Chapter I

Arctic Sarcastic

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day

"Dash here. I found it, Zaid! Syringes... just like the intel said. You were right... The Inuit lied... Most of these are old... Like Nazi-lab old... sealed in wax. And there are Japanese markings too... I'm in the right place... And other syringes have new labels... VE... numbers... Someone's been here... I'm sending you the coordinates now... Something's moving... Wait... wait..."

The radio crackled.

A low growl cut through the static.

Then a roar... massive, guttural.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A scream began to form, cut off before it could finish.

Silence.

Not even the usual hiss of background noise. As if the man's radio had been crushed to dust.

Rachel Shepherd was watching the horizon, belting joyfully "Tequila Kiss" by Jay Elle at the top of her lungs, the wind stealing half the words.

Rachel loved that song. It was her anthem for the lonely places, her go-to track when the horizon stretched too far and silence pressed too hard. She always played it loud in her wired earbuds...

"...I'm leaning for the kiss
and it's just pure bliss,
I finally get to taste all the salt,
All the salt there on your lips,
From your tequila kiss... tequila kiss..."

Then the man's voice tore through her receiver, frenzied, electric... and suddenly gone.

She stood on the sled runners, barreling over the snow, channeling *Emma Peel,* the crime-fighting heroine of "The Avengers," if *Emma* ever traded her Lotus for fourteen furry engines and zero brakes.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She pulled on the reins.

The dogs slowed instantly, obedient, sensing the shift. Rachel brought the sled to a stop, yanked out her earbuds, pulling on the wire, and grabbed the radio mic.

“Hello? Are you okay? Where are you?”

Nothing.

Only the same vast emptiness she’d been riding through for hours, just her voice, her dogs, and the wind, until the man’s voice broke through, wild and distorted.

“Puppy in a basket!” Rachel blurted, her go-to expression of surprise. “What the hell was that? Sorry, Jay Elle. “Tequila Kiss” sing-along postponed.”

“Old Nazi lab... Syringes? Japanese markings?” she murmured.

Her first time in the Canadian Arctic had been full of awe. Now, it felt uncertain. Tense. Like something old and waiting had stirred beneath the snow.

High above, the sky stretched in a deep, endless navy, gearing up for sunrise. A faint silver-blue halo clung to the eastern horizon. Stars freckled the fading darkness, still sharp as glass.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Way to start the day!” She said out loud, looking up. “I was thinking lips, real ones. Kissing at last... maybe even love... Should’ve known, just salt... again... always salt.”

Rachel imagined a drone, way up there, would see a single thread scratched across the tundra, her sled slicing the snow.

Fourteen shapes in motion, black-and-white blurs kicking up glittering crystals as they raced. Now, at a standstill.

The terrain was a quiet expanse of treeless hills and wind-sculpted drifts, broken only by the sled surging toward the Angna Mountains to the sound of her singing. There was no sign of the man in any direction.

Rachel stood still behind the dogs, tall, composed. A body-worn camera secured to her chest. Another mounted on her helmet. Both recorded constantly, audio and video, logging every mile, every breath, just in case...

She’d edit out the “Tequila Kiss” karaoke session later. That part was just for her and the dogs.

But the man’s message... Not about to be erased.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A tranquilizer sidearm holstered at her hip. A sled driver by necessity. A soldier by past. A singer when alone, or under a loud shower. A nature documentarian by trade, on a very special assignment. And perhaps, today, a damsel coming to the rescue of a gallant in distress... A modern Valentine's Day tale.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Energy security station
February 13, Present-Day

Rachel had thought her original outfit, bulky, down-filled, expedition-grade, was up to the task.

Then Kate saw her and nearly fell over laughing.

"You're not riding a dogsled in that thing. Not unless you want the dogs to die laughing," Kate had said, practically in tears.

"I'm thinner than I've ever been. The fabric's not heavy. Just fluffy. It's technical gear. Rated for negative forty," Rachel replied.

"You didn't give me much time to prepare," she added.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I was in the Amazon rainforest when you and your Vastan Energy execs started blowing up my phone, begging for me to come up to the Canadian Arctic and shoot footage for their PR campaign."

"I ordered from Amazon... from *the* Amazon... Does that even count as a pun? Anyway, this was the only thing Prime could get to me in time."

"I apologize for the rush," Kate said. "Vastan Energy operates like most corporations: they sit on their hands for weeks, then demand everything yesterday. The higher the stakes, the dumber the deadline. That's the Vastan way. Just... don't end up resenting me for this trip, okay?"

She gave Rachel a once-over, smiling. "I'm sure your outfit is warm. That's not the issue. You look like the Michelin Man and the Doughboy dancing cheek to cheek."

Kate laughed and continued.

"Even if they were polite enough to look the other way, those poor dogs would still collapse trying to drag your overstuffed ass across the tundra. You'd catch every gust of wind in that get-up. You can't slow the dogs down, Rachel. Speed could save your life."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel turned to the full-length mirror. She blew out her cheeks, then tilted her head side to side, conceding with a smirk that Kate might be right about the outfit.

“Tell me again… what party did you go to where you saw the Michelin Man and the Doughboy dancing cheek to cheek?” Rachel asked.

Rachel shimmied a little in place, a mock-sensual salsa move, boots squeaking faintly on the office floor. She winked at Kate through the mirror.

Rachel continued:

“What happens in the igloo stays in the igloo?” Rachel added as she raised an eyebrow. “Alright then. What do you suggest?”

Kate handed Rachel something else, sleek, state-of-the-art Arctic gear. Insulated but tailored. Reinforced at stress points. Light, but nearly impervious. The thermal catsuit looked like it had been designed by James Bond and Q Branch while downing martinis mixed by Giorgio Armani: water-repellent, heat-sealed, and fitted just enough to hint at confidence without inviting frostbite.

Kate leaned against her desk, arms crossed, watching as Rachel peeled off her outer layers

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

down to her underwear, lacy, red. No longer the standard-issue Army fare she had seen Rachel wear in the past.

No longer hiding what the Army had left behind. Scars that ran like old roads. Tattoos that looked like they might still be speaking.

New tattoos surprised Kate. Intricate. Purposeful. They looked like stories waiting to be told. The new scars too...

"I see you've ditched the tactical granny gear," Kate said, raising an eyebrow.

"Tomorrow's Valentine's Day," Kate added. "Did you manage to book a date with one of the three eligible bachelors on Baffin Island? Spill."

Rachel didn't look up right away. She unzipped the Arctic suit Kate had given her, ran her fingers along the inside seams, sleek, warm, aerodynamic. Then she glanced over her shoulder with a half-smile.

"Kiss but don't tell," Rachel said softly. "Wasn't that your motto? Who said it was only one of the three? Who said *bachelors*?"

Kate smirked, but didn't answer. She just watched as Rachel stepped into the new suit. The fabric hugged her frame like it had been tailored for her alone.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Now *that's* better. *Arctic Emma Peel*," Kate said, grinning with satisfaction.

Kate wasn't done. She tossed over to Rachel a pair of insulated combat boots, low-profile, lace-free, with magnetic fasteners and clawed traction soles.

"For ice. And impact." Kate said. "Expect lots of both out there."

"Are you still referring to my Valentine's Day plans?" Rachel asked. "Is that what passes for dating around here? I hope the ice is in a glass and the impact starts when dancing cheek to cheek."

"Let's discuss Arctic romance later, over a tequila," Kate said. "Still your favorite? It's hard to find up here, but I have a guy. Samuk. He owns the sled rental place. He can get anything..."

"The one across from the inn?" Rachel asked. "I almost killed one of his customers today. Nearly ran over a guy who forgot his receipt. Sorry, I'm not used to driving on ice… Don't worry, your truck is fine."

Kate raised an eyebrow, half-amused.

"I've got all sorts of insurance on that truck. No worries." Kate replied.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She returned to handing over the new gear.

Next came the gloves, touchscreen-compatible, reinforced knuckles, snug at the wrist. Matte leather, with a gleam of steel thread tracing the seams.

Not built just for warmth. Built for control.

“Raise your arms,” Kate said.

Standing behind her, Kate wrapped a utility belt around Rachel’s waist, a modular, magnetic-clip system holding a multi-tool, spare batteries, a flashlight, and a collapsible thermal blade.

Kate’s hands faltered. The belt slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

She crouched quickly, face suddenly level with Rachel’s waist.

In the mirror, their eyes met. Rachel arched an eyebrow.

“Is *Emma Peel* making you nervous?” Rachel asked.

Kate rolled her eyes.

“I've killed cuter,” Kate responded.

Kate stood up and secured the belt around Rachel’s waist, a little too tightly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Finally, she handed Rachel a pair of wraparound snow goggles with mirrored lenses and a comms patch on the side, more CIA than filmmaker.

Rachel, standing in front of the full-length mirror, adjusted the fit or her new outfit. She tried the goggles on and then removed them and handed them back to Kate.

Kate stepped back, put the goggles on her desk, and crossed her arms, admiring her handiwork.

Then she moved behind Rachel, both of them facing the full-length mirror. She adjusted the fabric draped over Rachel's shoulders, then let her hands glide down, pausing at Rachel's hips, before moving back up to the collar.

"Turn around for me," Kate said.

Rachel turned, standing at ease, just like during field inspections back in the day.

"How did you know this outfit would fit me so perfectly?" Rachel asked.

Kate fiddled with the collar, tugged the sleeves. Tiny, precise adjustments.

"I have a good memory," Kate said. "And I just saw you online in the Amazon, wearing very little, I might add. The Vastan Energy execs got

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

an eyeful. I figured the camera adds ten pounds. Did the math. Here we are."

Rachel smiled.

"How is it possible that cameras *still* add ten pounds? With all the filters, avatars, and A.I. body swaps out there, you'd think someone would've invented a slimming camera by now."

Rachel paused. "Then again, it would kill the body-tuning app market. This economy needs more apps, not less."

"Please look down for me, Rachel... just for a second." Kate said softly.

Rachel obeyed.

Kate leaned in and adjusted the collar. Her fingers brushed a small tag near the seam, stitched with the word **Vastan** in fine black thread. Kate's fingers paused, just for a moment. A flicker of calculation behind her smile. Gone in a blink. She pressed it lightly.

A faint click... so soft it might've just been fabric shifting.

Kate's fingers lingered. Then she stepped back, checking Rachel one more time.

Rachel looked up. "Something wrong?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Not a thing," Kate said with a quick smile. "Now that's more like it. You look like you're about to kick ass and quote Oscar Wilde at the same time,"

Rachel faced the mirror.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. I have no plans to get close enough to a polar bear to kick its butt. That's what zoom lenses are for. And I doubt the dogs pulling my sled want a lecture on the human condition."

Rachel paused and then said.

"They might prefer: '*The more I see of men, the more I like dogs*.' Was that Oscar Wilde? No… wait. It was Germaine de Staël. The French philosopher. I imagine you've met a few French people since you've been on Baffin Island?"

Kate handed Rachel a handgun.

"Loaded with tranquilizer darts soldier... in case your fancy undies attract the wrong kind of animals."

"You don't mean French people?" Rachel asked, deadpan.

Then she continued with a perfect French accent, and a wicked little smile...

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Les Français? Des animaux?*" She shrugged. "*Mais oui, les hommes, bien sûr.*"

"Another conversation over tequila," Kate replied. "And I want to hear about the new tattoos too... and the new scars... and your latest meet-cute while driving my truck..."

"More like meet-crash," Rachel said.

Her eyes opened wide.

"That man was French! It's coming back to me now. *Monsieur Jacques*. That was what the rental shack owner called him, *Monsieur Jacques*... Do you know a *Monsieur Jacques* Kate? Rachel asked.

Rachel looked up, thoughtful.

"Tall, handsome. Smart eyes."

Kate returned to her desk and glanced discreetly at her laptop.

A light blinked once.

Then twice.

She smiled at Rachel. Just a half-second too late.

"Can't say that I do. Monsieur Jacques?"

She paused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Nope." Kate said.

Rachel hadn't argued with Kate about the outfit. She trusted Kate with her life...

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Arctic Tundra
February 14, Present-Day

"Leave it to Kate to dress me like *Emma Peel* in the Arctic..." Rachel said out loud.

The gear clung like a second skin, armored and elegant. It moved with her, not against her. It was designed for a woman ready to take on the elements and possibly charm or outwit whoever might answer on the Arctic party line.

She lifted the radio from her belt again.

"Hello? Come in. You still there?"

Silence.

Rachel stepped off her dogsled and took a few cautious steps toward the front, where fourteen Canadian Inuit dogs were already sinking into a well-earned sprawl across the snow, stretching, preparing to rest.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She pulled off her helmet. She untied her long dark hair, grown well past her shoulders since she'd left the Army five years ago, and shook it loose, letting the cold air hit her scalp.

There was something effortlessly sensual about the motion. Of course, the dogs didn't care.

One of these moments in life... when feeling and even looking beautiful goes unnoticed.

A breeze stirred, the wind shifted directions, just slightly. Somewhere, far off, the faint groan of shifting ice, low, hollow. Almost like a breath.

Rachel adjusted the camera mounted on her helmet, making sure it was still secure and still recording.

"There are more chips on this helmet than in my army-grade laptop," she said, addressing the dogs.

She rested the helmet on the sled.

She attempted one more time to reconnect with the mystery man who sounded like he had met with trouble. No luck.

"Hello? Hello? Where are you?" Rachel repeated.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It was probably time to stop anyway. Three hours of bouncing and gliding had earned Rachel and the dogs a break.

Rachel's back had started begging for it a while ago. It gave a crack of protest as she ventured further toward the front of the sled. She arched backward, hands on her hips, and groaned.

She tilted her head further back, scanning the fading constellations still filling the sky like old lovers she didn't quite trust but looked superb from a distance, as always when you're alone.

"Today's Valentine's Day. Of course. Even the cosmos is showing off. Look at them stars cuddling up in constellations..."

Then, without warning, her boots slid out from under her...

"Whoa! Puppy in a basket!"

Rachel felt the ground being pulled from under her feet, as if some invisible Arctic deity yanked on the huge snow carpet that was covering the grounds in every direction.

One second, she was upright, the next... flat on her back.

And though she had just thought lying down under the stars would be nice, she realized that,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

under the present circumstances, the position was not quite as restful as she had imagined.

“Happy Valentine’s Day to me…” she muttered, breath puffing white. “Just as soon as I can get back on my feet.”

“As the saying goes, you’ve got to sit before you can stand. Not as easy as it seems around these parts.”

Rachel squirmed and flailed, elbows and hands skidding on the ice, scrambling to find support.

Eventually, she managed to sit up on the cold icy ground.

She found herself facing the entire dog team. They stared at her, all perfectly still.

She addressed the pack in a serious tone, narrowing her eyes. She thought they all seemed very interested in what she was about to say.

"Why are you all laughing at me?!?”

“I would never fall if I were on all fours all the time!”

Rachel’s eyes opened wider. Her head tilting slightly to the side, moving forward. Her voice lowered, warningly.

“Don't you even go there..."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A few of the dogs mirrored her head tilt.

Rachel's face twisted into a selfie-worthy blend of pain and embarrassment.

A distant creak echoed from the ice behind her. She paused. Listened. Nothing. Just the dogs, watching.

“Didn’t realize my legs would be so stiff from riding this long.”

She was still addressing the dogs who looked more and more interested in what she had to say, hanging on every word.

“Listen to me... I’m one of these people again. Talking to dogs. Haven’t done that in a long time.”

She stretched her arms forward, reaching for her feet.

“You know, some of the nuns in the orphanage where I grew up used to talk to Pearly quite a lot. Pearly was a beautiful Australian Shepherd... though not a purebred. Definitely part Collie. I got my last name from her: Shepherd.”

Rachel stretched out one stiff leg, then the other. Then she tried to touch her feet with her hands again. The dogs didn’t look away, waiting to hear more about Pearly, no doubt...

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“You probably never saw a dog resembling Pearly up here. I’ll show you pictures on my phone when we're back at the station.”

“I used to talk to Pearly too. About boys...”

“One of the nuns told me Pearly was found in a basket at the church door. The Church of Our Lady of Sorrows.”

“Same as me. I was left in front of that same door, in a basket too, or so the story goes.”

“Different basket.”

“Guess my mom and Pearly’s mom had better things to do. And both owned baskets...”

“I don’t blame them. New York City. Lower East Side. 1991. The year Freddie Mercury died.”

The pack kept staring at Rachel.

“The nuns talked to Pearly more than they’d talk to us kids. I don’t think they were dog whisperers or anything. They just... believed animals understood humans.”

“Pearly might’ve even understood those Bible quotes better than I did. She certainly understood when I talked about my crushes.”

Rachel let her shoulders drop. Her face softened, the hint of a sad smile forming.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"And Pearly understood at least one word from the Bible for sure."

Rachel gave a half-smile.

"You guys ever heard of the Golden Rule?"

"Treat others the way you want them to treat you."

Fourteen heads snapped to attention. Ears perked.

"Ah. So *that's* the word you caught." Rachel laughed.

"Treat... of course."

Rachel rolled onto her side, then pushed herself up onto all fours. A move she learned from Pearly. She lingered there, grinning at the dogs, couldn't waste the perfect "*told you so*" moment.

A low chorus of snorts and one perfectly timed sneeze rippled through the pack. Rachel squinted.

"Don't even try to play innocent. That was sarcasm, and you know it."

"Artic sarcastic... times fourteen."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Where were we? Ah... treats.”

She had been pushing the dogs hard, aiming to reach her destination just before daybreak.

In February, on Baffin Island, daylight is a rare luxury. If you waited for the sun to get to work, you’d never get anything done.

By Rachel’s calculations, the dogs had done their part. They were close to their destination now. Time for a break. And a snack.

“Still laughing at me?” she asked.

To be fair, she wasn't quite sure the dogs were laughing. But she was convinced that they were smiling. All of them. That expressive, unmistakable grin dogs put on, pretending to be panting when, clearly, they think you are a clown or, most certainly, you are acting like one.

“All right. Who’s going to help me up?”

A pause.

“No volunteers?”

Rachel laughed, a dry chuckle that warmed her chest.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You, Black Paw. I saw that wink when I mentioned being on all fours."

Black Paw was the leader of the pack. White coat, one jet-black front paw, the left, black up to the ankle. Hence the name.

He was the only one whose name she remembered.

She'd promised herself she'd learn all fourteen.

Thirteen to go.

It might take a while. After years of Catholic school, she still wasn't sure she could name all the apostles.

She forgave herself instantly. After all, she'd joined the U.S. Army the moment she could. And the Army had crowded her brain with practical, often-repeated information, stuff that came up every day more frequently than "Amen" in a convent.

Not soul-saving, maybe. But life-saving? Absolutely.

She rose slowly, careful not to give the dogs another show. Once upright, she dusted snow from her pants with deliberate dignity.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She pointed a gloved finger at the pack with theatrical flair, mimicking one of the drill sergeants who had put her and the other newbie recruits through hell during training.

"Go ahead," she said, addressing the dogs. "Show me how long *you* can walk on two legs without falling on your fanny."

She wondered if the dogs could sense the edge in her voice, that tightness she masked with humor, like armor.

Humor had worked for her at boot camp, when laughter had been the last defense between composure and collapse. She found out that it wasn't as effective in the field when real bullets were fired at her.

The radio call that had interrupted her ride still echoed in her mind, too raw to joke about for sure. It didn't sound like a drill...

"Let me tell you doggies. You have it easy. The army, in the end, wasn't so different from the orphanage. Though the nuns didn't curse nearly as much as the soldiers. At least not in front of me."

Rachel often found herself alone in the wild. It gave her plenty of time to revisit the past.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Should she have become a nun, caring for orphans, instead of enlisting in the Army? Was this, defending animals, fighting for life on Earth, her real calling? Or just atonement dressed up in camouflage?

She grumbled as she reached for the bag of treats tucked in the front of the sled, grimacing, still occasionally rubbing her bruised backside.

“Bloody ice... I’m afraid this Arctic mission is going to ruin my hair,” Rachel said in her best *Emma Peel* voice: crisp, arch, and unmistakably upper-class British, like she was about to dispatch a villain with a judo flip and a quip.

One of the lead dogs huffed, unimpressed. Clearly the treats were not coming fast enough.

“*Emma* would have done it all in heels. And much faster. Without tripping. Got it.”

She handed out treats, one by one, to each of the dogs.

She rubbed her lower back.

“Forget ruining my hair. I’m going to be bruised all over.”

Addressing the dogs.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“In my imagination, sledding meant snuggling under fur blankets while someone else did the work. Downing a bottle or two of Veuve Clicquot Champagne, of course.”

“If I must face danger, I’d rather do it with bubbles.” Rachel said, lifting an imaginary glass to the dogs, imitating *Emma Peel*, “To danger and looking good while outrunning it.”

She caught Black Paw’s stare. He was studying her. If he rolled his eyes, she wouldn't blame him.

The rest of the pack stared at her too, clearly unimpressed.

“You’ve probably pulled cocky tourists, influencers chasing *likes,* puffed-up hunters, and couples trying to impress each other, thinking nearly freezing to death is romantic.”

“Bet most of them didn’t last the day.”

“Bet the couples didn’t last the ride back.”

“I’m one to talk... thirty-something. Still single. On Valentine’s Day. On a date with fourteen dogs... no champagne... And I'm the one treating... And bruising without any kisses to show for it...”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Did any of the tourists even bother to learn your names?"

With their snouts buried in snow and treats, the dogs ignored Rachel completely.

A *Far Side* cartoon flashed through her mind, the one where dogs hear nothing but, "blah blah *food* blah blah *walk*."

Rachel checked her GPS. According to it, she was about fifty feet away from where a pregnant polar bear's den had been spotted.

Rachel was here to film the bear. That was the mission, the reason she found herself in this remote, frozen stretch of the world.

She'd worked in hostile terrain before, though rarely anywhere this starkly beautiful.

Radio silence was expected this far out, but the message she intercepted suggested the man on the radio might be nearby. And so was whatever had cut him off.

Backup was hours away. Hopefully, she wouldn't need it. Hopefully, the dogs would prove just as reliable as an army unit, steadfast, instinctive, and loyal.

She caught herself missing that feeling: being able to count on a team. She'd chosen to work

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

alone since she left the army, to escape. And she could handle it. She always had.

Better yet, maybe all she had to worry about was capturing fabulous shots and reels of a happy mother bear and her playful cubs.

Rumor had it the bear had dug into a cave at the base of a nearby mountain, ready to give birth. Maybe already had.

With a slow breath, Rachel narrowed her eyes at the snow-covered ridge ahead, the final barrier between her and the mouth of the cave.

Somewhere beyond it, nestled between the rocks, a bear was sleeping. Or maybe already stirring, stretching, preparing to emerge.

“I’d better get the equipment ready.”

The dogs? Finished eating. Back to smiling.

The first slivers of sunlight crept across the horizon, sharp, pale, and cold.

Rachel saw Black Paw perking up.

Then it came... a scream.

Raw. Primal. Gut-wrenching.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It ripped through the silence like claws through hide.

The dogs froze. No longer smiling. Their eyes locked on the ridge, ears forward, hackles raised.

Rachel drew the pistol from her waist in one practiced motion, pointing toward the sound.

“Fried jelly fuck fish...” she whispered.

A massive polar bear, foaming, blood-soaked as if something was leaking from inside it, appeared at the top of the ridge and charged toward Rachel and the pack. It closed to within thirty feet, then abruptly reared onto its hind legs. Another roar tore from its throat, raw, guttural, final.

Rachel’s finger twitched, but her body froze.

The bear’s mouth was wide open. Its eyes wild.

Then...

The bear’s chest detonated. Blood burst into the air like mist, then rained down over the mangled carcass, which crumpled into the snow in a heap of shredded bone and muscle.

Rachel had aimed at the bear but hadn’t fired.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Puppy in a basket!”

“What the f... was that?”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter II

Way off Script

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Arctic Tundra
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel glanced at the gun in her hand, then at the dogs, stunned.

"I did not shoot… Wasn't me!"

"I've got tranquilizer darts in this puppy! Pardon me, in this gun... Not bullets. No bullets I know, no barrage of them, could have done *that*!"

She stared at the steaming, shredded remains.

She looked at Black Paw.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“You saw that coming, didn’t you? What are you boy?” She asked.

She instinctively sniffed the air. No smoke. No chemical burn.

“It looks like a bomb went off inside the poor thing... a silent bomb.”

“How’s that possible? Manmade? If it was, it wasn’t made for humans to survive...”

Rachel holstered her gun, still wide-eyed, then jumped onto the sled and snapped the reins. The dogs lunged forward, charging toward the fallen bear.

She halted the sled a safe distance from the steaming remains. The last thing she needed was for one of the dogs to get curious and take a bite or lick the dead bear’s blood.

“One treat is enough guys,” she muttered. “I know it’s Valentine’s Day. I hope you’re enjoying this date so far... Not sure I am... But don’t think you can take advantage just because I’m single.”

“She eyed the pack. ‘Laugh it up. But you’re in the doghouse now.’”

She circled the bear’s mangled remains. The cam on her chest was always rolling, but she also

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

pulled out her phone, filming the carnage from different angles.

She narrated in a calm, clinical tone. More forensic pathologist than wildlife documentarian. Detailing the bear's injuries like a coroner walking through an autopsy.

"The head and paws say bear, but the rest?" Rachel murmured into the mic.

"Blood-soaked. Hardly any of the fur is still white, almost as if the blood had been seeping through the skin before the chest blew out. Internal organs appear melted. Liquefied."

"This almost looks like the bear was wearing a suicide vest," she muttered.

She steadied the camera and continued narrating.

"An extra-large vest... That's a lot of bear! Liquid... bear."

She'd seen this kind of carnage before... limbs torn, torsos flayed. When bombs went off close to a body… or were strapped to it. The unmistakable signature of an internal blast.

During her deployment in Syria, Rachel added a fresh list of atrocities to the mental catalog she'd been building since she joined the U.S. Army.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

After basic, she was placed with one of the Army's Battlefield Surveillance Brigades, units that were almost always first to arrive after a carnage and more often before one.

Rachel clearly remembered entering a Northeastern Syrian market square in 2015.

It had been torn open by fire.

The explosion had taken place minutes before Rachel and her unit arrived.

Smoke curled upward in ghostly tendrils, filtering the harsh sunlight into a haze of gray and ochre. The ground was scattered with the remains of stalls and awnings, mangled carts and baskets overturned, crushed beneath the weight of what had been a moment of ordinary life and was now a scene of horror.

Bodies lay strewn across the square. Some torn apart entirely. Shredded limbs. Flayed torsos. Faces contorted in agony or frozen mid-scream.

A child's sandal clung to a severed foot. The scent was unforgettable, charred meat, diesel, blood, dust.

Rachel stood in the middle of it all, frozen in place. Her fatigues were streaked with soot and

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

blood that wasn't hers as she had checked bodies for survivors.

Her face, younger then, just twenty-four, was caught between disbelief and fury. Her helmet sat askew, and her knuckles were white where she gripped her rifle too tightly. Her breath ragged. Smoke clinging to her eyelashes. She was blinking back tears, trying to stay composed.

A few yards away, Kate stood like a statue, her Canadian flag patch scorched at the edges from always getting in on the action. The corners of her mouth were tight, her gaze sharp and clinical.

Whereas Rachel's eyes were wide, taking everything in, Kate's were narrow, almost blank.

They locked eyes. Neither spoke. There was nothing to say. Only the silence that followed the blast, and the slow realization that they were too late... again.

Rachel would never forget that moment. Or the look in Kate's eyes. Not pity. Not even anger. Just calculation. Distance. Already gone somewhere else.

And something else Rachel wouldn't be able to name until much later.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The wind whipped sharply, jarring Rachel back. Black Paw growled.

Rachel blinked, the Syrian market fading.

“Some things don’t leave you... they just wait...” She murmured.

She tightened her grip on the phone and turned her attention back to the bear’s remains.

“I’m moving in for a closer look,” she said, her voice steady into the camera.

Rachel zoomed in on the bear’s head.

The jaw hung open, frozen mid-scream.

What remained of the creature’s face was stretched in a grimace of agony, its final expression locked in something beyond pain.

“Glass shard in the teeth,” she narrated. “Rounded edge… looks like it came from a vial. Or maybe a syringe.”

Rachel stepped back from the remains.

She paused her phone camera, slipped it into a front pocket of her suit. The body cam kept rolling.

The silence around her deepened.

The wind howled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She glanced at the dogs, ears flat, low whine. None of them were moving. Even Black Paw stayed put.

"Did I hear you guys say: *'You go first Rachel'*?" She asked.

"What a surprise... When in doubt, send the tourist..." she murmured.

She drew her gun and followed the blood trail toward the cave.

She moved slowly, fog spilling from her breath, every step deliberate, doing her best to stay silent. But the snow betrayed her, patches of fresh powder released deep muffled groans beneath her boots.

Near the cave's entrance, she spotted footprints... fresh ones. A single set. They approached from behind a small ridge on the right, outside the cave mouth, the stride uneven, as if the person had slid partway down the incline before regaining their footing and continuing into the cave.

Resuming her narration for the chest cam, Rachel whispered:

"Someone came down this ridge and entered the cave... before the bear came out."

She glanced at the horizon.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Sun's rising but not doing much. I'll need a flashlight."

She unhooked the flashlight from her belt, clicked it on and took two careful steps past the entrance.

"The cave splits into two sections," she murmured.

Her head moved slowly from side to side, eyes adjusting.

"Right side's a narrow tunnel. Looks like it ends in a tight little cubbyhole."

She dipped her head slightly; gun angled toward the dark opening.

"Left side widens into a larger chamber."

Then she froze. Listening. A drip of melting ice echoed off the walls.

She was still close enough to shoot and bolt if something lunged from the dark. But once fully inside either chamber, retreat would be far harder... no clear line of sight, no room to maneuver.

If it came to a fight, it wouldn't be at range. It would be up close. Hand-to-claw?

She wished she had bullets to replace the tranquilizer darts.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As she waited, ears tuned to the silence, Rachel's thoughts drifted to how she'd ended up here in the first place.

"I should've prepared better," she muttered to the camera. "Well... thanks for the gig, Kate. You forgot to mention a few things... like bear exploding... Is that what you meant when you said '*Don't end up resenting me for this trip, okay?'*... And tranq darts? Yeah, I'd feel better with real bullets right now... even if it means maiming the three Arctic's red-panty chasers you thought I might set a date with..."

There hadn't been much time to brush up on polar bear behavior before Rachel flew from the Amazon to Canada to meet her old friend Kate, the same Kate she'd served with in Syria.

Back in 2015, during the coalition push against ISIS in Syria, the Canadian military ran joint ops with the U.S. and other allies.

Rachel and Kate crossed paths constantly, sometimes on missions, sometimes over lukewarm beer and endless rounds of cards.

Patrols by day; black humor and bad whiskey by night, good tequila when they were lucky, often mixing both. That's where they started.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel couldn't say exactly when they became friends. Somewhere between a sandstorm briefing and a hangover confession.

Kate was now chief of security for Vastan Energy, an international mining consortium trying to burnish its image.

Publicly, the company claimed a deep respect for the Arctic environment, even as it expanded operations. Hiring a wildlife documentarian was part of the campaign.

Kate had recommended Rachel. The company's PR team pitched her over video call.

"Make us look green," they'd said.

"Well... white," they laughed. "Cuddly bears. Moms and cubs."

"We know polar bears depend on a habitat that's literally melting as temperatures rise," one of the PR reps said.

"They may be the most vulnerable species out there, considering the changes we've seen lately." He continued. "And honestly, we don't want our facilities underwater either. So, what's good for the bears is, more or less, good for us."

Another PR rep chimed in, condescending smile included.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You see, even a one-degree rise in global temperature could raise sea levels by six or seven meters. That's twenty to twenty-three feet higher than today!"

He gave a meaningful pause, as if delivering a punchline, clearly pleased with himself.

"We're all in the same boat, so to speak."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. Mansplaining *and* metaphors? Impressive. A full-service briefing. An image flashed in her mind. The two men in a raw boat with a huge polar bear… She smiled.

She glanced at Kate, who looked like she was silently counting to ten.

Rachel was genuinely proud Kate hadn't already strangled the entire PR team with their own branded neck lanyards; IDs still attached for easy identification…

Rachel had always weighed the ethics of working with conglomerates. Most of her gigs were for Greenpeace and similar groups. But she wasn't quick to judge. And this time, she hadn't dug too deep into Vastan Energy's background.

She trusted Kate to have signed on with a reputable company. And the execs were in such a rush that they were willing to pay very well.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“So much for white and cuddly,” Rachel whispered.

Blood streaked the cave floor and walls, still wet, still glistening... as if the bear had tried to shake it loose.

“I’m way off script...” she added.

“Lotta red in here, Kate... lotta red.”

“In this situation,” Rachel whispered to the camera, “Sir David Attenborough would remind us that a mother polar bear does not share her den with anyone, except her cubs. No other creature would be welcome. I’m gonna bet there’s no adult bear brave or stupid enough to crash her crib.”

Rachel took another step forward, slow, deliberate. She even lifted her nose slightly, like a predator, sniffing the air, trying to detect any trace of animal or human presence.

“Also, very unlikely that a wolf, or a whole pack, wandered in carrying syringes,” Rachel added.

She followed the blood trail with her eyes.

“Clearly, the footprints outside the cave didn’t belong to a yeti either,” Rachel muttered.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“If there’s something to fear... it’s what’s left of a very unlucky hunter.”

“Not a creature was a stirring,” Rachel muttered, slipping into her best New York City Lower East Side accent, grinning.

“Eeny, meeny, miny, moe... follow the blood and… off you go.”

She dropped to all fours and crept into the cave’s left chamber.

“If only the dogs could see me now...” she whispered.

“If anything, man or beast, comes near the cave entrance, give me a heads-up, boys. Treats for days,” she murmured, fully aware the pack couldn’t hear her from this deep inside the cave.

Rachel straightened once she was inside the chamber.

She swept the space the way the Army had drilled into her, quick, controlled, automatic.

But her breath was shallow. Yet too loud. The bear, the scream, the trail of blood... they all crowded in at the edges of her focus.

Her scan was textbook. But it wasn't complete. Not really. She moved too fast. Too

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

distracted. There was no one at her six now, and for once, she felt it. She ignored the feeling.

She'd gotten used to carrying cameras, not guns. Not even tranq guns. Used to the safety of documenting nature, dangerous, yes, but indifferent. Predictable, in its way.

Becoming a soldier again wasn't like riding a bike on some coastal trail. It took effort. Force of will. One could be in shape to run, to drive a sled for hours, barely, but that wasn't the same as being ready to kill or stay alive. That took a different kind of fitness. One she hadn't trained in for years.

She didn't want to re-enlist. Not even in her mind.

Still, she holstered her weapon, pulled out her phone, and activated its camera.

The flash provided just enough illumination to capture what she saw and to light the scene for her body cam as well.

Satisfied, she clipped her flashlight back to her belt.

She began scanning the chamber.

"Severed head," she muttered. "Still partially wrapped in a balaclava and gas mask. Torn clean

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

from the body beside it. Recently, from the look of it."

"White male. Blond beard," she observed quietly. "Balaclava and gas mask torn in multiple spots… neck partially exposed."

"Torso and legs shredded. Pattern's consistent with bear claws."

Rachel noticed a broken syringe in the corpse's hand. She picked it up carefully. Inspected it. Turned it slowly under the phone's light beam.

Nearby, an open case lined with foam. More identical syringes inside, sealed in wax. Etched Japanese markings and swastikas on the side.

"The syringes are filled with a clear liquid. Looks like the man removed one... deliberately. But not in self-defense."

"Most are sealed in wax. Two are newer it seems. Tagged. VE followed by numbers. They are empty."

She noticed a machine gun lying just beyond the man's reach. Next to it, a smashed radio, battered, its casing cracked open like a dropped egg. And inches away, a broken flashlight.

"Is this the man whose transmission I picked up earlier?" Rachel wondered out loud.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Hello Dash...” she said softly.

This wasn’t the plan, Rachel thought.

This trip was supposed to be a puff piece. A glossy shoeshine for the muddy boots of a mining consortium, caretakers of life in the Great North, or so the pitch went.

A glossy puff piece about environmental responsibility, native partnerships, and cuddly polar bears reclaiming ancestral dens.

Instead, she was going from a dead bear to a dead man, from silent snowdrifts to blood pools, syringes and broken radios.

“What’s next?” she thought. “Becoming a soldier all over again? Re-enlistment? Sure. That’ll go well...

Rachel held her phone steady, still filming, eyes scanning for more, all while describing the events that unfolded in the cave.

“The man opened the container… and realized too late the bear had him marked.”

“The bear either heard or smelled him from the next chamber?”

“Or maybe mama bear was out hunting for breakfast, and he thought the cave was safe?”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel slowly panned her phone camera from the chamber entrance to the man's remains.

"He didn't have time to grab his gun. Looks like he jabbed the syringe into the bear as a last resort."

"But it wasn't enough, fast enough. Why would he have thought the content of the syringe could even do the job? Why did he not go for his machine gun? The bear tore into him... ripped his head clean off."

"Man with a tiny syringe versus polar bear. Call it a draw? Who would've thought... What kind of fried-jelly-fuck-fish cocktail was in that stinger?"

"The guy's in white camo. But I don't think he was some lost hunter who stumbled onto a bear's den. He wasn't scavenging. He came for the syringes. A hunter would've been way more careful."

Rachel paused. The man's voice echoed again in her mind, like a ghost transmission: *"...Syringes, just like the intel said..."*

"He knew exactly what he was looking for."

Rachel moved deeper into the chamber, careful not to block her body cam as she swept the beam of her phone's light for clear footage.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Ahead, three figures sat frozen in time.

She jumped, heart hammering. For a split second, she thought she wasn't alone. Thought she'd had an audience all along.

"Puppy in a basket! You scared the hell out of me…" she said aloud. "I am definitely in need of retraining..."

She had told herself she was alone in dust, stone, and silence. Maybe a little too quickly. Maybe a little too defiantly.

Then she saw it... the brittle tension of limbs, the waxy hollowness of flesh. These people hadn't walked in behind her.

She took a step closer, raising her phone. The beam washed over the seated figures, three of them, cloaked in decades of dust and frozen air.

Motionless, clothes intact but skin paper-thin and drawn tight over bones. Their eyes long gone. Their mouths frozen open in what could have been screams, or maybe gasps. Rachel couldn't tell.

Her first instinct was to sweep the chamber again, gun drawn, like she should have done the first time. She could not take her eyes off them.

"They're mummified…" she whispered. "They've been here a long time."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

For a moment, the cave wasn't just cold, it was ancient. A tomb. Something that had been sealed and forgotten. And she, a trespasser.

A flicker of shame rose in her chest. She'd missed them earlier. Too fast. Too noisy. Too unsettled. And if these weren't just bodies, if they were clues, witnesses, or warnings, she almost walked right past them.

"Get it together..." she whispered.

She focused the phone's camera on the first mummy.

A woman, knees bent, her arms still wrapped around a small bundle, a baby, swaddled and pressed to her chest. Her face, sunken and darkened, retained the outline of youth. The contours of her face suggested Asian heritage, soft cheekbones, a high forehead, and narrow, upturned eyes. The child's form, heartbreakingly still, had shriveled but remained whole.

It looked to Rachel as if the woman had just given the child a kiss.

Opposite them, a man sat slumped, legs outstretched, one arm draped limply across his lap. His skin had pulled tight across his bones, dark and papery. Faded cloth still clung to their bodies, stiff and brittle, the remains of old military-issue wool and leather.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Between the woman and the man stood four old-style lanterns, showing little sign of rust, dust-choked relics from another era.

Rachel lowered the light slowly, respectfully.

Then she returned to filming the man, woman, and baby.

“Looks like syringe guy wasn’t the first to die in here,” Rachel muttered. “Not by a long shot.”

“Check these mummies,” she said to the camera as she filmed the man, woman and baby. “They have been here for a long time.”

She turned her attention back to the fresh headless corpse behind her.

Rachel pried the broken syringe from the decapitated man’s hand and slid it back into the open container.

She carefully placed the two newer empty syringes, marked VE next to the others.

She sealed the lid tight.

She turned the box over in her gloved hands... no markings, no labels. Nothing to hint at where it came from, or why it was here.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She rifled through the headless man's pockets. Nothing. Not even lint. That felt intentional.

"Odd. No ID, no paper, no money, no phone... nothing."

