

Paige LaReine, a political commentator, gets more than she bargains for while touring the front lines of Afghanistan. Drawn into a clandestine mission with a mysterious commander, Paige must choose between her career and a life of dangerous passion.

The Lyricist

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THE LYRICIST

By

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Chapter 3

London

Mandy beat me to the airport. She was already seated and waiting. Our flight was a short hour and one half from Nice to London.

Upon landing in London, the limo was waiting to take us to the large and elegant hotel located across from Russell Square to meet Mandy's assistant, Luke Marsedo. I had been told once that it was one of Queen Victoria's large dwellings that she devoted to her Lords and servants while the House of Lords was in session. A few years ago, one of the waiters in the sumptuous bar in the lobby asserted unequivocally that the person who had told me 'such an outrageous lie', needed to return to kindergarten. In fact, the large palace had once been part of the Duke of Bedford's estate! I will never argue with a Brit about *their* history. It is a mortal sin to ever question their knowledge of what they consider England's unshakable past.

Whoever was right, I'm still not quite certain. Regardless, it is a magnificent Victorian Grand Hotel that opened at the turn of the twentieth century. Spanning a city block, the red terra cotta structure faces Russell Square and is located in the artistic Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia, the literary corners of London.

I love to stroll in that area. Within walking distance of the hotel stands the monumental British Museum surrounded by quaint and prim streets lined with small cafes and myriad antique shops sporting period furniture and often one of a kind prints and old books. By now, I was annoyed that our rooms' accommodations had been reserved across town.

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My favorite pubs were located in this part of town as well. The legendary Fitzroy Pub still served fish and chips and whiskey to the new wave of modern writers who came to sit in its legendary leather seats. Luminaries such as Virginia Wolf, biographer Lytton Strachey and artists Duncan Grant and Dora Carrington discussed their coming of age philosophies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in these very seats. This realization always blew me away. Many of the pubs in the area still kept 'snob screens'. Years ago these dividers were propped up to help aristocrats from mixing with the lower classes while they enjoyed a drink. I'm certain the new generation looked kindly on these privacy items as well. One restaurant I frequent in LA has a similar set up; long and heavy drapes surround the dining tables. As the tiebacks are loosened, celebs are given time off from fantasy seekers and paparazzi while they eat. In our world, privacy is a thing of the past. Admirers of celebs want to own their heartthrobs.

After getting the tapes from Luke, we caught another black cab to the Grand. The reservations were confirmed and upon arrival we checked for messages with the concierge while our luggage was taken to our rooms. We both gave him a nice tip. It's always a good idea to tip mightily when you check-in to a hotel. Great service is ensured afterwards. I walked down the hallway in search of coffee. An old English man was sitting at the bar while he discussed horse races with the bartender. I waved at Mandy to follow me to the sitting area; a scrumptious afternoon tea was being served. We sneaked up on a colleague indulging on a crusty scone and we pulled our chairs to his table. A couple of our acquaintances strode by and the subject quickly turned to the war in Afghanistan. Reporters were embedded with the troops for the very first time. I would have loved to have been one of the first ones to experience the new

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setup. It was doubtful that my station would let me go. My show is popular, and my ratings are high. One of our competitors alternated their reporters; I would have been willing to share my spot to report from abroad during wartime. It was getting late. I smoked one more cigarette and finished my coffee.

“I’m going up, Mandy,” I said. I stood up, grabbed my bag and started toward the lift.

“Two nice suites have been reserved for us,” Mandy called out. I nodded with pleasure. “I’m here often enough,” she conceded.

I walked in the room decorated with mahogany furniture; the familiar white eiderdown lay invitingly on the bed. I threw my bag on the chair and strode into the bathroom. I turned on the hot water and emptied a bottle filled with sweet smelling lavender salts into the tub. Undressed, I relaxed my exhausted body in the luxurious bath. For a long while I stayed in there, while I wondered about the playboy I was to interview tomorrow. It was bizarre, I thought, that Dylan Fletcher had asked for me.

In retrospect, I should have taken the first plane back to Washington.

