



**DAWSON COUNTY, GEORGIA • 14:32 GREENWICH MEAN TIME**

The resurrection of Private First Class Joe Patterson took place twelve months after he had been secretly recruited into the Freedom Crusaders. It was a resurrection six nights after his death, three hours after the sun had cleared the top of the single pine tree visible from the kitchen of the double-wide that had been his home in Dawson County, Georgia, before he'd shipped out to Afghanistan.

Six days before this resurrection, his wife, Sarah, had joined the ranks of military widowhood by stepping away from an episode of *Oprah* inside the living room of the trailer to open the screen door to bright sunshine and two men in U.S. Army uniforms, each with hands clasped in front, one of them with chaplain insignia pinned to his collar.

Wives of men in uniform visualize this moment again and again during the months of service, but no amount of dread and rehearsing is preparation for the actual impact. Sarah had collapsed sobbing before the first man delivered his news with measured sympathy; she could not remember a single word the chaplain had offered as a flimsy comfort to the grief that tore her apart—tore her with the same force Joe had endured in the final milliseconds of his life after his convoy truck triggered a C-4 land mine somewhere north of Kabul.

Now, some six days and sixteen hours later, only prescribed pharmaceutical help allowed her any sleep, which was why she'd been standing at the kitchen sink in a daze when the phone rang. She had no recollection of how long she'd been staring out the window at the blue sky with a full glass of water in one hand and a pill in the other, desperate to catch some sleep, even if it was morning, worrying about whether the doctor had been right when he'd promised the pill wouldn't harm the baby swelling her womb.

When the phone rang, tears had been running down her face as she thought about what it would have been like to tell Joe that she'd felt the first kicks of the

baby. When the phone rang, she didn't fear that a call at this hour was to deliver bad news. Not anymore.

Still, she set the glass down and headed toward the phone with uncertainty. Not uncertainty caused by the hour of the call, but the uncertainty that had tinged every step and action she'd taken since learning of Joe's death six days before, as if gravity had ceased to exist while those two men in uniform stood on her doorstep to tell her about Joe, and she kept expecting gravity to disappear again without any warning.

It took three rings for her to cross the tiny kitchen and fumble for the phone. The digital numbers glowing from the microwave read 9:32. Since Joe had been shipped, it had been her habit to convert time here in Georgia to time there because it made her feel closer to Joe, which put the time at 6:02 p.m. in Afghanistan.

She lifted the phone.

"Hello." Her voice was as dull as her hair. She'd been wearing the same pajamas for days and hadn't looked in a mirror for even longer.

The hiss she heard was the uncertain connection from a satellite phone nine and a half time zones removed from the double-wide. From Khodaydad Kalay, Afghanistan—something that she would learn almost immediately into the phone call.

"Hello," she repeated, hearing a faint bounce back of her voice.

Then they came. The words that marked the resurrection of Private First Class Joe Patterson.

"Babe. It's me. I've got one minute. Swear on your mama's grave that you won't tell anyone about this call."

#### **HOOPER DAM, NEVADA • 14:32 GMT**

Of anything—blood, smell, bloating, dismemberment—Kate Penner hated flies the most. Thing was, all the other stuff didn't actually touch you. Sure, at times the sight or smell of a dead body seemed to cling, but it never actually transferred. Flies, on the other hand, could move from the dead and land on the living. Kate hated flies.

Her flashlight beam hit the dead man hanging upside down in the back of a cube van, the sudden light knocking loose a dozen flies from a thick coating of dried blood on the man's face.

Kate grimaced.

Kate's face was wider at the cheekbones than conventional beauty allowed. Her nose had been broken when another cop with bad aim swung a nightstick at a drunk she was wrestling, and it hadn't quite healed straight, which gave her a

certain allure that was more trouble than it was worth. She had great hair, reddish brown with gentle waves down to her shoulders, and knew how great it was, but because of this knowledge, she ignored the hair except to tie it in a ponytail. It was the same philosophy that caused her to use makeup sparingly—bad enough being a woman on the force; she didn't need extra trouble. Especially since the last time she'd taken pains to look good, it had resulted in attracting a man she thought worth marrying. And she had, though it didn't work from day one and ended the day she came home to find him with a yoga instructor learning . . . well, it wasn't the kind of yoga taught in classroom situations.

Her green eyes fooled people into believing she was nicer than she was, and Kate liked this. She liked setting them straight. When she grimaced, as she was doing at the flies, it was more than a good hint that maybe she wasn't simply an accessory for a social evening.

"We're close enough," she told her partner, Frank Vetter, flicking the beam down at the pavement. She couldn't see anything to avoid stepping on, but you never knew. Not these days, when CSI could use a strand of hair to put someone on death row. The last thing Kate and Frank wanted—or needed—was grief about disturbing the crime scene. And it was undoubtedly that.