Her voice was low, flat, alert, not rattled.

"Whatever's in these syringes... it's nasty. Leaving them behind isn't an option."

She swept the phone light one more time through the shadows.

Two old backpacks sat near the mummies, worn, faded, unmarked. One partially unzipped.

Rachel crouched beside it and eased it open the rest of the way. Inside, nestled in a bed of decaying fabric, was another metal container.

She lifted it carefully, testing the weight. Then cracked it open, slow and cautious.

"More syringes," she muttered. "These ones filled with something darker... meaner-looking. They are sealed in wax. Japanese markings and swastikas."

"Judging by the wear, this pack probably belonged to the mummies."

She placed this latest metal container back into the backpack and tucked the one the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

headless man had opened on top of it. Cinching the pack shut, she moved on.

The second pack near the mummies unfastened with a slow, deliberate tug.

A brittle leather pouch sat on top. Beneath it, another container, more syringes. She slid it back inside.

Her attention returned to the pouch. Its cracked straps barely held it closed. She hesitated before opening it. The leather was old.

Inside were only documents. She unfolded a loose page; her eyes caught the black outline of a Nazi cross. Japanese kanji. The first paragraph was written in German.

“Not that I can translate much of this,” Rachel murmured, eyes scanning the page. “But from what I picked up during my time stationed in Frankfurt... Yeah, no doubt. It’s German.”

She flipped to the next page.

“This one... might be Japanese.”

She’d spent time in Japan a couple of years ago, filming a short documentary on the aftermath of Fukushima. The 2011 disaster, a catastrophic combination of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, left behind invisible scars. While officials claimed the radiation was

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

safely contained, Rachel's producers, at the French news show she freelanced for at the time, wanted her to investigate claims of lingering contamination: the abandoned towns, the sickened workers, the oddly deformed wildlife in the exclusion zones. She'd spent days interviewing reluctant locals and rogue scientists, chasing a truth that flickered like static between official press releases.

She picked up just enough of the language to be polite: hello, goodbye, thank you. Rachel learned these few words from her guide and translator, a young, visibly pregnant mother who fearlessly led the way with two toddlers in tow. The children wore tiny paper masks and clutched cracked plastic toys, walking hand-in-hand behind their mother through empty train stations and overgrown playgrounds. The woman's voice was soft but certain, her steps measured and brave. She'd once lived near the red zone and insisted Rachel see the place for herself, "not just the map," she said, "but the silence." Rachel never forgot that phrase. Not the silence. Not the mother's swollen feet or the way the littlest girl whispered to a stray cat sitting on a window ledge, too thin to move.

The girl had taught Rachel how to bow properly. By the time Rachel left the area, her

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

bow was decent, though her lower back didn't always cooperate.

Rachel set the documents aside.

"Too many questions, not enough answers... Bedtime reading..." Rachel said while turning to the mummified man. "Mind if I check your pockets?"

She searched the pockets of the mummified man. Inside one of them: a wallet. Cash in both Canadian and American Dollars. Old cash. Pre-war print. Coins, too. She rubbed one clean: 1942. Papers that Rachel thought would be best examined later.

Nothing in the pockets of the Asian woman. She did not search the baby.

Time to pack up.

The wallet. The backpacks. The machine gun. That was it.

She squeezed the wallet in one of the backpacks.

The mummies weren't going anywhere. Neither was the headless man... nor his head.

Rachel switched on her flashlight and gripped it between her teeth, wrapping her lips

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

around it. She tucked away her phone, then drew her sidearm.

The last thing she needed was to exit the chamber and run into a curious bear, a pack of overly concerned neighborly wolves, or another syringe-chaser.

And now she had to haul two backpacks and a machine gun out with her.

"What a day," she muttered.

The flashlight in her mouth made her sound like an amateur ventriloquist.

"Short daylight hours up here, but damn, they're dense. Puts New York minutes to shame."

Rachel crawled out of the left chamber and stood up.

She set the backpacks and the machine gun down near the entrance of the cave.

She took the flashlight out of her mouth.

She knelt and stared into the right chamber, listening. Nothing.

She exhaled.

Then, once again on all fours, she crept into the right chamber.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Once inside, Rachel stood upright. Flashlight in one hand, gun in the other.

For the first time since entering the cave, she felt a flicker of ease.

The space was smaller than the first chamber, almost intimate. She scanned it with care, her eyes sweeping every shadowed corner.

“Smaller chamber. Almost cozy. No blood. No chaos,” she murmured. “Just a few mummified remains—a pair of feet, boots still on, half-buried in loose rock.”

She paused, sensing something subtle.

“Little drafty in here...”

She holstered her weapon, pulled out her phone, turned on the camera light, then turned off the flashlight and clipped it back to her belt.

She crouched beside the exposed boots, aiming for a close-up. She started filming and narrating again.

“Strange,” she muttered. “Looks like the rest of the body’s buried under the rubble. I’d guess this guy got crushed around the same time the couple and the baby died.”

She continued scanning the space, filming with both her phone and her body cam. A tuft of

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

white fur twitched... barely. Her hand snapped to her gun.

Then she spotted them: three tiny cubs, curled up together, eyes shut. Sleeping.

“Well, hello there... cubs,” she whispered.

Her smile faded into something harder. Not fear. The cubs were no threat. It was life. The kind that clings, demands, fails. Some creatures are born knowing how to survive. Others just get dragged along until they can’t anymore.

And sometimes the kindest thing you can do is show that special mercy... before the world finishes the job far too slowly. The kind of mercy God forbids, but Rachel had once heard whispered in the prayers of a few nuns. Mercy killing…

She still hadn’t figured out how to live with that idea and so many others.

Sometimes it felt like she’d downed half the tequila on Earth, alongside some of the *most brilliant minds* you could meet in a bar, and still, life and love refused to sleep in the same bed.

“Why can’t I be like people who believe the same things throughout their entire lives? Like the nuns? Why can’t I just settle down, period?”

“No tequila today. What a shame.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She glanced at the cubs.

“Should I smother you now? Mercy and all that... I don’t know you enough to say that I love you that much...”

She sighed, shook her head.

“Yeah. Didn’t think so. Let’s go, furballs.”

“I’m not here to be kind. Certainly not soldier kind. I’m here for a PR campaign. Imagine for a moment what the execs at Vastan Energy would say if I tried to explain that eternal sleep was a better choice for you given the circumstances...”

“Or, better yet, I left the cubs in front of a church in a basket... I don’t think I’ve seen a church since I’ve been here.”

She laughed.

“Kate would be pissed!”

She unzipped her coat, easing the cubs in one by one, against her chest, as if she could replace what they’d lost...

One stirred, lifting its head for a drowsy glance before nestling deeper into the warmth.

“Whatever happened here, eighty years ago or thirty minutes ago, these cubs won’t make it on their own.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She pulled her coat tighter. “I’ll take them.”

She was genuinely impressed by the flexibility of her outfit, sleek, form-fitting, and apparently smarter than most of the men she’d dated lately, tech-bros included. Some kind of AI-guided nanotech stitching, she figured, adjusting itself on the fly to accommodate body changes, muscle shifts, or, in this case, three squirming bear cubs pressed gently against her chest. A miracle of design, really. The perfect solution to occasional morphisms of the human form: pregnancy, bloat, smug overconfidence, indulgences, Valentine’s Day chocolates, you name it.

Thanks to Sir David Attenborough, Rachel knew just enough to keep the cubs alive, at least until she could reach a vet.

Most of what she remembered boiled down to a single rule: *stay away from a mother bear and her newborns.* Sadly, the mother wasn’t a problem anymore.

Rachel felt the familiar pinch in her chest, right where the cubs were resting, the ache of abandonment, of being left behind. That hollow space where a mother should’ve been.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She looked down at the tiny cubs bundled against her body, their warmth fragile, their breaths soft and slow.

“Sorry, guys,” she murmured. “Bad news. You don’t have a mom anymore.”

She hesitated, her voice nearly breaking.

“That makes you orphans. Just like me.”

“Good news... you’re going to be TV stars. Internet sensations!”

She turned her flashlight on and put away her phone.

Cubs bundled tightly, Rachel crawled out of the chamber, gun in hand, flashlight in her mouth.

Once outside the chamber, she rose, put her flashlight on her belt, slung the machine gun over her shoulder, grabbed the backpacks, and stepped into the daylight, gun in hand just in case.

She rejoined the dogs. They perked up instantly, sniffing with keen curiosity, staring at her chest.

Rachel carefully unzipped her suit and, one by one, eased the cubs from the warmth against

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

her chest. Their tiny bodies stirred at the shift in temperature, noses twitching, paws flexing.

She cleared a space in the sled, lining a sleeping bag deep into the well between her gear.

Gently, she nestled the cubs inside, tucking them close together, wrapping the bag snugly around them, leaving just enough space for air, warmth, and no room to jostle free.

"No flying lessons today," she murmured. "You've survived this long. You're riding first-class all the way back. Still, the ride gets bumpy... hang tight."

She secured the gear, backpacks, machine gun, into compartments on the sled as well.

Then she climbed aboard, steering the team in a wide arc around the mother bear's body, skirting the blood-soaked snow as they looped past toward the cave's entrance.

She wasn't done yet.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter III

Maybe One Day

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Arctic Tundra
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel aimed the sled toward the ridge, where footprints suggested the decapitated man had first appeared before making his way into the cave.

She wanted to follow his trail, see where it led beyond the ridge's far side.

The dogs surged forward, finding their rhythm, cresting the ridge with practiced ease before gliding down the slope beyond.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Twenty feet down the slope, the tracks ended at a snowmobile. Rachel recognized the model and the markings. It was the same kind she'd seen lined up at the rental shack near the Vastan Energy security station.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Energy Compound
Snowmobile rental shack
February 13, Present-Day

The prior day, on her way to meet Kate at the security station, Rachel had passed a snowmobile rental shack and a roadside motel, both options she'd briefly considered. The first to rent a snowmobile. The second for a place to crash.

As she was approaching the shack, a man burst out, waving a pink sheet of paper and shouting:

"Monsieur Jacques! Monsieur Jacques!"

Rachel's eyes flicked toward the scene. In doing so, she lost track of the road.

Coming straight from the Amazon, where everything was green, to Baffin Island, where

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

everything was white, her vision hadn't caught up yet. The Arctic felt like a hallucination.

"I'm tripping," Rachel heard herself say a few times on the ride from the airport.

Kate had parked her Ford F-150 Raptor, white, fully equipped, built like a beast, at the airport for Rachel to drive.

"I'm leaving my wheels at the airport," Kate had texted before Rachel landed. "Can't pick you up. But I'll leave instructions in the truck for the drive to the security station within the Vastan compound. I'll be there when you arrive. Promise. xo"

Rachel had half-expected the vehicle to have a turret with a machine gun mounted on the passenger side. It certainly looked like Kate drove her "wheels" like a tank, and not a trophy.

Clearly, Kate had the truck prepped to haul a sled team or a mobile morgue.

And Rachel was about to get her first Arctic roadkill.

She slammed the brakes, yanked the handbrake, and cranked the wheel in whatever direction her panic allowed.

The man with the pink paper was in no danger.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

But the man he was chasing, *Monsieur Jacques,* barely escaped taking a grill to the face.

The truck skidded sideways, finally groaning to a halt. Rachel hadn't been in control. Not really. Never was.

She stepped out.

Jacques had rolled just far enough to be staring up at the left front wheel of the truck, inches from his nose.

He stood. Brushed off snow and slush with a grace that made it seem choreographed.

"Puppy in a basket! I'm so sorry," Rachel said. "I didn't mean to..."

They locked eyes.

Jacques smiled.

"Puppy in a what..."

But before he could finish, the shouting man, Samuk, the owner of the rental shack reached them.

"Your receipt Monsieur Jacques. You forgot your receipt." Samuk said smiling.

He handed Jacques the pink paper. Then, looking at Rachel:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Absolutely the opposite of what you do on ice. You never slam the brakes. It locks the wheels. Then you skid. Then you can't steer. Then you kill someone. Or... yourself. Not as bad if it's just yourself…" Samuk explained.

Rachel looked at the man with wide eyes, thinking that she was really tripping after all. She pinched her cheek. Seconds after stepping out of the truck her hands were frozen and her cheeks were frozen. The pinch was useless.

"If you come rent from me," Samuk added, pointing toward the shack "I'll give you a dog sled. Dogs do the braking. You don't kill anyone. You might still kill yourself... Or, the dogs might eat you if you don't give them treats… What is your name?"

Rachel blinked. Her eyelids weren't frozen just yet. Jacques had already vanished.

"Rachel…" she said.

She turned to apologize again, but *Monsieur Jacques* was gone.

Back behind the wheel, Rachel glanced once more at Samuk. He grinned and waved.

"See you soon Rachel! Come and rent from me." He said smiling.

Rachel smiled politely, waved back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate was in charge of operations for this "mission."

Rachel had thought about renting a snowmobile and renting a room in a local hotel, out of habit, being on her own all the time, but she knew Kate would have everything lined up.

Kate knew Rachel would always choose a dogsled over a motor, not because Rachel was going to run over bears and caribous, or the occasional *Monsieur Jacques* but because it was the "green" thing to do.

And Rachel thought right. Kate had prepped a spare room for Rachel at the Vastan Energy compound so they could catch up in private.

It had been six years since they'd last seen each other.

They'd kept in touch, sure, trading grainy video calls and the occasional encrypted message. But that wasn't the same. Not after everything they'd lived through.

They'd become blood sisters on the battlefield. And, for a time, something more.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Bear Cave
February 14, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw yawned. Rachel looked at him.

"I wish we could all take a nippy... not just yet." She said.

Rachel's attention returned to the headless man's snowmobile.

She dismounted the sled and began a methodical search of the snowmobile.

In the rear compartment, she found a backpack, standard issue, black, weatherproof.

Inside, a walkie-talkie, a cell phone, a satellite phone, a small drone, a handgun, and ammunition for both the handgun and the machine gun he'd brought into the cave.

In one of the side pockets, she pulled out a clear plastic bag. It held a passport and a credit card, both issued to a man named *Wolf Dash.*

"Wolf Dash... great name... what's your story Wolf Dash?" she muttered. "Or, Dash as you used to call yourself…"

Another pocket held a folded map and a metal compass. The map detailed Baffin Island, with an inset zeroing in on the Angna Mountain region and the exact location of the bear's cave, marked in faded red ink.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Old school," she said. "But considering how flaky my GPS has been... not a bad idea."

The map was crowded with precise, spidery handwriting, some of it in a language she couldn't immediately place.

The paper had yellowed with age, its edges soft and feathered. It smelled of oil, mildew, and something metallic. It felt like it had survived a war.

Rachel was refolding it when a distant hum reached her ears, low, mechanical, getting closer.

The dogs stiffened. Ears perked. Noses high.

She didn't hesitate. She grabbed everything that looked useful from Dash's snowmobile, several bags packed with supplies, including the man's pack she'd just searched.

Moving quickly and efficiently, she strapped the cargo to her sled with brisk, practiced hands.

Then she brought a gloved finger to her lips and locked eyes with the team.

Not a sound. Not a breath.

She wasn't sure if the dogs understood the gesture. But they felt the tension in her body, the urgency in her eyes. And they obeyed. Still as stone. Or, perhaps you never burned up calories

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

barking in the tundra, where only predators could hear you anyway.

She climbed the ridge carefully, staying low. At the top, she flattened against the ice-crusted ground and scanned the horizon.

Eight snowmobiles cut through the landscape below, gradually slowing down. About a hundred feet out, the riders stopped.

The lead figure raised binoculars, surveying the area.

They all wore white camouflage, identical to what the headless man had on. Every rider was armed with a machine gun. Balaclavas. Gas masks. Anonymous and ominous.

The leader pointed toward the cave entrance directly below Rachel's position. She didn't flinch. She barely breathed. She was calculating. Could she keep herself, the cubs, and the dogs hidden?

"Puppy in a basket! That's a lot of firepower... Can I keep you doggies and cubs hidden… safe?" Rachel thought.

Instinct took over. First question: friend or foe? You don't shoot at friends... most of the time. And you don't shoot at enemies unless

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

you’re damn sure you’ll be the one walking away.

She watched the riders with hard eyes.

But this wasn’t just about her.

The cubs, once snuggled against her chest, the dogs, alert and loyal, all flashed in her mind.

"If I go down, no one feeds you treats doggies... you might even eat the cubs... I’m it,” Rachel murmured.

She was the thin, fragile thread holding their lives together.

Whatever was coming... She had to survive it.

Two of the snowmobiles broke from the group and sped toward the cave.

Rachel slid back a little from her observation point, careful not to expose herself.

The pair of snowmobiles approached the spot where the mother bear lay dead.

They slowed, steering clear of the remains, and continued toward the cave’s entrance.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The two riders stopped a few feet short and dismounted.

One of the riders pulled off her gas mask and peeled away her balaclava.

Rachel tensed, eyes narrowing.

The woman beneath was Asian, late twenties, maybe early thirties, with sharp cheekbones and a beauty made more arresting by the contrast of jagged scars slicing across her forehead.

Her head was shaved smooth, revealing intricate tattoos that spiraled over her scalp like fragments of a secret map.

From Rachel's vantage point, the inked patterns were unreadable, but the effect was unmistakable: this woman was marked by something... ritual, rebellion, survival.

Maybe all three.

Pretty, Rachel thought. But hard. The kind of pretty that's seen too much and stopped caring.

"Dash?! It's Juju. Are you in there?" the Asian woman called out.

Rachel recognized the woman's accent.

"Japanese... hmm," Rachel thought.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Dash? Zaid got your radio message... But you got cut off... You found the cave! That's great. Where are you? Did you find the stuff?" Juju asked.

Juju turned to the rider standing next to her and, pointing her machine gun at the cave's entrance, ordered him inside.

"Go in. Go in. He probably can't hear anything in there."

The second rider stepped into the cave.

"*Cut off*!... Oh, you're in for a treat, geisha lady..." Rachel thought. "Dash poked... The bear sliced... And you lady? You brought gas masks and guns... Hope you packed scrubbing brushes and bath towels from the bath house... Though you don't strike me as the loofah and lavender bath salts type... I'd say I'm looking at foes. No doubt about it."

Rachel didn't need more intel. What she'd just seen and heard was enough.

"Time to go."

Rachel eased back from the ridge, moving slow and low, careful not to make a sound.

She made her way down to her sled, climbed onto it, put on her helmet, and as if her thoughts were tethered to the dogs', the pack began

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

pulling her away from the ridge, gliding over the icy, uneven ground.

Rachel hoped to circle around the mountain above the cave and disappear from view.

She glanced down at the bundled sleeping bag nestled in the sled.

"Hang in there, furballs," she murmured. "I'm gonna have to give a name to the cubs. That means I will have to memorize sixteen names in addition to Black Paw… Brilliant Rachel."

She focused back on the horizon, guiding the team along the mountain's curve, aiming to vanish behind the ridge.

"Once geisha lady finds out Dash is dead, she'll search for his ride... same as I did." Rachel said softly to the pack… and the cubs.

###

Bear cave entrance...

Juju slipped into the cave behind her companion, impatience growing with every silent second. It had been too quiet for too long.

Juju was often impatient. Zen wasn't in her vocabulary. On top of that, everything took twice as long in sub-zero temperatures. Blink too slow

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

and your lashes could freeze shut.

She muttered under her breath, “Move it or freeze, genius,” then added with a huff, “If I wanted to stand still and die, I’d have joined a monastery on Mount Asahi.”

Her boots crunched faintly on bloodied snow. Her breath clouded the cold air.

“Where are you guys?” Juju called out. “Who’s blood is this?”

She did not hear any sounds coming from the left chamber. Just the moan of wind beyond the rocks. She flicked on her shoulder-mounted flashlight, its beam slicing through shadow. She walked further into the cave.

As she crouched to crawl into the left section of the cave, the rider stumbled out, shoving her aside.

“Dash is dead,” the rider blurted, his voice tight with shock. “Decapitated.”

He staggered past Juju and doubled over outside the cave mouth, barely able to remove his gas mask and balaclava before retching into the snow.

Juju blinked, the words barely registering.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Outside, the rider's retching echoed off the ice, then faded into silence.

“Dash headless... this, I’ve got to see for myself,” Juju murmured.

She ducked into the left chamber, eyes adjusting fast.

Dash was there... or what was left of him.

The headless body lay twisted on the frozen ground, neck a raw, open stump. Blood had pooled, already crusted black in the cold.

Juju had never liked Dash. Though she barely knew him. As far as she was concerned, Dash was an outsider. Seeing what had happened to Dash stirred nothing in Juju. No anger. No pity.

“Guess you did get *cut off*... I always liked you better quiet anyway,” Juju murmured.

She backed out of the chamber, jaw tight. She glanced quickly at the entrance to the right chamber. She listened for a moment. Heard nothing. She walked out of the cave into the frigid light. She tapped her comm and keyed into the private channel.

“Zaid, this is Juju,” she said into her comm.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Dash is dead... decapitated. No sign of the cargo. Cave's clear. You can move in."

The leader responded with a curt acknowledgment.

"Coming over!"

He gunned the engine and led the rest of the riders, like a white swarm of wasps, toward the remains of the dead bear first.

Zaid arrived ahead of the others, easing his snowmobile to a stop near the blood-soaked patch where the mother bear had fallen.

He removed his gas mask and balaclava.

He studied the carcass from a distance. There was no shock in his eyes, only confirmation. As if this outcome had always been part of the plan.

He nodded once. Not in horror, but in something resembling respect.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Energy Compound
The Inn near the snowmobile rental shack...
February 13, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid had been hired by a shadowy international arms dealer known only by a codename: *Hector the Vector.* Zaid didn't ask questions, and Hector didn't elaborate much.

Hector gave clear orders. That was it.

Zaid had gathered the team in the back meeting room of the inn, just across from Samuk's rental shack, a day earlier.

"Hector believes the last remaining samples of a long-lost Nazi-Japanese bioweapon are buried somewhere in the Canadian Arctic. Around here." He had shared with the team.

"The pay is generous. The reward for successful delivery? Even better."

Zaid had told his team almost nothing. Not even Juju, his second-in-command, knew the full scope.

"If local folks get curious, just say that we're hunters," he had instructed. "Dismiss."

He had dispatched Dash ahead to scout the area, warned him that whatever they were looking for was volatile. Dangerous. Strict orders: *don't touch anything*. Just confirm the find and report back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Should I start where the Inuit told us to go? You think he was lying to us, don't you? You want me to go west instead? Right?" Dash had asked.

"The Inuit is lying. Stick to the ridge as planned," Zaid had responded. "But trust your instincts. If anything looks unnatural, it probably is."

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Bear Cave
February 14, Present-Day

Zaid took one last look at the bear's remains. Dash had brought them to the right place.

He restarted his snowmobile and led the team toward the cave, waiting until each engine fell silent, one by one.

The stillness that followed was a relief. The roar of machines in a place this sacred grated on him.

Zaid closed his eyes, sitting motionless in the saddle.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

No one dared make a sound when Zaid closed his eyes. He was thinking. Planning. Whatever it was, if you were on Zaid's team, you'd been told: wait quietly. He would let you know when he was done.

What few people understood was that when Zaid closed his eyes, it wasn't just to think. It was to recharge... by summoning his own version of paradise. A private reel of memories. Most often, he'd recall pacing around a victim tied to a chair, calmly delivering a monologue on the nature of pain… just before proving his thesis...

###

Somewhere in Syria
Torture chamber
Sometime in the past year

Zaid recollected standing in front of one of his victims, a man, bruised, bound to a metal chair. Gagged. Blood crusted to the side of his head.

"I have always admired the ingenuity humans bring to killing, but I prefer quiet methods to loud solutions. Death comes for everyone, my friend. Why make so much noise delivering it?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid loved to set the scenery just right. A dim, claustrophobic space. Stone walls stained with time and blood. A single light bulb swinging from the ceiling. Flickering, casting long, shifting shadows.

"Peace and quiet... those are luxuries. Few get to experience them. Fewer still get to hold onto them. One should at least *pursue* silence whenever possible."

Zaid circled the man while talking, slow, measured. Taking his time. He crouched down. At eye-level.

"Fuck peace... kill them all. But kill them quietly... so you can hear them scream."

Zaid plucked a small blade from the tray.

"There's something about final sounds, animal or human, that stirs me. You feel it too? I bet you do..."

He held the blade delicately, like a violinist adjusting a bow.

"Dying has its own music. Not the racket of killing machines, but the real sound: a soul tearing loose. A first and final performance. A

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

one-time aria. Always unique. Always... beautiful."

"Men. Women. Children. Animals. Doesn't matter what language they grew up speaking. When death catches their breath, their voices carry weight. That is, if they don't cheat and die quietly in their sleep... or before I'm finished."

Zaid set the blade down and picked up a small recorder.

"I often imagine the breathy voices of modern pop divas rising into final, broken crescendos, something operatic, something primal, as they approach their deaths. Violent deaths. Deaths I would inflict to each and every one of them. My personal compositions. Actually, collaborations? Like Captain and Tennille? Not modern enough. Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars?"

Zaid hit play. A soft pop song began. A woman's voice singing about heartbreak.

Zaid grimaced.

"I've grown weary of the endless stream of broken-hearted lamentations flooding the airwaves, girls bemoaning boys who can't do anything right by them. Three-minute therapy

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

sessions disguised as songs, all broadcast with righteous fury. The never-ending overflowing of diary confessions delivered with the same throat-fry and righteous whispered teary affectations. Do you keep a diary?"

Zaid turned off the recorder.

"I don't believe in conspiracy theories. I *am* the conspiracist, and never theoretically. I write them. In blood, not ink."

"Still, no matter what playlist I craft for myself the algorithm manages to deliver these same songs and singers over and over. Ever wonder why that is? Something in my online profile?"

The man moaned softly.

"It grates on me. Aren't confessions meant for a private room, not global playlists? Don't die on me just yet my friend."

Zaid pressed a vial against the man's cheek. Cold. Glass.

"I look forward to hearing the last screams of pop stars, politicians, preachers and most of their followers. Hear them drift across a dying world

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

in the key of... poison? That would be a great playlist, don't you think?"

"One vial, one rupture, and it wouldn't matter who wrote the lyrics, the speeches or the sermons, or programmed the playlists algorithms. Everyone would be singing the same song..."

Zaid picked up the blade again.

" And I *cannot wait* to hear it.... but first... let me hear you..."

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Bear cave
February 14, Present-Day

Zaid opened his eyes slowly.

"Maybe one day," Zaid said softly, almost to himself.

Juju glanced over. "Maybe one day *what*?"

"Some voices deserve to be silenced... after one long last scream." Zaid responded. "If what we are looking for in this frozen world is real, if

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Hector the Vector is right, then lots of voices will let out their last screams... very soon."

"Well... Dash is definitely quiet now. Don't know if he screamed before his head got torn off his body. His radio is smashed." Juju said.

"Then we're making progress... tell me more." Zaid probed.

Juju thought Zaid looked like a dead ringer for Omar Sharif, mustache and all.

She'd seen Doctor Zhivago dozens of times. She had a thing for old movies. The way people died in them, so dramatic, so clean... so fake. The dying just as fake as the kissing.

But there was nothing romantic about Zaid, even here, surrounded by snow and silence like a scene from some frozen epic.

When he had pulled off his balaclava and gas mask, Juju actually did a double take. Somehow, the Arctic air played tricks on her, or on him. There was no doubt, Omar Shariff was alive... and on Baffin Island.

Zaid's features were soft, almost gentle, until you met his eyes. Cold, unreadable, shark eyes. Deadly in their stillness.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju heard Zaid shift beside her, a subtle exhale, the signal she'd stalled long enough. He was waiting for her to continue the briefing, come back from her daydreaming.

Juju straightened. "Dash is inside, in the back of the cave. Decapitated. Nothing in sight. No bags, no containers... We heard him talk about syringes on the radio. Didn't see any."

Juju had come to the same conclusion Rachel had reached when piecing together what had happened to Dash.

She shared her theory with Zaid as they walked over from the entrance of the cave to the bear's mangled body.

The shard of broken glass lodged in the bear's mouth seemed to confirm it had been poisoned by the content of a syringe.

Zaid had been thoroughly briefed by Hector the Vector, and he understood the consequences of mishandling what they were here to recover.

He let Juju speak, offering no comment. Just listening. Measuring. Calculating.

"Powerful weapon," Zaid said acknowledging he had been listening to Juju.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Bravo Hector...” he whispered.

Zaid pulled a plastic bag from one of his pockets and opened it. Juju grabbed the syringe shard out of the bear’s teeth and put it in the bag. Her gloved hand steady, holding her breath.

Zaid inspected the shard like an archaeologist staring at a museum artifact, precise, cold. He glanced at the bloodied snow, then at the bear’s torn throat and jaw.

“The bear fought back. Beautiful.” Zaid whispered.

“Yeah... beautiful.” Echoed Juju.

“Bring me a jerry can. And a flare,” Zaid ordered over his radio.

One of the riders ran toward Zaid and handed him a small red metal can full of gasoline.

Zaid poured gasoline over the bear’s remains.

“There should be no trace of the weapon left behind” he said addressing Juju.

“There will be other ways of proving what it can do. Soon.”

“Hector will not tolerate loose ends.”

Hector was a dealmaker, pure and simple. He didn’t care about gods, ideologies, or noble

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

causes. He sold to anyone with the means to pay. Between transactions, he vanished on one of his yachts, floating luxury retreats, taking him to remote islands and at times overly crowded ones, away from the people he called his customers and among the ones he called his playmates.

Zaid took the flare the rider had brought along with the can of gasoline. He cracked it and tossed it into the bloody mess, skin, bone, fur, and whatever was left of the bear. Flames caught fast. He watched, uncertain. Fire might not be enough.

Juju pulled off her gloves carefully and through them in the fire. She signed for the rider to bring her a new pair.

Whatever had been in that cave could have seeped deep into the ice beneath the carcass. The compound wasn't airborne, but it didn't need to be. Contact was enough. It spread through the body like necrosis, like flesh-eating bacteria.

Bears weren't immune. Zaid doubted anything alive would be.

"Where's Dash's snowmobile?" Zaid asked Juju.

Juju turned and scanned the area, realizing she hadn't thought to check.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid and Juju returned to the entrance of the cave.

By now, everyone on the team was waiting there. Pretty much covering what footsteps would have been those of Dash with their own and their snowmobiles, churning the ground into slush that rapidly froze into new shapes, erasing all clues as to what might have happened before their arrival.

With no sign of Dash's snowmobile nearby, Zaid moved toward the bottom of the ridge flanking the cave.

It didn't take him long to spot the tracks: one set of larger boot prints leading down, a smaller set heading up and down.

A dogsled trail had been pulled up the ridge as well, its grooves still sharp in the snow. Around it, a flurry of paw prints. He didn't notice any near the bear remains.

"Someone smart saw something they shouldn't have," he murmured.

Zaid crouched, scanning the tracks. At least ten dogs. Maybe more. That kind of team could cover serious ground. Fast.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Whoever got out of here wasn't just running. They were already gaining distance.

Smaller footsteps heading up and down... A woman?

Zaid studied the footprints heading up and down the ridge again.

"Light, but purposeful, precise. Someone trained. Not a tourist. Not a fool." He shared with Juju and the team.

"Who are you, lady? Where are you going? I think you took something that belongs to us... Hector won't like it."

Zaid paused. Closed his eyes. Then opened them again, sharper now. He'd heard her voice... he was sure of it.

Right after Dash's radio cut off, a woman had responded. No one from Zaid's team. Her radio must have picked up their frequency.

"I liked your voice lady... I bet you will sound great when I send you off. Even better than a pop diva would..." Zaid whispered.

Zaid climbed the ridge. From the top, he spotted Dash's snowmobile down the hill. He

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

raised his binoculars and scanned the hilly landscape.

Zaid saw nothing. Only wind, rising steadily, whispering across the ridge.

He swept the horizon, scanning each hill in turn, eyes sharp and methodical.

Far off in the distance, the sky had begun to thicken. A blizzard was coming. Still hours out, maybe, but coming straight for them.

Zaid had spent time in the Siberian wilderness, but he didn't trust himself to read weather patterns in the Canadian North.

He was a man of deserts, used to heat, to dust, to charting the crawl of sandstorms across the dunes.

Snow moved differently. And it didn't forgive mistakes.

Suddenly, about a quarter mile out, Zaid caught movement, dogs cresting a hill, their bodies low and fast against the wind. Then the sled appeared, trailing behind them.

They were heading straight into the storm.

"Ballsy move lady," he whispered.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He spun and raced back up the ridge and then down toward the cave, urgency sharpening his every step.

He ordered loudly:

"Juju! Dash's snowmobile is right on the other side of the ridge. I bet there's nothing left in it. Check, just in case. Then take it inside the cave. Remove the GPS. Take another look around the cave then seal it with explosives."

"Make sure no one can get back in there... ever. Then catch up with us!"

He turned to the rest of the squad.

"The rest of you, with me! We're going hunting."

Zaid leapt onto his snowmobile and powered up the ridge, the others right behind him.

They rode standing, knees bent, weight shifting instinctively with every rise and dip of the terrain. The machines snarled as they climbed, dipped, and surged, racing after the sled like a pack of steel-toothed wolves.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Heading into the storm
February 14, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Team Rachel

Rachel's sled crested a new hill, moments from disappearing down the other side. The roar of engines made her glance back. The riders had seen her. She turned to the dogs and said:

"Okay doggies! Lots of treats if you get us far away from here... fast. Some mean people are on our tail."

She looked down at the three cubs, still curled into one big, drowsy fur ball, and murmured:

"Don't worry, cubbies. You'll be just fine."

The same cub that had barely opened its eyes back in the cave, the littlest of the three, lifted its sleepy head, blinked at Rachel for a moment, then nestled back between its siblings' legs and drifted off again.

Rachel wasn't sure if she was steering the dogs toward the white cloud swelling on the horizon or if they simply knew it was the only way forward.

Either way, the storm felt like the safer bet. She, the pack, and the cubs had better odds against an ice tempest than a hail of machine-gun fire.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Adrenaline-fueled instinct doesn't give your brain much time to second-guess a plan. Especially when you're the one giving the orders.

She rode low on the sled, bracing for the staccato crack of gunfire to split the wind at any moment.

###

Syria
A decade ago, or so...

Once, in Syria, Rachel had respectfully objected to an order: evacuate the team, leave the civilians, a mother and her two children, behind in the ruins of a village as ISIS fighters closed in. The call came fast. The decision came faster.

Rachel had followed the command. She had obeyed.

And she regretted it, every day.

Some days, it hit like shrapnel. Sharp. Sudden.

Other days it just sat there, dull and heavy, like a stone she couldn't cough up or swallow.

Tequila helped. Until it didn't.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nothing silenced the memory. Not orders. Not rationalizations. Not time.

They could've saved them. Or at least tried.

The good of the many? The good of the few? The interests of a nation? The grand strategies and noble ideals?

Each soul is a universe. Unique. Irreplaceable.

But isn't it easier, sometimes too easy, to live by orders? Whether they come from a man with more stripes on his sleeve… or a book passed down from on high, pages filled with certainty.

No room for questions. No room for doubt.

She'd followed orders. And now she lived with the ghosts.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Heading into the storm
February 14, Present-Day
Team Rachel

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Now it was Rachel's call. Her cargo. Her responsibility. The dogs. The cubs. Hers to lose or protect.

One hand gripping the sled, she yanked her radio from her belt and keyed the mic.

"Mayday, mayday... This is Rachel Shepherd. Traveling southwest from polar bear den... I'm in serious danger. Being pursued by multiple armed riders... Repeat... mayday... Does anyone copy?"

Static... Gusts of wind were rising, slicing at her goggles in icy shards.

"OK, let's do it my way..."

They rode into the white… Then it happened.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter IV

Light Reading

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day

Gunfire. The rattle Rachel knew too well. She had been under it. She had returned it in kind.

###

Zaid chasing Rachel…

Zaid knew the odds of landing a lucky shot were low. He only hired good shooters, but firing from a snowmobile, in crosswinds like this, wasn't about accuracy. It was about pressure. Intimidation. Make the target flinch, hesitate. Lose concentration.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

But the figure leading that sled? Whoever she was, she didn't flinch.

Professional, by all indications.

He barked out commands. Two riders to circle right. Two to the left. The last two would stay with him, tailing Rachel's trail directly.

The storm was closing in faster than Zaid had calculated. What had looked like hours was collapsing into minutes.

The only real expert in Arctic weather had been reduced to two frozen pieces on the cave's floor. Dash Wolf, soon to be sealed forever in a tomb of ice and rocks. Perhaps Juju found something worth salvaging from what was left of him.

###

Juju at the cave…

Deep inside the bear cave, in the larger left chamber, the flashlight clipped to Juju's shoulder lit her face in profile, sharp, unreadable, the inked lines of her temple catching the glow.

She crouched beside Dash's remains, methodically checking his pockets.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nothing.

Nothing in the snowmobile either.

She had smashed its GPS with the butt of her machine gun after dragging it into the cave. After that she had stripped the machine down. She did not find anything in it, not even Dash's papers.

"Nothing... Nothing left in your snowmobile Dash. You got robbed blind. By a woman too... I don't know what's most embarrassing... getting your head cut off by a bear twice your size or getting robbed blind by a woman? Most likely half your size?" Juju said out loud, staring at Dash's severed head.

"If it's any consolation, Zaid's after her. You know Zaid... He won't stop until that woman's tied to a chair listening to one of his tirades... Right before she screams her lungs out." She added.

Juju stood and scanned the chamber.

She hadn't noticed the mummies when she first came in the chamber earlier. So surprised to see Dash in two pieces, she had looked around for syringes, bags, containers. She only noticed Dash's smashed radio. She didn't notice the mummies. Then she had left to report to Zaid.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Well, hello there... kon’nichiwa...” Juju said out loud. She didn’t bow.

The mummies amused her in a detached way. She studied them for a moment, head tilted, as if weighing a joke she chose not to make.

“I didn't see you when I came in to visit Dash earlier... Seeing him in pieces got me distracted...” Juju said.

The shape of the woman’s face, the slope of the eyes, Asian. Japanese, maybe.

“Hello sister...” Juju murmured.

She knelt and began checking the woman’s pockets, then the man’s... methodically, almost gently. Then she froze.

“What were you carrying?” she murmured, eyes on the baby. Then, a smirk. “If you were my kid, you'd be useful at your age. If you can eat, you can work…”

She began to unwrap the mummified child, her movements slow but unbothered.

Tucked deep in the folds of the cloth, she found a bracelet, small, tarnished.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A name etched into the metal, almost erased by time.

Kato, maybe.

On the reverse: a string of numbers.

She pocketed the bracelet.

She stood up, faced Dash's body and raised a middle finger.

"Goodbye, Dash," she muttered with a smirk.

"You are in good company..."

She looked through the chamber again. Nothing.

She crawled out and crossed into the right chamber.

At first glance, it looked just as barren. But as she turned to leave, something caught her eye, boots, barely visible beneath a tangle of rocks. A mummified pair of feet.

Juju knelt and began prying loose the debris. Bit by bit, the mummy emerged, legs, hips, torso.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She worked carefully, confident that side of the cave wouldn't collapse but wary all the same.

After all, something brought down all these rocks on the mummy. As she followed one of the arms, her hand froze.

A small landslide of stones clattered free.

She held her breath, listening. Waiting. Nothing moved. The dust settled.

Gently, she cleared more rubble and then saw it: the corner of a metal briefcase.

Her pulse quickened. If anything valuable had survived this long, it would be in there.

She dug farther, revealing the full case. Beneath it, half-buried in soil and shards of rock, was a collapsed backpack. She tugged it free.

Quick check of the mummy's pockets... nothing.

She glanced upward, uneasy. No more digging. The weight above looked unstable now. The briefcase and backpack would have to be searched later.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju retreated from the chamber and emerged into the cave's central mouth, standing tall and brushing the dust off her sleeves.

She placed the briefcase and backpack at her feet.

Suddenly, part of the right chamber's ceiling collapsed, a cloud of dust escaping into the cave entrance, as if chasing after Juju. She coughed. She covered her eyes and mouth and waited at the entrance of the cave, ready to run out if needed.

The cloud dissipated quickly. She retrieved the satchel of explosives she'd brought into the cave with Dash's snowmobile.

She began lining the cave walls, her movements efficient, almost clinical. Detcord snaked through cracks and around stones, linked to a detonator synced with her phone.