Fate works in mysterious ways; tonight I was flattered and even a bit excited about the assignment. The water was getting cold. Clean and pampered, I stepped out and enveloped myself in the thick white robe and comfy mules provided. The beds at the Grand Hotel are the most inviting in the world. I piled up all the fluffy pillows behind my back, flipped on the KBC on the TV screen, and turned off my thinking process while I sank deeply on the down coverlet. I had another full day to prepare for the interview and would report live after the musical. Later,

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I'd attend the public relation affair if Dylan Fletcher chose to extend a personal invitation. "That's regulation ninety-nine percent of the time," Mandy assured me.

Why not? I might as well enjoy London royally, I thought. Even if I had to work some extra hours, it might turn out to be great fun.

* * *

Mandy and I were to meet for lunch the following day - fish and chips of course, near Piccadilly Circus in Leicester Square. The English traditional fare was a favorite of mine in London, particularly the whiskey bread pudding. One of my preferred pubs next to the theater district baked one to die for.

As I arrived and faced the terrace of the hotel, the crowd was overwhelming. A harem must have been brought to London by a wealthy sheik. Many tables were occupied with elegantly clad women, dark hair, dark eyes; some were veiled but most just wore a loosely tied scarf on their heads. All women appeared to be enjoying each other's company. The age difference between them was minimal. Perhaps all were wives and concubines of wealthy Middle Eastern rulers.

I was absorbed by the immensity of the sight facing me.

After all the years that I've spent covering the news, I'm still mesmerized by polygamy. Every time I confront such a sight, I'm confounded. So many questions, so very few answers. How educated and well-bred women still covered their hair and sometimes their entire face as a purported sign of religious fervor is thought provoking at the very least for a Western born woman. Why is it so difficult for me to get it, I marveled? After all, Christian women in some parts of the world still covered their heads with a black mantilla upon

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entering a church and many walked around, dressed in black, their heads covered with black scarves. The Star of David or the Holy Cross hung on gold chains on many Western necks; all these trinkets, after all, were signs of religiosity. Then why focus on the Muslim women solely? I reflected on the sight at hand for a while; it astounded me. Perhaps, it was the fact that many of these women, cultured and probably well educated, were controlled physically, emotionally and by tradition in ways that Western women couldn't even fathom. Although I'd never corresponded from that part of the world, I knew their liberty as women in a male oriented society was tightly controlled -- not solely in their land, but in most places they were taken to. The right to drive, the right to vote, privileges that Western women took for granted, still eluded most of them. Such was reality. I could not comprehend how women who had attended foreign universities, some even had worked or interned in demanding careers in western lands, could return to their native countries and still behave subserviently to the male population in their personal lives. I presume that the influences of one's formative years are inescapable, and people have the tendency to return to their roots.

Little did I know as I observed these women with subconscious scorn, that similar women in a far away land would show me unbridled kindness in years to come; thereby turning my initial impression on its head.

I stood silently, inside the railing of the terrace, lost in my thoughts when suddenly I perceived the stunning blond waving amongst all the dark-haired beauties.

Oh well, faith and religion would always be at the forefront of debate.

Politics comes in a close second. The 2000 elections in the United States of America divided the nation on social, political and religious issues; neither side could comprehend the ideals of the other. Conservatism versus liberalism. We were stuck on each side of the barrier, unwilling to give up a millimeter; some even wished for the present administration to fail, as if we lived in two different lands! Who would suffer from these erroneous statements? The people.

The role of a reporter is to bring questions to light, to dig out as much information on both sides of the issue and let the citizens of the world decide. Sometimes, it was a hard standard to abide by.

I smiled and waived back at Mandy. I walked amongst the many tourists seated enjoying the livelihood of this popular district. One couple looked at me intently. I passed by and avoided the hand offered to me.

“We thoroughly enjoy your nightly show, Ms. La Reine,” the woman spoke emphatically with her hand extended in my path. It represented an affront to my personal space.

“We watch your commentary religiously,” her husband reiterated.

“Thank you,” I replied simply.

