thing nailed."

A sound of boots on gravel startled them, and a flashlight raked the wall behind the trees: the duty marine checking the perimeter at the beginning of his watch. Above the wall the sky was a dirty yellow from the streetlights that hadn't been shot out. "So you wouldn't let April ride in the car with us that day. You made her come to the gym with you and said it was because she was going to show your players her jump shot."

"I wasn't joking," Lindstrom said, but Burling thought he sounded evasive, in the way of a petty informer. "They didn't think a woman could do it. I said, how do you think she got a scholarship to Georgetown?"

Jack's pride in his wife was affecting, but it made Burling wonder what still existed between them. "What would make you think they'd understand a thing like that," he asked, envy stirring, "when you see the women here?"

"You don't give them any credit, Lucius, that's your problem. All they wanted was to get their people back, the ones Taraki was torturing."

“Why won’t the masons come tomorrow, Jack?”

“Because they’ve gone off to fight, man, just like they have since the British—shit, since Genghis Khan was here. If they don’t show up tomorrow, that’ll be our signal to get the hell out.”

THE MORNING AFTER, JACK PROVED TO BE RIGHT. THE masons didn’t come, and by afternoon the rats had chewed a tunnel through the wall from the open sewer running outside. Burling and two marines tried to patch it with a rotting bag of mortar they found in a shed, but the rats seemed to like it—for the salt—and made the hole larger than before. Like the siege of Krishnapur, no one in the embassy cared anymore—except Burling.

In the three days it took to get dependents out, he worked with a calm insistence, as if he’d been waiting for this all his life. He felt vaguely guilty at how much he relished it, and how much the work left room for nothing else.

Late on Friday afternoon he left Godwin’s office, which he had taken over, to bring his wife the news. He had kept his own family here while others got out because that only seemed right; now it was their turn. The gift of what Amelia wanted, to leave him, he bore sadly through the Residence gate. The sun was sharp from the west, and marines had taken up positions around the ornamental garden where he had kissed April, then learned that her husband had been perfectly willing to let him be kidnapped or killed. Crossing that threshold, breaking into their lives, had set something real and true in motion inside him. He had begun to believe that he was meant to understand things, about women, about the whirl of borders where he had been sent in his country’s service. He saw more clearly the factions involved in Godwin’s murder, the role of the northern tribes, even the future as it involved the United States, its enemies and allies, perhaps a Third Force, and how these things fit together in the puzzle of nations. Kissing April had even allowed him to set aside his anger at his wife, given him the distance he needed to treat Amelia with compassion, as he should. But even as he thought fondly of

pleasing her, longing, hard as a stone, rose up in his throat. It's all turned around, he thought. I actually want her to go.

Burling found his wife and son on the path near where Lindstrom had predicted the future. Jack had the information, all right, because that was his role, but Burling was meant to parse it, to *understand*. Godwin's death, his plan to work with the *mujahedin*, seemed ordained.

"Mom killed it," Luke said. They were huddling above a lank brown body, its coarse hair matted with blood. The boy was twelve, and his round eyes and freckled face couldn't decide whether to be impressed or horrified. He hadn't known his mother, a savior of birds, would beat a rat to death with a shovel.

"I am finished," she said.

Her voice seemed unstable, and Burling wondered if she'd been drinking. He could smell something strong but not quite sweet in the air, pungent and headier than alcohol. Then it came to him: the smell of Godwin's car.

"I know," he said to his wife. He felt mourning coming on, prematurely: the strength it took to hold up against it steadied him. Being a man entailed equal measures of risk and resignation. He touched her on the shoulder. "It's all pretty horrible, but you'll be out of here tomorrow."

"You're not coming with us," she said.

"I can't, Amie."

"You don't want to."

"We're going home?" Luke asked, disappointed.

"I am done," Amelia said.

LATER THAT NIGHT HE WAS BACK IN THE EMBASSY, arranging the journey up north. Sleeves rolled up past his elbows, blue pencil touching the map. Godwin's office smelled of rugs, books, and furniture polish. The pool of light from the desk lamp ringed a pleasurable solitude. Amelia had changed, or misrepresented herself, while he had simply stayed the same. What had been an adventure

when they married, what had drawn her to him, she despised in him now. His sense of purpose was a burden. That was why he'd turned to April. It was not what he had wanted, but he would have to take it on.