She keyed her radio.

"Zaid, this is Juju. Getting ready to blow this pop stand."

A short crackle, then Zaid's voice returned.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Hold off. Big storm inbound. We’re still in pursuit, but if we get buried out here, you might be the one taking over the chase. Stand by.”

Juju looked disappointed. She exhaled. She eyed the metal briefcase and backpack she laid out earlier. The chance to redeem herself... delayed.

She muttered to herself:

“I should’ve thought of searching for Dash's sled... Zaid's gonna think I'm losing it...”

She crouched beside the items, tapping a finger against the case.

“Dangerous to disappoint Zaid... never ends well... though sometimes...” she murmured.

###

Syria torture chamber
Sometimes in the past
Zaid and Juju..

Juju had known Zaid for years. Knew what those eyes meant. Knew better than to ever cross him. He was patient, methodical. But he didn’t feel pity. Neither did she. That’s why they worked so well together.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Only once had Zaid surprised Juju.

He was known to settle accounts immediately. If people couldn't pay what they owed, they were never given a chance to make it up later. In those cases, he took everything they had on them. And if that didn't add up, he took their lives, slowly, painfully.

He had a true talent for making people scream. In fact, he preferred it if they couldn't pay up or give him what he wanted right there, on the spot.

Once, in Syria, in a makeshift torture chamber, he brought a bound woman to the brink of death, carving his initials around the most sensitive places on her body, careful not to let her bleed out too quickly. Just as she was fading, she whispered something in his ear.

Zaid froze.

Then he wiped his blade clean, ordered her untied, and told Juju to see that her wounds were closed.

The only thing Juju heard him say to the woman was: "You're in my debt. Never forget."

He then turned to Juju.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"See that she lives."

The woman's face was battered, cheeks mottled, eyes swollen nearly shut.

Bruises bloomed across her features, the aftermath of the beating that came before the carving. Her hair, short, was matted with blood.

"I'm surprised you're still alive," Juju whispered.

"I'm only a good nurse when patients are really, really nice to me. Will you be nice to me?"

The woman nodded... faded... passing out.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Bear cave
February 14, Present-Day

Juju crouched over the detonator. Still. Eyes unfocused, caught in memory. She exhaled. Low.

"You always remember the ones that get away... not too hard when so few ever do..." she murmured.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She steadied her hand and reached for her radio again.

"You got it Zaid... holding off on blowing the pop stand."

###

Zaid chasing Rachel...

Zaid stood on his snowmobile at the head of the pursuit team, scanning the horizon as the first violent gust tore across the ridge.

Zaid's latest call on the weather had been wrong. A violent gust ripped through the ridge, reshaping the approaching white mass into something almost unimaginable, a rolling, flat avalanche of airborne ice and snow.

Almost simultaneously, both flanking teams radioed in to Zaid.

LEFT FLANK (RADIO): **"**Do you see the dogsled? We've lost visual!"

RIGHT FLANK (RADIO): **"**Same here. Total whiteout."

Zaid had also lost sight of Rachel. One moment, Rachel and her sled were racing the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

wind in front of his eyes... then the storm had swallowed them whole.

He paused before keying his mic.

ZAID (RADIO): **“**She’s still out there. And she’s got what we came for. No package, no pay. No bonus.”

The reality settled in. He would need a new plan.

ZAID (RADIO): “Dig in and wait. No one moves till I say. She’s out there, somewhere, buried in this blizzard like the rest of us. When it breaks, we hunt.”

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day
Rachel in the blizzard...

Rachel didn’t hear Zaid’s words, but she felt them. Men sent to retrieve bioweapons didn’t just turn back because the weather got rough.

She put her trust in Black Paw, who may have winked at her during treat time but hadn’t blinked once since diving into the storm. A true leader.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The pack was in its element now. The dogs were home.

Rachel no longer felt like just a passenger.

She felt like the guest of honor.

She couldn't see where she was going... Black Paw was in charge.

She couldn't see what was behind her either. If the men chasing her were only a few feet away, she wouldn't know it. She might not even hear the engines approaching over the wind.

Rachel had never experienced a whiteout. Kate had warned her it was a real risk.

"The weather can turn fast up here. Be careful," Kate had said.

Rachel remembered their last night together, poring over maps of Baffin Island on Kate's tablet, the firelight flickering as Kate walked her through the terrain.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Security Station
February 13, Present-Day
Kate's office...

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“You know this used to be all fur territory?” she said. “Inuit communities traded pelts, mostly fox and seal, with whalers and European traders. That was their whole economy until the mid-1900s.”

Rachel nodded, eyes still on the map.

“The fur trade collapsed after World War II,” Kate continued. “Too many animals pushed out. Too many people moving in. Mining took over. Zinc, silver, even uranium. Companies from around the world came up here in the '50s and never left.”

She zoomed in closer to the Angna range.

“By the '60s, they were digging deeper. Bigger machines. Settlements started to form. Families moved into prefab housing. Dogsleds gave way to snowmobiles. All of it in the name of progress.”

Rachel glanced at her. “And the animals?”

Kate shrugged. “Gone, mostly. The noise, the sprawl... it broke migration routes. The caribou vanished. Bears started denning farther north.”

Rachel leaned back. “So, this isn’t exactly untouched wilderness.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Nope,” Kate said. “It’s been touched. Branded. Extracted from. Since at least the '40s.”

Kate glanced up from the screen. Rachel met her gaze.

For a moment, neither said anything. A flash of memory passed between them, gear checks in dim tents, the weight of rifles slung across backs, whispered jokes before sunrise patrols in Syria. Dust, sweat, adrenaline. Trust built in silence.

“Just like the old days... the two of us prepping a patrol,” Rachel said.

“No kidding. From sand dunes to snowdrifts… Then came the Cold War,” Kate said, sliding her finger across the map. “NATO built a chain of radar stations across the Arctic, coast to coast. They were meant to catch Soviet bombers or missiles flying over the pole. The DEW Line.”

“DEW?” Rachel asked.

“Distant Early Warning. Basically, a nervous system for the West. Giant steel nerves stretched across frozen nothingness. A last-ditch effort to detect a nuclear first strike. Back then, the Cold War was like a chess game with missiles and long-range bombers. The shortest route from the USSR to North America wasn’t around the world, it was straight over the top, through the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Arctic. The idea was to spot incoming Soviet bombers or missiles in time to launch a counterattack. Mutually assured destruction, remember that gem? This was the ‘early’ part of early warning, just a few minutes' heads-up to scramble jets or fire back. Not enough to save lives, but enough to make sure both sides lost. These stations were manned year-round, in some of the most brutal conditions on Earth. Americans, Canadians, even some Norwegians. Rotating crews watching radar blips in endless snowstorms.”

Rachel squinted at the ridges Kate had just traced. “You’re saying there were radar stations here? On Baffin?”

“There still are. Most are abandoned, like bones under the ice. Antennas, bunkers, collapsed towers... some frozen in time, some repurposed, surveillance, research, or worse... Vastan’s outposts are built on a few of them.”

“Repurposed how?”

Kate hesitated. “A few are used by weather teams, survival schools, climate researchers. But some?” She shrugged. “Hard to say.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “You think someone’s using them?”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I think if you needed to hide something, equipment, records, people, it’s easier when everyone assumes the place is empty. And way too cold year-round to bother visiting.”

That landed. Rachel looked back at the map... really looked this time. The DEW Line wasn’t just a relic anymore. It was a breadcrumb trail. A chain of hiding places strung across the Arctic.

Kate tapped one of the old outposts on the screen.

“Oh, and, almost forgot. One of these, closer to the coast, is being remodeled into a kind of Arctic Zoo.”

Rachel arched a brow.

Kate continued.

“Some billionaire decided a luxury resort in sub-zero temperatures would be a hit with the extreme sports crowd. They’ve started construction, but nothing happens during the winter. Skeleton crew up there, holding down the fort.”

Rachel squinted and asked.

“Extreme sports? You mean some hedge fund cowboys trying not to freeze to death teeing off on a tundra golf course? Or maybe it’s ‘Safari

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

on Ice', shooting at polar bears from heated igloos? Billionaire's bullseye?"

Kate gave her a look, dry, deadpan.

"Doubt you'll need to go that far for your bear footage. Unless you're into pacing wildlife behind plexiglass. Not exactly what Vastan wants for their wilderness rebrand."

Rachel smirked.

"Well, at the rate the ice is melting, that resort might start competing with a Mediterranean Club Med by next summer."

Kate gave a half-laugh, then Rachel's expression shifted.

"Have you had a chance to explore the region?" she asked. "If the cave the Vastan execs flagged is empty, where am I supposed to find polar bears?"

Kate nodded, turning the screen slightly so Rachel could follow.

"Good question. I didn't go around knocking on cave walls to wake up bears, but I've done patrols in most of the area, part of keeping the mining sites secure."

She leaned back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"But the dogs I picked for you? They know the land. Been everywhere with me. And with Samuk, their master, and loads of visitors. They tend to pull toward the smelliest dens."

Kate smiled at the memory looking at the dogs lying nearby.

"I figured you'd want a sled team. Quieter than a snowmobile. *Green*. And way more dependable. If you're caught in a whiteout and your GPS fails, the dogs won't. They'll find shelter. Trust them. Let them lead. They've got a weird fondness for the old fur trading outposts... what's left of them."

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Rachel and the dogs in the blizzard
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel realized now, Kate had been right.

She still couldn't see the path ahead, but Black Paw led with unwavering confidence, his nose slicing into the wind.

The sled slowed beneath her. Then stopped.

The storm was unrelenting. She could barely see the sled's front from where she stood. Wind

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

whipped in every direction, a cyclone of white noise and disorientation.

She hesitated. If she stepped off and the dogs bolted, she'd never catch up. The thought was chilling.

Then, like a ghost emerging from the swirl, Black Paw appeared. He trotted back to her, the rest of the pack trailing him in a graceful arc.

Watching fourteen dogs pull a U-turn in a blizzard felt surreal, like a dream she wasn't quite part of.

Black Paw pressed against her left leg and whimpered, nudging her gently, urging her to follow.

Rachel stepped off the sled. She unhooked Black Paw from the harness.

She looked behind her. Around. No sign they had been followed. She was hopeful the men chasing them were lost or worse.

Black Paw started walking, pausing often to look back and make sure Rachel was following.

Seconds later, partially hidden beneath a drift, she saw it: a wooden door nestled between two snow-packed mounds. Only the top edge was visible, like the hatch of a buried shelter.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She swept the snow away with her gloves, revealing a crude wooden handle. No lock.

Shouldering into it, she pushed.

On the third try, the door gave way with a groan, opening into darkness.

She looked at Black Paw, who stood calmly beside her.

“Shelter. Thank you boy.”

“Let’s go and bring everybody in before the storm eats us alive.”

The door hadn’t been sealed tight. Snow had drifted in, covering the floor of what Rachel had first assumed was a cabin. She switched on her helmet light.

A wide corridor stretched ahead, vanishing into darkness. Just a few feet in, steel rail tracks gleamed beneath the frost... this wasn’t a cabin. It was a mining tunnel. Wide enough for her, the dogs, and the sled.

She backed out while looking at Black Paw walking at her side.

“You are way more loyal than the past lovers I can still remember Black Paw,” Rachel said. “Don’t get too clingy. I wouldn’t want to break your heart.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Within minutes, the sled team, still harnessed, pulled the rig into the shelter of the mine. Rachel shut the door behind them and wedged it closed with chunks of timber, splintered lengths that had once supported rail.

"Time for treats everyone!"

The dogs perked up, crowding around her.

"Double rations," she added with a weary smile.

She let the moment linger, watching the dogs devour their reward. She took her helmet off.

She wasn't hungry herself. But she wasn't alone.

"What do bear cubs eat? Not dog treats, that's for sure. Milk? Maybe… condensed milk?"

Rachel rummaged through her supplies and pulled out a small carton.

"Well, no bottle. No teat."

She glanced at the cubs, still fast asleep, bundled together like fuzzy embers under the sleeping bag.

"You don't look like it's dinner time anyway."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Carefully, she lifted them from the sled, keeping them swaddled and warm.

Then, reaching for the satchel she'd taken from the cave, she unbuckled the flap.

Time to read.

Rachel sat cross-legged on a folded sleeping bag isolating her from the cold stone floor, the cubs nestled on her thighs in their own sleeping bag.

One by one, the dogs surrounded her, pressing close until she was wrapped in a circle of warmth.

Black Paw sat by the door, still and alert. Watching. Guarding. Always the loyal leader.

Rachel opened the satchel and began to sort the printed material, separating the German from the Japanese sections...

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Juju at the bear cave
February 14, Present-Day

About a mile away, Juju stood by the cave's entrance, watching the whiteout descend like a wall of smoke.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She brought her snowmobile inside the mouth of the cave and parked it next to Dash'. She pulled a tarp from her snowmobile. She retreated deeper inside to the left chamber, carrying the tarp and the metal briefcase she had found earlier in the right chamber.

She covered Dash's body and severed head with the tarp, then sat beside the mummies and opened the metal case.

She couldn't read German, but some words stood out. And the unmistakable swastika confirmed it.

"Definitely Nazi," she murmured.

She flipped through the documents, scanning diagrams and typewritten pages. Her fingers paused.

She saw something familiar... Kanji. Japanese characters.

She froze. Her eyes narrowed.

"No way..." she said.

She separated the Japanese pages, spreading them carefully.

A faint rumble echoed from deeper inside the chamber. She looked up. Listened. Nothing. Just

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

her breath. And the silence of the dead sitting next to her.

She glanced toward the mummified infant, swaddled in decay.

Then, quietly she began to read.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Zaid caught in the blizzard
February 14, Present-Day

Somewhere between the cave and the abandoned mine where Rachel had taken refuge, Zaid sat alone in his tent. Wind clawed at the fabric, bending the poles, trying to tear it from the ground. The canvas flapped like a trapped bird, loud, relentless.

His men were in their own tents nearby.

He tried hailing Juju on the radio. Just static. A hiss, like a snake coiled in the speaker.

He smirked.

"I haven't heard a cobra in a while," he muttered. "Almost wish it was nearby. I'm ready for hot sand."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The Arctic cold pressed in around him, deafening in its stillness. He missed the heat of Syria, the clarity of desert missions.

His mind drifted to the woman who had slipped through his fingers. Who was she? And how had she outpaced him?

He closed his eyes and tried to picture her. Not just her face, but how she moved. How she *decided*. There was something deliberate in her actions. Something trained. Not fear, not luck.

"How had she gotten here?"

He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and retrieved a folded map, worn thin at the creases, protected by waxed canvas. He smoothed it across his lap, eyes narrowing as his gloved finger traced the terrain.

"Where would she go?" he muttered.

She hadn't just fled... She'd *chosen* her route. Into a storm. Into white oblivion. That wasn't desperation. That was strategy.

He'd seen fugitives jump from buildings to avoid capture. Because they knew who he was. Because the idea of what he would do to them was worse than death.

He stared into the flickering shadows of the tent, voice low, curious.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Is it possible… that you know me, lady?"

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Rachel and the dogs in the mine
February 14, Present-Day

Inside the mine, Rachel lifted her head. The cubs lay curled against her. The dogs were sprawled all around, forming a wall of heat and fur.

Rachel kept track of time, logging everything on paper. All the tech in the world meant nothing without batteries, and eventually, hers would die.

She looked toward the entrance.

Black Paw was still awake, alert, motionless, watching the door like a sentinel.

She blinked, pulled back into the world of ink and secrets.

She recognized many of the German words, but some sections were beyond her, chemical experiments, complex formulas, dense with jargon.

There were faded pages. Pictures too, some barely legible, others disturbingly clear. Even for her, they were hard to look at. Human beings can

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

do that… to each other. That's the way of the world.

She understood there were three separate chemicals meant to be combined for "*ultimative Ergebnisse,*" ultimate results.

Whatever that meant.

She remembered the syringes she'd taken from the cave, half filled with a clear liquid, the other half dark. And of course, two new ones, empty. No wax on them. Tagged.

According to the documents, there should've been a third liquid component? Perhaps not in syringes, perhaps in vials? She wasn't sure.

If only she could access the Internet.

What she could make out was enough though: each of the three mixtures was a potent poison on its own.

Her German was basic, patchy at best, but one phrase stuck with her: "Z*erstörung der Blutzellen.*" Destruction of blood cells.

One compound appeared to melt organs from the inside, attacking cellular linings and bypassing natural defenses.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There were photos of concentration camp prisoners receiving injections, followed by images of decomposed flesh and exposed bone.

Just like the bear.

The second liquid, the darker one, didn't need to be injected directly into the bloodstream. It was designed to spread through water supplies.

Only trace amounts were required.

Why was it in syringes? Could it be hidden inside a body? That would allow someone to carry it undetected, deliver contamination from the inside out, like passing on a disease to someone?

The warnings were numerous. While none of the three compounds were airborne on their own, they became aerosolized when mixed under the right conditions.

And of course, there were two syringes tagged VE, followed by numbers. These looked brand new. But they were empty. There did not seem to be any references to them in the document.

Rachel rubbed her eyes. She had been reading under the dim glow of her phone's screen for too long.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

What she had learned was enough: the men chasing her weren't going to stop. Not until they found her.

She kept an eye on the storm's progress. As long as the entrance door, guarded by Black Paw, kept rattling and letting in flurries of snow, the weather hadn't improved.

Rachel stood up and walked toward Black Paw.

"Thank you, Black Paw," she said as she knelt beside him and ran a gloved hand over his head. "As long as the wind keeps howling through that door... we're safe. But not for long, I fear..."

Rachel gave Black Paw a treat. They both watched the door.

The wind finally dropped.

Rachel cracked the door open.

A blinding whiteness greeted her, silent, wind-swept, still. A wall of snow erected against the entrance, heavy but holding. Above it, just enough space for a clear view of the horizon.

Rachel scanned the vast, frozen silence.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"The worst is over," she murmured, glancing down at Black Paw, now standing beside her, ears forward. "What do you think?"

Black Paw snorted softly.

"They're gonna be back on our tail soon," she added smirking. "No pun intended..."

The men would be on their way soon. Or maybe they were already moving.

Either way, she had to plan like pursuit was a certainty.

Her eyes lingered on the blank horizon a moment longer. She eased the door shut.

In between deciphering German instructions for poisoning humanity, Rachel had reviewed her options as the storm raged on.

She didn't think the riders were local. Kate had said very few people were. Still, they might have a good guide or two.

They wouldn't find much in the way of tracks, not after the storm, but they'd scan the horizon as soon as visibility returned, hoping to spot her sled on the ridgelines.

Hard to camouflage a fourteen-dog team, no matter how white most of them were.

She glanced down at her own gear. All black.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Thanks, Kate," she muttered. "Did Emma Peel ever wear a white catsuit? I wonder if Amazon Prime delivers this far north... I can't wait for drone deliveries to become a serious option... in all weather conditions... that'd be some drones..."

She smirked faintly, almost laughed.

She had tried to contact Kate, but no luck. The storm had scrambled the airwaves.

Even standing right by the mine's entrance, the door open, she couldn't reach the security station or Kate's satellite phone yet.

And her batteries were running low. Even top-tier gear had its limits. She was close to running out of power now. She needed to conserve what was left.

She looked down at the rails and then at the darkness farther into the tunnel.

"Where do these rails lead inside the mine?" she asked Black Paw.

She had tucked the cubs back into the sled. The pack was resting peacefully.

"Keep guarding the door," she told Black Paw.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel decided to follow the rail deeper into the mine.

As she walked, she tried to recall what Kate had explained about the area's history, how, after the radar stations were dismantled, the mining consortium repurposed some of them as storage depots and extended railway lines underground.

And of course, one of them soon to be a kind of Arctic Zoo.

"Whatever happens to a brain once it realizes it has sled-loads of money?" Rachel said softly, shaking her head.

A few minutes in, she came upon a flat shuttle cart resting quietly on the rails, likely once used to haul supplies through the mine.

Rachel stepped closer and ran a hand along the frame. It looked solid. Heavy, but intact. If she could hoist the sled onto it, the cart might just save them all some effort.

"I bet Black Paw and the rest of the doggies could pull the cart with the sled on it..." she murmured. "Let's see how well this cart rolls on the rail... the wheels don't look rusty."

"No rust. That's promising. Let's see how you roll, *chéri.*"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She gave the cart a push. It moved surprisingly well... It was lighter than it looked, yet solid beneath her hands.

But the risks of going deeper underground piled up in her mind.

The tunnels could be blocked. She might have to backtrack. There was no way to know if it was safe.

From the dust and silence, it was clear no one had been down here in a long time. How long could the cubs survive? What was she going to feed them?

If this potential escape route turned into a dead end, they'd be even more cut off, no radio contact, dwindling supplies, no easy exit.

Her mind spun, caught in loops of doubt and planning.

Analysis paralysis.

The other option? Head back outside. Run like hell. Hope the dogs could outrun the snowmobiles, avoid getting shot, and reach the security station. But that was on the other side of the mountain from here, and there was no retracing their original path.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel turned back. She pushed the flat cart toward the mine's entrance, to where the dogs and the cubs waited.

Using old planks, she scavenged from along the tracks, she fashioned a ramp and managed to hoist the sled onto the cart. Then she tied the dogs to it, securing their harnesses in place.

Black Paw stepped up, taking his position at the lead without needing a word.

"How are you at seeing in the dark?" she asked.

Light was going to be a problem.

"Let's hope we end up out in the sunshine soon."

Rachel walked back to the entrance and eased the door open just a crack.

From the outside, there was no sign her sled had ever arrived here. The wind and snow had erased everything.

She quietly lifted a gloved hand in a soft wave to the horizon, a silent goodbye to the open world, to light, to any sense of direction.

She closed the door and secured it with planks.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel inspected their resting spot one last time.

There could be no trace. No gear. No prints. Nothing to say she, the cubs, or the dogs had ever taken shelter here.

The air still carried their scent, but not for long. The tunnel was drafty enough to erase that too.

She checked the sled again, making sure the cubs were secure.

She'd been so focused on keeping the dogs and cubs safe, and later, on reading the documents she'd taken from the cave, that she'd nearly forgotten about the bags she'd grabbed from the headless man's snowmobile.

She remembered finding a map back then. Dash had been prepared she had remarked.

Rachel dug through Dash's bags and located the folded map and the compass she'd glanced at while searching his snowmobile.

Kate had offered Rachel a copy of the route map they'd studied the night before, plotting Rachel's journey to the bear's den.

In her usual effort to avoid waste, Rachel had declined the printout, asking instead for a link to

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

a digital version she could access on her phone. Not exactly helpful without a signal...

Now, between Dash's old-school paper map and her memory of Kate's digital one, she hoped she could triangulate where they were and where they might go if they followed the rail deeper underground.

But the compass was acting strange. And the map didn't seem to show any mine entrances or anything suggesting underground routes.

"You're not helping, Dash," she muttered.

Then: "Oh. Wait... Look at what we got here..." Rachel said, in her New York City Lower East Side accent.

She rummaged through the other two bags she'd salvaged. One held food. The other, flashlights, batteries, and several plastic snap-glow sticks.

"Hey, doggies! We're not going to be blind after all."

She turned to her team.

She strapped the green glow sticks to three of the dogs' harnesses, Black Paw included.

"Much better," she murmured. "Time to head into the abyss."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She placed one hand on the sled's frame. "Slow and steady, guys."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter V

Size Matters

From the French Alps to the Amazon Rainforest
February 10, Present-Day

Another voice had reached her a couple of days ago, this one via encrypted text. Anna, her agent, asking if Rachel would be available to document the current state of the Amazon Rainforest for a client who wished to remain anonymous.

Rachel had just leapt from a helicopter above the French Alps when she felt the "buzz."

Altitude: five thousand meters. Just two hundred meters above the icy crown of Mont Blanc, the "roof of Europe," straddling the border between France and Italy. The chopper had circled the summit twice before the door slid

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

open with theatrical inevitability, letting the skydivers peel off into the void.

"Breathtaking," Rachel had thought as she launched herself into the blue, free-falling. "Like diving into a tub of adrenaline. My perfect idea of a relaxing bath…"

Wrong vibration.

Her left forearm buzzed. Her watch lit up with an incoming message…

"Who the f—?"

She tilted slightly, trying to catch the sender's name mid-plummet.

"Puppy in a basket!" she hissed, twisting her torso just enough to silence the notification without tumbling off-axis.

"Sorry, I'm taking a bath…"

She was still twenty seconds from pulling her chute. Plenty of time to finish the jump. Plenty of time to curse at the modern world for breaching the sanctity of an open sky.

"Note to self: next time, rent a chopper with *just* a pilot and *zero* motivational speakers… And *no* tourists. And *no* watch. *No* phone…"

First…

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The safety briefing beforehand had been, in a word, abysmal.

Fifteen minutes of garbled encouragement, missing details, and a disorganized sales pitch disguised as instruction. The co-pilot, also doubling as tour guide, safety instructor, and low-rent motivational speaker, had mumbled his way through the essentials with the practiced charm of a man used to applause, not accountability.

Rachel had watched the tourists accompanying her absorb the vagueness with increasing terror, their eyes flicking from carabiners to door handles to each other, as if trying to spot the first one who would crack and give up on *the adventure of a lifetime*.

She decided against leaving a Yelp review. But she *would* send the tour guide a note. As if…

"Nothing of value," she thought. "A masterclass in how *not* to prepare people for a jump."

The pilot hadn't said a word.

Meanwhile, the guide grinned and pointed: "It's a beautiful day. No wind. Look at the top of Mont Blanc… you can tell barely any snow is flying off the summit. Perfect conditions!"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I've jumped in terrible weather," he added, proudly. "But we never bring anyone up unless we're confident you'll have the time of your life."

Pause. Big grin.

"Just don't forget to open your parachute," he said, chuckling like he'd told the joke for the hundredth time. Which, of course, he had.

Second…

Sitting across from Rachel in the back of the helicopter was a couple from Cape Town, South Africa, goggles too tight, eyes tighter still, stealing glances in her direction.

They were holding hands, but their fingers looked clenched rather than entwined. Probably nervous, Rachel thought. First-time jumpers, maybe.

Still, something about them itched at her. The man, a tall, athletic Black man, seemed to be trying too hard not to meet her gaze. His partner, a lighter-skinned woman, offered Rachel a brief, brittle smile before quickly looking away.

Rachel's instincts began to hum, something about the couple felt… off.

But before she could dwell on it, the woman beside her interrupted the moment, a silver-

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

haired Englishwoman with a mischievous grin and a bag of ashes on her lap. She had promised her late husband she'd scatter him from the sky, over the mountains he adored.

She looked well into her eighties, but there was steel in her spine and a spark in her voice… and, no doubt, a few alloys here and there, hip, knee, maybe a wrist, or shoulder, standard upgrades for a life fully lived.

As the divers filed in, the old lady turned toward Rachel and lifted a zippered canvas pouch.

"This is Bertrand. Most of him. We were married for sixty-three years," she said, smiling like the sun had never set.

"They wouldn't let me bring the urn I bought for him… it's solid gold, you see. Very heavy. I suppose they worried I'd drop it mid-flight and take out a skier. Bertrand wouldn't have wanted that. I understand. It's a very big urn. Bertrand *was* a big man… if you know what I mean." She gave Rachel a sly wink.

Rachel offered a polite smile. "I do. That's quite a large bag."

"I kept some of him in the urn… it's on the coffee table by the fireplace at our chalet. I

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

couldn't let go of it all… I'm not sure what part of him I kept, to be honest…"

She looked out the window and pointed. "Bertrand was born right down there. Chamonix. That's home."

"How wonderful," Rachel said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," the woman replied, clutching the bag a little tighter, as if Rachel might be flirting with Bertrand's remains.

Rachel glanced down at the ashes with the faintest grin. *Who would've thought that size actually mattered all the way to choosing an urn...*

The freefall would last forty to fifty seconds. By the time they were meant to open their parachutes, they'd be dropping at around two hundred and thirty kilometers per hour. Rachel briefly considered how fast a gold urn, a large one, let's say not quite full, might fall. And how much damage it could do on impact.

"Closer to a bowling ball than a feather," she thought.

"What a beautiful story," she said sincerely. "I don't think anyone will ever do that for me."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The woman's eyes twinkled. "Came to Chamonix for a winter holiday. Met Bertrand. Handsome devil. I fell hard. Sixty-three years later, here I am. Time flies, pun intended."

She leaned closer. "You'd better find yourself a husband. Or a wife. Or whatever sends your kite flying… Oh! Another pun! I'm on *fire* today! I'm flying high!"

She laughed, full-throated, fearless.

Finally…

Rachel had volunteered to jump first. She couldn't wait. The plan was to stretch her freefall well beyond the recommended window, escape the pack, and carve her own path above the mountains, weightless, private, alive.

She launched herself just as the helicopter passed over the *Mer de Glace*: The Sea of Ice.

The largest glacier in France, and one of the fastest disappearing. A slow-motion tragedy visible from space. Each year it shrank in length, in thickness. Like watching time itself erode.

Rachel had her helmet camera running long before they boarded, as always. She often commented mid-dive, narrating the fall for footage or just for herself. She regretted capturing the old woman's kite-flying advice,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

but that was easy enough to delete from a memory card. Not so easy to erase from the folds of her mind.

She knew she'd been alone for a while. Intimately. Voluntarily… Maybe.

As the Sea of Ice surged up toward her at terminal speed, she finally pulled the chute. Her harness snapped taut, jerking her body back into the sky like a dog yanked off a chase. She exhaled. Nothing like a canopy ride above the Alps to clear a girl's head.

"Should I see who dares to call while I'm bathing?" she muttered, voice nearly lost to the wind.

She fished out her phone with both hands, letting the parachute flirt with the gusts, reckless, as always. Maybe it was Tim. They'd met a few weeks earlier at a bar on the Upper West Side. He had a decent smile. She had a terrible schedule. He was afraid of even getting on airplanes.

"I would have let him walk in on me while taking a bath…"

Rachel's studio, shoebox-sized, wedged into the top floor of a crumbling brownstone, rarely saw her home. Just the way she liked it.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She glanced at the screen.

"*Pas* Tim," she said, sighing. "Not Tim. Guess I didn't make the right impression."

She tapped to open the message.

"Looks like I'm going to the Amazon Rainforest."

"Your loss, Tim," she added aloud, securing the phone back into her gear. "I won't see you. At least, not for a while."

She tugged the chute's risers, banking toward the landing zone, making the jump last as long as possible. She was going to be stuck in airplanes for a while.

Rachel booked a connecting flight to São Paulo, Brazil, from Geneva, Switzerland, the closest international airport to Chamonix. From São Paulo she flew to Manaus, a gateway to the Amazon Rainforest. It was a long trip.

From the French Alps to the Amazon Rainforest
February 10, Present-Day

Rachel remembered the last time she heard herself say "Slow and steady, guys…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There were two guys by her side then. One gripping her left leg, the other her right. She barely knew the guys, having met them in a bar, having *recruited* them after chatting over drinks. She had wanted a repeat of a rather unexpected thrilling experience she dared to engage in once, a very long, long time ago. She thought it was fun at the time but didn't think she would try it again. And yet, she thought… Why not?

How do you make the case for saving the Amazon Rainforest without taking quasi-impossible picture and video shots that hopefully sway the hearts and minds of donors, voters, politicians, and mostly people who don't care, who don't have time to care, until it's too late to make a difference?

You have to be daring, a maverick, take risks, for sure. But you can't *go it alone*, as they say.

For what Rachel had in mind, she needed at least two guys. Young. Strong. Willing to try something new. With ropes. Soft ropes.

The Amazon Rainforest is not just a tragedy sketched on a map; it's a dense, bleeding ledger of violence and profiteering. Nearly all the forest loss has been illegal, engineered by sprawling networks that bribe officials, launder timber, and silence anyone who dares to question them.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Journalists have been murdered for telling the truth. Indigenous forest guardians have fallen in ambushes. Even conservation money, meant to protect the trees, has sometimes been funneled into schemes that padded the loggers' pockets.

This isn't wilderness passively suffering at the hands of humanity… it's a war zone. Humans killing trees, killing each other, killing themselves. As they have done for eons. Pure greed wielding chainsaws. And greed, of course, is just fear in another costume. That compulsive urge to accumulate, to stockpile wealth or whatever object becomes a stand-in for immortality, as if riches could inoculate us against our only certainty: death.

So, what will you do with your riches?

Throughout history, as the nuns reminded Rachel again and again during her orphanage years, those who failed to earn a place in Heaven by living righteously tried to buy their way in. They donated their estates to the Church. They commissioned chapels, statues, frescoes, masterpieces carved and painted in tribute to God. They hoped beauty could bribe divinity. That enough gold might tip the scales. You can't take your fortune with you, but maybe you can buy forgiveness on your way out.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel murmured to herself: “The voices in our heads…”

Voices that justified chainsaws. That rationalized poison. That whispered the cost of silence, the price of looking away.

The rain came down harder. It was water season in the Amazon Rainforest.

Rachel watched the river’s edge disappear behind the heavy downpour, as the boat that was taking her to her destination sped up.

Anna had compiled the latest intelligence and made it available for Rachel to download onto her tablet, images, videos, and audio recordings. She knew Rachel often preferred listening to information over reading it.

Rachel had plenty of time to brush up on the latest regarding the state of the Rainforest. The consequences of deforestation had been profound.

Anna’s voice narrated:

“The Amazon Rainforest has lost approximately seventeen to twenty percent of its original forest cover, with deforestation rates fluctuating over recent decades. Brazil contains about sixty percent of the Amazon, followed by Peru, Colombia, and other South American

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

countries. Annual deforestation rates vary from around four thousand to over eleven thousand square kilometers per year in the Brazilian Amazon alone, depending on government policies, enforcement, and economic pressures."

"Cattle ranching accounts for roughly eighty percent of Amazon deforestation in Brazil, as forests are cleared for pastureland. Agriculture, particularly soy cultivation, represents another major driver. Logging operations, both legal and illegal, create access roads that facilitate further clearing. Infrastructure development including dams, and mining operations also contribute to forest loss."

"The impacts on local ecosystems and communities are severe. The Amazon hosts an estimated ten percent of global biodiversity. Deforestation destroys habitat for countless species, many still undiscovered."

Rachel wasn't quite sure she understood how undiscovered species could be estimated…

"A question for another time," she thought.

Anna's voice went on:

"Large mammals, birds, and specialist species are particularly vulnerable. Specialist species are organisms adapted to thrive in a narrow ecological niche, relying on specific food

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

sources, habitats, or environmental conditions. They are highly vulnerable to changes that affected their limited resources."

"Kind of like nuns in a convent." Rachel thought.

"Good thing tequila is available just about everywhere I go," Rachel murmured to herself.

Rachel didn't have to order another shot of tequila after her first one since she took off from Geneva. Throughout her journey, the flight attendants kept bringing her refills as if they knew what was awaiting her, glancing at the pictures on her tablet while walking up and down the aisle, or as if there simply was a sign on her forehead reading "more tequila please".

"Maybe I should turn down Anna's voice," she thought.

Even at a lower level in Rachel's headphones, the information Anna delivered did not lose any of its gravity.

"Over four hundred indigenous groups call the Amazon home. Deforestation threatens their traditional territories, cultural practices, and food security. Many communities depend on forest resources for medicine, food, and livelihoods."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Amazon soils are often nutrient-poor, and without forest cover, they quickly become degraded and less productive for agriculture."

"Forests regulate local water cycles through evapotranspiration."

Rachel had to rewind. "What?"

"…*evapotranspiration*."

"Good one Anna…" Rachel figured it best to assume the meaning of this word and left looking it up for later.

Anna's voice continued:

"Deforestation can lead to reduced rainfall and altered seasonal patterns in affected regions. The Amazon's destruction has far-reaching worldwide impacts."

"The Amazon Rainforest stores an enormous amount of carbon in its biomass and soils. When forests are cleared and burned, this carbon is released as CO2, contributing significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions. The forest also acts as a massive carbon sink, absorbing CO2 from the atmosphere."

"The Amazon influences weather systems across South America and beyond through its role in atmospheric circulation. Deforestation

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

can affect rainfall patterns in regions far from the forest itself."

Rachel paused Anna's recording.

Over the past decade, Rachel had worked with countless 'green' clients, NGOs, brands, so most of what Anna had recorded wasn't new to her. Still, Rachel wasn't jaded. If anything, each project she took on only energized her more.

She caught the attention of the nearest flight attendant and asked for a tequila refill, and a bar of Swiss chocolate. Dark. Preferably orange flavored.

Savoring every bite she resumed listening to Anna:

"Scientists warned that the Amazon Rainforest could reach a "tipping point" where large portions would transition from rainforest to savanna, potentially releasing massive amounts of stored carbon and fundamentally altering global climate systems."

"In addition, many medicines derive from Amazon plants. Continued deforestation eliminates potential medical discoveries before herbal species and their properties are even identified."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel sipped more tequila, marrying its taste with the orange flavored chocolate in her mouth.

"I am ready for a kiss…" She thought.

"I wonder what kind of alcohol Amazon tribes brew," she murmured to herself.

As it turned out, Anna had thought of just about everything, especially everything Rachel might be curious to explore on this mission. The two had worked together on several "docu-missions" before. Anna was a broker of sorts, an agent who paired filmmakers with above-average risk tolerance with environmental groups in need of powerful stories to rally support.

Under a file labeled *Beverages*, Anna had uploaded an audio clip describing what Rachel could expect when thirst kicked in.

To Rachel's ears, Anna's voice carried both a smile and just a hint of envy as she read:

"Amazon tribes make chicha, a broad term for a traditional fermented alcoholic concoction, usually made from chewed and spit-out corn. Saliva enzymes kickstart the fermentation process."

"Chewed and spit-out, huh…," Rachel repeated aloud.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I haven’t kissed anyone in a while, and now I’m about to swallow spit from strangers… strangers I won’t even get to see naked. I love my life… I wonder what the old English lady in the helicopter would think of that as a way to send my kite flying.”

Rachel paused the recording and closed her eyes for a moment. She let a square of chocolate melt on her tongue, chased it with a slow sip of tequila, and swallowed deliberately. A sudden series of bumps pulled her back to reality. The flight attendant, always on cue, appeared with another shot of tequila and a fresh bar of chocolate.

“Thank you,” Rachel said, returning to Anna’s voice.

“The Amazon Rainforest acts as a "flying river," with moisture from the forest contributing to rainfall across South America. Deforestation threatens water security for major agricultural regions and cities throughout the continent.”

“While deforestation often occurs for short-term economic gains, it undermines long-term economic sustainability. The forest provides valuable ecosystem services worth far more than the immediate profits from cattle ranching or agriculture on cleared land.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Anna had included pictures and videos taken by photographers flying over the Amazon, capturing vast swaths of charred earth, patchwork deforested landscapes, and ghostly bare hillsides where lush jungle once stood.

As she listened to Anna, Rachel was going through images, showing green forest abruptly giving way to rust-brown clearings, visually communicating the scale of destruction in a way that words alone couldn't. Sea of tree stumps and blackened earth stretching to the horizon, with a tiny sliver of green forest clinging at the edge.

Anna went on:

"During particularly bad fire seasons, most notably the 2019 Amazon wildfires, satellite imagery showed huge smoke plumes rising from the Rainforest, reaching high into the atmosphere and drifting hundreds of miles away."

"Planet in crisis" Rachel thought. "I don't have to worry about ever being unemployed."

Anna had also included aerial photos and videos of *illegal* fires raging through the forest, often showing flames consuming trees and brush with billowing smoke. Close-up shots of black smoke trailing, bulldozers and tractors at the edges of the burn zones.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As she read on, Anna's voice sank, slower, softer, laced with a sadness Rachel had heard before. Grief, perhaps, or weary disbelief.

"Photographer *Victor Moriyama* and similar documentary photographers have spent extended time on the ground documenting deforestation, capturing intimate, up-close scenes like "forest before and after" sequences, exposed riverbanks and soil where tree canopy was lost, and logging operations with heavy machinery. These visuals, often paired with Indigenous voices, put a *human scale* on the crisis, making the destruction relatable and emotionally compelling."

Anna's emotional response was evident as if she knew some of these photographers.

Rachel focused on an image of a single tree standing alone in a barren field, a stark symbol of loss and isolation. She could relate.

"How did that one tree survive? Is it still standing?" She wondered.

Anna's recording paused. Rachel could hear her breathing on the audio, maybe wiping away tears.