The woman seemed intent to pursue her rant of appraisal, but I briskly continued to walk toward Mandy and came to sit down across from my friend. I threw my bag on the chair next to me. I’m accustomed to being recognized in the United States but I was taken aback here in London. I might have lost a couple of viewers. Regardless, I never understood the concept of being captivated by people I don’t know. I have enough issues with intimacy amongst friends and loved ones, let alone

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strangers on the street. Additionally, I envisioned the woman's extended hand as a petri dish of germs! During political campaigns I've always been astounded at people who force candidates to hold and kiss their children-- the handshake alone was repulsive to me. I remember, for God's sake, while still a young reporter the great difficulty I experienced when we exchanged microphones with other journalists. These insane patterns of behavior were offensive. One could say I am a germaphobe.

Better not let too many people share my personal space, I'd whispered to myself. Naturally, I wouldn't and couldn't share any of this philosophy with my peers; that would be politically incorrect.

"Have you eaten, Paige?" the variety reporter demanded.

"No. I'm famished. Let's forget about fish and chips and eat here."

I asked for a flute of Veuve Clicquot that was on the wine list and I perused the food menu. We both ordered stuffed fillets of sole poached in a creamy champagne sauce. It was always great fun to be with Mandy and today our conversation covered all newsworthy events abroad. An hour later, fulfilled and content, we were ready to spend money.

"We need to stop shopping to reinforce the British pound," I giggled hysterically. After lunch, we walked all the way to Strand Street by the theater district and stopped in many high-end boutiques on the way. London was hip.

"We've done some damage to our pocketbooks," Mandy observed as we held large bags of new clothes and jewelry in both hands.

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“We deserve it,” I replied, imitating the television situational comedy star that had made the phrase popular. “Let’s see what’s playing at the theater, other than Dylan Fletcher’s musical” I replied. I’ll attend his dress rehearsal tomorrow morning.

Les Miserables was still packing the theater and *The Lion King* had a long line of spectators waiting to purchase tickets. Mandy really had it made. She was editor in chief for a variety magazine. Agents, producers and financial backers of shows sent her choice tickets to keep the critics on their good side. Perhaps being superficial worked well for the life that she led, quite different from the daily routine of covering the political world.

“I love London, and I’m fond of English men,” Mandy said out of the blue. “They’re sensitive, witty and quite liberal. Very much like their American counterparts, they wear their heart on their sleeves!”

Fifteen years older than I, Mandy is very hip, edgy and a barrel of fun. Because of her work as a variety columnist and editor in chief of a major publication, she always has the scoop on the latest gossip. We met in London years ago when she was covering the London scene for our station. I adored her company from the very first time I met her.

Over all the years that we have known each other, a few subjects still remain taboo; one being Mandy’s family. She was born in the Deep South, west of New Orleans, but apparently lived part of her childhood in the Midwest. Evasive about anything that touched on her formative years, I learned long ago that Mandy’s past was off limits. I recall being deeply troubled by the pain in my friend’s face when she divulged that she was the mother of an eighteen-year-old boy. She confided that she

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was barred from seeing him by the courts. Immediately, I'd pressed her about a few extra details but none were forthcoming. Mandy would not go any further. I relented. Several years later, the subject had resurfaced; the answer had been the same.

"It's in the past, Paige; I can't change it even if I wished to," she sighed. "So why lose precious minutes in the beautiful world we're living in!" She'd finished with her usual upbeat demeanor.

Mandy was most promiscuous, even for 21st century standards. Whether this mysterious son was the product of a failed marriage or one of her promiscuous liaisons, she was not repentant for having left her own flesh and blood behind.

"Children are not my thing," she stated flatly and often.

I understood her fully. I loved my job. What kind of a mother would I be with the type of schedule I kept? Not that nannies lacked compassion, but in my mind, I didn't see the purpose of having children while spending the greater part of my daily life at work. Quitting my job was definitely not in the cards. Quality time, as I've often heard my colleagues praise, was in my opinion highly overrated if at least one of the parents was not intent on staying home. Well, maybe that was just my old-fashioned side.

All in all, the relationship between Mandy and I worked well. The core of our personalities was very much alike, but we went about our lives in a most different way. And that was OK as well.

Superficiality worked well for the life that she led.