"Burling."

It was as if he had fallen into the map: he wasn't sure how much time had passed. April, dressed in a white *djellabah*, was leaning inside the door.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't call you Lucius," she said, seeing the look on his face. To his surprise, her presence was unwelcome. "It doesn't fit you somehow."

"It was my father's name," said Burling.

"Where I'm from they'd call you Junior. Something else if you were black."

No other person in the embassy would dare to affect native dress, but April wore it as a provocation. Like her languages, the robe was almost a weapon, or a camouflage. Inside the open neckline, he could see the low swell of her breast.

"I haven't seen you since . . .," she began, then immediately laughed at herself, collapsing slightly to one side so that her knuckles bore her weight on the credenza. A deceptively strong woman, she tossed her fine blond curtain of hair behind her shoulders, as if its luxuriance annoyed her. Not exactly beautiful, Burling observed. Amelia would have turned more heads at the Chestnut Hill parties where she and Burling had come of age. April's eyes were a bit too light, the skin across her wide cheekbones sprinkled in places with the pockmarks of a childhood disease. But her neck led gracefully into her muscular shoulders and long, slender arms, wrists cuffed with tight bracelets; and her breasts, while substantial, looked firm. His father could have drawn her in three or four finely arcing strokes, his pencil describing a long thigh and hip, a cheekbone on the opposite side and above, perhaps the hair and slender shoulder to bring the composition into balance. From her waist to her toes, which were painted and bare, she was perfect. Irritation at her presence dissolved into something warmer, desire.

"You meant since Wes was killed."

“That’s what I was talking about, yes,” she said, coming around to his side of the desk where he could see her whole length. The *djellabah* rippled across the space between her thighs. “But you were thinking of kissing me in the garden.”

Burling’s words caught deep in his throat. “I can’t stop thinking about it, to be honest.”

“You’re a good man, Lucius Burling,” she said. “One kiss is not that big a deal.”

“Since Wes died, things are not . . . No, I don’t want to put it on that.”

April turned and went to the tray on the windowsill, where a cut-glass bottle of arak, a pitcher of water and glasses, shared space with Burling’s African violets and creeping philodendron. “You brought your tray in here,” she observed.

Weary with lust, Burling rose. “My plants,” he said.

“You’re funny.”

“I’ve kept them alive for a long time,” he told her, picking up the long tendrils of the philodendron in his hands and rubbing his thumb on a waxy leaf.

“Most men don’t keep plants.”

“These are easy to care for.”

April poured them each a measure of the clear liquor. Adding water clouded the liquid to the color of milk. A smell of licorice rose from the glasses.

“My father raised vegetables,” she told him. “He would make them come up out of the ground like a sorcerer. Rocky ground it was, too, but fertile just the same.”

“Did you and Jack have a garden in Berkeley?”

She laughed, somewhat ruefully, and handed him a glass. “Jack is more like one of those bitter weeds that grow out of the cracks in a sidewalk. You have to respect his kind of strength. Hack him down, he just keeps growing back.”

“How did you meet?”

April sighed and lowered herself on the long leather couch, and Burling stood above her, tentatively drinking. “When I entered

the program at Cal, I felt very detached. All the other kids were privileged, very stoned and theoretical. I went down to a gym in Oakland to see if I could teach the girls from the neighborhood basketball. And there was Jack, just back from his first tour. His grandfather's mission had funded the gym."

"I just realized," Burling said, feeling his height and sitting down on an ottoman. Their knees were almost touching.

"What did you realize?"

"That I don't want to talk about Jack."

April smiled, which narrowed her eyes. "We're not going to make it here, you know," she said, watching for his reaction over the rim of the glass, "in Godwin's office."

"Was that supposed to be on the agenda tonight?"

"I'm probably not even your type," she said, bringing the glass again to her lips. They were plump, of a rare shade of pink, defined by clean lines against her pale skin. He thought again how they had felt against his, the slight pressure receiving him, and the hardness of her teeth inside.

He had to take in breath to gather himself. "Why do women always say that to me?"

"That we're not your type?"

"Yes, but why?"

"Because under most circumstances, you wouldn't even look at a girl like me."

"I would find it impossible not to."

