

THE LAST EXPRESSION

THE STRANGE DEATH
OF THE MASTER



JIM THRONE

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Chapter 1

The two waited at the end of the lane for the men to exit the Humvee. A jowly overweight NCO in a too-tight camo led two others - a balding frail-looking man in a lab coat and a short, squat, olive-skinned soldier with a single stripe on his sleeve. The private held the leashes of three non-descript dogs, waiting while they peed on bushes beside the lane.

“Hi. Thanks for coming. I’m Scott Jameson and this is Mizz Jardin.”

“Yeah, whatever. We’re the Guard. I’m Phil Silvers aka Sergeant Bilko, but you can call me Sarge,” the man snorted, ignoring Jameson’s outstretched hand. “Mario’s the guy back there with them curs. The dude in the white coat is Doc MaKay, the Guard’s own ‘Rent-a-Vet,’ just in case one o’them critters gets hurt. Gov’ment issue, y’know. Shepherd’s name is Oscar, Beagle is Dumbo, and the Lab’s called Mutt. Now what the hell’s this all about?”

“Are there more of you coming?”

“Not in yer lifetime, Sonny. Mario and me, we is it. Besides, we’re from the motor pool. We fix trucks and tanks, iff’n ya get my drift. Yesterday, we got assigned to the dog squad. M’be you dint notice, but a Goddamn big wind come through here a couple a days ago. Blow’d down half the fuckin’ world. ‘Scuse my French, Missy,” he said to the woman standing next to Jameson.

Scott smirked. “Yeah, we’ve noticed. I believe the weather bureau called it an F-5 tornado, the first one in the state in thirty years. But thanks for pointing that out anyway. For your future reference, Bilko, Mizz Danielle Jardin is from France, and...”

“Oh, sorry ‘bout that slam on yer country, Missy. And *parlez-vous* or somethin.’”

“I speak English, Sergeant,” Jardin said demurely. She was slender, tall, willowy. Her fashionable magenta-vermillion layered cape nearly touched the ground. The opening in her cape revealed black patent leather knee-high boots now smudged with mud. Her ginger hair jutted from an

equally stylish maroon beret. Owlsh lavender sunglasses, perched on the bridge of her not-quite-upturned nose, hid her eyes. “I believe you asked what the hell we’re doing here.” She gestured up the rutted lane. “Somewhere up there is - or was - the studio of the artist Keve Duda. The Master is an internationally known oil painter who represents the last of his genre.”

“Don’t know nothing ‘bout gen-ree,” the Sergeant snorted. “We jes’ here ta make certain he ain’t dead or hidin’ somewhere, y’know.”

“Thank you, sir. But let me finish, please. The Master was supposed to ship me some valuable paintings for a major exhibit in my gallery next month. But I have not been able to reach him for more than a week. So I came here, to this town, to search him out. Needless to say, I was stunned to learn that the area was devastated by what you call a ‘big wind.’ I prevailed on the town leader, a Mister Lambert, to help me seek out the Master.”

Jameson picked up the story. “Sarge, Ryan Lambert’s the Mayor. He called you folks to help out. I was told there’d be several more of you.”

Serge roared. “Hey, Sonny, yer Goddamn lucky yew got the two of us. Plus them dogs and ol’ dog-bones.” He gestured toward the vet who stood halfway between the group and the truck, arms akimbo. “So, let’s get with it, okay, ‘cause we got other places ta go and things ta poke our noses into ‘fore the day’s over, y’know. An’ besides, we get awfully thirsty ‘bout this time of day, iff’n you get my drift,” he snorted, giving a leering wink at the woman.

Before Jameson could outline his search and rescue plan, a pickup truck pulled up behind the Humvee. Four guys wearing reflective lime green vests and hard hats piled out.

“Hey, Scott, the calvary is here,” the driver shouted as he struggled with his backpack. The others were busy donning theirs along with warning yellow gum boots.