We finally reached the theatre district. A new performance of *Les Miserables* came highly recommended; nothing beats a

London or New York audience. Everyone gets into the act and many theatergoers convene in the pubs following a performance to talk their hearts out about the ‘presence’ of the actors, the performances, the mood, the rhythm of the play; not unlike the Fouquets in Paris during the Opera and theatre season.

After the show we stopped at a popular pub.

“I really love it here, Mandy. I should purchase a loft in this awesome capital. Everything about London, I love! So now, my dear, tell me the dark secrets of the elusive Dylan Fletcher?” I solicited.

“Good La Reine, “Mandy laughed. “I was taught long ago in broadcasting school to surprise the interviewee to get candid answers. Let me give you a few leads, before I attend to my own affairs.”

I looked admiringly at the senior tabloid bureau chief. She winked and got closer to me, away from curious ears. She motioned for me to do the same.

“I understand, that he never gives interviews,” Mandy started, searching for her yellow pad in her large cognac Hermes bag, “and, he does not allow any pictures. He lets the artists do that job. He writes and when he’s through with the script it is given to the agents and promoters. He’s an eccentric recluse, I must say. The bizarre thing is that he specifically asked for you. Have Bernie come up with you. Maybe he’ll grant you a few pictures as well. Pushy is the name of the game in this line of work, Paige. The only thing he can say is no. Then, abide to his wishes.” Mandy had been in this line of work since graduating from Columbia with a broadcasting major over twenty years ago. She knew her business and I trusted her.

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“Well, anyway, he asked the station for your services, so keep him on a tight leash and ask him questions on his private life-- namely lovers, places where he lives and plays.” Mandy saw the smirk on my face.

“For me, damn you, I should have gotten that interview, Paige, you know that, don’t you?” The fuming blond exclaimed.

I doubled over, but did not answer.

Suddenly Mandy’s gaze focused on a tall blond fellow who strode toward us staring at Mandy as if he owned her. The usual smile on the pretty blonde’s face disappeared, immediately replaced by a grave glare directed at the man. Curious, I stared at her. Before I could inquire about the approaching figure, Mandy cut me off and stood up.

“Pardon me, Paige. I need to attend to this good for nothing before he destroys everything I have ever worked for! I’ll see you tonight.” She grabbed her bag and before I could pursue the remark, Mandy was gone. I watched her storm toward the man who by now was smiling at her.

Flabbergasted by this turn of events, I focused intently on Mandy who anxiously passed by the mysterious man, without so much as a nod. She apprehensively nodded him to the President’s club nearby. Within minutes both were gone.

Left alone at the terrace, I finished my warm beer. I’d have to ask Mandy about the peculiar interlude that just unfolded before my eyes.

I picked up the London Times left on the table next to us and decided to indulge. I asked the waiter for the whiskey bread pudding desert.

Chapter 14

Now in Paris, I awaited my assignment. I would have to fly to Frankfurt, and then on to wherever Jeremy Talkan, my new boss, would tell me to report from. Excitement raced through my veins. Finally, my goals were attained. Granted, it had taken a much different route; nevertheless, it was exhilarating.

In order to fulfill my professional potential, I had been obliged to change stations. Why my station had pulled me off training was beyond my comprehension. I was one of their strongest candidates. I'd followed all orders on base diligently and the commander appeared to be pleased with our group and me especially. Twenty- three days into the one- month training, I had been recalled to the station. I questioned, and refused to believe the reason behind my dismissal. Supposedly something had been reported, my French background had been invoked. Chris, our chief editor, had e-mailed that my show was falling apart. Fat chance! Further explanations had been blurred - the story changed constantly. The return back to DC had been embarrassing. I swallowed my pride until a better opportunity came my way. I did not have to wait long.

I quit and I signed on with a rival station. It saddened me. WCLA had been my first job as a young journalist, right out of grad school. I had interned with them in New York while still in school. Right after my stint in England as a Rhodes Scholar, Cormack, the station chief, had hired me in the Washington office.

Feeling like an ambitious whore, I placed thoughts of my old station out of my mind. After all, that's what I wanted to do now, report from a war zone. I was ready and deserved it.