"That's sweet, and I know you're not lying, right this minute, but if I had come to your office, the summer I interned at State, you wouldn't have been any more than polite."

Burling took a quick gulp of the arak to steady himself. She wouldn't have found him at the Department of State, of course, but she would certainly be aware of that. Jack would not have been reticent on that score. "Why do you think so?"

"Because you're a sophisticated man. Worldly. Handsome, but not so good looking that people wonder."

"No?"

She smiled to acknowledge his feigned disappointment. “You move like you played a sport, football or basketball, maybe had an injury or two, but you’re careful so as not to hurt anyone smaller than you. You went to private schools, and you’re probably rich, or at least well off compared to most people, and now you’re being groomed for one of the top political appointments—deputy national security advisor, or number two at CIA.”

“Shhh,” said Burling, pointing at the ceiling where the microphones would be. Taraki’s government had the benefit of Soviet security expertise. “Who says that?”

“Jack. Besides, you married a debutante.”

“Not quite,” Burling said. “When I met her, Amelia was rebelling against being a society girl. Drinking and going to jazz concerts with men. It’s her money, by the way. My family lost ours long ago.”

“What luxury!” said April. “To reject what others want more than anything.”

“What *do* people want? Amelia and I are about as conventional as can be. The problem is what goes on in my head. I tend to disappoint people.”

“Are you going to disappoint me?” April asked, pointing to his nearly empty glass.

“I’ll have one more, if that’s what you mean,” he said, draining it.

April got up. She seemed somewhat hardened now, yet still he couldn’t help feeling encouraged. When he envisioned the journey up north, she was already with him in his mind. Up to Samarkand, over the Pass. Translating Dari and Pashto and whatever else they ran across. It was probably a very bad idea to take a woman, but he was making up reasons that it had to be done for the sake of the mission, and he had already begun to believe them.

“I need you to stay with me,” he said.

She looked at him over her shoulder, half-angrily, half-wanting. At least that was what he hoped. “I already told you, I can’t do that.” She said it softly, as if to the glasses she was filling.

"That's not what I meant," Burling said, accepting the fresh drink. They stood close, their glasses resting against each other in salute. "When the charter flight leaves tomorrow, I need you to stay. Come over here."

"Be careful," she warned. "Jack is probably out in the garden right now. He's getting high again, and when he does that he likes to talk to the marines."

"That's why I can't take him with me," he said, setting down his glass on the corner of the desk, "even though he knows the terrain." On a yellow legal pad, he wrote, *I have to go up North, to Mazar-i-Sharif, to talk to the mujahedin.* "Things are happening faster than I thought, and I need someone with languages."

"I came out here to help with girls' education," she said, sounding slightly desperate now. "Just because I speak Dari doesn't mean I understand what these men are up to. And I don't care what Jack says, killing Godwin didn't make any sense."

"Oh, yes, it did," Burling said, sampling the new, stronger, mixture. "Ever heard of Franz Ferdinand?"

"That's another problem. I'm not as smart as you are."

"Now you're patronizing me," Burling said. "You know what I think?"

April raised her eyebrows. "I wish I did."

"You're perfect for this."

SUNDAY MORNING, BURLING'S FAMILY LEFT, BOARDING THE DC-3. Only Luke, young and game enough still for the flight on an airplane to excite him, looked back across his shoulder at his father. Amelia stared resolutely at the seatback in front of her, and their daughter Elizabeth already had her nose in a book about Emily Dickinson. Jack Lindstrom sat in front of them, "headed for an epic druggie meltdown in the States," as April put it.

As the plane took off, leaving a trail of oddly black exhaust, and tilted across the mountains to the east, Burling thought about his children. Another secret thing he cherished was a potent love

for Betsy and Luke, but he had probably lost them, too, if he had ever really had them. They were beautiful, but he had thrown off the delicate balance of that beauty through his failure with their mother. It made what he was about to do all the more important, so that someday they would understand, and the pieces could be put back together into a larger, more beautiful whole.