“He means the cavalry,” the second man shouted. “And besides, I’m in charge here. Of course, after you, sir,” he said, saluting the NCO.

“Hell no. I ain’t in charge,” the NCO laughed, ignoring the salute. “This guy here is.” He pointed to Jameson. “Who the hell are yew guys, dressed all funny like that?”

“We’re CERT – Community Emergency Response Team – and I’m Wilson, the group commander,” he said proudly. He was short, stout, with floppy ears and a bad haircut. He now held out his hand to the Sergeant. When the Guardsman ignored this gesture, he shrugged and continued, “We’re highly trained in SAR. Y’know, Search and Rescue? Charlie over there’s a specialist in structures. Y’know, what’s stable and what ain’t? Andrew’s our fire expert. Knows all about the alphabet stuff. Y’know, A, B, C? LaQuelle’s our Safety Officer, so to speak. He’s supposed to look out for downed wires and such. ‘Course you guys know all that stuff too, doncha?” He grinned and snickered.

The Sergeant turned to Jameson. “I’m gonna make one thing clear. Rat here an’ rat now. When we do our work, yew keep yer boy scouts outa our way. When I need’s ’em, I’m gonna tell ’em, unner’s t’stand? I only got me so many Gov’ment-issue body bags in da truck, y’know. Oh, and the sooner we’s get started, the sooner we’s get to hit the local watering hole, iff’n yew are still gettin’ my drift.”

“Understand. Now here’s the plan.” Jameson pulled on his hard hat, moved to the hood of the city car, and unfolded an aerial map. “The Sherwood place was platted in the late 1700s. It’s a section, a Jeffersonian mile squared, or 640 acres.” He pointed to the lane and then to the map. “It appears that this is the only access to the buildings on the crest of the hill. Map shows what appear to be a farm house, a barn, and a couple of smaller buildings. Maybe a chicken coop and what looks like a milk house.” He pointed to the map and again to the landscape. “Looks like a shed or lean-to just beyond those trees. We should scope that out first, then head up the lane.” He turned to the CERT guys who were pushing one another, trying to get a look-see at the map. “The guard guys’ll check it out using the dogs before we see whether we can enter. Agreed?”

While Jameson was briefing the teams, Jardin worked her way up the lane around water-filled runts and past overgrowth and was now a dozen yards away from the group, heading toward the clump of trees.

“Miss Jardin, you must stay with us,” Jameson shouted, stopping her march. “Better yet, you must stay behind us. Downed buildings, live wires. These sites can be very dangerous.” She gestured, hands in the air in a well practiced action. *Acknowledgment? Or obscenity?* Jameson wondered.

“Okay, boy scouts,” the NCO snarled as the group moved in mass toward a building set in from the road and the lane. “You guys know all about structures? Have a look-see, see-cure it, and we’ll let the dogs out.” LaQuelle and Charlie dropped their backpacks and donned their hard hats before carefully moving to the structure. After Jameson made certain the woman was kept some distance from the shed, he followed, a couple steps back. LaQuelle gingerly rocked a portion of the roof of the collapsed structure. It held its position. Jameson and Charlie, the structures man, propped it to keep from sliding. The dogs bounded into the darkness. The NCO moved the others aside and played his light this way and that, trying to follow the dogs’ snorts.

“Nothing but a bunch of smashed crates,” Serge said as Mario called the dogs out. The volunteers released the props, causing that section of roof to partially collapse away from the shed access way.

Wilson, the CERT leader, marked the traditional X and other pertinent data on it. “I marked it ‘NE’,” he whispered to Jameson.

“The Master detested interruptions,” Jardin said. The private had prevented her from moving closer to the partially collapsed structure. Now she cautiously approached it. “In particular, he hated deliverymen. He told me he’d dragged a shed from up there, down to here. He stored his crated paintings here where the delivery people could pick them up and where they could leave the supplies that he’d ordered.” She stepped around Jameson, toward the access. “Did that soldier say there were crates in there?”