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In a sick way, I was attracted to conflict. While reporting on horrific situations in myriad sordid places, I felt the most satisfaction when I flashed light on issues that would otherwise have slipped under the rug. Helping to sort out the lives of the downtrodden, the ones who could not help themselves without my reports had always attracted me - period. Early on in my career I became the laser of good, the one who enlightened the rest of the innocent world. I tried to give facts to policy makers so as to enable them to do what was right for humanity. That was journalism in my eyes - the power of the free press in the nutshell. If my superiors would not let me fulfill my potential and achieve my saintly goals, too bad. I was left with no other alternative.

For God's sake, I devoted my entire life to my career. In reality, I was well aware that journalism had been a wonderful emotional blanket. The strength of a person is to know thyself, and my career had helped me do that. On the other hand, long-term romantic attachment frightened the hell out of me. I was afraid of commitment, and the fear of rejection or pain was insurmountable. At work I could compartmentalize, and that was good enough.

WBIC paid off my remaining contract and hired me as a foreign correspondent. Training had been a hellish experience, but I made it through with flying colors and now I awaited the deployment of troops and reporters.

While in Frankfurt I developed a nice rapport with most of the military commanders and the soldiers I would bunk with. I remembered Aaron's comments. Friendly rapport and admiration for these guys was a must. That was easy. To keep an objective view of the conflict, that was difficult. I observed proud young men and women and fearless military commanders, willing to lose their lives for the betterment of

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others. This alone could sway the objectivity of the most seasoned journalist. But, as I incessantly reminded myself, our business needed to sort out the truth. It was my mantra and I would not let go of it.

Like a foot soldier, I attended all meetings and sessions. Everything that was required of the soldiers was required of me - except to fire a gun. Finally, we were called. I was ready and extremely willing.

Chapter 15

AFGHANISTAN

Three months later near Kabul.

Horrific human destruction unfurled around the narrow streets of this isolated village, north of Kabul, where we had been filming. I shouted to everyone to suspend taping and to flee the scene. The now desolate street, scattered with dead bodies, stunk of charred flesh. *The calm before the storm*, I thought. I looked in all directions to protect my back – and my front, and called the truck that was to return us to our base.

No connection.

I tried again. My crew and I were to meet the sergeant who had taken us here in the wee hours of the morning and who probably by now was ready to shoot us. Perhaps he wanted to teach us a lesson. I kept on calling, but the line was dead. Orders had been violated, a senseless action on our part, and we were now trapped in a double-crossing area where everyone we met brandished a gun or worse.

These small towns were home to the tribal dissenters. Nestled in a large chain of treacherous high peaks and caves, these villages were too remote to be reigned in by either Pakistani forces or the Afghan government. We had been warned to stay in a specific area where the armored vehicle would come back for us in less than two hours. Instead, we persisted, and rambled into a hornet's nest. Filming the murderous and gory sights we had been privy to was now futile. We had seen an exchange of fire between foreign troops and what appeared to be tribal warriors, and furthermore, a

bombastic explosion had razed two buildings to the ground. I had a pretty good idea of what occurred. Better write the story now and send it out before we got shot down or worst, taken as hostages. I looked at Harry, my cameraman. His face was ashen. *You are a journalist, I kept telling myself. Stay cool. It will work ... trust ... it will work.*

A broken-down Humvee started down our path. I tried to focus on the person behind the wheel, waving my press passes. It appeared that no one was driving it, and yet it kept an even pace.

“Fuck, they’re nuts. Harry, what’s going on? That’s off... it’s coming right at us. Harry, Harry, they’re coming at us.” I screamed to my cameraman, pushing him down to the ground.

The silent Humvee came to a halt in front of us. Harry was still on the ground.

“Get up,” someone shouted. As the side doors of the vehicle opened, masked men with M 16s surged out of the vehicle, pointing their guns right in our faces.

I felt the point of a gun on the small of my back.