A crime. And a scene. Kate checked her watch. Six thirty-three.

She flicked her flashlight back to the dead man. What Kate could see of the man's face showed Middle Eastern descent. But there was so much blood it was hard to be sure. How could any body have ever held so much? It began somewhere in the middle of the man's shirt, soaking it so completely that the patterns of the fabric were no longer patterns. The blood covered the man's chest and neck and had pooled beneath his head, which hung only inches off the deck of the van. All the blood was dry, but that didn't tell Kate much. This was the desert. Anything liquid dried in a hurry.

Frank stood beside Kate. He held a flashlight too, but with sunrise twenty minutes away, he didn't need it anymore unless he wanted to add another beam to the darkness inside the van. He'd been a cop as long as Kate—just over ten years each. He, however, was a Dunkin' Donuts cop, happy putting in his time. Kate didn't mind—fewer leadership issues that way. Some of her former partners had struggled with the concept of independent-minded women.

"We'll need the crime scene unit," Kate said. She was an excellent detective with dogged ability that could have put her at the head of the homicide unit. But she didn't like the price that would come with a position like that—paying as much attention to department politics as to good investigating. She'd get the promotion she deserved only when the current chief forgot about how she'd mashed his head into the bottom of a punch bowl for slapping her backside at the last Christmas party. Which, of course, meant never. He'd been drunk enough to forget about

political correctness and make the grab but sober enough to recall the humiliation of the cherry jammed in his left nostril when he came up for air, spouting like a whale. She should have filed a grievance for where he'd put his hand, but that would have meant politics too.

"Yeah," Frank said. "Let's get CSI. Maybe they can solve it in an hour."

Bad joke. Long-standing joke. Anywhere in the department. The Boulder City department, close as it was to Vegas, suffered too because of the hit television series. At least once a week, tourists dropped in, thinking maybe Boulder City was actually part of Vegas, as if they were checking out a rotation of all the stations hoping to catch a glimpse of a star anywhere. *How stupid can people be?* Kate always wondered when they came by.

She paused. *How stupid could people be?*

She had one answer right in front of her, Kate thought. Stupid enough to find a way to end up dead, upside down in a cube van.

**KHARR YUNIS, GAZA STRIP • 14:32 GMT**

"You are not Abu," Mulvaney Quinn said to the Palestinian opposite him at a table.

The hostage exchange took place in a small room as bare and rough as its table—an almost unbearably hot room with a dirt floor and filled with the smell of garlic, like any of thousands of similar rooms in the squalor of the Gaza Strip.

"I am Zayat," the man said. "Abu takes no risks. He sends me instead. This is my proof."

The Palestinian dropped a small wristwatch on the table. The man's dress suggested he'd taken public appearance lessons from the late Yasser Arafat.

Quinn turned the watch over and looked for engraving on the back. *To Crystal. Love, Daddy.* The rest of the luxury watch matched the description that had been given by the father: pink leather wristband, extra hole punched in the band because it had been too large for Crystal's tiny wrist. She was only four, probably couldn't tell time, and had been given a watch that was worth double what the average Palestinian family earned in a year. Bad luck for her to be an American child in the Middle East, unaware of how much wealth she had on her wrist, how dangerous it was to display that wealth in a public place, and how much Americans were hated, even innocent children.

"Roz," Quinn said into his telephone headset, "I've confirmed the watch."

Roz. Out of the entire staff at Corporate Counterterrorism International, only Quinn called Rossett by that name. Here it was a code word, letting Rossett know that on Quinn's end there were no complications. Yet.

Crystal had been kidnapped, along with her mother, from a Jerusalem side

street. Quinn was optimistic that they were still alive; it was very unlikely that the woman and the child had been taken into Gaza, where the kidnapers had demanded this meeting. Security checkpoints were too risky for them to attempt to take the victims outside of Israel. This was simply a safer place for the kidnapers to negotiate, a haven in a territory of lawlessness.

"You know it belongs to the child," Zayat said. "Now I tell you about the change. You wire the money to a different account number."

"The agreement was clear," Quinn said. "No money until the woman and child are delivered safe."

This wasn't the place or situation for a business suit. Quinn wore khakis and a white mock turtleneck with short, loose sleeves. Comfort over formality. He was in his late thirties, lean and tanned, a tall man with a face that had forgotten how to smile.

Quinn's laptop, running on battery power, sat on the table between them. Quinn wore a headset attached to a port on the laptop, which used voice-over-Internet protocol to serve as his phone. The line was open to keep him in contact with the office in Tel Aviv. Every word was being monitored and recorded at CCTI. During telephone bargaining with Abu over the previous few days, Rossett had explained repeatedly that this constant contact was nonnegotiable.