Jameson grabbed her just as she started to crawl under the roof structure. “Jesus Christ, Jardin. What the hell do you think you are doing?” he yelled.

“Oh, sorry. I just thought...”

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“The trouble is, ma’am, you didn’t think, ferchrissakes,” he yelled again. “We’re looking for a human being, not a bunch of paintings, ferchrissakes.” He turned to the CERT men. “Secure this building. I wanna keep other people from doing stupid things.” He was still holding the woman by the arm. “C’mon, ma’am. I’m sorry but it will be necessary for me to keep a tight rein on you as we check out the other buildings.”

Jardin pulled hard at his grip. “You are hurting me! I am not a child, sir. Please release me immediately.”

He hesitated for a long moment before releasing her. Disgusted, he helped one of the men to string the yellow caution tape around the structure before saying, “Okay, guys, let’s tackle the road.” He looked around for the Guard. Mario had already corralled the dogs. The vet had brought Humvee up the path and ‘Bilko’ was sitting in it, writing notes.

* * *

According to the aerial plat, all the buildings - other than the shed at the foot of the lane - were clustered in the center of the acreage. The ruts in the lane were often axle deep in water. The the CERT team with Jameson and Jardin on board took nearly twenty minutes to drive their vehicles the half-mile to the complex. The group parked behind the Humvee in a weedy area that at one time had been a lawn.

“Jesus and Mother Mary,” the NCO barked. “Sure as hell took you pussies an eternity to get yer asses up here! Me and Mario already gone through a couple a cancer sticks waiting fer ya!” He was sitting on the edge of a concrete watering trough with yet another cig hanging from his lower lip. “The dogs and the vet is somewhere out there.” He waved to an overgrown field. “Prob’ly poopin’em!”

Jameson helped Jardin from the back of the stake truck. Wilson had taken the map from him and unfolded it on the hood of the truck “Unbelievable,” Wilson muttered as he surveyed the scene, comparing what he saw with what the map detailed.

Much of the main house was scattered across a large portion of a winter wheat field. A major portion of the roof, shingles attached, was

several hundred meters from the site. Furniture, pink insulation, sections of second-story walls, and a large portion of the first and second floor flooring filled in between. Remnants of furniture, drapery, sundry clothing – the stuff of life lived – dotted the landscape. The foundation, the posts for the wraparound porch and about half the walls of the first floor remained. Two unbroken wicker chairs and a large freezer sat unmoved on the remains of the porch.

“Can’t look for no bodies in there,” the Sergeant snickered, pointing to an open portion of the porch, to the cellar where water was nearly to the top step.

“We won’t know that for sure, Sergeant, until we pump that out, now will we?” Jameson said. “How ‘bout checking the wreckage?” He pointed to the several acre debris field. The Sergeant shrugged and whistled to Mario. The private and the dogs worked their ways into the muck of the wheat field. The vet followed, gingerly picking his way through the mud. The Sarge stood back, finishing his sig, before returning to the truck for his note pad.

The CERT team fanned out toward the outbuildings. Two of them reported that part of an underground storm or root cellar had a foot or more of water. There was substantial debris in there - mostly floating Ball jars of canned something or other. But no floating bodies. They also reported that the concrete milk house was intact but the floor was also under water. Dozens of milk cans floated in the water but no bodies. They X’d the building sides with the appropriate FEMA codes properly filled in. The outhouse was flattened, inoperative, and sans occupants

Jameson caught up with two team members as they headed to the remains of a barn. Jardin followed a few paces behind, trying with little success to stay out of the mud, the bottom of her cape now pretty much encased. The barn walls and most of its roof were strewn across another wheat field beyond, along with what appeared to be hundreds of bales of straw or hay. What was left was the stark skeleton of what had been a well-built working barn. The stout eight-by-eight hand-hewn vertical posts were still supporting four-by-twelve beams. Most of the loft planks remained. Although the structure leaned a few degrees from vertical, what remained seemed stable.