“Get in,” I heard an American voice shout. “Hurry, we don’t have all day!” I was shoved hurriedly in the back of a vehicle while someone placed a sticky band over my mouth. From my peripheral vision I focused on Harry’s camera. It was snatched from the photographer and smashed forcefully on an iron bar where two dead goats dangled bloody and riddled with bullets. A man who squatted close to the ground in dark grey baggy pants and a long dirty tunic torn on its side shouted at Harry to get to his feet and run for the bed of the vehicle. As the cameraman prepared to follow orders, a bullet hit him from behind. It was all over, I saw my trusted friend fall on the

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pavement mortally wounded, blood squirting out of his mouth. The bullet had come from behind, perhaps from the remnants of the insurgents who had attacked American and British troops two hours earlier - I could not tell. A sudden urgency filled the air as the men who held me, now tossed me on the floor of the vehicle. Within seconds, a reeking potato bag was thrown over my face. I felt a scratchy material touch my wrists, and the skin over my hands and arms burned. Cruelly, someone rolled me over on my stomach. It was all over.

“Harry,” I shouted one last time.

The cacophony of sound, the shooting rifles, and the roaring sound of the motorcade, all made me tremble. My world was void. Extreme pain on the back of my skull took my breath away. Sentences formed in my mind but I was unable to articulate any words, the sounds became distant... I lost the little cognizance I had possessed seconds earlier as I either fell or was pushed into the bed of a roaring vehicle- all was lost.

I don't know how long I lay unconscious, but I woke with a blinding, torturous headache, my hands unable to move in any direction. God, they had tied me up, I was unable to see. I felt the hard edges of the truck's flatbed driving hard into my stomach and ribs. Silence, otherwise was all around. No familiar voices-only the constant hum of the truck that must have traveled on an uneven surface. The acrid smell of the desert sand was burning the inside wall of my throat and nasal passages, making it difficult to breathe. The truck stopped. Fear set in. I prayed that Americans were still the culprits in my abduction; I must have been confused with someone else. No, in retrospect, Harry's camera had been smashed to the ground and destroyed, and my film and notes were torn from my hands as they marched me to the vehicle. All had been confiscated at best. I could not recall anything, the events occurred so damn

quickly. Well, perhaps once they realized that an error was committed, I would be returned to my convoy. I did have dark hair. No, I reasoned, a helmet covered my head at the time of the abduction. Oh, God, what a murderous mess. I had never been abducted before while reporting out of a war zone. The vehicle slowed down and came to a halt. Silence reigned. Within seconds, I heard the slamming of a metal door bang shut, and then, thumping sounds, probably of men landing on the hard rocks. I heard the clicking sound of a latch sliding open, and then someone was lowering the flap in the back of the vehicle. Gloved hands pulled my legs backwards. I screamed but could not emit any sound. The heavy bandage covering my mouth was pulled tight around my head. Someone then pulled me out of the rolling machine and grabbed me as if they were lifting a sack of grain to be stacked in a silo on some Midwestern farm.

Was that my fate? Fear rattled my limbs; I was blinded. Pure madness turned me into a frenzied beast. I gesticulated inside the duffel bag that was now my home. After all the hard work trying to make it to this horrific part of the world, I was going to die in this forsaken place. And worst of all, I could not tell the story. Damn, I was there simply to enlighten the public and to free the innate curiosity of a generation of historians. The damn bastards would realize soon enough who I was.

The person who carried me stopped suddenly. I struggled to slide down to the ground, but just as my feet touched the hard surface, I was quickly pulled forcefully upward and reminded to keep quiet by being rolled against someone's chest. Shortly thereafter, I regained my balance on my captor's shoulders and stayed there quietly. It was now hard to breathe. At one point I heard the thunderous sound of bombs detonating in the distance, provoking large boulders to tumble down ravines, which in turn

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hurled everything in their path. It was not too distant, as I sensed the earth gyrating below with each blasting sound. The moving ground reminded me of my college years spent in California during the numerous earthquakes I experienced. Now, like before, the roaring came first, followed closely by the moving of the earth. Dear God, my days were counted.

What in God's name could I do now?

"Here, relax, ma'am." I heard a man with a Southern accent address me. "You will have a visitor shortly," the voice continued. "Please ma'am, if you do not scream and stay very quiet once we arrive at our destination, we will remove your bandage. You will be safe if you follow orders."