"I give you the new bank account," Zayat pushed a piece of paper across the table. "Abu is a cautious man. He does not trust what you have set up." He pointed at the laptop. "You change it now while we wait."

Quinn did as directed but didn't like Zayat's obvious tension and impatience. Things went wrong when emotions got in the way.

Before Quinn could say anything, however, Rossett's steady voice came through the headset. "The woman and child are safe."

"Understood," Quinn said. Adrenaline and stress had been sustaining him through horrible jet lag, and he felt the muscles in his shoulder relax as he let out a deep breath of relief. "Roz, I'll release the money."

Quinn spoke to Zayat in Arabic that was flawless except for the Israeli accent. "I've just received the first confirmation. The mother and child are safe at the King David."

Roz was in Tel Aviv, but they'd chosen a Jerusalem hotel for the drop. There would be hugs, screams of joy, and collapsing in relief as the family was reunited in the lobby, but Quinn would permit himself the satisfaction of savoring the triumph later. He tapped at the keyboard on the laptop. "As agreed, one million dollars in U.S. currency are now being transferred to the account number that you provided us. When you've confirmed that your men are back on this side of the border, you allow me to leave."

To make this work, someone needed to provide a guarantee that Abu's men

would not be detained. This was Quinn's other role today. If Abu's men were betrayed, Quinn would be held until they were returned, killed if they were killed.

In theory, the Gaza Strip was no longer a concentration camp. But under the Palestinian National Authority and the new Hamas government, this was still theory. The fact that kidnapping Americans could be a profession to fund terrorist cell groups attested to that. Abu's men would be very safe inside Gaza. Unlike Quinn.

The door opened, briefly flooding the room with sunlight, showing the air heavy with floating dust. Quinn glanced over.

The new arrival was a younger man dressed in a manner similar to Zayat's, but his face was swathed in black cloth. He moved to stand behind Zayat. In one hand he carried a knapsack, which he set on the floor. The other hand held a machine gun, which he lifted and pointed in Quinn's direction.

Quinn stared at the man with the machine gun, then made a point of deliberately turning his head to Zayat without showing any alarm. This was business. When terrorists kidnapped rich Americans, it wasn't about ideology, only money to finance the ideology. Everyone understood that killing negotiators hurt future business. In theory.

"I believe this is personal for you, isn't it?" the new arrival said to Quinn in Arab-accented English. "Your partner handled the negotiating, but you are the one here in person. You even cut short a vacation to return here from America for this. Las Vegas, I understand—a den of sinners in a country of sin."

Quinn refused to show surprise at the man's knowledge. He had seen these situations played out at both extremes. Complete silence until the next confirmation phone call to let both sides know the Palestinians were safe and Quinn could be released. Or endless chatter that was a sure indication of nerves on the other side.

*Teflon*, Quinn always told himself. *Be Teflon. Nothing sticks. Answer in polite, neutral tones with polite, neutral words.* "I represent Lloyd's of London and the American businessman insured by Lloyd's. I'm a middleman. Which means it is my job to make the transaction successful for both parties."

"Yet if I understand correctly," the Palestinian said, "you lost your wife and daughter to a Palestinian suicide bomber. What, five years ago? The woman and girl matched in age then to the woman and child you just ransomed for one million; isn't that right?"

Now Quinn was alarmed. This was information the terrorist should not have. CCTI firewalled personal information of employees with the zealotry of guards at Fort Knox.

"I represent Lloyd's of London and the American businessman insured by

Lloyd's," Quinn repeated. He was a good poker player, and this was high-stakes Texas hold 'em, where the losers ended up dead. "I am a middleman. This is business. Nothing more."

"One might guess you are still trying to rescue the family you lost," the masked Palestinian said with an obvious sneer in his voice. "A futility, is it not?"

Images flooded Quinn's mind, the images he fell asleep to every night, triggering here and now the same emotions that didn't seem to lose the edge or rawness over time.

*Teflon*, he told himself. *Teflon*.

"Put a hand on the table, palm up," the masked Palestinian said, still standing behind Zayat.

Quinn raised an eyebrow.

The man raised the machine gun and pointed the barrel at Quinn's head. Quinn leaned forward and rested his left forearm on the table, turning his palm toward the ceiling.

"Now is your time," the Palestinian said.

Zayat leaned forward too and clamped his fingers over Quinn's wrist, holding Quinn's hand in place. He reached under his leg, pulling out a long knife he'd kept hidden. With savage swiftness, he drove the point of the blade down into the center of Quinn's palm, pinning Quinn to the table with a thud.