That afternoon he took April on a different kind of plane, a light Cessna of the type they had used in Vietnam. Its spartan cabin shook as the engines choked to life. In the front seats rode the pilot and a young Afghan man named Abdul Hadi who worked as a liaison to the government, but was run as an asset by Burling. In the narrow seats aft, pushed together by the tapering fuselage, sat April and Burling. As the Cessna climbed above the mountains to the north, April smiled at him quickly from behind her shining hair. She wanted to be a part of his world, but what did he want from her? In his office, sharing the arak, he hadn't kissed her again, but the possibility had hung between them like a strong magnetic field. It crackled there now, at the margins. The hard stuff—as Godwin had called it—excited her. He knew that he was taking advantage of that, and yet he didn't, couldn't seem to, stop himself.

“On the way back—” Burling was talking above the engines to the pilot, pointing his finger at the windshield—“we may have to get in down there.”

A spine of dry, trackless hills hunched up before them, and the pilot nodded, taking a drink from a flask and offering it to Burling, who politely refused it.

“Is this where the ones who killed Godwin went?” April asked.

Abdul Hadi turned to look at her. He was uncomfortable with her presence, and Burling felt it as a judgment on him. The Afghan might be on his payroll, but where Abdul's ultimate loyalties lay—to the Americans, Taraki, or his clan—was definitely a matter of concern. “She's merely cover,” Burling had told him. “When we get to Samarkand, she'll be my wife.”

“Hey, Lucius,” said the pilot, cocking his head to one side. They looked down at the pocked, ochre dirt.

"Mines," said Burling, nodding. The plane's feathery shadow blew across the expanse. "That's the Soviet border down there."

IN SAMARKAND, THE MINARETS WERE SILENT. THE *madrassah* with its symmetrical blue-tiled façade was empty of life. In the center of town, an old hotel faced a large, shaded square. Its lobby had the stale, dour feeling of a place for English travelers on the Continent; the old British ladies who played bridge in the cool dusty corner by the stairs seemed right at home. On the roof was a terrace strung with multicolored lights, and on the night following their arrival, Burling boarded the creaky old lift with April, to eat "*en plein air*," as he said. He had dressed in khakis and his white linen shirt, as if playing the part of a colonial in a play. His hand spread gently across April's back as he helped her to her chair.

Children ran through the tables while their parents sat smoking over the wreck of their meals. The night air was blue with their fetid tobacco, which smelled as strong as Jack's dope, and the savor of herbs and roasted meat. In one corner of the roof a raggedy band sat on the edges of folding chairs, war medals flapping on their chests in time with the swing.

"Dance?" Burling said.

On the floor, the touch of their hands seemed quite harmless, refined.

"I've never been asked like that," she told him when her cheek was close to his. He could feel the slight tremble returning, and he didn't answer her for fear he would stutter, something he had struggled with as a child. "In southwest Virginia the boys don't typically ask, they just take you."

No one else joined them, and the old English ladies nodded their approval; their milky blue eyes tacked from April to Burling as the couple drew more closely together beneath the star-strewn globe of the sky. The ladies said they hadn't seen a man dance like that since the Blitz, and they fixed April with watery stares that

were fond and regretful. The music was flat, an uneasy rendering of the big bands that Burling used to play in the living room at home—his Washington home—in a time that seemed long ago now. The music felt wrong in this dry, spicy air. No scratch of cicadas with their manic crescendo, no scent of honeysuckle sweetening the night. So far from Amelia advancing through the soft, firefly dusk toward the picnic table, flowered apron tied loosely across her hips, leaning over to pick up plates. No Glenn Miller from the open kitchen window behind her. The arid Soviet night had an electric taste of betrayal and he and April glided through it with ease while the people talked about them in Russian and English and the keening of Dari.

“Why did you really bring me up here, Lucius Burling?”

Across the tables, the lift opened and a young Chinese man emerged. Burling knew from the sharp concentration of her eyes that April had seen him. Her body stiffened, which improved their dancing, as if she had taken the lead. Behind the younger Chinese came a short, fat man about Burling’s age, his thin hair combed across his scalp. The thought ran through Burling’s mind that he wanted to spoil this now, to save himself. Bringing the Chinese in complicated the whole thing beyond what he was able to predict.

“I’m serious,” said April. “If you brought me up here just to fuck me, that I can understand. And Jack can’t seem to do that anymore, in case you didn’t know, so I might just be up for it. But if you pretend there’s something else, if you’re just putting on a show . . .”

