

## Chapter V

"So wha'd you do in Baghdad?"

Randall had a habit of smiling as he asked questions. Not that this alone was a damning characteristic, but the way he smiled seemed loaded. Judgmental. As if you were supposed to explain yourself and every idiosyncratic thing that ever happened in your life. It was a big toothy grin that made his eyes disappear. Free of self-awareness. This was not the only reason Lester had vowed never to patron Randall's indie video rental store but it was the first one he thought of every time he had to remind himself when he walked by it from the deli.

As they huddled over Randall's MacBook, behind the counter of "The Cultured Lens", deciphering the millions and millions of code bytes pouring on the screen from the server location of <http://www.halt-edi-alchez.ml/>, Lester remained silent. He had mentioned only once to Randall his time in the military and Randall had responded with rolled eyes and a dismissive crinkle of his mouth. "That bullshit". Lester wanted to cup his neck in his hands, stare him in his bloodshot eyes and pull his face into the cash register below. But he knew this was the only movie store within a few hours driving distance that had the entire Criteria Collection of Sam Peckinpah's work on VHS. So he restrained himself. That time. Three meetings before the incident with the pizza, when he did not.

"Hey. Hey Lester."

"What"

"Whadja do in Baghdad."

"All sorts of things, Randall, I'd rather not talk-"

"Did you shoot anyone?"

The humming of the central heating became apparent, as if it had kicked on all of a sudden, although Lester wasn't sure. He glanced up at the rows of DVD's holding a century's worth of men making sense of the world. Griffith, Eisenstein, Fellini, and Ford. The colors of each package blending as the rows disappeared towards the front of the store. A dotted palette of store racks. It used to feel invigorating to stand in the middle of a video rental store. Now it felt like a graveyard of outdated worldviews.

"No, I worked in a lab there."

"Oh shit a lab? Like, a secret weapon lab?"

"Are you going to be done soon?"

Randall laughed and tuna on sourdough came out with his breath. He had a pencil thin goatee and a bowl-style hair cut that almost made him look like a Lord from the Lancaster dynasty. Lester almost laughed remembering they were supposedly inbred. Up until Randall came, the video store was Lester's oasis in a desert of Cineplex's and supermalls. The old man who ran the place knew how to treat customers. Sitting at the desk, hands folded. A turkey sandwich from the deli across the street, and the Star Ledger sports section neatly tucked on the right side while WNEW played Sinatra songs. But when his knees couldn't take the daily rise and grind, Randall- somehow, yet naturally- emerged from the muck of local resumes to take his place. All the good moves on from a small town or retreats back to the land, Lester thought every time he saw Randall picking his nose while lost in a Tarantino movie. Several times he contemplated stealing a DVD over the counter just to slap it on the desk a week later yelling "See what happens when you don't do your job?!"

Instead he decided to flip the odd DVD case over. A silent, noble protest.

"I told you, you can't just plug a site like this into your browser. That's like walking through the front door of a house you wanna rob."

"I'm not trying to rob anybody."

"I know you're not trying to rob anybody but you're gonna look like you're trying to rob them."

His goofy smile returned, "Thought you were a secret military guy, man!"

Lester could feel in him rage beyond approach when someone like Randall expressed the slightest bit of disappointment in him.

Suddenly the code stopped on Randall's screen. The cursor flashed and the server drive clicked with the sounds of learning. Before the two of them had time to react, everything went black, save for a tiny blinking rectangle. The entire process had the feel of launching into space, escaping the stratosphere.

Randall held his hand up to the screen like a spear. "The back door", he said.

Lester looked at the time on the clock: 4:32.

"Wait four minutes."

"You sure?"

"Yes I'm sure, Randall."

"Hey I don't need this as much as you do. And I'm happy to throw your dumpy ass out again after all that shit last year so watch your tone."

The pizza was not the target of his rage that day. When Randall's laugh sounded even colder than usual. When two other customers were behind Lester, trading sighs to each other in an unknown but fairly clear language. When the good-looking young woman by the Harry Potter section stared with the back of her head. But Lester did not care how many of them wanted him to move on, he would not let go of his demands.

"How have you never heard of 'The Best Years of Our Lives'?"

"Look man, we don't have it!"