Then Anna's voice returned, quieter now.

"That's all I have."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel closed her eyes. That voice, and a first name that might not even be real, was all she knew of Anna. No photo. No video call. No verifiable background. Just a consistently encrypted stream of research, logistics, and last-minute updates that had guided her through missions in six countries over four years.

For all Rachel knew, "Anna" could be a man. Could be a team. Could be Greta Thunberg, disguising her voice. Could be an AI composite stitched together to mimic warmth and urgency. The voice had the tone of someone deeply invested, sometimes even emotional, but Rachel had learned long ago not to take anything at face value in this line of work.

Being an agent, especially one specializing in the intersection of journalism, activism, and danger, meant threading a razor-thin line. You had to vet your clients, but not too loudly. You had to make sure they'd pay, but never follow up too often. You needed field operatives who were fearless, invisible, and replaceable. Above all, you had to stay ahead of the corporations and governments who considered your work a threat, sometimes even a crime.

Anna had been targeted more than once. Rachel had heard rumors, blackouts, system breaches. There were whispers of a car bomb

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

that was meant for someone else. Whether the stories were real or part of a calculated mystique, Rachel didn't know. What mattered was the signal always came through, the data always arrived, and the next job was always waiting.

Rachel didn't know where Anna lived. She didn't want to. Their communications were tunneled through rotating VPNs, double password-protected, and rerouted via encrypted devices. Anna's phone numbers changed monthly. Her email handles were riddled with special characters and expired like burner IDs.

They had never met. And in this business, that was probably why they were both still alive.

Rachel opened her eyes and took another bite of the dark, dangerously addictive Swiss chocolate the flight attendant had left for her. It melted slowly on her tongue, igniting the same neurons as a good memory.

She smiled. Fitting, really, that she was flying straight into the land where the cacao tree was born. A quick query on ChatGPT earlier had confirmed it: *Theobroma cacao*, sacred to many Indigenous cultures, had grown wild and been cultivated in the Amazon for centuries. Its beans had launched empires, sweetened revolutions, and now powered eco-tourism and sustainable

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

trade. Chocolate wasn't just dessert down there, it was politics, heritage, economy.

"I guess I started working on the plane in more ways than one," Rachel thought, amused. "I might just charge Anna's client a little extra."

Rachel thumbed through more of the images Anna had uploaded to the drive.

One series stopped her: powerful protest art, raw and urgent. Murals made with wildfire ash and earth pigments. Symbols drawn from soil that had barely cooled. One stood out, an enormous piece in São Paulo, spanning the length of a city block. It depicted an Indigenous elder mid-speech, arms outstretched, eyes blazing, his call to end deforestation etched in smoke and ochre.

It was more than a mural. It was memory, activism, and testimony all at once.

Rachel admired how it married art and urgency in a way traditional journalism often couldn't. It dragged the forest into the city, into air-conditioned cafés, subway stations, and the daily routines of people who had never seen a kapok tree, but who might, suddenly, care about one. Especially once they understood that the buoyant fibers inside its seed pods helped fill

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

their pillows and mattresses, and that substitutes might be far less comfortable.

By the time the plane began its descent into Manaus, Rachel had a decent sense of how she might structure her documentary.

Then again, she knew better than most: you never really knew how these stories ended.

First, Rachel needed to make contact.

Anna had provided a list of local allies, activists, biologists, community leaders, people she'd reached out to ahead of time. They knew Rachel was coming. They were expecting her.

Rachel traveled light. Always had. Her gear was state-of-the-art, compact, durable. She packed like a soldier on a solo op: everything had its place, and nothing came along that couldn't survive mud, heat, or a ten-foot drop.

As she stepped out into the humid press of the Manaus afternoon, a voice cut through the crowd.

"Rachel Shepherd?!"

A young man in his late twenties was waving a placard over his head, her name scrawled in thick black marker.

"I'm Rachel," she said, approaching him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I'm riding you," the man said with a thick Portuguese accent, stepping forward. "I am Miguel Silva. Anna sent me."

He reached for her carry-on.

"I got it," Rachel said, adjusting the strap over her shoulder. "Just lead the way."

"I am taxi. Special taxi," he added proudly. "I drive to dock, then you go on boat, up the river."

Rachel hadn't slept a wink. The tequila and chocolate buzz was fading fast, and her body begged for rest. But now wasn't the time. She stayed alert, eyes drifting between the passing scenery and the man behind the wheel. She watched Miguel discreetly, the way she always did with new drivers, file it under field survival instinct.

"How long's the ride to the river, Miguel?" she asked.

"Two hours," he said, eyes on the road. "Anna say to me, 'Drive careful Miguel.' Miss Shepherd important lady."

He was right about the timing. Two hours later, the car rolled to a stop beside a quiet, private dock lined with mossy wood planks and

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

rusted cleats. Miguel stepped out and opened her door but didn't reach for her bag. Rachel noticed.

Smart guy.

"Thank you, Miguel," she said with a nod and a smile.

Waiting at the dock were two women. One was tall, poised, in her forties. The other, younger, with sharp eyes and a watchful stance.

"Rachel?" the older one asked. "I'm Helena. This is Luiza."

Luiza gave a small nod.

"We'll be assisting you during your journey," Helena continued. "Luiza was born here. She knows the terrain, and many of the local dialects. I studied English. I teach in Manaus. How was your trip?"

"Amazing," Rachel said. "Thanks for asking."

Miguel waved goodbye and hopped into his car. Two sharp honks later, he vanished into a rising plume of dust, instantly dampened and devoured by the heavy, humid air, as if the jungle itself had licked it clean.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"If only man-made fire, plumes, and destruction could be so easily stomped out," Rachel thought.

Rachel followed Luiza into a weathered speedboat. Luiza fired up the motor. Helena untied the ropes, then leapt aboard just as they pulled away from the dock.

"Two hours to the lodge Anna reserved for us," Helena said over the hum of the engine. "We'll rest there tonight. Tomorrow we travel upriver."

Rachel said nothing. Her body spoke for her. She stumbled into the lodge room like a soldier returning from war, dropped her gear by the door, and collapsed onto the bed without even untying her boots.

Helena's voice woke up Rachel the next morning.

"Good morning, Rachel. Are you ready?" Helena said knocking on the lodge's door.

"Five minutes," Rachel replied.

February in the Amazon Forest is hot and humid. Temperature in the high eighties. Some sunny period now and then. It is wet season or high-water season. Intense rainfall. Rivers are at their highest, allowing deeper exploration by

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

boats or canoes. Rain had started as the boat left the dock, heading from the lodges to a remote village further up the river.

The motor boat seemed to float silently as the pouring rain drummed on the river all the way to its destination. Luiza stayed at the helm for four hours straight. Rachel and Helena took turns scooping water off the boat.

They were wearing rain ponchos. Rachel felt completely soaked as if she was under a shower the whole time. She could not see more than a foot in front of her face. It did not stop Luiza from going full speed.

By the time they reached their destination, the rain had tapered and the sun was smiling between clouds. Briefly. A forced smile now and then.

"*Esta é a minha aldeia."* Luiza said.

"This is Luiza's village." Helena translated.

The rain had softened to mist by the time they pulled up to a warped wooden dock lashed together with vines. Rachel climbed out behind Helena and Luiza. The boat listed as she stepped off. Her boots landed in two inches of warm mud as she walked off the dock. Welcome to the jungle.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A handful of villagers watched from under thatched roof overhangs. Children barefoot in the puddles. A dog barked once, then disappeared behind a hut.

"*Esta é a minha aldeia*," Luiza said again, quieter this time.

"This is my village," Helena translated unnecessarily.

The pride in Luiza's voice had dimmed.

Rachel followed the two women past a row of open-air homes perched on stilts. She saw a broken solar panel leaning against a fence, its surface cracked like a windshield that had a brief situationship with a brick dropped from an overpass above a highway. A frayed fishing net dangled from a pole. Piles of cassava roots sat half-peeled in a basin, unattended.

It wasn't a ghost town, but it felt… hollowed out. Like some essential part of village life had been uprooted, and no one had dared speak its name since.

Inside the central lodge, Luiza lit a lantern. The faint glow caught a photo nailed to the wall, a man in ceremonial paint holding a long spear.

"Luiza's husband," Helena said, noticing Rachel looking.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Luiza's eyes watered. Tears flowed. She spoke, in English:

"My husband tried to stop them. The men with machines. Big trucks. Chainsaws. They said it was government approved. It was not. My husband is dead."

Rachel said nothing. She had learned, over time, that grief liked silence more than sympathy. We have words… but there are no words. Yet, we feel obliged to say something.

"They found him in the river," Helena added. "Face down. Clothes gone. Police said it was a boating accident."

"But he didn't have a boat," Luiza said, flatly.

Rachel took out her camera. She ran her thumb along the lens rim. Recording All The Time or RATT, as she often said. Maybe she could have someone make her a logo. That wasn't her style.

A camera is a weapon. Not just to defend yourself. She had used cameras to hit a few thick-headed hired hands who thought they could stand in the way of a great shot. It certainly worked better than a rosary when it came to answer some prayers as it exposed cruelty and caught criminals red-handed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Can I speak to the village elders?" she asked. "Anna said you would introduce me?"

Helena nodded. "We'll take you at first light."

The next morning, the sun rose red and swollen over the tree canopy. Steam rose off the river like smoke. Rachel filmed it, low angle, pushing through the foliage with her lens, catching the morning light as it caught a line of ants dragging leaves twice their size.

"Talk about hard work…" Rachel murmured.

Rachel liked beginnings. They were honest. What you see is what you get. Her focus was on making sure honesty made it to the end of a documentary, whatever her clients were hoping to expose. Beginnings were all she controlled in her line of work. Much like wars. You know when and how it starts, you never know when or how it ends. Yet, everybody still standing claims victory.

Luiza led Rachel and Helena to the *maloca*, a large, thatched communal house at the heart of the village. Inside, four elders sat in a quiet semicircle: three women and one man, all slow-moving, deeply wrinkled, but with eyes sharp as obsidian.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

One of the women rose. She took Rachel's hand with surprising strength and held it for a moment.

"I am Yarelle," she said. "The village's shaman. I will call upon our ancestors and the spirits of animals to guide you… and answer your questions."

Rachel recalled Anna's recording on the subject. While male shamans were often viewed as the norm, especially after centuries of colonization and Christian influence, women had long played central spiritual roles in many Amazonian tribes. Their erasure, Anna had said, was a symptom of patriarchal overlay, not indigenous truth.

Anna's voice echoed in Rachel's memory:

"Recently, there's been a resurgence, women returning to the shamanic path, challenging restrictions and reclaiming what was once theirs. Maybe they'll succeed where men have clearly failed. In many traditional Amazonian cosmologies, there is no division between nature, culture, and health. Shamans serve as bridges between the human and the spirit worlds, which live in the rivers, the forest, the animals. They become jaguars. Birds. Snakes."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Yarelle gestured for Rachel to sit beside her. Helena and Luiza settled behind them.

A young woman stepped silently into the circle, holding an enormous ceremonial pipe in both hands.

As Yarelle whistled softly, a high, spiraling note, the young woman walked slowly around the group, blowing tobacco smoke in wide, curling arcs. Rachel remembered Anna's words: the smoke was for purification, protection, and connection. A ritual of welcome and trust.

The pipe looked almost comically large in the young woman's slender hands.

Yarelle fell silent. Then, in halting English, she said:

"No forest… no memory."

Rachel raised an eyebrow.

"The trees…" Yarelle said softly, her voice threaded with both reverence and sorrow. "They hold us. You cut the trees… we forget who we are. Who we were. We think we watch them grow, but they…" she tapped her chest, "they watch us grow. They remember. They hold our memories. We are buried at their feet. Rain quenches their thirst. We feed them. They guard us. They watch over us."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel felt something shift deep in her spine, like a soft vibration climbing her vertebrae. A resonance. A reckoning.

Anna had included notes on the funeral customs of various Amazonian tribes. Rachel could still hear the calm clarity of Anna's voice:

"Some communities bury their dead. Others cremate them. But before either of those rites, the body is often taken into the forest, wrapped in leaves, and left to decompose for several weeks.

Once only the bones remain, they are burned and the ashes stirred into a fermented banana soup. The entire tribe drinks it, allowing the spirit of the deceased to pass into their bodies, so the soul continues to live, to remember, to protect."

Rachel had paused the recording at that point. She remembered smiling, dark humor rising to the surface.

"I don't care much for bananas," she had thought wryly, nibbling on one of the orange-flavored chocolate bars from the flight attendant. "Here's hoping no one dies while I'm visiting."

She blinked herself back into the present.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel rarely checked her footage during fieldwork. Her rigging was meticulous, shoulder-mounted or clipped to her headgear, always recording, always aligned.

She trusted her own movements to frame the story. She felt confident Yarelle's speaking was going to fit perfectly in the documentary, cut together beautifully, carry real weight in the final edit.

Another elder spoke, this time a man with a voice like distant thunder. Helena translated quietly, her voice careful not to interrupt the flow:

"Some days the water smells and tastes like fire. My grandson was sick for three weeks. I had made him a new *fletcha*, spear, for fishing. I used a fallen branch from the tree my father was buried under. My grandson caught many fish. It was too easy. The fish were different. Almost lifeless."

He paused.

"The animals are leaving. Birds are gone. The howler monkeys… silent."

Rachel looked at the man's grimacing face. Something about that phrase rang familiar. "Smells and tastes like fire."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

To her that meant chemicals. Warfare chemicals. Wear a mask and most likely still suffer for rest of your life types of chemicals.

The elders took turn smoking, telling stories. Helena translated.

Yarelle started whistling once again. The ceremony was over.

Luiza had made arrangements so that Rachel, Helena and herself would use her shack while they stayed in the village.

Rachel unpacked. Her gear was compact, military-grade, silent miniature drones, stabilizer rigs, night vision filters. One case looked like it belonged in a sniper's crawl bag. Another was custom-built to waterproof a RED Komodo 6K camera.

She laid out a plan that night by candlelight. She'd leave early, before dawn. Travel by canoe with Luiza and Helena. She wanted to get deep into the burned zones. Not just the edge scars, but the fresh wounds.

Helena looked skeptical.

"Why not wait until we know more? Until it's safe?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel pulled out her tablet and flipped through satellite overlays and tagged logging encampments.

"Because the new fires started a few days ago," she said. "Which means the people who lit them are probably still nearby. And lighting and sustaining a fire while rain keeps pouring down like the Niagara waterfalls takes way more than a couple of matches and men blowing on embers to get the fire going."

Helena stared.

"Don't worry," Rachel added, without looking up. "I've done stupider things. Now, where does a girl meet a guy, or two, around here? We're gonna have fun…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter VI

Rachel (in) the Amazon

Amazon Rainforest
February 11, Present-Day

The following day, on the way upriver, Helena quietly told Rachel that the land they were approaching was where Luiza's husband was last seen alive before he was found floating in the river. Locals now call it *"The Black Vein,"* a long stretch of forest scarred by back-to-back fires, illegal clearings, and unregulated mining runoff.

Rachel didn't speak for the rest of the ride. But she did something strange: she hummed. Not a military cadence. Her go-to prep song, *Tequila Kiss* by Jay Elle.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She was observing, calibrating. Thinking. Her humming synching well with the drumming of the rain on her hat and coat.

The river narrowed.

Sunlight barely reached through the tree canopy now. What had once been a gentle rainforest current turned sluggish and dark, its surface sheened with a chemical rainbow.

Rachel reached over and scooped a handful into a vial. She sealed it. Labeled it. Slid it back into her tactical vest. Her fingers smelled like fuel and scents she could not identify.

Luiza gripped the rudder of the narrow canoe, her eyes fixed on the banks. Her voice, when it came, was just above a whisper:

"*Foi aqui que eu o encontrei.*"

"This is where I found him." Helena translated.

Rachel nodded.

She took off her rain poncho and tapped her chest, not out of reverence, but to get the camera on her harness rolling.

The lens panned slowly across the blackened tree stumps.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Cut to: a rusted bulldozer, half-sunken in mud, its blade still caked in ash.

Cut to: empty plastic drums labeled "HYDROGEN PEROXIDE 35% INDUSTRIAL," half-buried in the riverbank.

There were no birds. No frogs. Whatever was left of the jungle felt like it had lost its voice.

Rachel directed Luiza with silent hand gestures. Luiza understood that Rachel wanted to bring the boat to the shore as far into what was left of the forest as it could go, taking advantage of the high water.

Rachel's every movement was planned in advance. She filmed like a sniper, long lenses, slow pans, shot-countershot.

"Where are the men we hired last night meeting us?" Rachel asked Helena.

Helena turned to Luiza. They talked quietly.

"They are going to meet you further into the forest," Helena responded.

Rachel slipped off the boat with her waterproof rig and stepped ankle-deep in charcoal mud. The smell of smoke still clung to the earth. Rachel crouched beside a field of blackened cassava stumps, listening.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Helena and Luiza stayed on the boat, ready to steer it back to the river at a moment's notice.

A few yards away, something crunched.

Rachel turned, camera up.

A figure stood frozen: a boy, no older than fifteen. Shirtless. Dirty jeans. His hands were covered in soot.

"*Não tenha medo*," Helena said. "Don't be afraid." She translated for Rachel.

He bolted. Rachel didn't chase him.

Helena called to her softly from the river.

"This way to the Rendez-vous," she said, pointing with her finger.

Rachel waved her off.

"You stay put. If I am not back by sundown, go back and let Anna know I didn't come back," Rachel said.

Rachel walked in the direction indicated by Helena. She followed the boy's trail uphill, past scorched bark and brittle vines, until she came upon a makeshift camp.

Plastic tarps hung between trees like battlefield bandages. Inside: rows of jerrycans, a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

barrel fire long dead, and bags of white powder stacked like bricks.

Rachel zoomed in on the labels:

"FERTILIZER CALCIUM AMMONIUM NITRATE" "DO NOT EXPOSE TO FLAME" "VE"

She scanned the surrounding area. No movement. No voices. She set the camera down gently and took a still photo on her phone, one she could transmit immediately, even if her video footage never made it out.

Suddenly, a rustle. Not a bird, boots.

Rachel froze. She reached for the handle of her machete, not to use it, she hoped, but to look like someone who would.

Three men approached from behind the clearing. Laughing. One of them carried a shotgun.

Rachel stepped out from behind the tree.

"Hey," she called. Friendly. Loud. Disarming.

The laughter stopped.

They stared. One of them raised his hand as if shielding his eyes from the sun, or maybe from recognition.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I see you brought a friend," Rachel said.

As they came closer, she recognized two of the men: the ones she had hired to accompany her.

When they met the prior evening, Helena had begun translating, but it quickly became clear both men spoke and understood English well enough. Rachel was able to explain what she needed directly.

She hadn't revealed the full details of the mission, only that she required two strong men for a little bit of fun in the jungle. She asked them to bring dynamic ropes: the kind used in climbing, elastic and able to absorb the shock of a fall by stretching.

The men looked at her strangely.

"Am I mansplaining?" she wondered.

Feeling the need to illustrate, she brought her fists together, then pulled them apart repeatedly in front of her chest, slowly, with exaggerated resistance, mimicking elasticity.

The men burst out laughing.

Rachel blinked. "What? It's a technical gesture."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel wrote the specs down for them on a napkin and made sure that they understood, having Helena repeat the instructions in Portuguese.

Helena kept her hands around her drink.

“Get soft rope,” Rachel said. “The softest you can find.”

She treated everyone to a few rounds.

It occurred to Rachel that she was carrying expensive gear and that the two men might have contemplated doing nothing but robbing her blind.

They figured that bringing another man, especially armed with a shotgun, would deter Rachel from resisting.

But, Luiza vouched for the two men. She said they were born and had lived in the village, like herself. They had to adapt and find work wherever they could in the area. Often, sadly, participating in the activities Rachel was here to document.

The third man carried the climbing ropes she had asked for the prior night. The ropes looked perfect and made Rachel feel more confident that they were all here to do whatever she had in mind.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"This way!" Rachel said, smiling.

The three men followed.

There are important, large, and noteworthy underground caves hidden in the Amazon Rainforest, with water features and formations, holding numerous cavities, some holding evidence of past inhabitants. Rachel noticed formations on the satellite pictures Anna had gathered. Not far from where Luiza's village was located. An hour or so away from where she just met the three men.

Rachel had trained and used static and dynamic ropes while in the army, rappelling, climbing and of course helicopter fast-roping.

She had gone spelunking for fun and captured amazing shots in the French prehistoric cave of Calanques, near Marseille, in the south of France, the Cosquer Cave. The entrance of this cave is underwater. It is a difficult cave to explore and requires diving and technical caving. It is inaccessible to the public.

Rachel had been asked to film the steps involved in accessing the ancient paintings of animals and marine life the cave was guarding. Engravings and paintings dated to be at least twenty thousand years old, depicting bisons,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

horses and seals and fish, the only known cave with both terrestrial and marine prehistoric art.

At the time when Rachel explored the Frenchy cave, the original entrance was some thirty meters under water due to the rising sea levels.

###

Rachel thought that the Amazon cave formations revealed by the satellite pictures might trap evidence of chemicals used in the process of deforestation.

Anyone could see the burned tree stumps and the vast open areas meant to support agriculture and cattle ranching. Not everyone would imagine or believe how this was done and what the consequences of a rapid deforestation might have in other areas.

Whatever was to be grown and raised above ground could possibly be poisonous as chemicals found their way through infiltrating water sources and soil.

The only way to find out was to explore the caves in the area. During her conversation with the elders, the prior day, Rachel found that they were indeed aware of cave formations where their ancestors once lived, a long time ago. These were sacred locations and it took a lot of

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

convincing from Luiza to get specific directions to one of the most accessible entrances to these caves.

An hour or so under the pouring rain, sometimes through muddy open areas, sometimes cutting their way through thick vegetation, Rachel and the three men reached one of the caves' entrances.

Rachel wasn't sure if she would find clear evidence of chemicals being drained and having pooled as she had concluded might be the case.

Of course, she expected to find the usual chemicals, the kind she'd seen in containers, piled up at the camp earlier. Approved fertilizers. But rapid deforestation, especially in a rainforest battered by constant rain, often relied on chemical solutions no one involved would ever dream of using in their own backyard where their children played, even to quickly remove bushes and make space for a swing set.

Her calculations might be way off.

Depending on the chemicals, they might have burned off or evaporated already. Washed away by the rain into the soil so that only few traces might be detected or considered unsafe from the samples Rachel might be able to retrieve.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Large concentration of chemicals mixed together in the caves could seriously impact crops and cattle.

The two men Rachel had hired followed her into the cave with the ropes. The third man stood guard near the entrance sitting on the ground, holding his shotgun tight. He was taking his role seriously.

The two men settled a few feet below ground, mooring the ropes, each one holding a different line tied to Rachel's harness.

"Double-check your knots," she said to the taller of the two men, who had looped his dynamic line around a protruding root just inside the cave. The root looked solid, old as the earth, but Rachel gave it a hard tug anyway. She didn't trust anything until she did.

"Slow and steady, guys…" She said smiling.

"Once I'm ten meters down or so, feed the slack slowly. I'll signal if I need to stop. Two tugs," she said, pointing at the man with what appeared to be much softer hands than his companions' more rugged ones.

He nodded.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As Rachel continued into the cave, she thought about the young boy she had seen earlier. He had disappeared into the trees.

"The Amazon Rainforest makes for a cool playground, I guess." She murmured as she descended slowly. "I am enjoying the rope course."

She checked that her lights were on and cameras were filming.

"And… action…" She said out loud.

The air inside the cave was immediately different. Heavy. Damp. Not cool like the limestone tunnels she'd filmed in Europe, but wet with a pungent, almost metallic scent. Like burnt sugar mixed with rot. Not entirely unpleasant, just… *wrong*.

Rachel switched on the small chest light embedded in her harness, then checked the rotating lens mounted to her helmet. She hadn't decided yet if this section of the exploration would be a segment for the main cut, or just raw archive. It didn't matter.

She adjusted the second lens mounted to her hip, facing backward. The idea was to capture a continuous, 360-degree descent. A spinning angel in the dark.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Then she jumped.

A controlled fall, rope hissing through her gloves, she spun slowly as she dropped, knees bent, toes pointed. The glow from her light ringed the cave walls, revealing striated colors where mineral and mud had etched layers like a fingerprint. Her shadow danced. Then vanished.

Rachel steadied her descent, locked in her feet against the wall, and pushed off, a graceful kick, slow-motion zero-gravity, flipping herself backward.

She wasn't just exploring; she was *choreographing*.

"Imagine Pink meets Werner Herzog," she said out loud. "But the cave might actually kill me… Some rope course…"

The first chamber opened like a wound. A massive hollow, twenty meters wide and full of still water that shimmered with iridescent greens. The light caught something slick on the surface, an oily sheen, undiscernible smell, thick.

Rachel hovered above the pool, suspended from her hips and shoulders. She twisted into an upside-down curl, filming one-handed while the other stabilized her against a ledge. Then she flipped again, dropping to a thin rock island in the middle of the pool.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A low sound pulsed beneath her feet.

Was it water? Or machinery?

She knelt, dipped a gloved finger into the puddle beside her, and brought it to her lips, not to taste, but to smell. She carried a tiny sensor patch tucked into her collar. She pressed it to the droplet and waited for the light.

It blinked **orange**.

"Not lethal. But not natural either," she murmured to herself.

She filmed the readout and stitched a live commentary into her mic: "This is the first site with direct visual and chemical evidence of industrial contamination leaching into sacred cave systems. We're three kilometers from active pastureland. Locals say this cave used to echo with birds. It's silent now."

Suddenly, the rope above her twitched.

One tug. Then another.

"Hold?" she called out. No response. She wasn't worried. The men were probably stretching to avoid cramps. "Isn't it fun guys? I told you right…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She stood up and tightened her harness. She noticed a crevice barely wide enough for her shoulders. The smell intensified.

Inside the crevice, she filmed scorch marks. Not natural burn patterns. This looked like industrial acid or incendiary compound. One wall shimmered with crystalized black soot. Another surface was so smooth it reflected her own face back at her.

And there, embedded in the soot, was a twisted metal tag.

She pulled it out. A corroded number plate. Faint lettering in a language that made her pause.

German.

Then, deeper in the dark, something moved.

A sound like breathing. Not human.

Rachel squeezed deeper into the narrowing passage, her knees scraping wet limestone, elbows grinding against the jagged stone. Her light flickered.

“Don’t you dare,” she muttered, tapping the helmet. The second beam blinked on, casting a greenish halo that only made the shadows twitchier.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She landed in a cavern, not wide, but tall, like the throat of a giant opera diva about to start her aria. The floor below was dark and rippling. Not water. Something thicker.

She released a compact testing puck into the murky pool, designed to detect chemical toxins and acidity

It sizzled.

Acid. Or something close. Maybe runoff from burned lithium or chemical accelerants. The puck vanished in seconds.

She backed away, only to feel the ground shift beneath her heel.

The rock cracked.

She jumped, hands grabbing a horizontal stalactite, and swung her legs wide, twisting midair to land on a flat outcropping nearby. Her boot slipped, nearly tipping her sideways into the pit.

She caught herself with a sharp gasp, one glove dipped in a thin rivulet of orange fluid trailing along the ledge.

She pulled her hand back, fast.

"Corrosive and radioactive," she muttered, watching the glove's rubber bubble. She tore the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

glove off and flicked it away. She pulled a spare from her pocket and slid it on.

"Never touch the colors that aren't supposed to exist other than on an impressionist's palette." She reminded herself out loud.

Then she saw them: bones.

Human bones. Piled along the far wall of the cavern, half-submerged in the acidic muck. Some charred. Some clean. Some still clothed.

Rachel zoomed her camera. The tattered remnants of a shirt floated in the soup. It bore faint lettering. Not English. Not Portuguese. Cyrillic?

No. Wait.

VE.

Lowercase. Barely visible. Worn into a breast pocket where a badge might've once sat.

Black on black.

"Wow! They make good shirts whoever these people are. I just lost a glove in seconds. That shirt is still floating. Part of it, anyway. Not who was wearing it… that person is gone."

She scanned upward.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Behind the pile of corpses, etched into the wall, was a crude diagram, drawn with what looked like soot and blood. A branching tree. No leaves. Its roots spread like lightning bolts.

And tangled in those roots… symbols.

Vats. Tanks. Barrels. Circles with slashes through them. And one repeated shape: a blocky square with a slit through the middle.

Drums.

Like the ones Rachel saw at the deforested camp. Like the ones some of Anna's pictures showed.

She panned her camera slowly. Made sure it all got recorded. Her breath echoed in her headset.

The silence was so complete it started to ring in her ears.

She took one careful step back.

Crack.

The ledge beneath her gave.

She leapt again, this time swinging the rope around a jagged stalagmite midair and looping it around her waist in a freefall maneuver she hadn't used since combat training. The slack

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

caught just in time to halt her fall, but not her swing.

She slammed sideways into the wall, gasping, gritting her teeth through the impact.

"Still got it," she hissed, clambering to a shelf of stone that overlooked a secondary chamber.

There…

More barrels. Most rusted. Some split open. One had spilled its contents into a trench that drained downward. Toward groundwater.

And wedged between the barrels, limp and faceless, was a *mask*.

Not a gas mask.

A camera mask, one of Rachel's own brand's, Liquid Image, or Cyborg maybe. The kind used by underground videographers or war documentarians.

And on its cracked lens, smeared in dried blood, was a thumbprint. The ridges had melted, destroying what it recorded.

She froze.

Someone had died down here trying to film the truth.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And that someone… may have known her.

Rachel adjusted her footing and scanned the trench.

The cave narrowed, then opened again, not upward, but *downward*. A vertical crevice, the kind only visible when your light caught the angle just right. She dropped a glow stick. It tumbled… then *vanished* into darkness.

The two men above had been out of sight for a while. One whistled faintly, checking on her.

She answered with two short clicks on the comm. She was fine.

But something below called to her. Not a voice or a sound. A feeling, a *pull*.

She secured the dynamic rope, clipped in, and began her descent.

Thirty feet down, the air changed. Denser. Warmer. Smelled like earth and iron and… old things. Not rot. Not exactly. *History.*

She touched down on uneven stone. Shined her beam forward.

Her breath caught.

The walls were painted.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Ancient, unmistakable. Lines drawn in ochre, blackened soot, and faded crimson. Human hands. Animal forms. Twisting vines. Spirals.

Some had been *scratched through*, as if someone had tried to destroy them.

Others had been *marked over* with chalk-white stencils: chemical shapes, danger signs, engineering schematics. *VE*, in lowercase, marked the corner of one crude map. Almost stamped.

But what stopped Rachel cold was what lay at the center of the chamber.

A *body*. A woman.

Half-submerged in sediment, curled into a fetal shape as if she'd crawled here for shelter, or absolution.

Rachel knelt.

Thin. Probably mid-thirties. Long, dark hair matted into the rock. One arm outstretched toward the cave wall, the hand still clutched around a broken GoPro on a makeshift rig. The camera lens had cracked, but the chip inside…

Rachel gently removed it, hands trembling.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The woman had been wearing tactical gear, adapted for heat and moisture. She wore a press badge, now bleached white by fungus and decay.

Rachel pried the corner of it free.

"Clara Ibáñez. GoFreeLens International."

Her heart stopped.

That name.

She knew it. Anna had mentioned Clara once at least, in passing. Said she'd gone quiet in Brazil. That she probably "went corporate."

But this wasn't going corporate. This was *disappearing*.

Rachel sat back on her heels.

Why didn't Anna tell me?

Then she saw it, Clara's final resting place wasn't random.

Carved directly above the body, high on the wall, was an ancient pictograph: a mother with three children, standing beneath a canopy of trees. A jaguar watched from the branches above.

Someone had *circled* the mother. With what looked like wax pencil.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Underneath, scrawled in English, were the words:

“We were warned.”

Rachel swallowed.

She stood and filmed the entire space, panning slowly. Every symbol. Every line.

This was it. The truth buried deep. The sacred made toxic. The ancestors' sanctuary turned into a corporate dump site. And the people who tried to speak the truth, like Clara, silenced and left to rot with the ghosts.

Rachel lowered the camera.

For the first time in a long while, she whispered a prayer.

To no one in particular.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with… blah, blah, blah…” Rachel caught herself reciting under her breath.

Rachel yanked the ropes twice, sharp, deliberate tugs. The agreed signal.

No response.

She tried again. Harder.

The ropes went slack.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Then, with a sickening hiss, they *fell*, the coils unraveling around her boots like dead snakes.

Her safety lines were gone.

She stared up into the darkness above, lips pressed tight. The narrow shaft where she had rappelled down was now unreachable, the angle too steep, the walls too slick with condensation and algae. A silent scream built in her chest.

"No time to panic," she murmured.

"Hey guys!!! I decide what's fun here…"

No response. No whistling. Nothing.

She switched off the camera lights for a moment and let the darkness claim her. Her breathing slowed. Her training kicked in.

Think like a soldier. Move like a ghost.

She scanned the cavern for vertical ridges and possible handholds. There, a limestone chimney to the left, broken and ridged like a frozen waterfall.

Rachel coiled one of the ropes around her shoulders.

"You're not stuck. You're cornered. There's a difference."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She began to climb. She wedged her boots into cracks, hooked carabiners onto jagged stone, using both upper body and core. Once, a rock gave out and she nearly fell, catching herself mid-air with a yelp that echoed through the hollow.

After an hour of sweat-drenched climbing, bruised and panting, she spotted daylight bleeding through a narrow crack. She followed it. The tunnel grew tighter, forcing her to crawl, shoulder-blade by shoulder-blade, dragging her camera case behind her like a stubborn puppy not ready to go home.

At last, she reached the surface.

But not where she started.

She pushed through the earth slowly, cautiously. Leaves and brush parted above her. She rose inch by inch, eyes scanning the jungle clearing.

Silence.

No men. No shotgun.

Then, a mechanical growl.

The *roar* of diesel.

She froze.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Three colossal bulldozers crashed through the trees from the far ridge, their metal treads pulverizing the undergrowth. Vines snapped. Trees bent and cracked like bones. The jungle *shook*.

Rachel ducked low, barely pulling herself out of the ground in time. She rolled flat onto her stomach, pressing herself into the damp earth.

One of the bulldozers passed directly above her, thunderous, heat searing. She gritted her teeth, swallowed the rising scream, and counted the seconds.

She turned. All three machines were now rumbling toward the entrance she had used to get into the cave. The lead dozer dropped its massive blade with a clang and *plowed forward*, shoving dirt, debris, and ancient stone into the yawning black hole. The others joined in erasing the existence of the cave.

Rachel's camera was running, recording everything she saw and heard.

They were burying the evidence. And the woman journalist's body. *And the cave paintings. And the poison. Thinking they were burying her too…*

Rachel's eyes widened in horror.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She crouched, hands over her ears. The fumes choked her throat. Her eyes burned.

“Puppy in a basket!” she murmured.

She sprinted into the jungle, a zigzagging dash through heat and shadow. Branches whipped her face. Roots clawed at her boots. Rain pouring down again.

Get to the river. Get to Helena and Luiza. Get out.

Everything around her looked green, especially the rain that had intensified since it restarted just after she leapt up and ran.

Her sense of direction was tested. She could be running around in circles she would not know it. As long as the bulldozers' engines continued to fade in the distance, she felt confident that she was at least heading in the right direction... Away from danger… that danger.

But was she running toward the river? Where Luiza and Helena waited for her on the boat?

She had not made it to the makeshift camp yet. She felt like she had been running for the longest time.

The rain was coming down harder and harder. She could not believe there was that much water in the sky. Was a cloud following

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

her? She kept wiping her face, clearing her eyes. More water. This time under her feet. She was getting close to the river at least.

A snake slithered across her path.

She froze, held her breath.

The beast glided on, indifferent.

Rachel felt like it took forever for the creature to vanish. Like waiting at a railroad crossing in the middle of Montana, trapped under a summer storm, the roof of her car down, and an endless freight train dragging every boxcar ever made.

She watched as a snake slithered across her path, long, lean, green and brown. A common boa, maybe. Or a young bushmaster, displaced and disoriented. Was it lost too? What was left to eat? The birds were gone. The frogs were gone. The forest no longer hummed the way it used to. Predators were starving. She almost expected to see a tiny backpack stitched to the snake's skin, a refugee from its own collapsing ecosystem.

Convinced the snake had no plans to make her acquaintance, she pushed forward, aiming for higher ground.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The rain had eased, still heavy, but less punishing now. Through the curtain of water, she spotted the river's edge.

And the boat.

Two figures sat inside, blurred silhouettes behind the veil of rain.

She was about to shout the women's names, raising her hand to wave… when someone grabbed her hand.

Rachel spun instinctively, fist already cocked, then stopped herself just in time.

It was the boy. The same one she'd seen earlier.

He brought a finger to his lips. A silent plea.

Rachel froze, heart pounding.

Her fist, still clenched, hovered less than an inch from the boy's chest. Slowly, she let it fall.

The boy's hand was small but firm. His touch startling.

He looked up at her, wide-eyed, his expression urgent. His finger still pressed to his lips. His hair plastered to his forehead, rain dripping from his lashes, longer than hers.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel nodded slowly, her instinct overriding confusion. She crouched beside him, scanning the river's edge again.

The boat rocked softly in the current.

The figures stood aboard the boat, barely visible in the downpour, one at the helm, the other holding what looked like a rifle, covered by a thin tarp. They wore Helena and Luiza's rain ponchos. But they were men. Government? Mercenaries? Loggers?

Definitely *not* Luiza and Helena.

Rachel's chest tightened.

The boy tugged at her hand again. He motioned with two fingers: *eyes*. Then pointed toward the tree line to their right.

More men.

One crouched with binoculars. Another stood near a felled trunk, scanning the shoreline.

A trap.

They weren't searching for someone. They were *waiting* for someone.

Her. In case she had made it out of the cave somehow.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel ducked lower behind a cluster of palms. She turned to the boy, whispering now, her voice almost drowned by the rain.

"Where are Luiza and Helena?"

He didn't answer. He just pointed downstream, then tapped his chest twice, an urgent signal. *Follow me.*

He took off into the underbrush with the confidence of someone who knew every root and rut.

Rachel hesitated, just a second, then rushed into the green maze after him.

Behind them, the river held its breath.

But the hunters were there. Watching. Waiting.

And then… shooting.

Rachel did not hear the shots. Only the too familiar, slicing whizz of bullets. She'd heard that sound many times before.

She wondered, just briefly, if Luiza, Helena and the men who had accompanied her to the cave were still alive.

The bullets kept coming, snapping past trees, past her ears, past the boy.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She ran harder. Trying to keep up.

The rain, relentless now, distorted sound, disrupted aim.

She prayed for more of it. For the first time since arriving in the Amazon, she hoped it would pour even harder.

The boy ran faster now, leaping over dead branches with practiced ease, zigzagging between trees, slaloming, something that Rachel had planned on doing on the slopes of the French Alps, before her vacation was cut short by Anna.

Rachel followed, matching his movements as best she could, mirroring his footfalls like a shadow.

No more whizzing. The forest had taken the bullets for them.

Suddenly, he stopped.

Without a word, he knelt and began pulling away enormous leaves, revealing a narrow canoe hidden beneath.

With surprising strength, he dragged it to the river's edge and jumped in.

Rachel didn't hesitate. She stepped in after him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The rain kept falling, a heavy curtain draped around them, blurring outlines, softening sounds, erasing their wake.

Rachel paddled hard, her arms burning. The boy didn't speak, didn't glance at her, just kept his strokes tight and controlled, a rhythm he'd learned young. He knew this river. Every bend. Every hiding place.

They hugged the shoreline, staying beneath the thick tree canopy where the rain hit like needles but the trees cloaked them from view.

Rachel kept her head low, scanning the water, the banks, the branches above. A figure could be anywhere, gun raised, finger curled.

The boy turned to Rachel, raising his hand, indicating it was time to stop paddling.

He jumped off the canoe and pulled it between two trees, securing it.

Rachel stepped out. The boy covered the canoe with leaves and branches.

He led the way into the jungle. She followed; glad he wasn't running this time.

Snap. A branch broke somewhere behind them.

The boy slowed. He motioned left.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel followed.

The trees thickened. The world dimmed to green shadows and heartbeat pulses.

Rachel dared to whisper. “Where are we going?”

The boy glanced back. “Safe house.”