“I don’t know how to do this properly,” Burling told her, watching the Chinese colonel take his seat. “Even those ladies over there, watching our every move, I don’t know how people think about things like this.”

“I think you do but you like to think otherwise.”

He furrowed his brows to signal that he didn’t understand.

“I think that people like you like to *tell* yourselves that you don’t understand what people think about in the darkness of their minds, what they do with each other. That way you’re protected from the consequences.”

“People like me?”

“Powerful ones. You can screw up people’s lives and hide behind your ‘properly,’ your discretion.”

“You have me all wrong,” Burling told her. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

Her laugh was thrilling, and warm. “No shit, Chief.”

AFTER DINNER, HE AND APRIL RODE THE LIFT TO THE LOBBY, agreeing without a word that they would not go to bed, not just yet, if that’s what they were going to do. The old elevator jerked downward, and the drop in Burling’s stomach disoriented him: along with the possibility that he would sleep with April tonight came the thought that his rush to fulfill one desire might be a willed distraction from the enormity of what he was about to set in motion with the Chinese. Working with them to arm the *mujahedin* against the Russians was a line of attack that had only glancing support at the Agency, if it had any support at all. If Amelia found out about April, or if the deputy director hung him out to dry when the operation backfired, he would be in the wilderness for a very long time.

He and April sat close, her hip touching his thigh, on a hard wooden bench in the square, framed by short, dusty trees. A public security car trolled the streets around for black marketeers. Up the crumbling steps from the bare little park they could see the brown, implacable face of the hotel, its roof bleeding color and music into the sky.

“I wasn’t making it up, when we were dancing,” Burling said. “I don’t think you understand.”

Between her thumbs April broke a pink grapefruit she had taken from the table. The fruit smelled ripe, a bit funky, and her face was sly but reluctant in the shadows. Explain yourself, she seemed to be saying. If you can.

“The first time I saw a Viet Cong dead,” Burling told her, “it was early in the war, before the marines even landed at Da Nang.”

“Where Jack got his ‘million dollar wound,’” April said with fond sarcasm, tearing the peel.

“That was Tet. This was long before that, in the fall of ’62. We were there in an advisory capacity, helicopter support. The ARVN had killed this VC in a village outside Soc Trang, and we went up to look at him, because we’d never seen one before.”

“Like killing a cougar,” April said. She handed him a section of grapefruit, the strands of pink flesh sticking to her fingernails. “When I was a little girl all the cougars, the mountain lions, were supposed to be gone from the hills behind my father’s house, but he and my brothers swore they were there. They wanted to kill one to prove they existed.”

“Did they ever get one?”

“They never did, but that didn’t stop them from believing it. If they ever had killed one, I don’t know what they’d have done.”

The security car moved soundlessly behind the trees, a cigarette glowing inside, showing dark figures slumped against the seats. The Chinese colonel, with whom Burling was to meet next morning, came down the steps and looked this way and that.

“When Wes was murdered,” Burling ventured, “the first thing I remembered was that Viet Cong. Two of the men dressed up as police, or maybe they *were* police, we don’t know; anyway, they were dead, too, one of them lying there on the ground beside the car. No one had closed his eyes yet. I looked at him, and he had that same sort of meditative look, almost thoughtful, and he was terribly slender, just like the VC, and I thought again that we were in trouble, now—how’d you put it?—now that we know it exists.”

April got up an inch and sat down, the way women do to shake off a subject from themselves. Above the trees to the west the sky was the color of amber, liquid and dirty from the marketplace stalls.

“What exists, Lucius? I ask you why you brought me up here, and you tell me a story about dead Viet Cong, about the soldiers of God. You tell me it’s real. What is real?”

“Sacrifice.”

“For you? For me?”

“Love.”

“Who were the Chinese on the roof?” April asked him.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON THEY TOOK OFF AGAIN, THE PILOT flying low above the ruinous desert country to the east, shaped by wind, through the jagged peaks and chilly, verdant valleys to the landscape of rocks that was home to the *mujabedin*. The flat, rocky ground came up to meet them, the pink horizon rocked back and forth, and April grabbed Burling’s hand with a disarming strength that reminded him sharply of the night before. At first she had led him, for which he was grateful, but as soon as he felt her with nothing between them, all the impediments around them ringed like forces held at bay, he’d begun to believe he was truly in love. What a fool I am, he thought.