"You do have it. I refuse to believe the owner of this rental store. The store I rented 'The Steel Helmet' from, mind you, I refuse to believe that owner would have the cinematic sense to have that movie and not The Best Years of Our Lives. Go check, young man, I don't need this today. Go do your job."

"I checked!"

"Check again!"

"I see we have 'Grumpy Old Men' will that do?"

And then the pizza box got in the way of Lester's furious uppercut.

Normally, pizza flipping into the air and landing on Randall and several customers would only be an embarrassment leading to Lester's hastily escaping the business and speeding his Volvo out of the parking lots as soon as possible, but this particular pizza had just come out of the oven at Nicola's, next door. Hot grease had scalded Randall's forearm, and one slice flew up and managed to land on one of the sighing customer's face. The lawsuit, filed against the video store for having the pizza box open on the front desk to begin with, was currently pending. Lester hadn't walked into the store since.

"So you just did experiments in Baghdad?"

"I spoke there, that's all."

"You spoke about, what, science?"

"About my work."

"Which was..."

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

"I read you guys gave everyone cancer in Fallujah. That's pretty fucked up but thank you for your service and all that, of course."

"You know, Randall, I could report you for harassing me like this."

"Harassing you, I'm not harassing you; you're asking me for a favor."

"My military career doesn't enter into the favor."

"Military career, okay Lab Sergeant."

"Right there, I'm reporting that."

Randall's laugh now took on a shock therapy-like cackle. Lester had to walk back to the other side of the counter. He felt like he just ran a sprint.

"Reporting me for what, hombre?"

"It is unconstitutional to degradate or abuse military personnel."

"That's such bullshit-"

"It is unconstitutional to abuse military personnel as it obstructs them from their duties-"

"What fucking duties are you doing right now, man-"

"This, what we're doing? This is highly classified espionage. Ah, not laughing now, huh?"

Randall looked at the screen, his hands all of a sudden careful to avoid touching any part of his Acer.

"Hey man, I thought you were trying to buy drugs or something."

"No. Worse than that. I think there's a cell right here in town."

"A cell?"

"Come on, Randall" Lester pointed to the Action section, where tiny images of Schwarzenegger and Stallone squinted back, "You watch this crap all day in here, I know you can at least tell me what a cell is."

"I don't need eighty bucks this badly."

"Too late, Randall, you're in. And if you want to stay alive, I suggest you shut your mouth, listen" as he pointed his finger to his chest, "to your commanding officer, and pray he doesn't call his respective CO after this and disclose your violating Article Fifteen of the Seventeenth Amendment. We clear?"

Randall gave a subdued nod. Lester was elated. Pure joy as he staccato tapped the desk inserting his original position over Randall and the laptop.

"You mean popular election of Senators?"

"What?"

"That's the Seventeenth Amendment. Popular election of Senators. I heard that shit at Banville Community."

"You weren't paying attention."

"Nah, I'm pretty sure that's what that one is-"

"Look Randall, I'm perfectly happy to go to my contacts in the city. I was literally doing this for conveni-"His eyes came upon the time bar in Randall's laptop: 4:37.

"Shit! Shit! Type this." Lester fumbled the wrinkled notebook paper out of his wallet. He pulled it open and shoved it in front of Randall's eye line. Randall had "Flying Phantom" punched and entered immediately.

More code. Then a black screen. Then more code again. And then an icon, titled "Forum".

"Open that."

"I'm not sure we should."

"Just open it. It's fine, I assure you, you're working under my orders."

"Orders of the Seventeenth Amendment?"

Lester had enough of his insubordinate officer and clicked the icon himself. It grew giant and revealed a site sprawled with two things: Arabic words and naked women. Pale skinned and almost Nordic in features. They had frizzled hair and unshaven in ways that dated each image back to at least the 80's. One of them he recognized as a Playboy spread of Sharon Stone that used to hang on a technician's wall years ago at the base.

"Are you serious?" Randall's laugh was more cautious now. Up was down and down was up for his little world. "What's this, porn?"

Lester read the Arabic in each caption of each nude photo. "No. It's instructions."

Suddenly a message dinged from the site. Lester discerned it: Have you met with Brother Ibrim yet?

"Holy shit is he talking to you?"

"Do you have a translation converter?"

"A what?"

"The keys Randall, your keys are in English, do you have a conversion tool or-"

Then another ding. A message replying back.