It was the first words he’d spoken.

She exhaled. Relief, maybe. Or exhaustion.

The hidden passage twisted for what felt like forever. Then it opened into a shallow cove, shielded on three sides by moss-covered rock. A crude lean-to made of branches and plastic tarp huddled at the back.

Beneath the tarp, nestled between buckets and a rusted lantern, sat a weathered backpack.

The boy unzipped it, pulled out a small cloth bundle, neatly wrapped, and peeled it open to reveal a waterproof satchel. Inside: a satellite phone.

He handed it to Rachel without a word.

She dropped to her knees, breath catching in her throat, fingers fumbling as she powered it on. The screen blinked to life, probing for a passcode.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"On the back," 007 said. "The company men are too lazy to memorize passcodes."

Rachel punched in the code.

Searching… searching…

One bar. Then two.

Rachel dialed Anna's emergency line.

One bar.

Gone.

"Puppy in a basket!" She muttered, teeth clenched.

She looked up. "What's your name?"

"Double-oh seven," he replied without hesitation.

"Double-oh seven?" Rachel repeated, eyebrows raised. The way he said it, crisp, confident, gave her pause. Not just the name, but the delivery.

His accent had hints of schoolbook British, like he'd memorized lines by pausing and rewinding the same dialogs a thousand times. Somewhere between Sean Connery's slur and Roger Moore's smirk. Not a hint of irony in his voice, he meant it. She smiled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Yes. Like James Bond," he said, proudly. "I learned English watching his movies. This is my safe house. I make martinis with chicha." He gestured toward the pack. "Is the phone not working? I found it at a logger's camp. They leave everything lying around."

"No signal," Rachel said, amused. "But go on. Tell me more about those chicha martinis."

Grinning, the boy pulled a cocktail shaker from a black plastic bag, along with two drinking gourds made from hollowed seed pods. He poured liquid from each gourd into the shaker.

The metal looked shiny, new. Big, too.

"They really do leave everything lying around," Rachel murmured.

He shook the concoction with practiced flair, longer than Rachel expected. Or maybe she was just thirsty. And sore. And in dire need of something to take the edge off.

"No ice, sorry. But shaken, not stirred," he said, handing over the shaker.

"Also… no glass. They don't leave glasses lying around the camp. They fill them up and take them to their tents."

"Thank you, Double-oh Seven," Rachel said, raising the shaker like a toast.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She took a sip. The mixture burned down her throat, feral and unfamiliar, but it warmed her core, dulled the tremors in her limbs, calmed her breathing. She drank more.

"Nice, 007," she said, handing it back.

"I don't drink," the boy said. "My grandfather says I'm too young. You met him yesterday. He sent me to keep an eye on you. On Luiza and Helena, too. Luiza's my cousin."

He paused, face darkening.

"Luiza and Helena were waiting for you… then company men with guns showed up. The ones who have been clearing the forest. They took them. Someone must've tipped them off. Or maybe just saw the boat."

"Thank you 007." Rachel said softly. "I am sorry about Luiza and Helena."

The boy nodded. "We'll wait here a little longer. Then we go back to the village. I'll tell my grandfather. He'll know what to do."

Rachel drained the rest of the chicha martini. She hadn't felt this relaxed since that helicopter jump over the French Alps, floating, then freefalling, utterly present, until rudely interrupted by Anna's text.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The rain let up now and then, but only for seconds at a time. It was as if the clouds paused to inhale the scent of an orchid, just long enough to breathe it in, then exhaled again, slow and heavy.

Finally, 007 stood. Without a word, Rachel tried to rise.

Her legs didn't cooperate.

She hadn't realized she'd finished the entire shaker. She blinked, swayed, then accepted the boy's outstretched hand.

"That was a good martini, 007."

"I'll make you another when we get to the village," he said, steadying her.

They returned to the canoe.

The ride was peaceful, quiet save for the rhythmic splash of paddles and the whisper of wet leaves. Rachel rowed with all her might but felt… nothing. Not the paddle. Not the rain. Not even her hands.

It was like being cocooned inside her own mind, watching her body from a distance. Detached, but not lost. A passenger in her own skin.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She could almost count the raindrops as they slid past.

That was a lot of raindrops.

"I'm Rainman," she whispered, tilting her head back and opening her mouth, letting the sky pour straight in.

She swallowed and laughed softly. "Not sure that when I was your age, I would've obeyed my grandfather, not after a martini like that… Actually, I never knew my grandfathers… I had lots of grandmothers though."

Back at the village that night, Rachel set up her equipment and began uploading everything she'd captured, video, ambient audio, stills, beaming it through the jungle canopy via satellite.

The footage was intact. Her instincts had been right: Yarelle's voice, the ceremony, the escape, all of it would frame the heart of the story.

But one card remained stubborn.

The memory chip she'd retrieved from Clara, the dead journalist in the cave, was unreadable.

She stared at the little plastic rectangle in her palm.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She'd need help with this one. Someone with the right tools. The right touch.

Someone who knew how to crack into secrets.

Rachel tried again to reach Anna. Still no response, no return call, no reply to her emails. Just silence.

Back in the maloca, 007's grandfather sat cross-legged beside the fire, calm as an old cedar. He assured Rachel that Luiza and Helena would be all right.

"Too many people know them," he said. "They were on the river, not trespassing. No footage on them. The company men will not want trouble… not that kind."

Rachel nodded, though her jaw tightened. She didn't like not knowing.

"And the men who helped at the cave?" she asked.

The elder waved a hand gently as he responded: "The ground speaks before the engines arrive… The men felt the ground shake and ran as the machines approached."

Probably true. Those men had likely melted into the jungle the second they felt danger coming.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

007 reappeared with another shakerful of his signature martini. Rachel accepted it, this time sipping a bit more slowly, but only just.

She cued up some of the footage for them, Yarelle and the other elders, projecting it on a small cloth screen inside the maloca using her compact field projector. The boy and his grandfather leaned in, bathed in the flickering light of Yarelle's ceremony, the snake, the escape through trees, the canoe ride beneath the rain.

007's eyes widened.

"This will go viral," he whispered. "People will see. Right grandfather?"

The elder said nothing at first. He simply watched the trees flicker on the screen.

Then he nodded.

"They will see. And they will have to choose."

Rachel wasn't so sure.

She knew the media. She knew how quickly the world forgot.

Attention spans flickered like fireflies, bright for a second, then gone.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She had gotten pretty fast at thumbing through posts herself. Might be doomscrolling but at the speed of light.

And when her footage did air, someone powerful would undoubtedly take notice. Not to applaud her. To shut her down.

These days, all it took to discredit something was a shrug and a phrase: *Fake news. AI. Deep fake. Misinformation.* End of story.

The kind of people responsible for the chemicals she'd been inhaling, and bathing in, had the resources to make truth look like illusion. They had deep pockets, teams of lawyers, and algorithms working overtime.

"I should have brought a gas mask." She muttered.

The rain hadn't scrubbed her clean. The scent still clung to her skin like a ghost. She wasn't sure if the burning in her lungs was from the chicha martini or from whatever had been oozing out of the cave walls.

She wondered if what made 007's martini so potent was how it combined with the chemicals she had been inhaling in the cave.

Part of her was disappointed… no return of the strange, floaty euphoria she'd felt paddling

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

back to the village. But as she stood to pack her gear, a familiar numbness crawled up her legs again.

"I refilled the shaker," 007 said, appearing beside her like a polite bartender at a jungle speakeasy.

She blinked at him, took the drink. "Thank you, 007," she said, or thought she did. Her tongue felt like it had borrowed someone else's accent. Sean Connery's?

She finished packing her equipment, then hugged Yarelle and the elders. 007, of course… perhaps a little too tightly.

"Which way to Luiza's shack?" she asked, already swaying.

007 led the way.

At the door, he turned to her, beaming. "You are like Pussy Galore."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "You say that to all the women whose lives you save? How many have tasted your chicha martinis?"

"No! I mean… she was splendid. You fly through trees like her. Except… you wear more clothes. And you breathe in the chemicals…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Your English is excellent. You should start watching BBC nature shows next. Sir Something-or-Other… David Attenborough! That's the one."

"Come here." She pulled him into a hug. "Thank you for saving my life. I'll never forget it…"

She stepped back, gave him a quick smile, then turned and rushed into the shack.

"Wait a minute!"

She reappeared a moment later and handed him a photo of herself, on a camel, her face exposed enough to identify her. Helena had printed it from an image Anna had sent. Rachel had noticed her glancing at it back at the dock, just before they'd boarded the boat with Luiza, verifying they were meeting the right person.

On the back of the photo, Rachel had scrawled a phone number.

"This is my private number," she whispered, slipping the picture into his hand. "In case you ever need to reach me. Don't leave it lying around. Especially not on any sat phone you *borrow* from the company men out there. Dial. Leave a message. Then delete the number."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The boy's fingers closed tightly around the photo. He felt like he really had been in a James Bond movie all day.

Rachel gave him one last, fast hug, tighter than the first, then disappeared into Luiza's shack without looking back.

Dropped her gear. Peeled off her boots. Her clothes.

There was one thing she needed more than a drink.

A shower.

A large barrel out back collected rainwater, and Helena had thoughtfully brought soap in anticipation of that moment. A luxury. A small, human mercy after a long day in the underworld.

Rachel brought her phone into the shower area and set it on a narrow wooden shelf at eye level, just within reach. She turned on the water, cool, steady, rain-fed, and stepped under it without hesitation.

She was hoping Anna would get back to her. Maybe Anna could speed up efforts to free Luiza and Helena. Maybe she'd have news about the men who had helped at the cave, whether they'd made it safely out, or not. And there was footage to discuss. Urgent footage… And Clara.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel scrubbed with military precision. Every inch. Rinse. Soap again. Repeat.

She was halfway through the bar of soap, grateful for Helena's foresight in packing it. It felt like a ritual now, less about hygiene and more about penance, erasure. A way to scrape off the chemicals, the fear, the violence.

The phone rang.

A video call.

Rachel didn't hesitate. She wasn't even looking at the screen. With the knuckle of her middle finger, left hand, she tapped the green accept button, while her right hand kept scrubbing.

She wasn't stopping until the soap surrendered its last bubble.

She knew it wouldn't wash away what she'd seen underground, what she'd inhaled. But between the sting of the soap and the warm numbness of 007's jungle martini still coursing through her, it was the first time she felt even close to human again.

Maybe.

"Listen, Anna," she said, raising her voice over the rush of water, "we need to talk about

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

future assignments. What kind of fried-jelly-fuck-fish prep was *that*?"

"Hi Rachel. This is not Anna," Kate said. "You might want to soap up a bit more… or maybe point the phone in another direction. I'm here with my colleagues from the Vastan Energy PR team…"

"Kate!" Rachel lit up. "Been a while. How are you?" She kept soaping. "I saw you tried to reach me… sorry. Just wrapped a shoot. I'm in the middle of decontaminating. Hands are wet, phone's balanced, so everyone can look away or enjoy the view. Your call. What can I do for you?"

Kate's face filled the screen now, framed against a clean corporate backdrop Rachel didn't recognize. No logo, but the sterile lighting and faux eco-wood paneling screamed corporate PR.

Kate blinked, clearly restraining laughter. "You're lucky I'm the one leading this call. The others are… momentarily off-screen."

Rachel wiped a stripe of soap from her cheek with her forearm. "So, this is the part where I get sued? Or recruited?"

"Both," Kate said dryly. Then her expression softened. "Rachel… how would you feel about

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

filming a mother polar bear and her cubs up in Canada?"

Rachel leaned closer to the screen, water pouring over her. "Just tell me when."

Kate continued. "Did I mention I work for Vastan now? Head of security. I recommended you to shoot footage for their new PR campaign."

Rachel turned slightly, letting the water hit her full in the face. She rinsed off the soap and smiled. Then looked back at the phone.

"Does this come with hazard pay? Unlimited soap? Chicha martinis? Shaken, not stirred? Preferably by an adult male? And ice?"

Kate smiled. "Chicha martinis? Can't say I've ever had the pleasure. But we've got plenty of ice. All kinds. Vastan is in the chemical business. I can get you dry ice, gel ice, slush ice, artificial ice, chemical ice… and yes, good old water ice… the kind you actually want in a drink. I can get you tequila. You can use my *shakers* anytime."

She paused.

"Available adult males are rare up here. The pay is excellent, though. And yes… we have soap. Local, handmade with seal fat or bear

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

tallow, scented with tundra herbs like Arctic heather, or Labrador tea… What have you been drinking, girl??"

Rachel grabbed the phone with one hand, held it close.

"You had me at *dry* ice. I feel like I have been wet for days… Call me back in thirty. I'll be decent. Bring on your stuffed-up PR team… or was this just you being motherly? I'm all grown up now."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter VII

It's Couteau not Cousteau

Ar Raqqah, Syria
February 11, Present-Day

An explosion rocked the earth. A mortar landed nearby. Dust rained down on two men. Neither blinked. They casually brushed grit from their jackets.

"Who are these folks, Igor? Future clients?" Jacques asked.

"No worries. Their aim is awful," Igor said, flicking dust from his coat. "Perfect customers."

Jacques was a spy. An independent contractor, discreet, expensive, and indifferent to

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

which country hired him. French intelligence used him frequently.

Technically, he worked in counter-industrial espionage: uncovering leaks, insider theft, and stolen research for corporations and governments.

It was a quiet war, fought in boardrooms and server farms, and it had earned him more enemies than medals. Especially among the criminal networks and disgruntled insiders he'd exposed.

No one knew his real name, or age.

He went by **Jacques Couteau**, sometimes a business consultant, other times IT guru. Once, he'd even posed as a musician. He played a mean guitar some said.

He had multiple passports. Lived in a crumbling château in France. Traveled constantly. Whatever he told people was just cover. He was pretty good at keeping track of his lying. One of the most important skills one could have in his business.

His château was falling apart long before he bought it.

On his days off, he patched stonework and rewired electrical systems, trying to fix what his

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

American father had dubbed *"La ruine de mon garçon."* The ruin of my boy.

It was a money pit. But Jacques didn't care. It took his mind off work. Though he didn't have to take just any job to pay for the *ruine*. He still made plenty of money when taking only the interesting ones.

He'd never married, much to his French mother's chagrin. No children getting lost in the castle.

Perhaps she hadn't expected much from her firstborn, but she'd certainly expected grandchildren.

On a bright sunny day in February, the French government called, interrupting his latest attempt to patch the roof above one of the upstairs bathrooms.

They had intel. Hector the Vector, a notorious arms dealer, was chasing a long-lost chemical weapon. They wanted Jacques to investigate. Was the weapon real? How dangerous was it? Should they bid for it? Make it part of the French arsenal?

The assignment was thin on details. But Jacques knew Hector. They'd crossed paths before, not dramatically, but enough to leave a mark.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Worse, Hector had access. The Russians had granted him, for a substantial fee, a permanent library card to their most sensitive World War II-era archives. Hector had deep pockets, asked few questions, and left no trail.

Jacques knew he had to be careful if he were to check Hector's latest endeavors.

If Hector caught wind that he was poking around about a chemical weapon, things could get complicated fast.

There were few people Jacques could trust, fewer still who wouldn't immediately tip off Hector.

Jacques needed someone discreet, dangerous, and morally flexible. Someone who owed him a favor or two.

That's why he had called Igor Stogoff.

Igor wasn't just a mercenary. He was a broker of death.

Jacques had worked with him before. He trusted him... mostly. But Igor couldn't leave Syria. He was, in his own words, *"in the middle of a deal."*

So, Jacques flew to Syria.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"They're young, these ISIS fighters," Igor muttered as the two ducked into a shallow trench between crumbling buildings.

"They were promised life under Muslim rules, the strictest application of Sharia texts. They were promised land, power, women, and money, lots of money. Now they're not even sleeper cells. Just ghosts with guns. But they stole cash. Gold too. Lots of it. I'm selling them firepower before they die. I want that gold, Jacques. That's why I'm here."

"Let's move further along the trench," Igor said.

"As I said," Igor continued, "I'm working on a deal with these guys. They're still on the fence. Maybe you can talk to them, on my behalf? You've got a charming way with murderers, Jacques."

"Of course," Jacques replied. "Once they get to know you like I do, they'll trade their mothers for whatever you're selling."

Igor laughed and sat down beside a stack of ammunition crates, leaned back, and lit a cigarette.

"Welcome, Jacques! Welcome to my humble abode, as they say. Thank you for making the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

trip," Igor said with a smile. "They can keep their mothers… I take cash or gold only."

"You are welcome," Jacques replied. "I do have a question though. Shouldn't you be selling weapons in Ukraine and Russia right now?"

"Great question Jacques. Too many people pushing weapons in Ukraine right now. There is demand of course but way too much supply. I don't have to tell you. Everyone and all their little sisters are trying to sell the latest and greatest coming out of their weapon factories. The eyes of the world are glued to the place. Too much competition. Who wouldn't want their latest fancy weapons to be the one credited for having ended the war? The publicity would be priceless, maybe even a Noble Peace prize for the inventors? I don't like to be in the limelight Jacques. We are the same you and I. We work in the shadows. People in the shadows last longer. There isn't much on the news about ISIS anymore. I don't care about headlines, certainly not for myself. And I don't care about ending wars. That would mean the end of putting bread and vodka on my table and caviar. I want wars to last a long, long time. I want guns and ammunition purchases to be ongoing, monthly annuities. I am like the makers of home office printers my friend. I live off the selling of replacement ink cartridges. Sell more and more

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

often and at a higher price. I swear ink cartridges have less and less ink in them. The cartridges I sell always have the same number of bullets in them. I've got to learn from home office printers' manufacturers…"

Igor stopped talking for a moment rubbing his chin, pensive. Then he continued.

"It's too soon for me to sell in Ukraine. Another year, maybe two. In the meantime, I've got these ISIS fools, my next favorite customers. You should really talk to these future clients of mine. Just introduce yourself. I've heard you do it. Igor imitates a thick French accent. "My name is Jacques Couteau. Then, as everyone does, they'll say, Jacques Coussssteau? We thought you were dead!" Igor laughed.

Igor Stogoff was a Russian mercenary by reputation, but in truth, more of a gun broker, a man who trafficked in favors, almost always paid for in firepower. He didn't care who pulled the trigger, so long as it wasn't aimed at him.

Jacques had never seen Igor behind a desk. He wondered if Igor ever used a printer for that matter. Igor was always in the field: smoking a cigarette, selling weapons, or shooting at someone. Jacques, Igor and Hector the Vector had crossed paths before. Same battlefield, same

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

filthy business. Jacques called it the "war and death economy."

Jacques smiled and said, "It's *Couteau*, not *Cousteau*. Jacques *Louis* Couteau. *Couteau* means knife in French. You can call me Jack the Knife, if you'd like."

Igor laughed. He loved hearing Jacques correcting people who misunderstood his name.

Then Jacques added, "And yes, Jacques-Yves Cousteau is no longer with us. Great man. He had everything…"

Another mortar exploded nearby. Dust and grit fell over the two men again.

"I don't think your future clients know who Cousteau was," Jacques said. "They don't strike me as the type to care much about the oceans, or the future of the planet, for that matter."

"You should spend more time in the trenches," Igor said, gesturing for Jacques to sit beside him. "Men talk when they're about to die. You hear real things down here."

"I don't disagree," Jacques replied. "I've heard Al-Qaeda's waiting on something new. Something deadly. Theatrical. Are you involved, Igor?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You know they won't get anything that can't be traced before they use it." Jacques added.

Igor didn't respond right away. He sat there, eyes narrowed, as if weighing whether Jacques was truly an ally, or just another variable to account for. Igor didn't play chess. He found the board too limiting. But he *did* think in moves and sacrifices. Trust was a luxury. Information was currency. Timing was power.

There was more to gain by keeping Jacques close, at least for now. Better to feed him pieces of the truth and study his responses. If Jacques proved useful, he'd remain an asset. If not, there were other ways to keep tabs. Igor already had someone in mind. Someone Jacques wouldn't suspect. Someone who could get close to Jacques and report back.

"Not this time," Igor said. "Not this time. No one has this weapon. No one… Yet."

He paused, drew a long breath. Just as he opened his mouth to continue, another blast cut him off. Sand and dust rained down over the trench.

Jacques brushed off his jacket.

Igor coughed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"This is between you and me Jacques. Can I trust you?" Igor asked.

Jacques nodded.

Igor continued.

"When the Red Army took the city of Straubing, in Lower Bavaria, they seized some Nazi files. They were sealed for decades. Just declassified. Or rather, let's say our mutual friend Hector the Vector *helped* get them declassified."

Igor gave Jacques a knowing look.

"You ever been to Bavaria, Jacques?"

"Many times."

"If you're truly interested," Igor said with a grin, "there's a chemical weapon waiting for you... in Canada."

Jacques blinked. "Canada? Weren't we just talking about Bavaria?"

"Bavaria to Canada. You're going to love this story, my friend." Igor smiled.

Then he handed Jacques a sleek, unfamiliar machine gun.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You might need to return fire once or twice. Keeps my future ISIS clients engaged. Just aim high. Don't hit them!"

Jacques examined the weapon.

"Modified Israeli Negev," Igor explained. "New trigger system, digital sensors. Computer-assisted platform. Great with moving targets. Once they stop playing with their toys and themselves, I'll give my future ISIS clients the full demo. That is if they don't get lucky and kill us both first."

Jacques raised the weapon and fired three crisp rounds high into the sky, neatly over their attackers.

"Bavaria to Canada?" Jacques asked.

"You remember I used to work for Russian intelligence?" Igor asked, grinning.

Jacques gave the gun an appreciative glance. "Nice upgrade."

"Of course, I remember you talking about your spying days Igor. I learned a lot from you," Jacques added.

"Then you'll enjoy this."

Igor launched into his story as if they weren't being shelled at all.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Dr. Munchen. Nazi chemist. Ran labs across Germany during the war, one right near Dachau. Human experiments. The worst kind. In January '44, our good doctor Munchen left Straubing. Took his Japanese assistant with him, rumored to be his lover, their newborn baby, a young German lab tech who had been hands-on with every experiment, and three SS soldiers. Quiet exit. Very hush-hush."

A mortar landed close to Jacques and Igor. The trench shook.

Igor, unfazed, popped open a crate and tossed Jacques a fresh magazine. Then he reloaded his own weapon, a different make, but also computerized. Sleek, lethal, and far too expensive to be anywhere near this trench.

From another compartment, Igor pulled out a battered bottle of *Eau-de-Vie*, Water of Life, a clear, fruit brandy, and two dented steel shot glasses. He set them down like it was a picnic.

He tilted his head, lips moving silently as he counted the seconds between bursts of gunfire from their unseen ISIS attackers.

Then he poured.

"Here's to doing business with bad shots," Igor said with a grin. "It's so good to see you, Jacques."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques smiled. “To you, Igor.”

They clinked glasses. Drank. Re-shouldered their weapons.

“Dr. Munchen made it to the northern coast. But he didn’t last,” Igor said. “Dropped dead of a heart attack near Nienhagen. The soldiers buried him quietly. The lab tech bolted, vanished. But the woman, Dr. Munchen’s Japanese lover and assistant, their baby, and the SS guards boarded a U-boat.”

Igor looked at Jacques and asked.

“It took me a while to figure out where they went. Want to guess?”

Jacques arched an eyebrow. “Let me guess. They went to Canada.”

“No, Jacques,” Igor said. “They went to Greenland.”

He poured another round, letting the moment breathe.

A burst of gunfire zipped overhead.

Both men reloaded, almost in sync.

“Then to Canada,” Igor said, laughing.

It was lucky Igor carried some of the finest *Eau-de-Vie* Jacques had ever tasted, otherwise

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques might've politely asked him to skip the theatrics and get to the point.

"Firing the latest tech on a live battlefield is a lot of fun Igor" Jacques said, adjusting the strap on his rifle. "Fun times, Igor. Fun times. Just curious: when these things jam, do you take them to the local Apple Store?"

Igor burst out laughing.

"Great question! I miss the old days, Jacques. You could grab a rifle by the barrel and beat a man to death with it. Now? These beauties are so light. Break one and you don't even have a paperweight left. Sure, you can stream tutorials... if you've got the time. Someone on YouTube will show you how to fix these things. But I sell. I don't service. There's no money in service. Try to get your home office printer serviced. Fat chance."

"Smart man," Jacques nodded still wondering when Igor ever dealt with a printer. But Jacques was not about to ask. Then, shifting gears, he asked: "Where in Canada?"

Igor leaned forward, lowering his voice as if his future ISIS clients might be listening between shots and explosions.

"Well... things get a little fuzzy the closer you get to the North Pole," he said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Igor checked his magazine, then continued.

"On February 14th, 1944, a German U-boat left a covert weather station on Greenland's west coast and crossed to Baffin Island in Canada. They radioed in to the base in Greenland a few hours later: mission accomplished. The message made it to Berlin. But the sub never returned. It took me a while to dig all this up as you can imagine."

Jacques listened intently.

"I eventually found out that on the same night, in the same area where the sub disappeared, the Canadian Air Force lost contact with one of its planes. No wreckage. No pilot. Nothing. Next day, a blizzard rolls in… three weeks of whiteout."

Igor continued.

"They had real storms in those days... the kind that erased men and machines. Search parties came up empty. And the Allies? They were busy prepping for D-Day. No time for mysteries, especially involving just one plane."

Igor paused.

"Do you know how many Allied aircraft supported the D-Day invasion Jacques?" Igor asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No?" Jacques responded.

"Twelve thousand aircraft. That's a lot of wings, Jacques."

Igor smiled.

Another mortar barrage from the ISIS cell sent tremors through the trench. Igor muttered in Russian, as if scolding rowdy neighbors.

"Dayte nam peredokhnut', idioty," he muttered. (*Give us a break, you idiots.)*

Jacques squinted toward the source of the mortar fire, then turned back to Igor.

"So why aren't you in Canada chasing after this weapon yourself? Or did you already find it and now you're hoping to send me on a wild goose chase while rounding up customers? My people might be interested in buying," Jacques said.

Igor laughed. "No chasing wild geese for you, my friend. I swear. You might get chased by a polar bear or two, or hungry wolves. Wanna take one of these machine guns with you?"

Jacques fired a short burst toward their assailants, suppressive but non-lethal.

"Doesn't seem like business is booming for you here, Igor."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I have faith," Igor said with a grin. "And anyway, Hector gave the contract to someone else."

"Hector hired Zaid," Igor said. "Sent him on a winter vacation in the Great North. I don't know why. Zaid loves camels. Perhaps, Zaid gets too cozy with camels, some say. I hear he loves them very much... desert heat. I can't stand the heat, Jacques. You like the heat?"

"I prefer cold," Jacques replied. "Hmm… Zaid. Did he bring Juju with him?"

"You know Juju?" Igor asked, raising an eyebrow. "Beautiful girl."

"Yes. Beautiful. And deadly," Jacques said. "Don't get your hopes up Igor. She prefers women… I hear."

"Well, you never know, Jacques. You never know..." Igor said.

"Forever the optimist. I love you, Igor." Jacques smiled, then steered him back. "So, how do you know so much about this trip from Bavaria to Canada?"

"Great question, my friend." Igor grinned. "I'm good at my job."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He opened another box, full of grenades. Casually pulled a pin, lobbed one toward the distant ISIS gunmen.

"Just noise," Igor said, handing another grenade to Jacques. "Don't throw too far."

"You're very good at your job, Igor," Jacques said, pouring another round of *Eau-de-Vie*. "That's why I'm here. Not just for the drinks and entertainment."

They downed their shots. Jacques pulled his pin and tossed the grenade just far enough to satisfy the show.

"Excellent form," Igor said. Then, after a pause, "You remember I was telling you about the young German lab assistant who vanished after Dr. Munchen's heart attack?"

"Yes."

"He ran. Deserted. Must've been spooked by something," Igor said. "I tracked him to the town of Demmin. That's in Pomerania, northeast Germany. You ever been?"

"Many times," Jacques said. "Fascinating place. After news broke that Hitler had offed himself, a bunch of townspeople followed suit. Couldn't imagine living without their Fuhrer."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You don't see that happening these days," Igor added. "Do you think some Russians will off themselves after Putin dies?"

Jacques smirked. "Just about as many Americans will kill themselves after Donald Trump dies..."

They laughed, sharp, bitter, knowing.

"To the die-hard *tyrant-lovers*!" Jacques raised his glass. "May they follow their heroes into the grave sooner rather than later."

They clinked glasses.

"That's good stuff," Jacques said, inspecting the label on the *Eau-de-Vie* bottle.

"There's more to the story, Jacques," Igor said.

"I meant the *Eau-de-Vie* is good," Jacques replied.

"Yes, very good, very good. I'll give you a case." Igor said. "How do you like the machine gun?" he asked Jacques. "Fun, right?"

Jacques nodded, already reloading. "How much do you charge for the cartridges?"

"Free for you my friend," Igor replied.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Igor leaned forward, eyes a little glassy, but voice steady.

"So, I search… and search… and search," Igor said. "And finally, I find a diary. The lab assistant's diary. Damaged, worn, but some parts still legible."

Igor continued.

"The lab rat wrote about what it was like working with Dr. Munchen's team. Not much about the experiments, just bits. Some of the secret stuff, but incomplete. Mostly daily routines. Munchen's team tested chemical weapons in concentration camps, Sachsenhausen, Natzweiler, and Neuengamme."

Igor chuckled darkly. "One entry says he walked in on Dr. Munchen having sex with the Japanese woman, the other assistant on the team. Must've been awkward... maybe not..."

Jacques let Igor ramble. He knew Igor got more talkative with each shot of *Eau-de-Vie*, and he wasn't about to stop pouring.

The machine gun purred in Jacques' hands. He fired a short burst, reloaded smoothly, and refilled their glasses.

"The final diary entries describe their trip from Bavaria to the Baltic coast. They were

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

meant to board a submarine. But when Munchen collapsed, the assistant panicked, and ran." Igor said.

Igor lobbed two grenades in quick succession. Dull thumps followed. Then he raised his glass.

"To people who keep diaries. Makes my life easy." Igor said.

"To Anne Frank," Jacques added, meeting the toast.

Igor leaned into the story again, barely missing a beat.

"Hitler's top chemist, Dr. Munchen, was sent to strike North America with something new, something terrifying." Igor explained.

"According to the lab rat's notes, Dr. Munchen tested the chemical thoroughly. Prisoners died in agony. If the dose was strong enough, or applied to the right place in the right way, death came within minutes..." Igor added. "And then… the bodies *explodierte...* exploded."

Jacques raised an eyebrow.

"That's what he wrote, Jacques. The bodies exploded!" Igor said.

Igor waved his arms. "Boom! Jacques."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Just then, a mortar exploded nearby. Dust and grit rained down.

Igor didn't even flinch. He kept talking while Jacques wiped dust from his empty glass, clearly annoyed.

"Aren't you nervous these future ISIS clients of yours have drones that will soon hover above our heads and drop more than dust in our shot glasses?" Jacques asked.

"You can't get drones around here, Jacques. Just about every single drone coming out the factories is shipped directly to Ukraine. Plus, the ISIS guys are old fashion. I have sold more Japanese swords around here than I thought would be possible. Put a lot of vodka, caviar, and bread on my table selling Japanese swords Jacques. These ISIS guys all fantasize about chopping some poor bastard's head off. It's a rite of passage for them. They don't score as many points with their God taking their enemies heads off with drones. There is usually nothing left to cut off if you bomb your enemies from a drone. Got to have heads more or less intact even if you cut them off dead bodies. It's all about visuals these days. Internet posts. You know."

Igor poured another round and returned to sharing his findings from the lab assistant's diary with Jacques.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Small amounts of chemical resulted in hours of suffering. There was no stopping the chemical from burning through blood vessels. It acted like an acid poured on flesh but no amount of washing with any liquids could stop its effect. Dr. Munchen was thorough. His team tested every liquid known at the time from water to gasoline, to schnapps, etc."

Jacques didn't interrupt.

"Apparently, the travelling party had enough to annihilate Toronto and Detroit. After that, the plan was to produce more, hidden away somewhere in Canada or the U.S., protected by three SS commandos. Lean and mean."

"A first strike," Jacques murmured, almost to himself.

"Exactly." Igor nodded. "Psychological and biological warfare. No safe water. Just blown-up bodies everywhere."

Jacques's brow furrowed, a rare thing.

"I know what you're thinking," Igor said, with a sly grin. "You want the name of the Asian woman."

"That... and a few other things," Jacques replied. "Like where the hell this weapon is now."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No name for the Asian lady. Sorry. But the child... a baby boy. Name was Kato. Cute, no?"

Jacques raised an eyebrow. "Charming."

As if on cue, the two men raised their weapons and fired skyward, bursts of harmless warning fire above Igor's jumpy future clients.

"So, back in 1944, the lab assistant ran off and ended up in Demmin. The town was bombed. The Red Army found his body and the diary. I am not sure anyone read the diary at the time. No one ever connected the information to what was seized in Bavaria or Dachau as far as I can tell," Igor said.

He smirked.

"I got there before Hector the Vector did. I have good contacts too."

Igor finished his *Eau-de-Vie*. Jacques did the same.

Igor continued.

"You know, Jacques, the Nazis destroyed records systematically, especially around human experiments, especially when private companies were involved. Some of these companies are still in existence today... You might have worked for some of them, or you might soon. These companies operate under new names of course

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

but they have always valued their research and inventions."

Igor added.

"Orders were oral. No paper trail. Our lab rat died. His diary survived."

"*C'est la vie*," Jacques said. *"La vie vas te tuer…*Life will kill you…*"*

Jacques leaned back, gun resting on his lap, and added:

"Back then, a journal was the only way to preserve your story. Now? Smartphones. Uploads. Podcasts about pain, streaming in real time." Jacques said. "There was a time when you knew you had to grow up. Your mother didn't crowd the fridge door with your artwork under cute magnets. You had to become an adult quick. No "oohs" "aahs" when you figured out how to draw a stick figure ... Now, people upload their artworks on giant fridge doors called Instagram, TikTok... X... whatever... forever young... forever artists... forever seeking attention... getting none... paying for the fake kind..."

"Can you imagine how World War II would have played out if every person had a smart phone then? A TikTok account?" Jacques asked.

He smirked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You'd probably advertise on Instagram Igor..." Jacques added.

Igor looked amused at the thought.

"Selfies of all sorts..." Igor laughed.

"We're not any safer for it," Jacques added.

"You might capture and upload massacres faster, but the bullets fly just as fast. You might not get to hit 'upload' in time." Jacques said.

"Can you mount your smartphone on this thing?" Jacques asked, nodding at the weapon. "Livestream your kill count?"

"I like the way you think Jacques," Igor grinned. "The ISIS kids will love that. Good for recruiting. Though they will want it mounted on their Japanese swords first of course."

By the time the sky lightened over the Syrian ruins surrounding Jacques and Igor, the gunfire from the ISIS cell had stopped. Igor's future clients had either worn themselves out, or run out of ammunition.

Jacques stood, dusted himself off, and shook Igor's hand.

"Thanks for the *Eau-de-Vie*. And the fireworks."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Thanks for not killing anyone," Igor replied. "Time for me to pull out my white flag and pay them a visit. I think they are ready to buy..."

"I'd say bring some of that amazing *Eau-de-Vie* with you but I don't think they drink..." Jacques said.

"Take my plane, Jacques," Igor said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I won't need it for a few days. And honestly? I envy you. The cold up there in Canada clears the mind."

"Thank you, Igor. Good luck with your new customers," Jacques replied. "I'll send you a video of the Canadian Arctic."

Igor grinned. "Make sure I see you in it, means you're still alive."

Jacques smiled.

"Good luck to you too!" Jacques said.

Jacques stepped into the same car that brought him to Igor the evening before.

Igor's driver dropped Jacques at the airport, where Igor's sleek private jet waited on the tarmac.

Inside the jet, a bottle of the same *Eau-de-Vie* was waiting in the seat beside him. Later, a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

beautiful young woman presented Jacques with a box, neatly wrapped in paper and ribbon.

"Is today your birthday?" she asked with a smile.

Jacques looked into her eyes.

"Early Valentine's Day gift... Igor is a special friend..." Jacques said.

Inside the box: one of the sleek, computerized machine guns Jacques had used in the trench.

"Your gift also came with four cases of *Eau-de-Vie* to take with you when we land," she added. "Shall I keep pouring?"

She leaned in, voice playful. "Happy early Valentine's Day Jacques. Can I call you Jacques, Mr. Cousteau…? I thought you were..."

"Dead?" Jacques asked. "My name is Jacques Couteau, not Cousteau…"

###

Inside Igor Stogoff private jet...
February 12, Present-Day

Jacques looked at his watch. They had been travelling for over twenty-six hours. Refueling took longer than expected. Ground staff needed

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

reminding that Igor Stogoff owned the plane. Without that name, they'd still be waiting on a tarmac between Syria and Canada.

The young woman who had welcome Jacques on the plane, Mariam, a stunning woman in her mid-twenties coordinated everything without missing a beat.

Jacques had come to learn she was Igor's executive assistant, meaning, in her case, *chargé d'affaires* and then some. A diplomat heading missions in the absence of the ambassador, Igor.

She kept everything moving smoothly.

Jacques never had to show any of his passports, American or European.

Mariam poured herself some of that amazing *Eau-de-Vie* Igor had sent along. Jacques and Mariam drank to Igor's health and traded stories about him.

The plane finally touched down at Kimmirut Airport on Baffin Island, if "airport" was even the right word. The runway felt more like a frozen luge track than a landing strip. But Igor's crew specialized in impossible landings, often under fire, so this landing was tame by comparison.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As Jacques stepped out into the wind-swept cold, Mariam who had kept his glass full and the conversation lively during the flight leaned in with a reminder.

"The crew will leave the four cases of *Eau-de-Vi*e with your luggage, Monsieur Couteau."

Jacques smiled, nodding. "Merci, Mariam. Please call me Jacques…"

He'd been to Baffin Island before. On more than one occasion, he'd accepted covert assignments to investigate mining operations for corporate clients. His work often involved unearthing what companies weren't putting in their press releases. That kind of digging made friends, and enemies.

Now, he planned to reach out to both, friends first of course. Cautiously. Discreetly. He'd ask around: any unusual deaths? Any strange foreigners passing through? Odd behavior?

He would also visit his old friends, an Inuit family who had welcomed him warmly in the past.

They had their own distinctive way of welcoming friends, humorous skits, little reenactments of embarrassing or joyful life moments. The goal was simple: everyone should

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

leave the celebration with a smile. It worked every time.

This time, the family invited Jacques to stay with them again. Neighbors were called, and the celebration grew.

At one point, a very old man was carried into the room in a chair. He had a permanent smile, barely moved, and didn't speak. But when Jacques greeted him, he sensed recognition, a warm, silent connection.

The man's name was Igaluk. The word around town was that he was over a hundred years old. He had lived through it all, children, grandchildren, great- and great-great-grandchildren. His presence alone seemed like a blessing, but it was more than that. To his family, he was a living shelter, a quiet dome of protection beneath which they all breathed a little easier. When Igaluk was near, the world felt less chaotic, less dangerous. His silence carried weight. His gaze, reassurance. It was as if time itself respected his authority and offered peace wherever he stood.

Later, some of the young men carried Igaluk and his chair into the center of the hall. He was going to be part of one of the skits lined up for the evening, a moment everyone anticipated with reverent joy.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques had brought three of the four Eau-de-Vie cases Igor had gifted him. The crowd drank heartily.

Naturally, Mariam had arranged for the alcohol to be declared as medicinal supplies at the airport. The border attendant hadn't asked many questions. He was sick himself and earned two bottles of Water-of-Life for his troubles.

A much younger man stood beside Igaluk and announced that while the old man rarely stood these days, he always rose for this particular skit.

Despite visiting the family in the past, Jacques had never met Igaluk or seen the performance. Tonight, would be his first.

Sure enough, Igaluk stood slowly, but proudly, and held perfectly still while the younger man next to him danced in a lopsided, limping fashion, flailing his arms for balance.

The crowd howled with laughter.

Jacques couldn't help but smile. It was genuinely funny.

One of Igaluk's great-granddaughters, Margaret Amka, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks, leaned in to explain between fits of giggling:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Igaluk loved to tell the story of a man he once guided to a secret rendezvous with a submarine, in 1944” she said.

“Igaluk barely made it out alive. The submarine was sunk, and the man he’d led disappeared into a cave with others who’d arrived on the submarine, never to be seen again.”