“What is it?” she asked, drawing back.

The wheels banged across the slabs of the landing strip, jolting him out of his dream. The airfield had been built by the British after the war, part of their own misadventure in this remote, empty place. The plane shimmied as the engines and brakes dragged it down, then choked to a stop before a rusting Quonset hut. A hundred yards along the tarmac sat a Chinese military plane, with a Land Rover parked beside the tail. When the pilot opened the hatch there was no sound but the wind.

A rumpled guard roused himself from his seat against the corrugated steel of the hut, scratched his new coils of beard, and dragged his rifle out to see Burling’s papers of introduction, his *bona fides* from Jack. Somewhere a piece of metal banged against itself.

“How did the Chinese get here?” April asked.

“Overland,” Burling said. “The borders are pretty porous up here, but they can’t fly that plane into Samarkand.”

“I don’t see them, though.”

“I know. Neither do I.”

April tried to ask the guard in her limited Dari, a language of which she was proud for the very obscurity of it, but the guard was like a man waiting for a storm: as Burling's papers flapped before him unremarked, he kept looking at the featureless sky. Abdul Hadi climbed from the plane and watched her with dark-eyed contempt.

Where had he been last night? she wondered.

"What on earth possessed you to learn a language like Dari in the first place?" Burling asked as they waited. "Apparently even the natives don't trust it."

She could see that Burling was trying to place the guard.

"They didn't tell me that at Georgetown," April said. The guard uttered a few rusty, atonal syllables she didn't understand. "They were more about Pashto, the language of the rulers."

"Did he say that they were coming?"

Abdul nodded before she could open her mouth, and suddenly her irrelevance coursed through her like a shock. The guard seemed to be suppressing an emotion, although it was unclear if the twitch around his mouth was mirth or rage.

"He speaks the languages, too," she whispered fiercely to Burling. "Apparently some that I don't."

"There are a lot of them," he said, "but I don't trust him as far as I can spit. Come on. Roy!"

He hailed the pilot and turned toward the plane, but before he took another step they had begun to hear the sound of a small band of men riding down from the hills—not a sound exactly, but a sudden disturbance in the ceaseless wall of wind, the creak that is made by tack flailing the muscles of lathering horses. The pilot, smoking by the wing of the plane, reached for the holster on his hip, but Burling made a damping motion with his hand. Shapes emerged from the brown pack until each was an individual rider and animal, bearing down across the hardpan in a clatter of hooves and drawing up, veins bulging in necks dark with sweat. April watched them with her mouth half open, her hands raised slightly from her hips as if she were about to appeal to them for something. Mercy was the word in her mind. The air had stopped in her mouth. Saliva

seeped from the insides of her cheeks, but her throat was bone dry. This was the first place she had been where she knew that being American didn't matter.

The leader, who rode a bay stallion two hands taller than the rest of the horses, dismounted in a whipping of cloth. The loose jacket of April's suit lifted in the wind, chilling her. Her hands were plunged deep in the pockets of her pants, stretching the coarse cotton across her hips and the backs of her thighs. She had always been strong, tough; her physical qualities had served her well while making her different and hiding her mind, her emotions, from men in particular. Burling had seemed to cut through those traits: while he clearly admired her body, wanted her openly like a younger man would, he seemed genuinely moved by her manner, intrigued by her mind. He made love as she'd thought he would, carefully, restraining, controlling a massive emotional and physical force. He moved forward now, a grim smile set on his face. The wind stung April's cheeks. Slowly, he and the leader looked each other up and down. In a moment they were shaking hands vigorously and nodding, the leader looking to his comrades and flashing his gleaming white teeth, pointing and laughing as if he'd won a bet.

"Abdul!" The leader, an uncle to Jack's power forward, gave the man a kind of greeting that April had seen in Kabul, grasping both shoulders, shaking him. "Come."

"You stay here with Roy and the plane," Burling told her, *sotto voce*. "If you see Abdul Hadi come out of that Quonset hut without me, he may have sold us up the river."

"What do we do then?"

His eyes met hers as if to say that no matter what happened, it had been worth it, but she wasn't so sure. Something told her that his own romantic dream would survive, with her as only a memory.