Two men, rope-tied to one of the vertical posts, cautiously maneuvered into the muck and detritus of what was once the barn floor. After several minutes of probing under debris and into corners, they declared that the structure was clear. Andrew propped a four-by-four chunk of barn wall against a post and spray-painted an X.

“What about in here?” Jardin was standing at the remains of what appeared to be a poultry shed, or as one of the CERT guys said, a chicken coop. The building was a dozen meters from the barn, on the apparent leeward side of the wind gusts. Although it had lost a substantial portion of its roof and some of the rear wall, its front door and most of the chicken-wire window glass was intact. The volunteers agreed that it was in better shape than the other buildings.

“This must be the Master’s studio. I’m going in,” Jardin, pushing at the door. Before Jameson could grab her, the door swung open and a chunk of the roof came down hard on her head. “Oh, oh, oh,” she moaned as she sank to the ground, her hand pressed against her head, blood oozing around her fingers. Jameson yelled for the vet who’d been monitoring the dogs in the far field. He came as quickly as his age and the muck would allow. He pried her hand from a sizeable gash on her forehead, dug in his coat for a large gauze pad and pressed it into the wound. LaQuelle and Jameson supported her as they moved her toward the barn, Scott holding the compress to her head as they did. Meanwhile the vet moseyed to the Humvee for his medical equipment.

While he cleaned and dressed her wound, Jameson and Wilson, roped to safety lines, gingerly stepped into the building. “She was right,” Jameson said as he played his light across the contents of the room. “This is an artist studio. There’s one, two, three easels. Two are down and pretty busted up. One is still standing but has a busted leg.” He played his light on the painting still clamped to the upright one. “Jesus,” he gasped. “What the hell kind of an artist is this guy?”

The painting was easily three feet on a side. It depicted two naked forms in garish colors. A woman seemed to be hurling red stones at a man who was bleeding from every orifice, including what had once been his sexual organs. What appeared to be a snake was wrapped around a tree behind the two figures. Jameson stepped over jars of paint and evil smelling

solvents to the easel. Even with the CERT leader's light playing on the easel, it took him several minutes of moving detritus before he was able to free the painting from the easel.

He sat the painting next to the door and returned to the French woman. "Mizz Jardin, are you feeling okay?" he asked. She was propped against the stump of what had been centuries-old oak, sipping water, her eyes closed. Her pristine cape was now mostly mud-covered as were her boots. Wilson had found her beret hooked on a section of the studio roof and had placed it on her knee.

"She's okay," the vet said, kneeling next to her. "She just got a good knock on the head. Head gashes always bleed a lot. She'll need a tetanus shot. Even though the gash is a couple of inches long, I doubt she'll need stitches. I put some peroxide on it and put a couple of butterflies on it. She'll probably have one helluva headache for a while. Gave her a couple of Tylenols."

"Are you okay, Mizz Jardin?" Jameson asked a second time.

"Yes, thanks to the Doctor," she said weakly. "Were you able to get into the building?"

"Yeah. You were right. It was the dude's studio. Dozens, maybe a hundred canvases. A bunch of easels and lots of paint pots and brushes and such. The place is pretty much a wreck. I managed to salvage one of his paintings for you."

"Oh, oh, where is it?" She started to stand but the vet stopped her.

"Here it is." Wilson, who had been studying it with great intensity, carried it to where she was sitting. "Kinda weird iff'n you axe me. Think da damned thing ain't finished, though." He pointed to a section near the lower left corner.

"Yes, it's his work. Omigod, what a wonderful effort," she gushed, squinting at it.

“It’s Goddamned ugly,” one of the other CERT guys said as he approached. “Looks like a deranged kindergartener at work,” another snickered.

“Oh, oh, did you say there were more in there?” she asked excitedly, ignoring their statements.