She broke into more laughter, then struggled to her feet and shouted:

“Time for more medicine!”

The crowd cheered.

“Thank you, Igor,” Jacques thought. He had contemplated the real possibility that Igor was sending him on a wild goose chase. Igaluk’s story might support Igor’s.

However dangerous the submarine visitors may have been, Igaluk never tired of recounting how the man he guided tried to warm himself by flapping his arms and hopping on one foot, thanks to a bum leg.

Any excuse to reenact that absurd image was seized with glee.

Later, Jacques quietly questioned several of Igaluk’s relatives. A few of them still remembered the location clearly. For many

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

years, Igaluk had described every detail of his journey to the coast and the strange visitors that had come out of the submarine.

But the area had changed drastically since World War II. Everyone agreed the search should begin at the Vastan Energy compound, the one with the security station on its grounds. From there, Jacques would need to rent a snowmobile.

How much trust could Jacques place in an old tale, retold countless times, often through a haze of alcohol if not always?

While most of the family members pointed to the Vastan Energy compound as the starting point, others, slurring their words, claimed the site where the submarine surfaced lay much farther north, some even insisted it was on the coast of James Bay, not even on Baffin Island.

With no better leads, Jacques had little choice.

The following day, on February 13th, Jacques rented a snowcat. It was the fastest and safest way for him to reach his first destination, the Vastan Energy compound.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Vastan Energy Compound
February 13, Present-Day

Five hours after leaving Igaluk's village, Jacques passed the Vastan Energy buildings and the adjacent security station. He didn't stop.

His first stop was the inn just as some in Igaluk's clan had recommended. Clean, quiet, and close to the compound. There was no other travel accommodations in the area.

Jacques parked the snowcat and made his way to the inn's front desk. He rented a room. He brought his suitcase, and the last bottle of Igor's *Eau-de-Vie* he had left.

He set the bottle beside the bed.

"Saving this one for a special occasion," he murmured.

According to Igaluk's granddaughter, Margaret, the terrain ahead would get rough.

"Get a dogsled," she'd said. "Snowmobiles won't get you everywhere."

Jacques had nodded. "Good, I prefer dogsleds over snowmobiles anyway."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques crossed the road to the sled rental shop, Samuk's Rental, where the smell of fuel and dog fur mixed in the cold air.

"Hello. My name is Samuk. How can I be of assistance?"

"Hello. I'm Jacques. A very beautiful lady with an amazing singing voice, Margaret Amka I believe her name is, told me I could rent a dogsled from you?"

"Margaret Amka! *One with a friendly spirit*. Of course, my wife. You heard Margaret sing?"

"I was invited to a party where I met an older gentleman named Igaluk. Margaret took the time to explain to me why Igaluk was standing still while another gentleman was jumping up and down next to him. Near the end of the evening, Margaret sang a beautiful song: 'The Life I've Lived'. Gorgeous voice." Jacques said. "Margaret said you would help?"

"Of course, of course," Samuk replied. "You want a dogsled. That's good because I don't have any snowmobiles left. I rented all nine of them this morning to a group of hunters."

"They weren't regular hunters," Samuk said. "Too quiet. Not drinking. Foreign hunters always drunk."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He went on talking about his other customers:

"I've been very busy today. The head of the Vastan's security team, Kate, had already reserved a dogsled with fourteen dogs, which she took to the security station. Very nice lady Kate." Samuk said.

"Very friendly lady. Very friendly. Kate always wants to give me a tip!" He laughed. "I told her, don't tip Samuk. Tip the dogs. I sell treats. I'll add it to your bill."

"All I have left is a smaller dogsled. Eight dogs. They are fast, but you can't load too much." Samuk added.

Samuk, sized Jacques, looking him up and down.

"Good thing you're not too big. The dogs are in good shape but you can't carry too much. What brings you around here?" Samuk asked.

"Sightseeing," Jacques responded.

"Perfect! When are you sightseeing?" Samuk asked.

"Tomorrow morning. Is that ok? Will the dogs be ready?" Jacques asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Sure. Where are you staying?" Samuk asked.

"The inn across the street." Jacques pointed toward the modest building across the road.

"Nice place. Good choice. The best!" Samuk said. "The dogs will be ready. And their treats."

He laughed and added, "I'll put it on your bill."

Jacques stepped outside, feeling confident. He preferred dogsleds over motors, silent, dependable, adaptable. The kind of transport that didn't scream.

He started crossing the snowy road, already thinking ahead. Once in his room, he'd draw out a map, merging Igaluk's oral accounts with the topography Igor had supplied. No electronics. Just pen, paper, and instinct.

Behind him, he heard Samuk shouting:

"Monsieur Jacques! Monsieur Jacques!"

He turned, puzzled, and then saw it. A white pickup truck barreling toward him. Fast. Out of control.

Jacques lunged. Rolled.

The truck skidded to a stop just inches from his face. The scent of rubber filled his nose.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He lay there for a second, staring at the truck. He hadn't been under one in a while.

He stood up and brushed himself off, still focused on his plan for the next day.

A woman had stepped out of the truck. Flushed, breathless. Saying something, apologizing, maybe.

"Puppy in a what..." Jacques thought.

But before Jacques could respond, Samuk appeared, holding a pink paper.

"Your receipt, Monsieur Jacques!" Samuk said cheerfully, handing it over. Then, turning to the woman:

"Absolutely the opposite of what you do on ice. You never slam the brakes. It locks the wheels. Then you skid…"

Jacques accepted the receipt with a nod. He turned and walked away as Samuk carried on explaining what to do and not to do when driving a truck on icy roads.

Jacques had other priorities.

In his room at the inn, lying flat on the bed, Jacques pulled out his notebook and pen. He began sketching. Positioning. Calculating.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He reviewed what he knew, what Igor had told him, what Igaluk's family had shared.

The players. The movements. The stakes.

And then he thought about the woman in the truck who almost killed him as he was crossing the road.

“Beautiful woman... Was her name Puppy?” Jacques thought.

Before drifting into sleep, Jacques thought about what happened on Baffin Island, on February 14th 1944…

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter VIII

The Last Dive

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, 1944

Ice is noisy…

In northern Canada's wilderness, along the southern coast of Baffin Island, the ice that blankets the water throughout most of the harsh winter can get boisterous. It crackles. It bangs. It pops. Snaps and rattles.

The ice will randomly fill the frigid air with drumming sounds, a symphony of guttural raspy noises stirred and carried in all directions by the glacial winds.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

When they are not hunting seals, the polar bears sleep soundly through this ruckus.

The bears are used to the ranting and raving of the ice.

They don't have to hibernate like black or brown bears, though pregnant female polar bears will come close to a hibernation state and give birth in a warmer, more isolated and protected place.

And, sometimes, a quieter one.

On February 14th, 1944, at exactly 1 AM, the ice cracked like never before to the ears of the suddenly awaken nearby wildlife.

In an isolated cove, an unmarked German Type II U-Boat broke through the ice a little less than one hundred and fifty feet from the shoreline.

First the submarine's conning tower pushed against the compact sheet of ice fracturing it wide enough to let the submarine's periscope pop through the fissure.

Then the periscope slid up above the ice's surface as high as it could go. It proceeded to complete two 360 degrees scans of its surroundings.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The submarine's captain, Dieter Von Ruden, scrutinized the horizon in all directions to ensure that the submarine could continue to surface safely.

The ice was sparkling, reflecting the light from the stars illuminating a dreamily clear night sky.

"Poor conditions for a stealth mission!" the captain said out loud.

He could not tell through the periscope where the shoreline began as the water and the grounds were covered by the same glittering white shroud of snow and ice.

Von Ruden had ordered surfacing as close to the shoreline as he gauged was safe given the depth of the water in the cove selected for what had been referred to as a most critical secret rendezvous by his superiors.

The fate of the Third Reich rested on this mission being a success.

After inspecting the landscape surrounding the submarine for a third time, Von Ruden gave the order to continue surfacing.

"Blow the main ballast tanks!"

Von Ruden heard his order repeated by his second in command.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The tower resumed its upward move, arising slowly, shattering the ice around it which cracked and snapped louder and louder.

The tower finally halted its climb, having pulled above the ice half of the cigar-shaped hull of the submarine.

No doubt having awakened a few polar bears, at least for a moment.

On the nearby shore, startled by the noise, Werner Seitzer instinctively reached for his hunting rifle.

He had dozed off, sitting on his backpack while waiting for the submarine. He wore gloves but his hands were stiff, almost numb.

He tried to wrap his hands around his weapon but could not get a firm grip. He would never have been able to raise the rifle, aim and shoot had he needed to defend himself.

Thankfully he did not need to use it. He did not have to fend for his life. There were no predators threatening him. No Canadian army patrol. No hungry bear. Just ice polished to near perfection by the relentless freezing wind, sweeping snow over its surface, and, of course, the very quiet Inuit guide, Igaluk.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Werner had hired Igaluk to lead him to the rendezvous point with the submarine. It was the third time Werner had asked Igaluk to accompany him on an expedition around Baffin Island.

Werner wanted to make sure he knew a guide well before taking him on an important mission.

Igaluk had shown he was very familiar with the area. The Inuit was reliable. Never asked questions. He was always on time. Never drunk.

After Werner was awakened by the submarine's surfacing, he glanced at Igaluk. The Inuit was still standing in the same place since the two men arrived at their destination.

Igaluk watched calmly as Werner stood up and reached for his rifle.

Igaluk did not think that he was in danger of getting shot by Werner, not even accidentally. Clearly Werner was too cold to use his weapon.

Igaluk knew he was safe, whatever nightmare Werner had been woken up from by the submarine surfacing through the ice.

Igaluk remarked in a soft-spoken voice in his tribe's dialect:

"*Were you going to shoot yourself to save yourself from freezing to death?*"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Werner did not speak Inuit very well.

"Could you please translate that for me?" he asked Igaluk.

"Of course, my apologies" replied Igaluk. "Are these the friends you were waiting for?"

Igaluk pointed to the dark mass slowly rising through the ice.

"I am sure it's them," said Werner.

"I would not expect too many submarines around these parts."

Igaluk had always insisted on being paid in full, upfront, before agreeing to accompany Werner on his journeys.

Guiding people around Baffin Island was not unusual, even though the world was at war. But Igaluk had sensed from the get-go that there was something strange, downright suspicious, about Werner.

This time Werner had told him that he was helping friends rejoin their families in the U.S, travelling through Canada to their final destination.

"*Ujuq!* (Unbelievable)" thought Igaluk.

Werner had showed Igaluk papers bearing what looked like legitimate seals from the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Canadian government and he offered Igaluk a lot more money than the Inuit had received from him on prior occasions.

Igaluk's family needed the money. He had no choice but to take the job. Whatever reservations he had about helping Werner, refusal wasn't an option. Still, he made one thing clear: he was a guide, nothing more. He would not lead Werner into a crack in the ice, but neither would he save him from one. Just as a hunting rifle wouldn't stop the cold from blackening a man's nose and ears, Igaluk made no promises of protection.

Igaluk would have left Werner freeze to death if Werner had napped for much longer.

The submarine's tower emerging loudly through the ice saved Werner's life.

"The money was good but did not buy that much after all." Igaluk thought.

Werner, now standing up, started bouncing on one foot, waving his arms, hoping his body would warm up.

That was quite an amusing sight to Igaluk's who stood silent and perfectly still, exerting as little energy as possible.

Igaluk had noticed that Werner had a bum leg when they first met. He was surprised that

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Werner had been able to follow him at the brisk pace the Inuit set on every one of their outings.

Igaluk had lived all of his life on Baffin Island. He was used to the cold. That didn't mean he wanted to linger out if he did not have to do so. Plus, he wasn't paid by the hour.

This journey required walking through treacherous landscapes, rarely taking a break.

Obviously, Werner's injury forced him to jump up and down on his one good leg. It was rendering the dance whimsical and quite entertaining. Igaluk wondered if the bum leg remained cold.

Both men watched as the black metal tower rose steadily between the chunks of broken ice.

The cracking sounds were accompanied by the scraping noises of the ice raking its sharp edges against the metal sides of the submarine.

Steam rose around the vessel, coming from the water, between the lumps of ice now fracturing into smaller pieces, weakened by the steady push of the submarine toward the sky.

Within a few minutes the bow of the vessel emerged from under the ice, followed by its stern.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The hull rocked back and forth a few times, tightly nesting itself in its newly formed cozy cradle of frozen white wedges.

The ice had lost the battle. But not the war. The ice always won, eventually.

Almost immediately after the submarine stopped its rise, the fractured ice fragments started getting sewn back together by frigid gusts of wind.

These rapidly turned the leaping water bouncing between the chipped slabs of ice into lumps, creating a tailor-made tight garment around the hull of the ship, trapping the submarine where it had stabilized.

It had taken a couple of minutes for the vessel to rise and stabilize.

The normal crackling of the ice resumed.

No doubt the awakened bears fell back to sleep. Way too early for breakfast.

Werner was still awkwardly dancing on the ice-covered ground, but did not feel any warmer.

Once he realized the submarine had completed its surfacing, he stopped his hopping and bopping and reached into his backpack.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He took out his kerosene hooded lantern. He had not needed it thus far as the stars and their reflections on the ice gave off plenty of light.

His hands were still numb. All he had to do to signal his presence to the crew of the submarine was lifting and dropping the lantern's hood at regular intervals, directing the light at the submarine's tower.

But lighting the lantern took a while. The wind was picking up, blowing erratically.

Werner knelt down and walled off the lantern between his body and his backpack. The kerosene finally lit up. Just in time.

As Werner stood up, holding the lantern at his side, a silhouette appeared at the top of the submarine's tower.

Werner started moving the hood of the lantern up and down creating short and long bursts of light directed straight at the silhouette.

Werner spelled out the code words that were agreed upon to identify himself and waited for a response from the figure atop the tower's deck.

Captain Von Ruden decoded Werner's message with a sigh of relief.

"Perfect timing" he said, addressing the cold air.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Von Ruden did not want the submarine to be delayed above the ice. Rime was forming quickly on the submarine's sides all around the hull.

He raised a kerosene battle-lantern above the edge of the submarine's tower and responded to the signal Werner had sent from the shore.

Then Von Ruden looked down through the tower's hatch behind him and ordered down to his second in command to proceed.

"Send up the gunner's mate! Quickly!" Von Ruden said.

About ten seconds later the forward-escape hatch of the submarine sprung open quietly.

A sailor leaped out and headed toward the turret supporting the single 20 mm anti-aircraft gun set a few feet away from the tower.

The sailor readied the machine gun to fire. He pointed the weapon to the sky above the Bay, opposite the shore.

The type II submarine wasn't equipped with a deck cannon. The 20 mm anti-aircraft gun was all the armament available to the crew to repel an attack while above water.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

This part of the shore was totally covered by ice. The Canadian forces wouldn't be able to use ships to patrol the area.

An attack could only come from the ground or from the sky.

Von Ruden knew that the submarine was at risk of being spotted by aircrafts patrolling the area more so than by a foot patrol.

His best chance of returning his vessel and its crew safely to their base in Greenland was to watch the sky, be ready to return fire, and dive quickly.

He ordered for two more sailors to join him and the gunner on deck.

"Send two men to watch the sky!" Von Ruden said.

His second in command acknowledged the order.

A sailor climbed out of the forward hatch and immediately started scanning the horizon, facing west, pressing large binoculars to his eyes.

Simultaneously, the submarine after-escape hatch opened and another sailor came out to join the watch, his binoculars targeting the horizon, facing east.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Both men scrutinized the sky systematically, following a grid like pattern over and over, regularly wiping ice particles off the lenses of their binoculars.

Once Von Ruden felt confident that he had sets of eyes where he needed them and that his gunner was ready to respond to an attack, he gave the go-ahead to his second in command to carry on.

“Tell them to come out.” Von Ruden said.

A few seconds later, another sailor came out through the forward hatch of the submarine.

He hoisted three backpacks from the inside of the submarine and placed them behind him on the deck.

He was then handed four pairs of ski poles which he set alongside the backpacks. Next, he reached down to the hatch and grabbed a black and silver metal case, the size of a small suitcase.

He handled it with care, slowly lifting it above the hatch and then placing it cautiously on the deck, between two of the backpacks.

Seconds later, a man dressed in extreme weather clothing came out of the hatch, followed by two other men wearing the exact same outfits.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

One of the men took a ski pole in each hand and stepped carefully from the submarine onto a large block of ice resting against the hull.

He tested the stability of the slab and walked a few feet away from the submarine in the direction of the coastline.

He retraced his steps and stood at the edge of the ice block, one foot on the ice, the other on the submarine's hull.

He used one of the ski poles to steady himself on the ice and pointed the other one toward the men still on the submarine's deck.

One of the two men that followed him out of the submarine grabbed the end of the pole and stepped onto the ice.

The last of the three men handed him the backpacks, remaining ski poles and the metal case, handling the object even more cautiously than the sailor had earlier.

The man on the ice carefully laid out everything that was handed to him far enough away from the submarine so that none of these items could possibly fall in the water should the cracks in the ice around the hull widen.

Then the men stood silently, immobile.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A minute later a smaller figure emerged through the hatch. The sailor made sure the person found its footing on the icy surface of the deck.

The two moved together toward the edge of the deck, very slowly. The other three men took over and helped the figure step off the deck, onto the ice.

The sailor swiftly disappeared through the hatch, returning below deck.

Each of the three men on the ice strapped a backpack on their shoulders.

One of them picked up the metal case. It was equipped with a wide shoulder strap which he loosened to fit on his right shoulder.

The four individuals looked at Von Ruden atop the tower but did not say a word nor raise their hands to salute the captain. All four nodded quietly, almost in sync.

Von Ruden understood that the gesture meant to say “thank you” and “good luck to us all,” and of course “heil Hitler!”

The party started walking toward the shore, slowly approaching where Igaluk was standing and Werner was still dancing… ever so awkwardly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Werner estimated that it would take about six minutes for the four individuals to make their way to him.

He had been clear when communicating his plan to Berlin that there were enormous risks proceeding with this mission. One of them being the freezing temperature.

As Werner observed the off-loading, he realized the last person to come out of the submarine appeared to be a woman.

He had focused his binoculars to get a closer look at the smaller figure. In doing so, he discovered that the person was carrying an odd-looking bag against their chest.

“Is this a woman…? Is she carrying a child…?” He asked Igaluk as he handed the Inuit his binoculars.

Igaluk adjusted the binoculars. He took his time, looking carefully at each of the four individuals walking toward him and Werner.

“Hard to tell,” Igaluk said.

What Igaluk was really interested in was to find out if anyone carried weapons.

No one from the landing party appeared to carry rifles but they could have handguns, on themselves, or in their backpacks.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Igaluk scrutinized the submarine for markings as well.

There were none. Neither the captain nor the sailors wore uniforms. They were dressed like fishermen.

“Odd,” he thought.

He handed the binoculars back Werner.

The instructions Werner had received from Berlin were very clear, as always.

He had to prepare for a party of five men, three highly trained SS soldiers, veterans of campaigns in Russia and Finland, and two scientists.

Werner had thought through every detail accordingly.

“The plans must have been changed at the last minute,” he thought.

Werner would have been well on his way and it would not have been possible to reach him to share new information without risking compromising the mission.

Werner had everything ready to accommodate for a party of five adults, but he had not planned on making sure a baby could

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

cope successfully with the challenges of the upcoming trip.

There was a long way to go between Baffin Island and Kingston, their final destination in Canada before crossing Lake Ontario to Rochester, New York, in the United States.

The journey would include some long walks on snow and ice-covered grounds in freezing temperatures.

Werner had learned a lot about Canada in the past three years. Especially about the country's winters.

Werner arrived in Canada in 1941. He had joined the German SS in 1937. A year later he injured his right leg during a training exercise.

The injury barred him from serving in combat, but his flawless English, and equally fluent French, made him a natural candidate for espionage. It was suggested he serve the Third Reich as a spy.

He was sent to the western coast of Greenland to a secret German weather station and submarine base.

There he planned and conducted reconnaissance missions, tracking allies' naval operations in the North Atlantic.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

In the summer of 1941, Canada ramped up its war effort and Werner was ordered to make his way to Quebec.

Provided with the necessary papers and cover, he entered the country secretly and once settled, he carried out missions as ordered, gathering information which he would transmit to Berlin, via Greenland.

He walked with a limp due to his leg injury, leaning on a cane or crutches on occasions. It kept folks from questioning why he had not joined the Canadian military. In fact, at times, people came up to him and thanked him for his service.

Up until three months ago his spying assignments had been limited to tracking war preparation activities and gathering whatever he deemed would be useful information.

Then in early November of 1943, he decoded new orders sent to him from Berlin. He welcomed the directives. Finally, a mission that would take him into the field.

Werner was to pinpoint a location where a small submarine could bring five individuals to Canada as early as possible in February of 1944.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The Canadian Navy and Coast Guard were on high alert along the east coast across Greenland.

It was daring of Werner to suggest sending a submarine into the Hudson Strait, to the southern coast of Baffin Island, but his plan was approved by the Fuhrer himself.

And now here he was, waiting for the four individuals who had just left the submarine and were heading toward him.

Another couple of minutes and Igaluk and Werner would guide them to a nearby cave at the bottom of a small mountain near a ridge overlooking the cove.

Werner had calculated that they would reach the cave within three minutes. He had prepared the cave so that everyone could get some rest and spend the night in a relatively safe and warm environment.

A few hours later, early in the morning, they would all march to a cabin further inland. That is everyone minus Igaluk.

Werner planned on making the cave Igaluk's final resting place. There could be no loose ends. For the sake of the mission. He no longer needed the Inuit.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

From the cabin the party would make its way to a small air strip. There, they would board one of the small aircrafts used to fly animal pelts and tusks south to a small town on the shore of the Hudson Bay.

There, they would hop on a local train, and, passing through small towns, they would continue their journey using the most inconspicuous modes of transportation, sometimes walking through the wilderness as needed.

All the papers were in order to fake the identities of five men but not for a woman and a child.

“No doubt Berlin thought this through,” he convinced himself, “a woman and a child might actually help the travelling party blend in and avoid being noticed.”

Werner was revising his plan mentally as he waited for the party to come to him.

Captain Von Ruden watched the three men, woman, and child leave the submarine.

He was a combat veteran. He was chosen for this mission because of his achievements in the North Atlantic, having led his crew in sinking more ships than any other German submarines had to date.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He had nerves of steel, his men all agreed.

But coastal operations aboard a small size submarine was not his preferred way to wage war against the enemies of the Reich.

The Type II submarine, now under his command, was usually favored for training missions.

It could dive quickly, if not trapped by the ice. And it was the right size for Baffin Island's coastal waters.

Unfortunately, it had little chances of fighting off an attack by enemy forces above water and it carried only two torpedoes.

Von Ruden much preferred chasing warships and torpedoing them to the bottom of the ocean from the relative safety of the U-Boat he had helmed since the beginning of the war.

Surfacing this "pocket" submarine on a clear night, to see it quickly pinched by ice that would undoubtedly slow down diving back into the water, made Von Ruden feel uncomfortable.

He wasn't too keen on the fact that there were no markings identifying the submarine and that he and his crew were ordered to wear plain fishermen clothes instead of their uniforms.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He wasn't a spy at heart, though submarine warfare might be the equivalent of wedging battle as a sniper does, albeit with much larger and much more powerful "bullets".

"If snipers could shoot torpedoes… Well, they might one day", he thought.

When brought out in the open, out of his submarine, he would rather wear his colors proudly.

He wished the landing party would hurry.

He watched the three men and the woman carrying her baby walk toward the shore. He had responded to their gestures with a nod.

"Hurry up," he murmured to himself.

Werner realized that it would take longer than he had initially estimated for the foursome to walk from where the submarine had surfaced to where he was standing with Igaluk.

The ice was thick.

The landing party was not in danger of falling through, but they had to walk slowly so as not to slip on the glassy surface, even steadied by the use of their ski poles.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And, even slower, as the smaller individual, and her mysterious baggage resting on her chest, seemed overly cautious.

He wished he could have found an isolated cove with deeper water nearer to the shore.

The submarine had risen closer than he had imagined would be possible but still even closer would have been better.

“This captain is good,” he said to Igaluk.

Igaluk did not respond.

Werner had studied as many maps as he could find and read the manual explaining the capabilities of the Type II U-Boat. It was mainly used for training but also had been designed to conduct coastal missions and support infiltrations in enemy territory.

Werner concluded he had it easy compared to the challenges the captain and the crew faced to make it to this rendezvous and then would face until they reached the safety of their Greenland base.

The four individuals finally arrived where Werner and Igaluk stood. It became clear that the shorter person was indeed a woman.

Werner could not confirm just yet if she was carrying a baby. The bundle was so well

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

wrapped but Werner felt quite sure the woman was holding on to a child.

He greeted the group.

“Welcome. This is our guide Igaluk!” he whispered to them.

No one said a word. Igaluk had thought that if he heard one of the individuals talk, he could have detected an accent.

Werner spoke with a perfect Canadian accent. Still, that didn’t make him any less suspicious in the eyes of Igaluk.

Igaluk discreetly scanned again for signs that the men or woman carried weapons. He could not tell.

Igaluk turned around and started walking toward the cave.

Werner invited the three men and woman to follow Igaluk simply pointing his hand toward the Inuit.

Igaluk led the walk up to the mountain’s flank overseeing the Bay.

Werner brought up the rear, welcoming the opportunity to warm up, while limping, along the way. Jumping up and down hadn’t been enough.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Ten minutes later the group reached a small entrance to a cave carved into the base of the mountain.

Igaluk stood outside the cave.

The three men and the woman waited for Werner to take the lead entering the cave and then followed him inside.

They took off their backpacks and sat around four lamps Werner had set in the center of the cave earlier, before heading down to the shore to wait for the arrival of the submarine.

It took quite a lot of research for Werner to find the perfect place for this rendezvous.

His outings with Igaluk on prior occasions were meant in part to evaluate the Inuit's abilities but mostly to pinpoint a final rendezvous point.

Werner rested his rifle against the cave's wall near the entrance, took off his backpack, set it on the ground near the lamps, and then walked back out of the cave carrying his hooded lantern.

He stepped out into the cold, a few feet away from the entrance, and transmitted his final message to the submarine's commander:

"*Erledigt*. Done."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The submarine could dive back and return to its base.

Captain Von Ruden welcomed Werner's message.

Von Ruden had been ordered to transmit the successful arrival of the submarine's passengers on Canadian soil as soon as possible, waiting for them to be safe before doing so.

The Greenland station crew was awaiting his transmission, ready to pass on the message to Berlin.

Von Ruden ordered his second in command to radio in a one-word dispatch to Greenland.

"*Erfolg*. Success," Von Ruden said.

Greenland acknowledged reception almost immediately.

"The Fuhrer will be pleased," Von Ruden thought.

It was time to dive and return to Greenland.

Transmitting messages added to the risk of revealing to Canadian forces the submarine's presence in the area.

Von Ruden ordered his men to return below deck.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Prepare for diving!"

He couldn't wait to get back to sinking allies ships in the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
High up in the sky
February 14, 1944

Kaya-Kaya, or KK, as his commander and other airmen preferred to call him, had flown twenty-two training missions in the past month and a half.

He had earned his assignment to a Canadian Air Force squadron leaving for England in two days, on February 16, 1944.

KK was at ease flying his Supermarine Spitfire. A killing machine equipped with two 20mm Hispano II cannons and four .303" Browning machine guns.

The newly upgraded plane carried two 250-lb bombs under its wings and an additional 500-lb under the fuselage.

Prior to leaving for England, KK was granted one last leave of absence to visit his folks in Cape Dorset, near Foxe Peninsula at the southern tip of Baffin Island.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

On February 14, at 1 AM, KK was on his way back, flying over the Angna Mountains, following the shoreline, heading southeast planning on eventually turning south to cross the Hudson Strait toward his base.

The visibility was excellent. The sky was magnificent. Stars were shining brightly, undisturbed by a world war that spared almost no one on planet earth.

KK was enjoying the beauty of his ancestral surroundings, thinking that he may never see this place again or certainly not for a long time.

He turned off his engine and challenged his plane to glide quietly for as long as possible, as if at the helm of a sled, while he enjoyed the peaceful night sky.

Minutes later, a flashing light coming from the bottom of a mountain ridge on the left side of the plane caught his eyes. He reached for his binoculars.

He tilted the Spitfire to the left.

He stared fixedly at the point where the light originated.

He thought for a moment that he caught the reflection of starlight on the ice, but the burst of

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

light had seemed much too strong to be a reflection.

He considered immediately radioing the sighting to his base, but he decided to take a closer look first.

“Better to be sure that something is amiss than being laughed at…” he thought.

Also, he was not in a hurry to return to the base. Too beautiful a night. A little detour could be fun.

KK angled his plane slightly to direct it to the location of the light source.

He turned the engine back on and dove down for a closer look.

KK could not tell whether he heard the machine gun blasts or saw the fire spurting out of it first.

Tracer bullets flew by his cockpit. He was getting closer to the weapon aiming its repeated firing at his plane.

KK’s plane was facing the salvos head on.

KK responded in kind, pressing on the Spitfire’s machine guns trigger buttons.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The plane shook. He was aiming at the source of the deadly projectiles buzzing by his cockpit.

As he was nearing his target, he realized the machine gun firing at him was set on a cigar-shaped dark mass in the middle of the ice. He recognized the shape of the conning tower of a submarine.

He released the two bombs attached under the plane's wings before the bullets coming toward him crippled the plane's engine and shattered part of its cockpit, one of them penetrating KK's upper chest.

The engine caught on fire. KK could feel he was bleeding and sensed he was going to pass out. He used all the strength he had left to attempt to radio in what had just happened.

He tried to speak but could not utter a word. He was still conscious but could not move a muscle.

He thought about jumping out of the plane and smiled.

A bullet tore through the left side of his face. He gasped. His head fell forward.

Within seconds he crashed against the mountain side right above the cave where

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Werner and his party were resting, before continuing with their mission.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
On the submarine's deck
February 14, 1944

Captain Von Ruden watched calmly as his sailors return below deck, starting with the ones who had been scanning the horizon with their binoculars.

The gunner would head down into the vessel next, just before Von Ruden who then would slide down into the hull, pulling down the tower's hatch and locking it while the submarine would dive down. A perfect plan…

Von Ruden heard the plane's engine as soon as KK had restarted it, surprised at the sound that had reached his ears so suddenly.

There was no crescendo warning of the plane's approach. Von Ruden immediately sounded the quick dive alarm.

The gunner heard the plane's engine at the same time as Von Ruden.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Fortunately, the submarine's machine gun was pointing toward the area of the sky where the plane was coming from.

The gunner saw the plane in the crosshairs of his weapon just after hearing its engine roar.

He instinctively fired at the plane; his hands froze around the machine gun's triggers which spurted a continuous stream of bullets.

He saw the plane's engine burst into flames and heard the hissing of bullets coming from the plane as the pilot returned fire.

Neither the gunner nor Captain Von Ruden could see the two oblong objects heading toward the conning tower of the submarine.

The gunner ran and jumped inside the submarine through the forward hatch that was then quickly pulled down and shut tight behind him.

The captain slid down into the submarine and slammed the tower's hatch and locked it tightly.

The submarine was on its way down below the ice, but it was too late.

The first bomb hit the tower at its base while it was still partially above the ice and less than a second later the second bomb hit the submarine's hull.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

KK had managed to arm, release and successfully launched two of the three bombs his plane carried before passing out.

Freezing water gushed inside the submarine speeding its descent to the bottom of the cove.

No one on board escaped. Twelve crew members lost their lives. No message had been sent reporting their demise.

The ice fell back into place in an eerily quiet way.

It seemed to return perfectly to where it was laying before the submarine emerged through it less than an hour ago, like pieces of a giant puzzle.

Totally seamless.

The explosions had opened up the ice creating a giant fishing hole that shrank back and slowly disappeared.

Hot metal debris had fallen back and melted the ice on their way to the bottom of the sea.

Their journey soon concealed by fresh ice forming on the surface of the water.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
The cave

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

February 14, 1944

Werner had reentered the cave after sending his message to the submarine's captain.

He sat with the three men, the woman, and the baby. It was indeed a baby the woman had been carrying. A very quiet baby, though not asleep.

In the dim light bouncing within the icy walls of the cave Werner could see the baby's blue eyes staring at him.

For a brief moment, Werner imagined he was in the presence of the next generation of Aryans, pure, unspoiled, strong.

Then he caught the shape of the infant's eyes. Slightly slanted.

His smile vanished.

The child was not purely German. Not purely anything. That detail lodged like a splinter in his mind.

Werner had disturbed the child from enjoying suckling on one of the woman's breasts.

Werner opened his mouth to address the party, thinking he would suggest eating and then

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

resting, but before he could speak the submarine's machine gun fire echoed loudly inside the cave.

Werner and two of the men rushed out. They looked at the submarine and then followed the bullets through the sky to their target, a Spitfire from the Royal Canadian Air Force.

They were hopeful for a moment as the plane's engine took on fire in front of their eyes, but then they saw the explosions tearing the submarine apart.

There was nothing they could do. Their eyes followed the plane's trajectory. It was heading toward them and would hit the mountain, right above the cave in a few seconds.

They instinctively retreated inside.

The plane crashed twenty feet above the cave. The impact triggered an avalanche of snow, ice, rocks and metal debris that dropped straight down completely blocking the entrance of the cave.

KK had armed his last bomb but did not have a chance to drop it on the submarine before passing out from his injuries.

The 500-lb bomb exploded as the plane crashed against the mountain.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Inside the cave, powdered ice, snow, and dust filled the air. The lamps were still on.

Werner felt the ice particles freeze his lungs as he took a deep breath trying to calm his body.

He turned around toward the entrance to face a wall of ice and rocks.

The two men following him inside had been crushed as they were entering the cave. Werner saw the hand of one the men sticking out of the debris, pointing toward him, immobile.

Werner walked to the center of the cave where the woman was still sitting, holding her baby against her chest.

She was breathing hard, inhaling ice and snow, drowning slowly in a state of shock.

Werner grabbed a lamp and started walking around the cave.

The fourth man's feet were all Werner could see as the rest of his body was buried under ice and stones. He was the one carrying the briefcase. It was now buried alongside the man and his backpack.

Werner felt a small rumble. It quickly turned into a loud rockfall. The cave had partially collapsed dividing it into two sections.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The dust settled. He sat across from the woman.

“Do you have a cyanide pill?” Werner asked the woman.

She stared at him for a while and concluded that there was no way to escape from the cave. She did not bother to ask.

“No,” she said.

Werner reached for his cyanide pill.

He handed her the pill. She put the pill between her front teeth. She brought the baby’s lips to hers and bit on the pill. Both the woman and the baby died instantly.

Werner could now see her face more clearly. She looked Japanese to him.

Werner turned around and glanced at the wall behind him, where he thought he had left his rifle.

He was going to shoot himself.

First, he thought that the weapon was buried under rubbles.

Then, he remembered that Igaluk came inside the cave at one point earlier while Werner was addressing the men now lying dead, buried under rubbles.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Igaluk had left soon thereafter, probably carrying with him Werner's weapon.

Werner smiled to himself. The Inuit had sensed that Werner would eventually kill him.

"Smart… for an inferior race…" muttered Werner.

That was the way the rifle could have protected Werner.

By shooting himself Werner would have escaped slowly freezing to death.

That was what Werner thought he understood when Igaluk asked him the question in Inuit, as Werner was awoken by the submarine piercing loudly through the ice earlier.

"Were you going to shoot yourself to save yourself from freezing to death?" Werner thought to himself.

Werner knew his death would be slow and painful.

Drowning. Freezing. He looked at two of the backpacks carried into the cave by the three men.

He would never know what the Fuhrer had planned.

Maybe he could figure it out. He pulled one of the backpacks closer to him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The lights went out, one right after the other.

The cave felt even colder.

Werner drew his last breath.

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Outside the cave
February 14, 1944

Igaluk instinctively ran toward the shore when he heard the submarine's machine gun start firing.

Then he saw the plane diving down. By the time the plane flew over him before crashing on the side of the mountain, Igaluk had reached a safe distance.

He watched the plane end its journey flattening against the iced covered rocks above the entry of the cave where Werner and the landing party had sought shelter.

The crash and following explosion rocked the ground.

There was nothing Igaluk could have done for either the pilot or anyone in the cave.

He wasn't planning on saving Werner or the men in his party anyway, but he thought he

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

would have helped the woman and her baby if it had been possible to do so.

Igaluk had stolen Werner's rifle, discretely, as soon as he could, hoping that no one else had brought weapons from the submarine.

Igaluk had a chance to check if the group carried rifles when Werner handed him his binoculars earlier, but he could not tell whether or not they carried handguns, even after they started unpacking inside the cave.

Igaluk stood still watching a cloud of dark smoke rise from the site of the crash. A sudden avalanche of snow, ice and stones covered the plane and further sealed the cave's entrance.

In a few minutes no one passing through the area would ever suspect anything had happened.

What's left of the submarine would rest peacefully at the bottom of the Bay.

The ice would show no trace of having been broken.

The mountain would have healed its scars and snow and ice would cover them, returning the landscape to its original, beautiful and peaceful state.

Only the wind and the ice, crackling as usual would break the silence.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Bears would return to dreaming in peace until breakfast time.

Some of them thinking the ice had been particularly noisy tonight...

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter IX

Hello? Hola? Salam? Moshi Moshi? Алло? Sukoon? Bonjour? F*ck, F*ck, F*ck...

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day
Kate

Kate hadn't expected to hear from Rachel again until it was time for her to return, hopefully with enough polar bear footage to satisfy Vastan Energy's PR team. The clock was ticking.

Rachel had told Kate her personal life was a cycle of cursing at her phone between doomscrolling posts from hateful politicians and psychopathic CEOs, and then going off-grid into nature. No phone. No electronics. No plugging of any kind.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

To which Kate had said:

"You are in the right place. Not much plugging around here. Whatever color your undies may be. But remember you have a deadline."

Rachel's phone would be turned off.

Her radio would be off as well so as not to alert bears of her presence. At least once Rachel got close to the cave.

Kate knew Rachel would treat this Arctic shoot like a covert op. No pings. No noise. No signs.

Kate would do the same. The two of them had been part of covert ops while in Syria. Kate, a member of the Canadian Special Forces and Rachel leading her own small unit attached to the U.S. Army Battlefield Surveillance Brigades. That's how they met.

When you have experienced living the life of a soldier and have volunteered for so many life-threatening missions, you don't go back to living life any differently. You prepare, you think through every eventuality, you plan, you play out scenarios in your head. What could go wrong? What if?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel might have softened her approach to life a little, Kate thought.

After all, the red lace undies Rachel was wearing were unexpected... But even if Rachel wasn't as prepared as Kate had known her to be when they were on Syrian battlefields, she knew Rachel would catch up fast. And that she would be a tough adversary for bears and humans alike.

Kate had been in her office when she was alerted that a sudden blizzard had formed and was headed toward the Vastan Energy compound and the surrounding area.

Her second in command, John Glenn, had walked in.

"Is your friend okay? The storm's heading straight for us. Does she know?"

Kate glanced up.

"She'll be fine."

Kate wasn't worried, not because Rachel wasn't safe, but because she didn't want Rachel to be found. Not yet.

She knew Rachel to be a smart, resilient soldier who could take care of herself. She was not likely to call in to be rescued. The dogs were often way more reliable than a team of rescuers when it came to making it through a storm on

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Baffin Island and getting you safely to the nearest “niche”.

In any case, visibility would be near zero or less and no communications would be possible.

Kate tracked the storm. As she had expected, Rachel must have felt it full on based on where she was heading. Still, she wasn’t worried about her friend.

Kate looked up to make sure no one was approaching her office.

A glass wall facing the main area where her team had their desks, including John Glenn, in the open, did not give Kate as much privacy as she wanted at times.

She moved her laptop slightly so that no one passing by her office could see the screen.

She turned on an app that displayed the storm formation and its progress.

She looked disappointed as if she expected more information.

Her cell phone buzzed starting to dance on her desk. She did not recognize the number.

The phone buzzed again.

She looked at it pensively. Did she not remember Rachel’s number? Could it be Rachel?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Did her friend need help? Wasn't she in the middle of the storm by now?

Kate reached for the phone. The buzzing had stopped. A text flashed.

"Why wasn't I told?"