Unable to retort, I gleaned. It appeared that I was in the presence of Americans. If the soldiers were Americans, they would surely realize their grave error. At least that was positive. I de-stressed by taking deep and long calculated breaths the best that I could. My southern savior had loosened the noose around my head and my legs. I could walk-somewhat. Thank God, my Zen instructor had taught me some fabulous mental tools - I could use to zone out. Meditation took motivation and diligence, but it had been the answer to my obsessive-compulsive disease. I learned to tune out when I felt the syndrome creep up. Imagery and tuning out the clutter in my mind unraveled some of my most extreme fears and absurd rituals. Although there was nothing absurd about the predicament I was in right now, the relaxation worked nonetheless.

Someone untied my feet and unbound my hands. I was guided on uneven ground up a steep hill at first, and then my shins told me we were descending.

The musky, chalk-like scent of the man directing me appealed to my journalistic curiosity. Why would they want me? Perhaps I had been selected stealthily to cover a special mission in a desolate place. But my film? Well, perhaps they had confiscated the notes for safekeeping. Oh God, I was dreaming. Harry was dead. I would be next. I followed in extreme panic; fright stormed my very foundation. I stumbled deeper and deeper in what I now perceive to be a cave. Noises above my head were getting more distant with each step down the rugged path.

Someone tapped me on my shoulders. I felt a hand pulling on whatever was covering me, my blindfold was removed and the sticky tape around my mouth was loosened. Goggled men surrounded me. One of my captors placed his fingers over the place where his mouth was and another drew a spatial horizontal line across his throat. The gesture was universal. I kept silent. The men wore turbans and dark trousers. They pushed me forward. Now that my field of vision had returned, I could walk without tripping. They would have shot me long ago if their intention was to do away with me.

A rope was placed around my waist while the men cornered me on all sides. I followed obediently. Reason returned.

These men, although dressed as rebels, were Americans. I could not have been unconscious that long in the truck for a kidnapping to occur. In town they had spoken English to me with a southern accent. Our soldiers were not murderers, but my view had been obscured, and it was hard to know who our enemies were and who our friends were. My friend took a bullet that terminated his life. All happened swiftly, in a split second. I could not have reported the accident with confidence. The truth was that I did not know which side had taken my cameraman's life. Unfortunately traumatic events and horrific acts that shock

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the rightful mind happen in every war; volunteer army or not, the spirit can only sustain so much ghastly suffering. An unnatural response might have taken place, I did not know, but I was not God and I could not choose and edit a story. I was in this place to report the news. I was not the one who should decide what to publish. That was the editor's job in New York and no one was going to censor me.

Those were my thoughts then. I have strong doubts about my righteousness now.

Historians always quoted politicians when the latter spoke on the subject of war; they referred to it as the inevitable undertaking to achieve a lasting peace for posterity, the war to end all wars. What garbage, what misery. There had been endless conflicts throughout the twentieth century. War was the curse of humanity. I could not understand why nations could not resolve their differences through negotiations. War was so primal, yet I could not see an end in sight. I presume it fed my profession and countless others. I glanced at the man guarding me; he suddenly pointed his gun to a corner of the cave and gestured to the others to follow his lead. I leaned on the rugged rock and slid down, dejected. Something would break for sure. All the men disappeared except one. He stood opposite me with his gun on his hips. These fellows, in retrospect, were not your usual eighteen-year-old servicemen that I had reported on these past few weeks. Their Spartan-like physical stature was large, their demeanor controlled.

What seemed like hours passed. The man guarding me was inexpressive. I was freezing. He must have seen me shaking because he pulled a couple of blankets from his knapsack and brought them over to me. Just as quickly, he returned to his side of the cave. Would they leave me here to die in spite of the dark green blankets I had been given? Escape now was not an option.

Paige LaReine, a political commentator, gets more than she bargains for while touring the front lines of Afghanistan. Drawn into a clandestine mission with a mysterious commander, Paige must choose between her career and a life of dangerous passion.

The Lyricist

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