“Yeah. Lots. Some stacked against a wall and a bunch of rolled stuff. And lots look like they got stuff kinda through’em. Like parts of the building, glass and stuff,” the first man snorted.

“Can we get them out?” she asked excitedly.

“Not until we secure the building, ma’am,” Jameson said. He started to take the canvas from her when she gasped. “What?” he asked, worried that she might’ve injured herself on the rough wood of the support that held the canvas.

“No,” she said, her voice suddenly raspy. She was now very carefully studying the support. She turned the canvas on its edge and examined the way it was affixed to the support. She examined the canvas surface, running her fingers over the brushstrokes and smelling the painted surface.

“What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“Okay,” she finally said, pointedly ignoring his question. “I need you to secure the Master’s studio against further damage until I can examine its entire contents. Can you do that?”

He turned to CERT man Charlie. “More yellow tape,” he laughed. “Not too sure about dragging all that junk outa there, though,” he said hesitantly. “Probably need someone from the city to do that. Pretty sure the Mayor’ll wanna level everything. Pronto. Rats and vandals and all, y’know.”

“Mister Jameson, please,” she whispered. “Do not let anyone destroy the Master’s studio before I can salvage his art work. Oh, and the shed by the road, too. Please. Please.”

Before Jameson could answer, the Sergeant approached. Mario and the dogs trailed behind. “What the hell happen t’her,” he snorted, pointing at the woman.

“Got banged by some debris,” Wilson said.

“Serves ya right, missy, fer stickin’ yer Frenchie nose in this here business in the first place.” He turned to Scott. “Well, the dogs found nothing of interest in the debris field. ‘Cept for a pile of cow bones and a mountain of not-so-fresh cow shit. Way the hell back at what we thinks is the edge of this prop’ty. No corpses, if you get my drift. What we got here?” He pointed at the painting.

“The lady believes that we found the dude’s studio,” Jameson said, pointing to the shed. “Can you let the dogs out to search it? For any signs of the ‘Master’?”

Ten minutes later, Mario called the dogs back. Again there were no human remains.

* * *

It was mid-day. The early April day had turned hot, windless, humid. The CERT volunteers were sprawled on a dry grassy spot in the almost-shade of what was left of a centuries-old oak. The Guardsmen were sitting on the wicker chairs in the shade of the remains of the main house, chewing on beef jerky and swigging down water. The dogs were running free. Jardin was sitting on the porch deck against one of its beams, her head in her hands. The vet had again finished checking her wound and had disappeared behind the structure to pee. The consensus was that the search was over. “No body home!” Sarge had snorted. Jameson was pacing to and fro, trying to raise someone, anyone on his two-way radio with that information.

The Beagle was the first to become agitated, barking and yelping and jumping at something in the corner of the porch. The Lab nosed his way over to the Beagle and started sniffing around its lid. The Shepherd joined the two and began growling. The two Guardsmen ignored the dogs’ incessant baying and howling. The CERT guys, either napping or yapping, paid no attention either.

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Jameson had been alerted to their ruckus and was about to see what the fuss was about when his radio crackled to life.

He'd walked a dozen paces from the building, trying to report in as the radio cut in and out, when he heard the Beagle wail mournfully and the woman scream. In the seconds it took for him to bound to the porch and to the freezer, she had collapsed and the dogs were on their hind legs, heads in the opened freezer. It took just a quick look into the freezer before he slammed its lid hard against the dogs' heads. Mario charged after the yelping animals as Jameson tended to the fainted woman.

The Sergeant arrived seconds later. "What the hell's goin' on?" he said around his mouthful of jerky.

"Check the freezer," Jameson said, yielding his care to the vet who had finished zipping his fly and was now kneeling next to the woman.

"Jesus, what the hell is that?" the Sarge said, waving off the stench from the freezer and nearly slamming its lid on the vet's head.

"I think we have just found Mizz Jardin's missing Master," Jameson said. "Or at least what's left of his rotting corpse."