Kate put her phone face down on her desk.

She checked her laptop again.

Kate sat up. She changed from her standard security uniform, plenty warm for daily duties involving spending little time outside her office, or within the many compound buildings, to her own catsuit, almost identical to the one she gave Rachel.

She packed her laptop and left her office.

"I am headed out," she told her team. "I'll be in touch."

She checked her text messages as she walked away. Then she dialed:

"Hello?"

###

Mediterranean Sea
February 13, Present-Day
Hector The Vector

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Hector stood on the upper deck of one of his superyachts, savoring the view.

The sun was blinding out here, but his sunglasses were, as always, up to the task, each lens cut from a different designer frame. One slightly oversized, cobalt blue; the other sleek and tinted amber. Not from any single brand. He'd combined them himself, merging a pair of Dolce & Gabbana and a pair of Prada into a singular, off-kilter creation.

He wore them not for style, but because of an eyesight issue that had ended his shot at a professional soccer career. The lenses corrected his vision just so, especially under harsh sunlight. Mocking the fashion houses while getting exactly what he needed. That was just a bonus.

His t-shirt followed the same logic, half Hugo Boss, half Dolce & Gabbana, stitched down the center and branded, unofficially, as Dolce Boss, *Sweet Boss*. It had become something of a signature, even if he only wore it on the boat, where he might have been "sweet" on occasion.

He rarely altered garments for business meetings, but here, he preferred his own line of twisted tribute.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The seamstress who crafted his split outfits, paid generously and anonymously, was the daughter of a woman who'd worked with Hector's mother back in the day. A quiet nod to the woman who raised him and died too young of breast cancer.

He had yet to decide which bathing trunks deserved to be *Frankensteined* next. He was still weighing the aesthetic risk of combining Tom Ford with Versace.

He spent most of his life aboard those sleek, 200-foot vessels now. He owned four, identical in design.

He also owned an icebreaker, a luxurious icebreaker. It was waiting for him off the coast of Baffin Island. All of his boats could accommodate for the take off and landing of one of his Harrier Jets. All capable of taking off and landing vertically, of flying at over 700 miles per hour. Hector could be where he needed to be when he needed to be.

The boats were stationed strategically around the globe, never far from American, Russian, Chinese, or other major powers' warships.

He always kept a safe distance from his customers, but never so far, he couldn't close a deal quickly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He could anchor anywhere in the world and either take a short walk on a beach or fly off if a rendezvous called for it.

Most off the time he would connect via Zoom alternating meetings with dips in the yacht's pool. Today, the view was *La Plage De Calvi*, in Northern Corsica, Napoleon's birth island.

He had assembled what he thought was the best team possible to acquire a weapon that was created for one of his idols, Adolf Hitler. He believed it was only fitting to bring the weapon back to life.

Hector had always been fascinated by how Hitler and his followers pioneered so many "solutions", as he liked to put it. In his mind, weapons were solutions, just that. He always thought that Nazis and Japanese armies and scientists should have worked together closely. What great solutions would have come out of that, he often wondered.

While the German and the Japanese alliance rarely involved field activities, or naval operations based on his research, Hector had found that some of the countries' scientists had come together and shared resources and information.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Biological warfare was discussed, and information, samples, and equipment were exchanged, primarily via submarines. There were no encrypted computer networks back then to speedily exchange large amounts of data, especially pictures and videos.

This led Hector to finding surprising information when digging in Russian archives where documents seized during the liberation of concentration camps and other German facilities were made available to him.

He wasn't surprised when his research unraveled a collaboration that had been kept very secret for a very long time.

He paid well and plenty of people were pleased to pass on dusty, barely legible, decomposing manuscripts that no one had cared to look at for decades.

He took care of going through these himself, as he was fluent in German and Russian.

His first language was Spanish. He was born in Argentina and had lived in many places around the world traveling with his father who was a low-level embassy worker. His mother had died when Hector was five years old.

Hector was a fan of soccer. He had played throughout his youth until he graduated with a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

degree in business. He wanted to be a professional soccer player. His father wouldn't hear of it. He thought Hector should follow in his footsteps, and work as a civil servant.

Hector had been impressive on a soccer field. His aim was precise, strait. They called him *Héctor el vector,* Hector The Vector.

He was the one taking penalty kicks, corner shots, always in the spotlight, until an opponent's cleat came up high and almost blinded him.

After that, his soccer career was over. But following in his father's footsteps was out of the question.

He always thought that his nickname meant a lot more anyway. And he was right.

Hector had made a name for himself and a fortune selling arms, especially bioweapons.

In biology, a vector transmits a pathogen, a disease, like a biting insect or tick. *Hector the Tick* was not going to work out, but *Hector the Vector*... the carrier of death, that had a ring to it.

Hector had never learned Japanese. He relied on third-party contacts to track down whatever documentation still existed about Japan's

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

wartime laboratories and their collaborations with German ones.

But he thought he should hire at least one reliable translator to join his team. Juju's discipline and Zaid's ruthlessness made them the ideal recovery team.

He called one of his stewards after coming out of the pool.

"Ask these ladies on the beach if they'd like to join us here for cocktails."

He pointed to a group of young women sunbathing on the beach, *La Plage De Calvi*.

"Let's have a party. Let's celebrate!" He smiled...

"I'm in a good mood... I feel the world is about to remember who I am… and what I am… sweet."

Hector picked up his phone and dialed.

"Hola?"

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Zaid chasing Rachel...
February 14, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid stepped out of his tent, impatient, snapping his gloves on. He barked orders to the two riders with him:

“Clear the snow off the machines, get moving.”

He’d spent the storm hunched over his copy of the map Hector had given to him, a copy of the one Dash had used to find the cave. It was far too outdated to show recent installations or any modern infrastructure in the area.

If he could get a connection, he'd pull updated satellite data.

He hated being half-blind.

He scanned the horizon through his binoculars. Nothing. Just the storm’s afterbirth, blown snow and silence, thick as ice. He’d hoped to catch a glimpse of that dogsled again.

Just as he adjusted focus, the radio crackled... Juju’s voice. He grabbed it.

“Juju.”

“I’ve got something. I searched the cave while I waited out the storm.”

“No details on the radio,” Zaid said flatly.

“Dash might have attracted unwanted attention... I’m a quarter mile past the ridge,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

where we found Dash's sled. Seal the cave. Meet me here. I'll wait for you. Make it quick." Zaid ordered.

"Got it," Juju replied.

Zaid turned to the two riders beside him and keyed in the shared channel for all teams to hear his instructions.

"Move out. Three teams of two. Check every ridge, every slope. Look for mine entrances, cabins, igloos, anything that could offer shelter." Zaid said.

He added: "I'll scan maps while I wait for Juju. I'll send targets as I find them. Juju and I will join the search in a little while."

"One more thing," Zaid continued. "One of you scans with binoculars. The other stays on comms. Use your drones. The woman we're chasing is either frozen under snow, holed up in a building, or hiding in a mine. Move."

Snowmobiles flared to life and tore into the whiteness.

Zaid pulled a tablet from his gear. After a few failed attempts, it connected. A satellite uplink, patched through a secure relay buoy in low orbit. The signal was weak but functional. The tablet lit up with layers of topographic data,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

thermal scans from the last flyover, and digital breadcrumbs left by drone sweeps and automated trail cams synced to Vastan's private surveillance grid. Zaid tapped through a custom mapping interface, a hybrid of NATO cartography, Inuit trails, and geological surveys, filtering for caves, ice shelves, and man-made structures that could serve as shelter. Hector The Vector provided the latest and greatest technology to his teams.

Zaid wasn't just searching for shelter. He was narrowing the probabilities. Rachel was resourceful, but even she had limits. And so did her dogs. He started scanning for sites, structures, installations, anything that could hide a woman, and a team of dogs.

His phone rang. A name flashed on the screen. He answered.

"Salam."

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Juju at the bear cave
February 14, Present-Day

Juju had pulled her snowmobile just inside the cave mouth as the storm threatened to roll in.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Now the sky was clearing. The storm had moved on. Time to rejoin Zaid and the team.

She secured the metal case and the backpack she'd found. There was something to salvage from this mess, if they couldn't catch the woman who'd put the mission in peril, at least they had this. Zaid would want to see it.

She double-checked the explosives she had laid for maximum collapse of the cave, then shoved her snowmobile forward, pushing it as far out of the cave as the terrain would allow.

The storm had piled up a ridge of snow at the entrance. Juju gunned the throttle and climbed it, standing on the snowmobile as it bucked and surged over the snowbank. Once clear, she turned and rode the slope beside the cave, high enough for a safe detonation.

She stopped her snowmobile and pulled out her phone, tugging off her right glove with her teeth.

"Bye, Dash," she muttered.

She tapped the screen. The detonation rocked the air, louder than she had expected. The cave entrance collapsed in a thunder of falling rocks and ice.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

An avalanche tumbled down from higher up the mountainside, sealing the cave for good.

"Good one," Juju said softly under her breath, pleased.

She kissed her phone and put it away.

Before she could turn the sled around and roar off toward Zaid, the phone's ringer blasted *Lara's Theme* from the movie Dr. Jhivago. Juju rolled her eyes and answered.

"Moshi moshi?"

###

Syria
Igor waves Jacques goodbye
February 12, Present-Day

Igor waved goodbye to Jacques as his car took him to the airport.

Jacques was a good friend, Igor thought. He had come through for him on a number of occasions.

Usually, Igor stayed clear of Hector's business, unless a cut of the profits was involved. Hector didn't mess with small projects. Working with him was always worth considering.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As Igor had explained to Jacques, Hector hadn't asked him to join the mission to retrieve the Nazi-Japanese bioweapon.

Given the crazy, trigger-happy ISIS group he was dealing with these days, Igor thought he might want to keep a close eye on how things unfolded with Hector's project.

"The same idiots, that shot at me and Jacques might one day be able to afford Hector's weapons, and end up lobbing nasty chemicals in my direction before agreeing to buy some more sensible machine guns and other weapons from me." Igor said out loud. "Same deadly result. Different kind of pain… What am I going to do? Sell printers and ink? *Nyet.*"

That's why Igor had insisted Jacques flew his plane to get to Canada. Mariam, Igor's trusted assistant, would ensure things ran smoothly. More importantly, she would keep Igor informed of Jacques's whereabouts at all times. And as was Igor's habit, he would himself be ahead of the game. Igor had just pretended to be staying back in Syria. Shortly after waving Jacques off, he headed to a private airfield where he arranged to be flown to Baffin Island and arrive there ahead of Jacques.

Spying on Jacques was risky. The man's whole business was espionage. It had even

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

earned him a castle in France. Not exactly Versailles, from the pictures Jacques had shared. The place looked like it had surrendered to gravity years ago. But that was the point. A crumbling estate made for a perfect cover. Jacques played the noble heir with just enough charm and clumsiness to seem harmless, probably spent more time hitting his thumb with his hammer than the nails when patching up the roof. No one would suspect a spy disguised as a half-competent handyman.

Still, everyone needs a hobby, Igor thought.

"Lucky Jacques," he continued. "He always finds time for patching… and takes very good care of every patch."

Igor wondered:

"Who is going to pay the most? Hector? Jacques' employers? There could be a lot of other buyers..."

Igor's phone rang out loudly.

"Алло?"

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Igor's Private Jet
February 12, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Mariam had looked forward to wearing the brand-new parka she had received for her birthday from her mother, Sri, now living in Nepal.

Mariam tried the garment on in front of the custom Jonathan Adler Rococo gold wall mirror Igor had installed in the jet's bedroom.

She had instructed the crew to get ready for takeoff after waving Jacques goodbye. But she never gave the order for the plane to leave.

She would soon disembark as well. She did not want Jacques to know.

She saw Jacques make his way inside the airport hangar and then drive away toward the village.

While waiting for Jacques to be well on his way, she filled the jet's tub with warm water.

As the water slowly filled the gold-plated tub, she checked how the parka fitted her body from different angles.

She was naked beneath the parka. Its lining brushed her skin with a softness that stirred the memory of Jacques' touch. Peace and affection were luxuries, rare, fleeting, and never guaranteed in her line of work.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Her job took her wherever Igor sent her. She spent a lot of times in war zones. Most armies avoided frozen wastelands. It's hard to unpin grenades with mittens. Maybe generals were learning to avoid blizzards.

She was puzzled at the lack of common sense in the way men conducted warfare. Maybe the fact that men were in charge explained that they fought each other to death to begin with. She intended to leave them at it sooner rather than later.

She had nearly made it out. She was planning to retire before thirty. Igor paid her well, very well. She followed the FIRE philosophy, saving aggressively, investing smart: Financial Independence Retire Early.

Her dream was already taking shape: a house in New Mexico, where the sun was generous, the air soft, and comfort could be found in fabric... or in the hands of someone she chose, maybe someone like Jacques but without missions. Without masks. Including occasional trips to Paris and of course to fashionable ski slopes to show off future parkas. This time, the tundra would have to do.

For once, she would spend some time walking in the snow. It had not happened in a long time. You would think Igor would do

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

business on the slopes of the Swiss Alps. Or, even in Siberia. Igor loved the cold weather. He mentioned how he missed feeling his face go numb, that is without drinking vodka.

Mariam thought she'd give Jacques a long leash. Igor had warned her. Jacques is a professional. He will see you coming a mile away. The parka was white. She could get a little closer... perhaps, before Jacques noticed her on his trail.

While Jacques had fallen in a deep sleep on Igor's plane after ingesting a sizeable amount of *Eau-de-Vie,* Mariam did review the material Igor had sent to her about the bioweapon Jacques was after.

Jacques had been very cuddly with Mariam. She enjoyed that. And she had plenty of *Eau-de-Vie* herself.

She took a look at the crumpled sheets on the bed.

She could have used a nap. But she had to set things so she could track Jacques' progress from a safe distance and report to her boss. Igor would want daily updates at a minimum.

Mariam's phone rang. She was lounging in the tub. The last time she would feel warm before what could be hours, possibly days of

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

very cold weather. She picked up the phone, water lapping softly around her.

"Sukoon?"

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Jacques, approaching the bear cave
February 14, Present-Day

About two hundred feet from the cave, just beyond Juju's line of sight, Jacques, in a sleek Arctic suit not unlike the one Kate had selected for Rachel, pulled gently on the reins of his dogsled.

The dogs stopped instantly. Silent. Disciplined.

He watched a plume of snow, ice, and dust rise in the distance... an explosion. He tapped his lead dog's harness, steered the team toward the source.

At the blast site, he dismounted. Removed his helmet. Stood completely still.

Nothing moved. No voices. Just the faint, fading whine of a snowmobile engine, disappearing into the hills.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He moved, quickly, fluidly, his balance precise, as if the uneven mix of snow and ice beneath his boots were no more difficult to navigate than one of his castle's garden paths.

He let the sound trail off before moving closer to what had once been the cave's entrance.

Now, it was a smooth slope of debris, about twenty feet high, blanketing the base of the mountain like a snow-made tomb.

The steep rock face loomed above.

He pulled a folded piece of paper and a compass from his pocket.

"That was my cave! What did my cave ever do to you?" Jacques murmured, looking in the direction the snowmobile had gone.

He turned back to the mound of rubble. A glint of metal caught his eye.

He climbed the rubble carefully, then knelt to inspect the object.

A curved piece of metal, old, weathered. It looked riveted like a piece of an aircraft fuselage. No markings. Buried for a long time.

He pried it loose, slung it under one arm, and returned to his sled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Fresh snowmobile tracks cut a clear path away from the blast site. He studied them, then angled his sled to follow at a distance. He didn't need to get too close.

"People who go around blowing up caves usually aren't the friendly type," Jacques said, speaking to the dogs. "Wouldn't you agree, guys?"

He paused, scanning the horizon, eyes narrowing as he searched for a glimpse of the departing snowmobile.

Looking at the dogs, he said:

"My name is Jacques Couteau, by the way. I don't think we were properly introduced this morning. Sorry, I had to rush you here. Blame the storm. I wanted to get here as quickly as possible. Looks like I'm too late."

He reached into one of the bags strapped to the sled.

"Treats! Come and get 'em."

Jacques continued addressing the dogs:

"We've got a lot of running to do if we want to keep up with that snowmobile. We might have a chance to save a lot of innocent people... and puppies, of course. You don't usually blow up a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

cave full of treats... You take all the treats out first."

Jacques' phone vibrated in his pocket.

"Mom? I can't hear you very well. I'm working. Mom?... *Maman*?... I'll try you later..."

Jacques pocketed his phone and hopped on the sled.

He felt the phone vibrate again.

"Bonjour?"

###

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Rachel and the dogs in the tunnel
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel checked her watch. The storm had lasted just over an hour.

The dogs pulled her and the bear cubs into the tunnel, slowly, steadily. They had started moving as soon as the wind outside the mine had died down.

She had no idea where the rails would lead.

Thanks to the lights she'd found in the headless man's bags, she could see just far

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

enough ahead to stop the team in case of danger, as long as they kept a slow pace.

So far, the track ran flat, no dips, no climbs.

It suggested to Rachel they were moving beneath the mountain. No turns either.

She checked her compass again. Still on the fritz.

No radio signal. No cell or satellite connection.

She'd hoped to catch something, anything, from her pursuers by turning on the radio she'd taken from Dash. But nothing came through.

They probably changed frequencies once they realized she might have Dash's radio. She left it on, just in case.

There were no sounds behind her. That, at least, was good.

For now, it seemed she and the dogs were gaining distance from their pursuers.

About twenty minutes into the tunnel the dogs stopped. Rachel jumped off the cart. She pulled out her tranquilizer gun and flashlight.

She stepped in front of the dogs and continued forward a few feet. The rail stopped

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

right in front of a large metal door. A blinking green light caught her eye.

"Is this an elevator, Black Paw? You and the doggies fetched me an elevator? We should play fetch more often."

She pressed on the button below the light. The door opened, sliding into the tunnel's wall. This wasn't a mine tunnel. Whatever it was.

It was a very large elevator. It accommodated the flat rail cart. There were rails that allowed for the cart to be pulled inside by the dogs.

"Get in guys."

The dogs, led by Black Paw, entered the elevator.

Rachel stood by their side. Still holding her gun and flashlight.

Once inside, she pressed on the up button.

A light flickered above their heads. The elevator moved smoothly, very slowly.

Rachel timed the ascent. A long five minutes passed by before the elevator stopped.

The door opened.

Rachel pointed her gun out. A huge room welcomed her and her party.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It was dimly lit but left no corner in the dark.

Rachel quickly assessed that no one was there. No one and nothing. The place was totally empty. Except for rails that lined up perfectly.

The cart could be pulled into the room.

“Let’s go in”

The dogs pulled the cart inside the room. Rachel stood by the elevator door, waiting until they were safely through and for the cart to clear it safely.

She holstered her weapon and clipped her flashlight to her belt.

The elevator lingered open… but not for long. It clamped shut behind Rachel with a metallic groan.

Rachel turned. No buttons. No panel. No override. Just a hollow *clunk* that echoed far too long. Then silence.

The elevator shaft vanished, retracting into the floor and leaving behind a seamless, unbroken surface. It was gone.

Rachel was now inside what looked like a windowless vault, sterile concrete walls, no light fixtures, yet she could see clearly from corner to corner. Evenly lit from everywhere and nowhere.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There were no seams, no exit. The kind of room people don't walk out of.

Some of the dogs whimpered. She saw the cubs squirm in the sled.

Rachel steadied her breath. Her eyes darted in every direction.

"Looks like we're in a box now… No way in, no way out," she said ironically.

She circled the perimeter. Nothing. She ran her gloved hands along the walls, flat, smooth, featureless. Not a crack, not a groove, not a vent. Nothing. She took a glove off and caressed the walls again. It was as if the walls did not exist. They weren't cold or hot to the touch. She felt like Marcel Marceau in one of his pantomime performances.

She acted for the benefit off the dogs: a mix of Bip in the Modern and Future Life switching from a mask expressing puzzlement to one expressing total frustration. She got no reactions from the pack.

As she was waving her arms around, she realized that though there were lights, there were no shadows.

She took a deep breath… The air was clean, fresh, sterile even. No smell of damp, or metal,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

or wet dogs, or wet cubs. As if a ventilation system had taken over the moment the elevator disappeared.

She forced another breath in through her nose. She didn't feel like the air was thinning. She didn't feel like passing out. No dizziness. No shortness of breath. The dogs were calm, breathing normally. Not panting. The cubs were… the cubs, breathing, dreaming.

"If this is a box… shouldn't there be a cat in it?" she asked out lout looking at Black Paw.

Black Paw looked back at her, smiling…

"Where are we? Maybe we can get a signal here."

She fished out her phone and dialed Kate.

She walked around the room, lifting her arm up, trying to catch a signal.

"F*ck, F*ck, F*uck..."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter X

Leo P. (Prometheus)

Cape Town, South Africa
Two years ago

Prometheus in Leo:

Natural leader. Creative. Original. Exceptional. Charismatic. Visionary.

The great enlightener. The rebel. The genius. The inventor. The eccentric.

The titan who stole fire from heaven and gave it to humanity… who taught humanity writing, mathematics, craftmanship… ***and chemistry…***

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Think about water for a moment..." Leo Prometheus said. “Why would you want to drink anything else? You can have your water room temperature, cold, ice cold, or hot… as hot as you can take it.”

Leo P. paused and looked into Simba’s eyes.

“Everything else you drink is a chemical experiment… Flavored water… Fermented water, sugar water… I don’t care what you call it… It’s still water plus something… But to survive? You need nothing but water.”

Leo P. closed his eyes and took a deep breath, looking as if he were remembering all the times he drank water in his life.

He reopened his eyes and continued.

“To survive, you just need water. Unless, of course, the *only* way to ingest an antidote is to have it mixed in water, for whatever reason. But that assumes you were poisoned… and that drinking the watered-down antidote might save you. Which also means, at some point, you chose *not* to drink plain water. Or worse… Someone poisoned the water you *thought* was pure.”

Leo P. reflected.

“Historically, poison has been a woman’s weapon of choice. Efficient. Elegant. Quiet.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Sometimes giving a man just enough of a little bellyache to make a point. Sometimes… a goodbye kiss in a teacup that takes the man to his grave."

Leo P. laughed.

"Women make such brilliant chemists," Leo said, spinning in his chair.

He pointed to the painting hanging on the wall.

Simba looked up… a painting of Marie Curie stared back at him, unblinking.

"Does she ever get tired of listening to this guy?" Simba thought.

Leo P. swiveled back.

"Of course, you have to trust the water is clean. That no animal pissed in it, died in it, or decomposed somewhere upstream from your canteen," Leo P. continued. "Clean water was a luxury for most of human history. More people died from bad water than from lack of it. The invention of alcohol probably did more to extend the human lifespan than any medical breakthrough… At least until the Industrial Revolution, when humans started using machines... And drank absinthe, also known as the Green Fairy… *La Fée Verte*… Not ideal to

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

operate heavy equipment while drunk, mind you. Don't drink and drive!"

He laughed at his own joke. Simba didn't.

"But in the Middle Ages?" Leo P. went on. "That village well was a soup of piss, shit, dead cats, plague victims… you name it. You were safer drunk. You could go your whole life never touching water and be better off for it. Live soused, die clean."

He leaned back slightly, theatrically thoughtful.

"I wonder if the inventor of the distilling process ever got a prize," Leo said, stretching out the thought like a grand champion ribbon. "He should've gotten a statue… at the very least."

He paused, then smirked.

"Listen to me… *he* should've gotten a statue…" He tapped his temple lightly. "That's the narrative, right? What men have been writing… But some credit a woman, *Maria the Jewess*… an alchemist from Alexandria… with developing the core principles of distillation. I've been hunting for a painting of her. Do you think Marie," he gestured casually to the portrait of Marie Curie behind him, "would enjoy the company?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He paused and continued.

"Of course, history tends to hand the accolades to men. *Jabir ibn Hayyan*, an Arabic alchemist, is usually credited with inventing the alembic still. So maybe we split the credit? A man and a woman, equally responsible for humanity learning how to get drunk while waiting to die… and loving it. Cheers to balance."

Then, with that same amused smirk Leo said:

"Anywho… Any kind of flavoring added to water is chemistry. A chemical experiment. You… then… are…? A chemical experiment. It starts with your mother's milk…"

Simba shifted in his chair. It was becoming uncomfortable. He glanced toward the exit, then quickly back at Leo. His throat felt dry… and not from thirst.

"Same thing with what you breathe into your lungs," Leo P. said. "I don't need to expand on that. You get the picture."

He paused, just long enough to let the thought settle.

"Take in the wrong fumes…"

A faint smile.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"And there you are again. A chemical experiment."

He leaned back.

"And don't get me started on the lies companies have told over the years… Selling you useless additives. Mostly poisons. Slow ones. Small doses."

Leo lifted a finger, almost professorial.

"If companies are smart. And if they want to profit enormously, lying is the only way to go… Think about the throat-protection values of nicotine that were once paraded around in advertising."

A pause.

"Or sugar. Sugar is a good one." He chuckled softly. "At some point, it was said that sugar consumption would protect your teeth."

He shook his head, amused by the absurd audacity of it.

"Go back even further. *François Vatel*. Credited for the invention of the *crème Chantilly*." Plenty of people had been whipping cream before him… But, he certainly popularized it, certainly because of the amount of sugar he added to it, and French aristocrats

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

loved it… One of the most interesting chemical experiments ever conducted. Delicious!"

Another pause.

"And full of cholesterol," Leo P. said.

He leaned forward now, voice quieter, more intimate.

"But here's the thing… It doesn't matter if you stick to clean water, clean air, the exact amount of naturally grown food or perfectly raised cattle… You are *always* a chemical experiment."

His eyes brighten. A smile.

"Humans *are* chemical experiments," Leo P. said. "Welcome to my lab… It's full of rats… As you would expect."

Leo P. shrugged.

"You see, dogs are not man's best friends."

He looked as if he expected Simba to pitch in. Simba stayed quiet.

"Rats are." Leo P. continued.

"Sure, you can use your dog as a taster. Your personal royal poison taster."

A faint smile.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Your dog will eat almost anything you give it… though I once saw one spit out a piece of leek. A piece of *poirot*. I was making soup. It had fallen off the table as I was chopping it."

Leo P. laughed quietly at the memory.

"This dog hated leeks. But it wasn't poisoned."

He leaned forward now.

"And dogs won't drink just anything you put in front of them," Leo P. said. "They make terrible cupbearers. You have to dip a piece of meat into the liquid. And then it gets complicated."

He waved it off.

"But rats…"

Another big smile.

"Rats… *They* will ingest *anything*. In my labs, anyway. And pretty much everywhere humans leave trash around the world. A rat will be there. Chewing."

He tilted his head.

"And probably a starving dog, too." Leo P. continued. "It's a close call, really, who the best friend might be. Rat, dog… Dog, rat…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Leo P. paused.

"If you think your wife might be considering poisoning you… She probably is now and then… It's usually someone you trust," Leo P. said casually, "get a cage full of rats to taste the food before you eat it. You can pretend they're your new favorite pets. You can even give them names… Like dogs. Even dogs' names."

Leo P. leaned back, rubbed his chin, thinking for a few seconds, eyes drifting to the ceiling.

He looked at Simba.

"Where was I?"

A smile.

"Ah, yes. Humans are chemical experiments… Leave an unplugged robot lying on the ground for days," Leo P. said. "Anywhere."

Leo P. shrugged.

"What do you think will happen?"

Simba was pretty sure he should remain quiet.

"Nothing," Leo P. said. "Nothing at all. It might not even disintegrate for centuries… Millennia!"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He leaned forward slightly.

"Now leave a dead human body lying there… Same place, next to the robot… And watch what happens. It decomposes. It releases gases. It stinks up the place. It attracts flies. Insects. Larvae."

Leo P. smiled, almost fondly.

"And you don't even have to wait very long. Decomposition begins almost immediately after death. Within minutes cells begin to self-digest."

He straightened, repeating it louder now.

"Self-digest!!! Bacteria break down tissue. Then watch the bloating. The discoloration."

A small sigh.

"Fascinating," Leo P. said.

He leaned back.

"Einstein had it right. Again, and always," Leo P. said, mildly vexed. "*Chemistry and physics are deeply intertwined*."

Leo P. looked like he wished he could prove Einstein wrong… One day.

"Which brings me to something else. Why would we want to send human beings to Mars?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Or, some other planet? So, we can say that a human being took a piss on a red rock?"

He waved the idea away.

"We should send robots," Leo P. said. "For a purpose. Sending a Tesla into space is idiotic. You can't even pretend it's science."

Leo P. scoffed.

"And someone is bound to crash into it in a few thousand years or sooner. A chunk of junk circling around the sun."

A smile.

"You know… some poor soul at the helm of a spaceship… drunk… of course. Alone, absolutely… We don't want drunk space piloting to hurt anyone but the pilot."

He tilted his head.

"I hope it's a descendant of Elon. He should have a boatload, a battalion, or even an army, by then."

He paused, then smiled.

"But I digress."

Leo P. stood.

"You're hired, Simba. Welcome to the team."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He extended his hand across the desk.

Simba stood and shook Leo P.'s hand.

He hoped Leo P. had washed his.

Leo P. tilted his head.

"Are you sure you're not thirsty?" Leo P. asked.

"I'm good," Simba said.

Leo P. walked Simba to the door of his office and opened it for him.

"Great meeting," Leo P. said.

Then he turned to the woman seated at the desk just outside his office.

"Nandi," Leo P. said, "Simba is going to join the team. Please take care of everything."

He stepped back into his office and closed the door behind him.

Simba stood in a daze. He hadn't responded. Not a *thank you, let me think about it Mr. Prometheus*… The decision was made by Leo P.

Simba saw Nandi looking ecstatic.

Nandi, Simba's girlfriend, had made the introduction.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She had been working for Leo P. a little over two months as his executive assistant.

Leo P. needed a new bodyguard.

He had asked her if she knew anyone.

“My boyfriend is a bodyguard,” she had said. “He’s very good. He has extensive experience. I always feel safe when he is around. I’ll set up an interview.”

Simba had come prepared.

Nandi had helped him polish his résumé, tailoring it precisely to the job description Leo P. had prepared… Nandi was getting good at using AI.

Simba had worked for the South African Police after leaving the army.

Later, he’d taken a job as a bodyguard for a firm that provided protection to touring international pop stars.

When Nandi first suggested he interview with Leo P., Simba hesitated.

He did his research.

No red flags.

In fact, nothing at all.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Which troubled him more than a messy past ever would have.

"I can't find anything on this Leo P.," he told Nandi. "Or his company, Prometheus."

Nandi was excited at the possibility of working with Simba. She loved Simba…

And Leo P. paid very well.

Simba's job description changed after about a year working as Leo P.'s bodyguard.

The assignments grew more complex. More demanding.

Simba welcomed the challenge.

He knew not to ask questions.

He did what needed to be done.

On some of these "projects," he was instructed to work closely with Nandi.

They traveled as a couple.

It made it easier to get close to certain people.

To get the job done.

Nandi loved it.

Their most recent assignment had taken them to the French Alps.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And then to the Amazon Rainforest.

Manaus Airport, Brazil,
Amazon Rainforest
February 12, Present-Day

Simba stood in the terminal at Manaus Airport, Bluetooth in his ear, waiting for the connection to lock.

Nandi stood beside him.

A click.

"Simba," Leo P.'s voice said. "Do you have the information?"

"Rachel Shepherd just booked a trip to Canada," Simba replied. "Private charter. We haven't been able to get close to her. We tried when we were in Chamonix first, not much you can do in a helicopter as it turned out. Then we followed her here. The Amazon Rainforest. No luck. We never had an opportunity to access her equipment."

A brief pause.

"Do you want me to terminate her?" Simba asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Termination wouldn't help at this point," Leo P. said calmly. "If she's leaving now, she's already uploaded whatever footage she recorded. Remember, the footage is only part of what I want."

Another pause.

"I want the location of her agent," Leo P. continued. "I need to know who hired this Rachel Shepherd, who requested footage from the Amazon. Hopefully, we can intercept the data before it gets out."

"We could go back to the village where she stayed," Simba said. "See if she left anything behind."

"You do that," Leo P. said. "Get me what I want. One way or another."

The line went dead.

Simba tapped Nandi lightly on the shoulder.

"We're going up the river to a beautiful rainforest village…" Simba said with a smile.

En route to Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Energy private jet
February 12, Present-Day

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate had taken care of everything.

By the time Rachel reached Manaus Airport, a Vastan Energy Bombardier Global 8000 was already waiting on the tarmac.

Rachel had left the village immediately after her call with Kate and the Vastan Energy PR team. They had been insistent, borderline urgent, that she get to Baffin Island as soon as possible. According to them, the mother Polar bear had either already given birth or was about to.

“Do you think you could get close enough to film the cubs coming out of the mother’s… you know?” one of the PR team members had asked.

“I’ll ask the mother,” Rachel replied. “It’s always best to ask the mother.”

She paused.

“The father’s not around, I bet?” Rachel asked.

The PR team laughed.

Kate rolled her eyes.

Rachel forced a smile.

The Vastan private jet would get her to Baffin Island in eight to ten hours.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Before Kate had called Rachel, she had even arranged a speedboat to collect Rachel from the village. It was waiting for Rachel before the call was over.

"How the f… did Kate know exactly where I was?" Rachel thought.

Then dismissed it.

"That's Kate for you…"

Rachel was exhausted.

Still slightly under the influence of 007's chicha martinis, she didn't linger on the question.

"One thing I still need to take care of…" Rachel murmured.

She frowned, half-awake.

"What am I going to wear?"

She logged into her Amazon Prime account and searched for Arctic gear.

"Already suggested. Already approved. That was easy," she said. "They know me so well… I love algorithms… Sometimes. They are screwing up the planet, aren't they? Got to cool those servers… I am such a hypocrite… What kind of carbon footprint results from ordering clothes online? I should learn to make all types

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

of clothing by hand… Raise sheep… Use a *rouet*, a spinning wheel… and why not, prick my finger, sleep for a hundred years, wake up to a better planet, and still kissed awake by true love…"

She fell asleep on the boat.

Slept again in the car that picked her up at the dock, covering the distance to the airport in half the time it had taken going the other way.

She was whisked through the terminal by two Vastan employees, flight attendants.

No waiting. No questions.

The jet's engines were already roaring.

Rachel climbed the steps.

The plane began rolling on the tarmac as one attendant pulled the door shut behind her.

The other guided her to her seat and buckled her in without a word.

Rachel passed out almost immediately… in the most comfortable reclining seat she'd ever experienced on an airplane, or anywhere else for that matter.

Midway through the flight, Rachel woke up.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She reached for her computer tablet and started looking up information on polar bears.

She immediately felt the absence of preparation… the kind Anna would have done if this job had been booked through her.

"I haven't heard from Anna," she murmured.

"I hope she received the footage from the Amazon Rainforest."

An attendant appeared quietly and placed a glass of champagne on the table beside her.

"Are you hungry, Ms. Shepherd?"

Rachel squinted at the glass.

"Do you have any kind of chocolate?"

A few minutes later, the attendant returned with a large box of chocolate truffles, an assortment filled with Cointreau, champagne-infused dark chocolate, and several she didn't recognize, but looked very appetizing.

Rachel smiled.

"So," she murmured, her mouth already full, "Sir David Attenborough, tell me all about polar bears in the wild. You're the specialist."

She watched video after video.

Clips of bears hunting. Swimming.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Eventually, the screen blurred.

She fell back asleep.

"We're almost there, Ms. Shepherd."

The soft voice pulled her from the deepest sleep she'd had in ages.

Rachel blinked.

"I've got to get myself one of these jets," she murmured… "I wonder if they sell the seats separately?"

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Vastan Energy Private Airstrip and Dock
February 13, Present-Day

It was snowing when the plane landed.

Rachel pressed her forehead to the window, trying to make sense of the landscape, but there was nothing to see, only white. No horizon. No depth. Just falling snow.

The attendants said their goodbyes quickly and sealed the aircraft door behind her, seconds after she stepped onto the tarmac.

The engines never shut down.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The jet turned, taxied, and took off almost immediately, vanishing back into the white curtain it had come from.

A man walked toward her. He reached for her luggage.

"I'm good," Rachel said.

"This way," he replied.

They climbed into a small, unmarked SUV.

"The company provides drivers for its guests," the man said as they pulled away. "But Kate thought you should familiarize yourself with the terrain."

He glanced at her.

"We hesitated, but she said you'd be fine… We've learned not to argue with Kate… She said you're not the kind of corporate visitor we usually cater to," he said.

"*You don't say*," Rachel replied, smiling.

Snow fell steadily now, thickening. The visibility shrank to almost nothing.

The man drove as if it didn't matter.

A few minutes later, he stopped beside a Ford F-150 Raptor, barely visible through the snowfall.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"This is Kate's truck," he said. "The keys are inside. And we loaded a box from Amazon Prime addressed to you. It arrived just before you landed."

Rachel was relieved her Arctic gear had made it. Not especially surprised, it had arrived almost faster than ordering food in New York City.

Her Amazon Rainforest green khakis barely kept the cold at bay during the short walk from the jet to the SUV.

It only occurred to her now that there should have been Arctic gear waiting in Kate's car. There wasn't. Only what Rachel ordered.

"I guess Kate is slipping. The corporate gig is making her lose her edge," Rachel murmured. "Or, she wants me to freeze…"

She turned to the man.

"Thank you. Which way from here?" Rachel asked.

"Straight," the man said.

He stepped out, extended his arm all the way, hand vertical as if he was going to offer a handshake. He pointed into the white.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

His fingers looked disjointed, bending backward so sharply, she couldn't tell where *straight* was supposed to be.

"This way?" she asked, pointing, following his fingers.

"No," he replied. "This way…"

In every direction, all she could see was snow. She gave up.

"Could you wait until I start the truck?" she asked. "And maybe let me follow you to the road I should take?"

This time, the man gave her a thumbs-up.

She returned the gesture.

"Apparently a sign of total condescension when used as an emoji," Rachel murmured to herself, smiling. "Is this guy a Gen Z? I am pretty sure Kate did not ask him to be condescending…"

She climbed into Kate's truck, settled into the seat, and started the engine.

She honked.

The man drove off.

Rachel followed.

At the parking gate, he pointed once more.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel took a guess.

She waved.

"Thank you," she said, waving.

Then the SUV disappeared ahead of her and she drove into the snow, slowly, getting used to driving Kate's truck… and the terrain.

Amazon Rainforest
Luiza's Village
February 14, Present-Day

Simba and Nandi left the airport quickly after Leo P. abruptly ended the call.

By the time they reached Luiza's village, they had slipped easily into their roles… tourists. They were used to playing that role.

Cameras in full view.

Wide-eyed.

Taking in everything.

It didn't take long for Nandi to voice her disappointment, as a tourist would.

"The weather," she said to Simba, loud enough for anyone around to hear. "The heat.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The humidity. The rain. And this is supposed to be fun?"

The moisture was relentless, thick, heavy, clinging. Between the warm downpours, the air barely moved.

"I miss Cape Town, honey," she said, looking at Simba. "The simple luxury of being dry indoors when it rained. I'm not complaining. It was very nice of your mother to have paid for this trip. Very nice… Did she know the humidity here is the same inside every building as it is outside? Don't tell me this is where she met your father… Is she testing me?"

Simba knew Nandi was a better improv actor than he could hope to become. He just looked around.

They came across a young fisherman near the riverbank.

007 was preparing his fishing gear when he noticed the couple approaching.

"Do you speak English?" Simba asked.

"A little," 007 replied.

Simba smiled.

"What a beautiful place," he said. "I imagine you don't get many tourists."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No." 007 said.

"A friend of ours was here recently," Simba continued. "Rachel… Rachel Shepherd? We haven't heard from her. We were hoping she's okay."

His concern sounded genuine.

Nandi stepped in, her voice tight with worry.

"We were supposed to meet her here," she said. "She was going to show us around."

007 studied them.

"What does she look like?" he asked.

Nandi described Rachel accurately.

Leo P. had sent them a photograph, an older one. Rachel was wearing a uniform when it had been taken. They had studied it carefully.

And they had seen her more recently, up close, in the helicopter over Mont Blanc, in Chamonix, though she'd been mostly hidden beneath layers of mountain gear.

007 shook his head.

"I didn't see anyone like that here," he said. "Do you have a picture?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nandi didn't hesitate. Showing the young man a picture of Rachel in a uniform would not necessarily convey a close friendship.

