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ERNIE AND I HAD enough time on the ground in Afghanistan to get a meal and a luke-warm shower before we jumped on a C-47 for the flight to Turgay. Our two Navy Seals grabbed a sandwich and checked emails from their families. They didn't say much. But you always knew they were right there.

The C-47 is the military equivalent of the DC-3, one of the first popular civilian airliners when civil aviation began to be popular in the late 40's and 50's. This one was used by a clandestine airline named Air America, run by the CIA during the Vietnam conflict. An old bird, not too big, but more comfortable than the C-130.

We flew due north out of Kabul, 360 degrees on the compass, diplomatically skirting the western border of Pakistan, then north into Tajikistan, and on into Krgyzstan. The old airplane had long-range fuel tanks specially installed for long hauls such as this, and it's two radial piston engines were breathing hard to keep us at twelve thousand feet altitude. The droning of the propellers lulled me to sleep for a few minutes, maybe an hour, maybe longer, as we crossed the most desolate thousand miles on the face of the planet.

Snow-capped mountains and broad valleys with no sign of humanity. No roads. No villages. No farms. No signs of life. No diplomatic relationship with the United States. So, for us, no hope of getting home if the old bird runs out of breath.

I was dozing off again when the loudspeaker overhead crackled. One of the pilots announced that, if we cared to look out the windows on the right side, we could see Lake Balgash, straddling the border between Krgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The lake was where the pilot promised, a glittering aqua shade of blue in the shape of a kidney. Although we couldn't see it due to the haze and distance, the Caspian Sea was hundreds of miles to the west as we entered Kazakhstani airspace.

Kazakhstan's sheer size is difficult to comprehend. Twice the size of Alaska, and twice the size of the four other Central Asian states combined. Russia is at its western border, and China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region is to the east.

Our pilots changed course to 320 degrees, heading northwest. Turgay was a small town and didn't have an airport so we were heading toward Arkalyk, 185 miles from our present position.

God only knows what we may find there.

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UNMARKED AIRCRAFT SUCH AS ours attract attention, especially in such a remote and inhospitable dirt bucket as Arkalyk. So I wasn't surprised when an old Soviet Army jeep, probably left over from the glory days of the USSR's space program in this part of the world, clattered to a halt under the right wing tip as our C-47 rolled to a stop in front of a row of empty aircraft hangars.

After the propellers spun to a stop we stepped out the door and onto the ground. At once we were face to face with two old sun-reddened and bearded Russians, the occupants of the jeep. Both dressed in tattered and outdated Soviet Army uniforms, showing a tight fit at the waist and heavy with campaign ribbons. They stood still and tall, right hands locked above their eyes in stout salutes and their left hands steadying military-issue rifles. And, upon the horsey shouted command of the taller of the two, both dropped their salutes, and in unison raised their rifles to their chests with both hands, which I presumed was a show of respect rather than a reason to fear for our safety. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they lowered their rifles, turned and marched more or less in unison back to their old jeep and sped away in front of a small cloud of dust.

"Guess that's their version of a military welcoming parade," Ernie said.

I had forgotten that Ernie and I were dressed in military fatigues as if we were real soldiers.

Arkalyk is home to the state administrative headquarters for the Turgay Region, in north central Kazakhstan, bordering on the Steppes, where Russian cosmonauts parachuted back to earth during the early days of the Soviet Union's space program. After the space program went belly-up and the aluminum mines were shuttered due to lack of water for the refining process, many of the locals were relocated by the state from smaller towns like Turgay to larger places like Arkalyk to facilitate humanitarian services. The area was poor, generally illiterate, and not well connected to the outside world, which made it ideal for someone looking for a place to hide. Someone like Ahmed Munuza. Possibly that's why he came to Turgay when things got hot in Damascus with Hyacinth and the Muslim Brotherhood. But where he went when he left Turgay is the first question to answer.

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WE HIRED A CAR and set out on the drive to Turgay, estimated to take between eight and twelve hours if everything goes well. Much longer if the trip does not go well.

It had been a long flight and Ernie and I were out cold within minutes. Our two Seals were wide awake. A few times I awoke and heard the Seals speaking with the driver in Russian. When I heard a few laughs I figured they were telling each other jokes and went back to sleep.

I had dreams. Bad dreams. Dreams I hadn't had for a long time. Dreams of Mary and the shooting. Dreams of Maria and John on the doomed flight to Washington Dulles Airport. Dreams of my hotel room on fire during the trial in Washington. In each dream someone was talking to me, to me by my name, and

the voice was familiar. I don't recall what the voice was saying other than my name. "Jack," it said. "Jack." But the other words faded away. Faded away, like a conversation across a room, like when lips move but words fail. Then I was alone in the dream. Then the dream was gone.

The change in engine sounds woke me as we approached what I figured must be Turgay. Our CIA briefing said that Turgay was nothing more than a dozen streets, all dirt, maybe twenty-five or so clap-board houses previously home to miners, now abandoned, no businesses other than a barber shop, a small market, a state sponsored medical clinic and a coffee shop.

One of the Seals said something in Russian and the driver slowed to a crawl and killed the headlights. The sun had just begun to rise and try to penetrate the nasty brown haze that obscured the sky. The Seals had their weapons out and enabled. The driver took us slowly up and down all the streets of this miserable place. The CIA briefing had been generous. The deserted houses we saw were barely standing, collapsed porches and stairs, shattered doors hanging off broken hinges, window glass broken from the frames, holes that seemed to have been blasted in the exterior walls, nothing green growing, no light inside. It seemed as if the residents simply walked away, left the small houses to fend for themselves against the tortuous elements and cruel winters.

No one was on the streets, no cars or trucks moving, no signs of life. At least the CIA was correct on that.