"I want to come with you."

"That would be more dangerous than staying here," he said. "I'm doing this for you, believe me."

"Burling!" the leader said heartily. "We go?"

Together they started toward the hut.

The other riders drew their mounts together, the smallest man holding the reins of the leader's incredible horse. April shuffled back toward the wing of the plane, where the pilot was smoking a cigarette. The *mujabedin*—because that's what they were, “the soldiers of God” whose names she had taken in vain the night before—were nothing like she'd expected: up close, they were scruffy and rancid, with nervous faces and intense, dark, sorrowful eyes—not mountain lions at all, but scary in the way of stray dogs, unpredictable. They reminded her of hollow boys back home.

April said a few words to them in Dari, and they replied with a slur against women. The pilot, Roy Breeden, raised his eyebrows at her.

“They say they want to rape me,” April told him, although that was not exactly what they'd said. “I think a stake may be involved.”

“Like a Joan of Arc number?” Breeden squinted through his smoke.

“I could go for that maybe, if they didn't smell so bad.”

The pilot took a pensive drag. A scar cleaved his upper lip, and when he smiled it made his mouth look like a beak. “These boys might not take you up on it,” he said. “They'll be fed grapes by seven thousand virgins if I shoot them right now.”

April looked at the *mujabedin*. Suddenly their shifty demeanor seemed more menacing than before. Lucius had used the word “sacrifice” about them, equating it with love.

“What a load of shit,” she said aloud. The horses had moved more closely together, and she couldn't see the hard desert light between their bodies anymore. Her own bravado went brittle. This might work with the hollow boys in the gravel lot behind the high school, as the vapor lights wore out from the game, but she'd miscalculated here: she'd never been outside of Kabul. Two other riders dismounted, and for the first time she noticed the rifles lashed across the pommels—long, black, shining automatics like Jack's own M-16. Breeden flipped his cigarette toward the nearest hoof, reached back into the plane, and casually brought out a shotgun—a twelve-gauge like her father's—holding it as if it were as harmless as a broom.

April turned to the men, who had drawn their horses back at the sight of the weapon. "I'm the closest thing to heaven they'll ever get."

"You're a hell of a woman, all right," the pilot observed. "I can't decide if I like you or not."

"Do you think these boys know Jack?"

"Might."

She couldn't tell if he was implying that knowing Jack might not be an asset right now. He held out the carved walnut stock for the men to inspect. The one who'd been holding the leader's reins handed them up to the man beside him, who still sat his horse. Then he came forward and weighed the shotgun like an offering in his palms.

The near proximity of the dismounted men, who gave off a rank odor of horses and sweat, was causing fear, the real thing, to run through her like a current. She was guilty, she realized, not only of coming up here with Burling, but of thinking she could handle this. She had run with the boys all her life, run from her brothers straight to Jack, which had upset her mother and scandalized her graduate student friends at Berkeley, with their stoned existentialist boyfriends who didn't care what women thought, even whipsmart scholarship girls like April Wheeling, who could drink harder and quote Jean-Paul Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Fanon better than they could. When Jack went off to Vietnam for the second time, April had finally realized she could want more than boys could give her, but it was hard to break their grip. Beyond the horses, she could see Lucius Burling and the leader coming back across the runway. No Abdul. What did that mean? Trailing them was the stout Chinese man she had seen on the roof of the hotel. The man who'd been holding the leader's horse barked something at his clan, in a dialect she could barely understand. He removed a thick knife, about twelve inches long, from his garment. Fear gripped her heart when she realized what the man had said.

"Roy?"

The man on the horse trained his rifle on the pilot.

"They said we're not leaving," April told him.

Breeden moved his hand to the holster, but the rifle gestured him to take it away. Breeden didn't do as he was told. She saw him unsnap the holster, and the rifle went off above her, a quick burst that cut Breeden down. He was on his knees, screaming obscenities, as the horses crowded around her. At first it made her feel safer, their bellies pressing against her, the familiar sweet, sharp smell. She had a flash of her father, his long legs in blue jeans hiked high on his backside, climbing stiffly up the hill toward his broken-backed barn, winter sun in the bare trees behind it. Then she felt herself being lifted; her feet no longer touched the ground. Through the dust she saw the knife raised above Breeden's head.

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