Peace be upon you. I have not. I have been here in the school.

You are to deliver package to Brother Ibrim. He is waiting for you. Do not waste our time.

I am waiting for host to drive me.

You must get to Brother Ibrim before this Friday or he cannot help you. No one will help you.

"Okay this is where I'm out." Randall tapped on his mousepad and closed the browser.

"Goddammit, Randall!" Lester found a rack of New Arrivals behind him and shook it. DVD's rained down on them both. The sudden noise revealed how quiet everything had been before.

"Chill the fuck out!"

"You just sabotaged a major operation!"

"That's it I want you out. Out or I call the cops, I'm serious old man."

Lester tapped on Sarah's classroom door like he was a vacuum salesman. He always felt awkward out in the hallways in between classes. Although the last time he was out in the empty halls, the lights were off and he felt less clammy after reminding himself of that. Sarah was midway through a lesson on the Tariff policy of the Adams administration when she saw him through the glass. She waved and made her way over to him, but kept speaking as she did. It was a trait Lester always admired about his colleague: she never lost her focus on what she was supposed to do.

"Hey Les."

"Hi. I was just wondering if I could borrow one of your students for, to ask, to ask them something."

"Sure, who?"

"The exchange kid? Kasim?"

Sarah's smile stayed wide, though Lester could sense it was only a hollowed version of itself now. "Okay" she extended the word out, processing the request. "What do you want to ask him?"

"Sarah, it's not something I can disclose right now, I'm afraid."

"If it's something serious, I think then I'm exactly who you're supposed to be disclosing it to."

This was a trait Lester did not like about Sarah. She did not like to be undermined by anyone. Sarah was the employee leading the school's faculty in the walk-outs that happened a few years back. He remembered how she looked when she leaned her head into his classroom. "You're comin' right, Les?" with a bright inflection, ready to change the world. It never dawned on her she was running a yearlong campaign against attrition, not fighting a one-week battle. The union's collective bargaining agreement

wound up costing all of them 27 percent of their pension. After that, Sarah was seen individually stopping students in the hallways, asking them what "that stare was all about".

"Sarah, I don't have time for this."

"Good point. Neither do I."

His foot just caught her door as she was pulling it back in between them, "Okay okay, look, I think I found some proof of illicit activity, alright? I don't want it going around right now. It could cause a scare."

"Illicit activity."

"Website stuff."

"He's doing something illegal online?"

"Use your imagination, Sarah."

"Did you report it? I don't understand why the hell you want a one-on-one conversation with a student in the hallway if he's doing something illegal. Not quite sure I remember reading that in the guidelines."

"Sarah, you don't understand, this is going beyond municipal school regulations. I'm talking national security here."

"Well then I think your next visit should be with a member of the police. And in any event, he's not here. He's with Catherine. You did hear about the fight, right?"

"What fight?"

Sarah heaved a long sigh. "You know, Les, I'm getting real tired of how stupid we all are. That kid's probably getting deported because of what happened to him. And here you are trying to pin him as a-" She paused in the middle of the sentence and turned back to her class. "I'll be with you guys in just a second. Meantime, open your textbooks to the section on the Alien and Sedition Act. Write me a hundred words on how it applied to John Adams' retention of the popular vote. We're gonna change things up a bit today."

She turned back to him and with a more hushed tone, picked up where she left off "-a fucking terrorist. You're seriously letting the only brown kid for miles and miles get to your head."

"That's a lotta crap, Sarah. First of all-"

"Shh!"

"First of all, I have many diverse students in my classes and I treat each one of them the same!"

"Yeah I hear you do."

"The hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Whatever, I'm not doing this with you, Lester. He's in Catherine's office. Probably waiting for the cops to cuff him and do something awful to him. Why don't you go down there, you can let them know all about his illicit activity?"

Lester hung, suspended by whether he should defend his intentions, or embrace them. He decided to head down to the Principal's. As he backed from the doorway, the weight of what Sarah said dawned on him.

"Did you say a 'fight'?"

"Yeah. Four kids jumped him."

"Is he okay?"

"Oh he's fine. But he sent one of them to the nurse's with a broken nose." And then as she closed the door to turn her attention on her never-ending quest to save the world around her she added:

"Brad Byrd, I think."

**(end of excerpt)**