"I had quite a few on my previous phone. I just upgraded. I am not good with technology. I still have to figure out how to get my pictures on this new one," Nandi said.

007 thought she was lying.

"I have to go fishing now," he said.

He turned back to the river.

007 walked toward the pier and climbed in his canoe. He rowed away up river. He never looked back at them.

Simba and Nandi continued through the village, stopping for short conversations, polite smiles, asking the same question asked again and again, Nandi continuing her touristy remarks out loud.

"Do you think she was really here?" she whispered to Simba.

A young woman eventually led them to Luiza's shack.

They knocked on the door.

Luiza and Helena had only just returned. They'd been held for hours by company men at

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

one of their makeshift camps nearby, then released after a lecture on the dangers of approaching the deforestation area.

Luiza was fast asleep.

Helena woke up.

Helena opened the door slightly. The couple outside the shack seemed harmless. She stepped outside, still dazed from the ordeal. At one point, she had been certain Luiza and her were going to be killed. The certainty hadn't left her yet.

"Hello, we're friends of Rachel, Rachel Shepherd, we were told she was here." Nandi said.

"Rachel is not here," she said to Nandi. "Call Anna."

"Ah… Anna, of course. But Rachel is okay, right?" Nandi asked gently.

"Yes," Helena replied. "I was told she was fine when she left. I didn't see her myself. I just got back."

Her eyes struggled to stay open.

Nandi glanced at Simba.

"Do you have Anna's number on your phone, honey?" she asked, her expression quietly signaling him to play along.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Simba pulled out his phone from his pocket.

"Sorry, dear. My phone died."

Nandi turned back to Helena, smiling apologetically.

"Would you happen to have Anna's number?" she asked. "I don't seem to have it saved on my new phone."

Helena nodded.

She recited Anna's number from memory, slowly, carefully, then turned and went back inside the shack.

As she disappeared, she added over her shoulder:

"Give my best to Rachel and Anna."

Amazon Rainforest
007's Safe House
February 14, Present-Day

007 made it back to his *safe house*, tucked off the river, the same place where he had taken Rachel when they were chased by the company men.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He pulled the satellite phone he had lent her from his satchel.

The rain had stopped. The sun was breaking through the canopy.

With a bit of luck, the phone might still have enough power. Enough for a short call.

He reached into his pocket and took out Rachel's photograph. Looked at it for a moment.

He liked Rachel.

007 dialed.

"Please leave a message," Rachel's voice said, bright, cheerful.

He smiled. Instantly, he felt closer to her.

"Pussy Galore?" 007 said, excited to hear her voice. "People are looking for you here. A black couple. Older… Like you."

He paused, then added details, describing Simba and Nandi as best he could.

"When are you coming back, Pussy?" he asked. "I'm making chicha martinis for you…"

The phone went dead.

007 stared at the screen.

Then at her picture.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

007 looked sad.

Amazon Rainforest
Luiza's Village
February 14, Present-Day

Simba and Nandi made their way back from Luiza's shack to their boat.

Simba dialed Leo P.

"We have a name… Anna," Simba said when Leo P. picked up. "And a number."

Leo P. didn't hesitate.

"Anna," he repeated.

A pause.

"Anna," Leo P. said again quietly. "Go get me Anna."

The line went dead.

Simba looked at Nandi.

"Your wheelhouse," he said. "Can you get the tech team to trace the number?"

Nandi took his phone.

"Let's hope so," she said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She sent a message to her contact in the Prometheus I.T. department, Anna's name and her number.

And a short note, carefully worded to make the stakes unmistakable.

This is a matter of life and death. Yours and ours.

"Take us back," Nandi said to the man standing at the helm of their boat.

As the boat pulled away, she stared out at the river.

"Wherever this Anna is," she said quietly, "I doubt she's still in the middle of the Amazon Rainforest."

She glanced at Simba.

"You don't think Anna's somewhere around here, right?" She asked.

Simba shook his head.

"Tracing the number might place her on the moon," he said. "There are too many ways to mask provenance. It's up to the techies… It might not even be active anymore."

He paused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"And we shouldn't call it directly," he added. "That would tip off whoever answers. Let the tech people do their job. They don't want a pissed-off Leo P. any more than we do."

"Like I don't know that," Nandi murmured to herself.

As the boat cut back through the river, Nandi found herself thinking about the past two years working for Leo P.

He was a discreet man.

Careful with words.

Careful with origins.

She wasn't entirely sure where he was from.

He spent time in South Africa, mostly Cape Town. And a great deal of time in New York City.

She liked New York City best.

She enjoyed accompanying him there, working out of his Fifth Avenue office, overlooking Central Park. The view alone felt like a credential.

Leo P. was a forensic chemist. Independent.

He consulted for government laboratories around the world, applying chemistry, biology,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

and material science to help solve crimes... and plan a few, but only theoretically as far as Nandi knew.

Drugs.

Accelerants.

Explosives.

Body fluids.

He analyzed evidence using advanced techniques, identified unknown substances, and produced meticulous reports.

He never testified in court.

At first, Nandi's role had been strictly administrative, scheduling meetings, booking travel, tracking expenses.

But over time, she was given more responsibility.

Special projects.

Eventually, she began traveling with Simba on assignments. Sometimes with Leo P. Sometimes without him.

That was when the job truly changed.

Everything with Leo P. was urgent, yet always clearly prioritized.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And he was always calm. He spoke softly. Politely. At least with her.

Simba had described a different experience. On occasion, Leo P. could be short with him. Abrupt.

Nandi had met others on Leo P.'s payroll, eventually getting to know everybody at Prometheus.

They were all polite. All calm.

Whenever she needed support to carry out Leo P.'s requests, they treated her as if she *were* Leo P. himself. There was no griping. No excuses. No delays. No small talk.

It was as if everyone on the team shared the same temperament, deeply introverted, and uninterested in anything beyond the task at hand.

There were no company parties. No team-building retreats. No going for drinks after work.

No rituals designed to manufacture a company culture.

She was grateful for that.

There wasn't even an HR department. Most questions, onboarding, training, vacation policy, were handled by AI bots. One of them even

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

offered virtual sensitivity training. Nandi found herself wondering how an algorithm was supposed to handle workplace complaints. Would it cite case law? Offer breathing exercises? Or, just send her a curated list of *#MeToo* headlines?

Most everything HR-related was automated or outsourced. Occasionally, she still was assigned recruiting work, like when Leo P. had asked her to find a new bodyguard.

Leo P. was never in the news.

He had automated searches running constantly, scanning for his name and hundreds of variations of it, across the internet, and deeper places she didn't fully understand. The so-called dark web.

She wasn't entirely sure what *the dark web* even was. Just hearing the words gave her the sense of a digital basement filled with flickering fluorescent lights turning off one by one and very bad intentions. It sounded like a place where only terrible things happened, and no good ever came back out.

Mostly, it seemed like a convenient phrase, something movies and television used to avoid explaining the unexplainable, to preserve the illusion of logic in a poorly written story.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Leo P. did not leave room for illusions.

The tech team Nandi had been working with since she joined Leo P.'s company, the same one now tasked with tracing Anna's phone, had felt it necessary for some reason to explain the dark web to her more than once. Talk about condescending. Downright techsplaining.

She still suspected it was, at least in part, a way to invent incomprehensible problems in order to justify their jobs and maintain their position as the most condescending people in the organization.

Nandi received all alerts related to online mentions of Leo P.

In the two years she had worked for him, there had been exactly one that required looking into.

It turned out to be a misspelling.

Someone on Instagram had posted a photo of Leonardo DiCaprio wearing socks with open slippers, strolling outdoors in what might have been his least movie-star outfit ever.

They had probably meant to type *Leo D.*

Nandi and Simba waited in their hotel room near Manaus Airport while the tech team worked on tracing Anna's number.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Simba had drifted off.

The phone rang.

“The number belongs to Anna Bliss,” a voice said.

“Associated with an address outside Cape Town.”

“A house on a hillside near Table Mountain.”

A pause.

“Anna Bliss may not be the person you’re looking for though. This Anna is a webcam performer. Nineteen years old,” the voice continued. “Do you know what a webcam performer is?”

Another pause. Nandi wondered how much techsplaining she could take.

“See the attached report in my follow up text,” the voice said.

The line went dead.

Nandi looked at the phone.

Then at Simba.

“Looks like we’re going home,” she said, waking him from his nap.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Cape Town
Anna's house
February 15, Present-Day

Nandi knocked on the front door.

Then noticed the doorbell.

It was an unusual ringer, shaped unmistakably like female genitalia, with a small button at the top.

She leaned in, curious.

Just beneath it, engraved neatly, Nandi read:

Anna's Clito-ring.

Nandi hesitated, trying to imagine what sound might announce her presence after pressing on the button.

She raised her finger.

Paused.

Before she could press the button, the door opened.

A beautiful young woman stood there, smiling.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nandi smoothly redirected her finger and pointed at her instead.

"Hi," she said. "Are you Anna?"

"Yes," the woman replied. "How can I help you?"

"Are you Rachel's friend?" Nandi asked.

"Rachel Kruger?" Anna said. "My dentist… In the funny looking wheelchair? We're not *close* friends. We have a glass of wine once in a while. Is she okay? I am always so nervous when I watch her drive off in her wheelchair after we have a couple… Do they breathalyze cripples' when they bump into things or people on sidewalks?"

"I'm sure your dentist friend is fine," Nandi said gently. "I'm actually looking for Rachel *Shepherd*? The nature documentarian."

Anna blinked.

"Nature documentarian?" Anna repeated slowly, curling her hair around one of her middle fingers. "Like documenting sharks and that sort of thing…? I wish… Unless you mean filming people having sex on beaches kind of documenting."

Anna shrugged.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"That's what I do. I have sex on beaches, I document that… Never too close to the water though, obviously… Sharks."

Anna continued searching her memory.

"I don't think I know any Rachel like that."

They were staring into each other's eyes.

"Sorry… I don't know a Rachel *Shefield*," Anna said.

"*Shepherd*," Nandi corrected, smiling.

Earlier, after getting out of their car, Simba had circled the house. Nandi had waited for him to disappear around the corner before knocking on the door.

While Nandi kept Anna talking at the front door, Simba was looking for another way inside.

A sliding door at the back was open.

Anna had been sunbathing by the pool in the backyard, making sure her body showed no tanlines. When she heard the knock, she'd wrapped herself in a towel and rushed inside, leaving the door open behind her.

She'd been expecting a food delivery.

Sunbathing made her hungry. Sunbathing while drinking red wine even more so.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She was finishing a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from Excelsior, the De Wets' latest release.

Anna felt Simba behind her before she saw him.

She turned as he stepped closer.

At the same moment, Nandi came in through the front and closed the door behind her.

"What the fuck… get out of my house!" Anna shouted. "What do you want? I don't have any money here. Nothing of value. Get out!"

"We just want to talk," Nandi said calmly.

Simba raised his gun, not rushing, using it to direct Anna toward the living room.

"Sit down," he said.

Anna sat on the sofa. She didn't cross her legs.

Simba took a chair across from her, the gun steady, pointed in her direction.

"Where's your computer?" Nandi asked. "And your phone?"

"In my cam room," Anna said quickly. "There… by the kitchen."

"Passwords?" Nandi asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I don’t use passwords if I don’t have to,” Anna said. “The worst fucking invention ever. I don’t want to spend time memorizing shit or looking shit up. I misplace things all the time anyway.”

Nandi stepped into the cam room.

It was set up with care, a green screen, proper lighting, camera mounted at eye level. Everything positioned for recording videos and live cam sessions.

Nandi sat at the desk.

The computer was already on.

She pulled a USB stick from her pocket, slid it into one of the ports, and began copying the contents of the machine.

The Prometheus tech team had assured her it would pull everything, local files, cached data, cloud links, whatever Anna had stored or accessed from that computer.

It took a few minutes.

Nandi removed the USB.

Then she searched the house.

Everywhere.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She emptied drawers. Opened cupboards. Went through closets.

She opened everything that could be opened. And broke what wasn't meant to be opened. She didn't hesitate. She liked to break things when she was frustrated. She searched every pocket of every pair of pants and coats. She looked into every shoe, knocked on the heels, tried to twist them open.

There were no other computers. No phones. No radio. No television.

No external drives. USBs. No printer. No safes hidden behind picture frames.

Nothing.

She returned to the living room.

"Do you recognize this phone number?" Nandi asked, handing Anna a slip of paper.

Anna glanced at it for a few seconds.

"Nope."

"Does anyone else use your computer?" Nandi asked. "A boyfriend? Girlfriend? Anyone at all?"

"I'm not seeing anyone," Anna said. "I meet my friends at the mall sometimes. Hang out at their places."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Anna hesitated.

"My family doesn't agree with my lifestyle," she added. "They stopped coming here a long time ago."

She paused.

"Though I think my stepdad visits my cam room online," Anna added casually. "He probably tells my mom he's just checking to make sure I'm okay… When she catches him in the act…"

She scoffed.

"He's such a perv," Anna said, looking straight into Simba's eyes while spreading her legs, pulling up her towel slightly.

"You seem remarkably relaxed for having a gun pointed at you," Simba said.

"Go ahead. Shoot me," Anna replied. "I don't know if I'll be alive much longer anyway. I should be having surgery right now… My doctor says it's an emergency."

She laughed.

"I keep canceling. I don't trust doctors… I might die right here, right now, before you even have time to pull the trigger on your *big gun*."

She leaned back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“My last words,” Anna said. “Are ‘fuck you, asshole’. Will you remember that if someone asks?”

Simba sighed.

“That’s a beautiful butterfly necklace you have on,” he said calmly. “Are you involved in environmental activism? Save the planet? Protect nature? Animals?”

“I prefer animals to people,” Anna shot back. “More and more. Especially today.”

She smiled.

“If that’s your thing, I suggest you and your I-love-to-break-shit-in-other-people’s-house girlfriend go for a swim,” Anna said. “Feed the sharks… Why don’t you?”

She glanced down at his crotch, then lower.

“Every now and then I have to throw a snake out of the house,” she added. “Are you from the area? You know what it’s like. They like to make themselves at home… I don’t feel bad about throwing them out… At all.”

Her eyes flicked beneath Simba’s chair.

“Might be one under there...” She said.

Simba didn’t move. He didn’t look down.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Thank you for your hospitality, Anna," Nandi said, standing. "We'll be going now."

"You're not going to put things back where you found them?" Anna yelled after them. "Fix the shit you broke?"

Simba stood and holstered his gun.

"Of course, you come here, put your thing in my face," Anna said. "And then zip it back where it belongs."

A sneer.

"Just like a man… Don't forget to leave a tip… Fuckers!!! That's how I make a living."

Simba and Nandi left without another word.

They got into their car and drove away.

Anna closed the door behind them.

Her hands started shaking.

She had stayed composed the entire time they were in the house. Now it hit her all at once.

She slid down the door and burst into tears, her back pressed against it.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Then she stood and ran through the house, out to the terrace.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She dropped the towel and jumped into the pool.

The water was cool.

She stayed under for as long as she could, lungs burning, body forcing her to come back up.

When she surfaced, she gasped and floated on her back, staring at the sky, trying to slow her breathing.

"What the *fuck*!" she screamed.

She climbed out of the pool, wrapped the towel around herself, and went inside.

Her bedroom was chaos.

"This place is a mess," she said aloud.

The doorbell rang.

Anna froze.

She'd programmed her doorbell to play the sounds of mating cats, the yowling, the guttural cries, the unmistakable screech from the female due to pain and hormonal shock.

It sounded like distress. Like something going very wrong.

Anna didn't have many visitors. Mostly men, delivery drivers bringing food, mail, Amazon Prime packages.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She enjoyed watching their faces when she opened the door.

The reactions were grand.

She liked experimenting with animal sounds. Human moaning bored her.

She took her work as a cam girl seriously, but there was only so much of her faking orgasms she could listen to in a day.

And besides, she didn't want to give delivery guys the wrong idea. She just wanted to entertain herself for a change. The entertainer needed to be entertained occasionally.

She rushed to the kitchen and grabbed the largest knife from the block by the sink.

The bell rang again.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Delivery," a man's voice replied.

"Leave it outside," she said.

She went back to the bedroom, dressed quickly, hands still shaking.

Then she slipped out through the back door.

Past the pool.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Up the hill. Holding the knife tightly, looking over her shoulder regularly.

It took no time for her to reach a cluster of flowers, sugarbushes, her favorites, second only to red roses.

She stopped.

Listened.

Nothing.

She knelt behind the bushes and drove the knife into the soil, stabbing it with a groan.

Then she cleared away a few rocks, revealing a small metal box buried beneath them.

She opened it.

Inside was a satellite phone.

Anna glanced around once more before taking the phone out of the box.

No one.

She powered the phone on, entered the passcode, and dialed.

“Someone is after you,” she said when the call connected. “Or me… Or both of us.”

A pause.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Don't call me back… I'll reach out when it's safe."

She hung up.

Then she dialed another number.

"I have your Amazon Rainforest footage," she said. "Unedited. As you requested. Wire the money, and I'll send you the link."

She ended the call.

She powered the phone down, returned it to the box, and replaced the rocks.

She looked around one last time.

Still no one.

Anna pulled the knife free from the ground, stood, and headed back down the hill toward her house.

"Fuck!" She muttered, "I've got to clean up some of the mess if I want to work tonight…"

###

Nandi and Simba drove away from Anna's house.

Once they were certain they were out of sight, they pulled over behind a row of trees and bushes, positioning the car where they could keep watch without being seen.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nandi opened her laptop and slid the USB into the port.

Files populated the screen.

Images, mostly.

Anna in lingerie. Various bras. Sometimes none. Sometimes covering her chest with her hands. More often holding them, presenting them directly to the camera.

Nandi sighed.

It was better this way, she thought, better that she was the one going through the files.

"You keep an eye on Anna and the house," Nandi said to Simba. "I'll sort through the files while we wait for the tech team to do their thing with what I sent them."

Simba glanced at the screen. He was used to Nandi turning into the *directrice* more often than not. And while he welcomed that behavior in the bedroom, and was usually quite fine with her directing him on missions in the field, he thought that, this time around, she was overdoing it for some reason.

"You sure?" he asked. "It's tedious work. File after file."

"I'm good," Nandi said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Simba stepped out of the car and moved quietly through the trees until he found a closer vantage point overlooking Anna's house.

He settled in and raised his binoculars.

Anna was just getting out of the pool.

Naked.

He adjusted the focus.

"…Thank you, Nandi," he murmured.

A moment later, Anna disappeared back inside.

Simba kept watching.

A delivery car pulled into the driveway.

He couldn't see the front door from where he was positioned.

The car idled briefly.

Then drove away.

A moment later, Simba saw Anna come out through the back of the house again, this time, fully dressed.

She crossed the terrace, climbed the slope behind the pool, and disappeared briefly into the brush.

He adjusted his binoculars.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She knelt. Moved stones. Unearthed what looked like a satellite phone.

A short call. Then a second.

Then she buried it again.

Simba exhaled slowly.

The plan clarified itself. He would retrieve the phone as soon as Anna left the house. Nandi would follow her and alert him if she turned back too soon.

“Come on, Anna,” he murmured. “Don’t you have a rendezvous at the mall or something? Shit… She just had food delivered… We got lucky earlier.”

The sun dipped lower.

Shadows stretched.

By the time darkness settled in, Anna still hadn’t left her house.

From the car, Nandi had finished combing through every file on the USB drive.

More footage of Anna, naked, performing with sex toys, playing to the camera.

Nothing else.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

No client lists. No customer names. No references to Rachel Shepherd. No mention of a Rachel at all. Nothing.

"Let's hope the tech team has better luck," Nandi murmured.

Simba and Nandi had stayed in contact by phone. Simba told her what he'd seen, the calls from the bushes above the house.

By now, it was dark enough that the hill behind the pool had dissolved into shadow.

"I'm going up there," Simba said quietly. "I'll retrieve the sat phone. Is she online, by any chance?"

"Yes," Nandi replied. "I will keep her busy. Good luck with the phone."

Nandi hung up.

Simba looked at his phone for a few seconds. Puzzled.

"You will keep her busy???" He muttered.

After exhausting the files on the USB drive, Nandi had created an account in Anna's cam room under a male handle: *@cockeroo*.

She logged in and stared at the screen, unimpressed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I cannot believe I'm doing this," Nandi muttered, as she watched Anna posing in front of the camera, inviting visitors to chat and take her into a private chat room.

Under the cover of darkness, Simba moved uphill toward the sugarbushes behind the pool.

It took longer than he expected to locate the spot. Too many rocks. Too many places for something to be sleeping underneath, maybe even one of the snakes Anna threw out of her house.

He moved carefully.

He finally found a metal box, opened it and removed the satellite phone.

From his pocket, he pulled a small decoder and connected it to the device.

The screen lit up.

Characters began cycling, numbers, letters, testing combinations.

Simba called Nandi.

"It's going to take a bit longer than I expected," he said quietly. "I can't take her phone with me. We may not have time to put it back before she needs it again. You'll have to keep her occupied until I get the access code and

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

pull what we need for the tech team. I'm hoping the toy the tech team gave me actually works and cracks her code."

On the other end of the phone, Nandi exhaled.

"I will keep her busy…" She sighed and paused. "I've got it."

Anna responded almost immediately when *@cockeroo'*s handle appeared on her screen.

"What do you want to see, honeyyyyy?" Anna asked.

Nandi grimaced and typed:

"Everything."

"I can't believe I just wrote that," Nandi muttered.

"Everything is going to cost you, babyyyyy," Anna replied.

"Money's no object," Nandi typed. "How about a very, very, *very* slow striptease? Can you put more clothes on first?"

"I charge five dollars a minute, babyyyyy. Are you sure?" Anna said. "There's an additional fee for more clothes. I call it a 'garment tax'. Still sure?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Sure. I am sure," Nandi typed.

Nandi was typing slower and slower. Purposely pecking at the keyboard with one finger, while shaking her head.

"Good thing I process expenses for the office," Nandi said under her breath. "I don't think Leo P. would care but I don't want to explain this to him or anyone."

Nandi didn't need to do much to keep Anna busy, just respond, typing slowly. But that meant watching the screen.

"Give me a few minutes, babyyyyy," Anna said. "Some bitch wrecked my closet earlier today. All my clothes are on the floor."

"Bitches!" Nandi typed. "Take your time."

Anna came back in front of the camera. She was wearing a coat, a scarf, and a winter hat. She started playing with her scarf.

"Slower," Nandi typed. "Take your time."

The front passenger door opened suddenly.

"What the f… Simba!" Nandi hissed. "You scared the shit out of me."

He slid into the seat.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Looks like you're having a good time," he said.

"Very funny," Nandi replied. "Do you have what we need?"

"Yes," he said. "You can hand your *girlfriend* over to me while you drive."

"You wish," Nandi said.

Nandi typed quickly this time:

"Sorry babyyyyy, my bitch just walked in. I thought she'd be gone longer. Sometimes the bitch wrecks my closet too. I'll reconnect next week."

She shut the computer down.

Simba and Nandi drove to the Port of Cape Town.

Leo P. had rented a hangar there for one of his technical teams.

Inside the reception area, Nandi handed the decoder to one of the technicians. That was as far as she was allowed to go.

The hangar door closed behind the technician.

Nandi and Simba drove home.

Two hours later, the call came.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The tech team had cracked the satellite phone and gathered information from the files on the USB drive.

Anna had been careless, likely rattled by having a gun pointed at her in her own house.

They had traced both numbers stored on the device.

One belonged to Rachel Shepherd.

The number was active. The phone associated with it was currently on Baffin Island.

The second number was also on Baffin Island.

No name attached.

Not yet.

Simba called Leo P. and relayed the information.

“Moving forward, is the tech team set to track the calls from Anna’s phone?” Leo P. asked.

“Yes,” Simba said.

“Good,” Leo P. said. “Keep eyes on this Anna girl. Put Nandi on the phone.”

Simba handed the phone to Nandi.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"This is what I want you to do, Nandi," Leo P. said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XI

The Pussy-in-the-Box

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day

"Pussy-in-the-box… Puppy-in-a-basket… Fried-Jelly-Fuck-Fish!!!" Rachel shouted, her voice rising with each phrase.

She had been pacing the room where she'd been trapped, with the dogs and the cubs, ever since the elevator that brought them up had vanished back into the floor.

She raised her arm, then lowered it, trying to get a signal. No luck.

What she remembered of Schrödinger's cat had little to do with quantum physics. It was the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

card game *Cat in the Box* that stuck with her. A trick-taking game where card colors weren't defined until played. Uncertainty, paradox, chaos.

Rachel never applied herself to understand the game. But then again, after enough shots of whatever was on hand, she did not understand any game but the war games she was trained to play in the real world at a moment's notice.

She remembered playing *Cat in the Box* with Kate and other soldiers in Syria. Kate, of course, called it *Pussy in the Box*.

Over there, every game, *Cat in the Box*, any form of poker, or even *Go Fish* involved cash, of course, and a supply of whatever alcohol was available. Somehow, always a never-ending supply.

"We're trapped guys," Rachel said, turning to Black Paw, the dogs, and the cubs.

She had already circled the room at least a dozen times.

"What did the nuns say to do when you're trapped?" she asked, continuing the conversation with her silent entourage.

"Well… nuns put themselves in a box to begin with. Not all of them, sure. Some have

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

chores and dedicate their lives to helping people outside the convent. Others do everything they can to stay in. They pray to stay in. Some probably pray to get out… And then there's the confessional box… In, out, in, out…"

She looked at Black Paw.

He flicked an ear.

"Yes, Black Paw… Some of them make a vow of silence… Do you think we should pray?" she asked.

"I was left outside of a *convent box*, in a basket. I was taken in the *box* by the nuns. When I figured out where I was, years later, I wanted to leave the *box*. I prayed to get out, for my mother to come and get me… I also prayed for other things… For this kid, Jimmy, to kiss me… That was in fifth grade… That didn't work so well. The prayer came through but Jimmy didn't like it. He made a face. I couldn't get him to kiss me again… I even tried to bribe him with candy… Maybe he was gay?"

Rachel kept pacing the room, talking to herself. She was clearly putting the dogs to sleep, certainly not waking the cubs. Only Black Paw stayed with her, trying his best to follow, though he could barely turn his head to look at her.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I got out of the convent box by enlisting in the army," Rachel continued. "That was just moving from one box to another."

She paused, raised her phone in the air, and waved it around. Then she tossed it gently toward the ceiling, catching it on its way down. She glanced at the screen, still no signal.

"What did the army tell you to do when you're trapped?" she asked herself.

"It all depends on what kind of equipment you've got," Rachel said. "I could start shooting at the walls, but that's risky. What did we get from Dash's snowmobile? Explosives? That would be even riskier. Deadly, actually. And definitely deafening.

Rachel took another inventory of their supplies, taking her time as she sifted through Dash's gear more thoroughly.

"We're running low on treats," she murmured.

That didn't go unnoticed… Twenty-eight ears perked up. Fortunately, not a peep from the cubs.

"Knock, knock… Who's there? Nun… Nun who? *Nun* of your business!" she said, breaking into laughter.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"That might not have gotten the nuns out of their convent, but it's worth a try."

Rachel began knocking on the walls methodically, dividing them into sections. She hoped the sound might shift, duller here, more hollow there, and reveal a weakness in the structure.

She lifted her arm as high as she could, then worked her way down to the floor, tapping around her feet.

One wall down. Then the next. She moved clockwise, knocking and listening, determined to find something.

"Do you guys ever get to watch movies?" Rachel asked the dogs.

"We used to watch movies at the convent… Jurassic Park? Remember that one? There's this velociraptor who keeps testing the fence, trying to find a weakness in her paddock. Smart girl… Don't ask me what the nuns were thinking… I actually don't remember much of the film. I was too busy trying to get Jimmy to kiss me in the back row, in the dark. Didn't happen… You think that raptor was pissed off?"

She paused.

"Wait until *I* come out of this box…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I haven't studied interior design," she said to Black Paw, who now sat quietly beside her as she started knocking on a new section of the wall.

"The army didn't teach me how to decorate, just how to *demolish* interiors in all sorts of creative ways."

She paused, letting her knuckles tap along the wall again.

"Still, I do remember something from somewhere: *form follows function.* Lots of that in the military. Efficiency. Simplicity. Purpose over pretty…

"Nothing was decorated in the army, except the uniform. And that only if you earned a medal or two... or spilled some blood on it… Yours… Someone else's… Same colorful look."

She sighed.

"So, what the f... is this room for?" she asked, staring into Black Paw's eyes.

"It's not meant to kill us… They'd have cut the oxygen or pumped in gas. It's not meant to cook us, the temperature's actually decent. First time I haven't been freezing since landing on Baffin Island. Even Kate's office was cold.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She's not menopausal… is she? Already? Maybe perimenopause…"

She paused.

"Of course, Black Paw… You, the dogs, the cubs, me… We could be the frogs in slowly boiling water… Eventually my skin would peel off my face."

Rachel touched her cheek, then looked at her fingers, squinting.

"Way too many animals in here already. No need to bring frogs into it. Unless one of them turns into a prince after I kiss it…"

She paused.

"Eureka! Decontamination??? Mayyyy…be."

She spun around. Victory dance.

"How did I get from frog to kissing to prince to decontamination?" she asked aloud, turning to Black Paw.

Black Paw slowly licked his lips, tongue curling out with gravitas.

"Got it… Kissing frogs, even if they turn into princes, you've got to wash off, gargle…" she said. "Poor Jimmy. Now that I think about it… Or, were you thinking treat, Black Paw? Like eating a frog or a prince? Say no more."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She resumed knocking on the walls.

It finally paid off.

A subtle shift in resonance, barely perceptible, but consistent, spread across a stretch of wall about eight feet wide. From as high as she could reach without jumping, all the way down to the floor.

“Aha.”

She knocked on the outside edges of the newly discovered frame, then back inside it. The sounds were clearly different.

“If this is a decontamination room, how long before it opens up?” she muttered. “Is someone controlling the door? What would guide an automated system to decide we’re already clean? And clean of what, exactly?”

She scanned the walls.

“Where are the sensors? Are we contaminated?”

She stood still, thinking.

“Do I have to get naked in front of the dogs? And the cubs???” she asked, deadpan, facing the wall.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel took off her belt and anything else attached to her suit, laying everything neatly on the floor.

She emptied the sled, backpacks, and gear bags, opening the boxes that contained the syringes.

The cubs barely stirred as she moved them. She kept them together on the ground, forming a loose cocoon so all three would be visible, or scannable, assuming this *was* some kind of decontamination chamber.

Everything was out. Every pouch unpacked.

The room now looked like the teenager's bedroom she used to dream about back at the convent, cluttered, chaotic, hers.

"I've been dreaming of a messy room all my life…" she muttered.

Rachel spread her arms and legs wide, like at airport security.

Just then, a robotic voice echoed through the room, impossible to place, as if the walls, ceiling, and floor were all speaking at once:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“You are clear. Careful. Don't break the syringes.”

The section of the wall Rachel had identified through her knocking slid upward, revealing a corridor.

“Now I’m Agent 99?” she muttered.

“Max???” she called out.

“No, my name is Charlie.”

Rachel froze. Just for a second. Then she turned to the dogs and the cubs:

“Let’s go, guys. We’re all better off out of this box.”

There were no train tracks in the corridor, no sign of rails, wheels, or automation. The sled would have to be left behind, or maybe the dogs could drag it through the hallway if needed. She’d decide later.

So far, still no signs of other humans. The voice she’d heard was clearly robotic, maybe AI. That mystery could wait.

First mission: get everyone somewhere safe.

Option one: bunker down inside this facility and hope for rescue.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Option two: find the exit and ride to the Vastan compound.

But for now, one priority only:

Get out of the box.

She lifted the sled off the cart. It felt surprisingly light now, emptied of its contents.

"What do we really need?" she asked aloud.

She began sorting with purpose.

"Treats, for sure. No worries, guys, those go back in… Cubs, syringes, documents… and definitely guns and ammo."

Everything else could wait.

Rachel decided to leave the nonessentials in the corridor, just outside the decontamination room, and test whether the dogs could pull the lightened sled through the next passage.

They moved forward, Black Paw in the lead.

The door to the decontamination room stayed open behind them, a small comfort.

At the end of the corridor, they reached another door. Rachel halted the team a few feet back, stepped forward, and stopped about a foot away.

The door slid silently upward into the ceiling.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She scanned the new room revealed to her.

"Wow. Nice… Enter my palace, guys."

Black Paw led the pack, pulling the sled into a large room, a lounge that looked like the lobby of a luxurious 1920s French Riviera hotel.

Rachel took it in.

Velvet sofas, marble tile, Art Deco fixtures. The whole place seemed like a mirage.

She wandered farther in, eyeing the ambient lighting and steady, silent temperature.

"Adaptive lighting, smart climate control…" she murmured. "Definitely AI. Just like the decontamination room."

She waved her arms, testing for gesture recognition. No response.

She checked her phone. No bars. Tried the radio. Dead. Ran diagnostics on the rest of her equipment. Nothing.

"Alexa? Siri? Hello??" she said playfully. "Charlie?"

"Yes," the same voice from before responded calmly.

Rachel jumped slightly, then grinned.

"Where is everybody?" she asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“There is no one on the premises at this time of year,” Charlie said. “You weren’t expected. Neither were your dogs… or the cubs.”

“Hello Charlie. Nice to meet you. I can’t get a signal to call out. Is there a phone I can use around here?”

“Nice to meet you too,” Charlie responded.

“This building is a modified Cold War Distant Early Warning station. Abbreviation: DEW. You won’t be able to use a cell or sat phone from inside. To connect with the outside world, you’ll need to reach the main control room… or exit the building.”

Charlie continued, his tone calm, informative, almost proud.

“Note: nobody can track your phone in here either. That may be useful, in case you were being spied on or followed. This facility is one of the most advanced AI-controlled buildings on the continent.”

Rachel scratched her head. Charlie continued.

“Among other features,” he added, “it includes enhanced security and surveillance systems, smart locks, facial recognition, and

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

motion detection. I'm alerted to all activity, at all times."

Rachel opened her mouth to ask something, but Charlie didn't give her the chance. He was on a roll.

"I have a degree of decision-making autonomy," Charlie explained. "I can connect with other facilities if needed, especially if I perceive a threat. I can also seal a room and reduce its oxygen level, just enough for a human to pass out.

"I'm not trying to scare you," he added quickly. "There's a lot more I'm not permitted to share. But for as long as you're well-behaved, you might enjoy the free bar. A robot named Orion can prepare anything you want to drink.

"You can listen to music, watch TV, or play games, virtual only. No foosball or pool tables. Those were for the tech bros of the olden days. Nothing here is *olden days*.

"Think of this place as an AI bunker. You could live here, protected from nearly everything and everyone, for several years if you had to. I've been told the food is terrific.

"The regular human staff head home for winter to be with their families. I'm in charge while they're gone.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Oh! And one more thing," Charlie added. "We have health-tracking sensors throughout the facility. We monitor irregular heart rates, of course, and so much more. By the way, the cubs are very healthy. So are your dogs. But they are hungry.

"You'll be happy to know you're doing great as well. Your blood pressure is perfect. You are not pregnant. However… you *might* consider cutting back on alcohol. Have you been drinking more than usual lately? Orion will make you a mocktail."

Rachel stood frozen for a moment, stunned.

She blinked, shook it off.

"Focus. Focus. Focus." She murmured.

"Thank you... I think," she said, regaining her composure. "Could you please point me to the main control room, Charlie?"

"Of course. May I ask your name?" he responded smoothly.

Rachel smiled. "My name is *Nobody*, Charlie."

"Welcome, *Nobody*," Charlie said. "You are not listed among regular visitors or expected guests. Based on your vitals, and, of course, your questions, I'm registering this as your first visit."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No profile with your characteristics has ever been recorded… or I may not have access to it. That's also a possibility. In any case, there are only so many subjects I can discuss with you, questions I can answer… or doors I'm permitted to open."

A brief pause.

"This way to the main control room," Charlie added.

Green arrows lit up on the floor.

Rachel unhooked Black Paw from his harness. The two of them followed the illuminated path across the room. A door on the far wall slid open, revealing a smaller space, an old library, walls lined with shelves and actual books.

As more arrows lit up inside, Rachel glanced around.

"While we're walking, I have a question for you, Charlie," she said. "Why didn't you start talking as soon as we entered the decontamination room? Why leave us there to figure things out on our own?"

A brief pause.

"Great question," Charlie replied. "One I am not authorized to answer."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel rolled her eyes.

Rachel and Black Paw arrived in front of another door. This one stayed shut.

"Charlie? Are you there?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, *Nobody*. I am here."

"This door isn't opening. I made it through the library. Is this the main control room?"

"Yes," Charlie confirmed. "But as a guest visitor, you don't have access… Sorry, *Nobody*."

"Puppy-in-a-basket," Rachel muttered under her breath.

Then louder: "Hey Charlie, what about Kate Dawson? Is Kate Dawson on your list? She's head of security for Vastan Energy."

A pause.

"Yes, *Nobody*. Kate Dawson has full access to the facility. She is one of my bosses. Always so nice to me. Sometimes she tells me to be a little curt with the help around here. She doesn't suffer fools gladly, as they say. I remind her to follow company policy, we're nice to everyone at Vastan."

Charlie paused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Kate rolls her eyes when I say that. I think she knows things I don't."

"Great! Charlie, Kate is my friend. We've known each other for a long time. We fought in Syria together. She hired me to come up to Baffin Island to film a mother bear and her cubs. You saw the cubs in the decontamination room… Three of them. They're in the lounge with the dogs now. You said they were healthy."

Rachel took a breath, trying to sound measured.

"These are the cubs I came to film for Kate. I need to speak to her. We're being chased by very dangerous people. I need to get in touch with her. Can you please open the door? Or call her directly?"

There was a pause. Charlie's tone shifted, still neutral, but somehow firmer.

"Kate is *nobody's* friend. I've heard her say that many times in this facility. Especially to people who are trying to get away with something... while pleading friendship."

"I've actually been trying to reach Kate myself," Charlie said. "Since the moment you entered the decontamination room. No luck."

A pause. Then, almost as if amused:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I suppose that answers your earlier question, unwittingly. You're very clever, *Nobody*."

Rachel gave a tight smile. Charlie continued:

"I'm inclined to let you in… but I'd feel better if you answered a question or two about Kate."

"Yes, Charlie. Sure. Anything. Shoot."

"Does Kate have a sister?"

"Yes," Rachel answered instantly. "A twin sister. Lorin."

"Do Kate or Lorin have birthmarks?" Charlie continued.

"Yes. They both do. Same place, upper inner right thigh. A skin discoloration vaguely shaped like the Orion constellation… Not the local bartender, obviously." Rachel's tone was edging toward impatience.

"How do you know that, *Nobody*?" Charlie asked.

Rachel glanced around, searching for a camera, any lens she could lock eyes with.

"Can you see my eyes, Charlie? Where are you? Can you see my eyes?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I can see your eyes, *Nobody*. Of course." Charlie responded.

Rachel narrowed her gaze.

"Then know this… How I know about the twins' birthmarks is none of your business…"

She smiled and continued.

"You've got a man's voice, Charlie. The location of the mark implies that if you don't already know… you're not going to find out from me."

There was a short pause.

"No need to be curt, *Nobody*," Charlie replied, almost lightly. "I can see how you and Kate might be friends. Is it expected to be curt in the military?"

"Not at all," Rachel deadpanned. "Joining the army is like joining a never-ending tea party. Everyone's just so nice and polite."

"By the way, it was Kate that named the robot bartender Orion… That makes sense now that I think of it…" Charlie said.

He paused.

Charlie continued, his voice smooth and unwavering.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Given your responses, the sound of your voice, free of hesitation or deceit, your facial expressions, perfectly in sync with understandable exasperation... I’m going to open the door for you and your dog.

But understand: once you’re inside, I can guide you through making phone calls. I may not be able to answer certain questions.”

Rachel offered a crisp army salute to the door.

“Thank you, Charlie, sir!” Rachel said. “By the way, my dog’s name is Black Paw.”

The door opened. This one slid into one of the walls.

She and Black Paw stepped into the main control room, the hidden brain of the facility.

Without hesitation, Rachel grabbed a nearby chair and wedged it against the sliding mechanism. She wasn’t about to let herself get locked in.

“Nice pad, Charlie,” Rachel said, scanning the room. “Do you bring girls here often? I’m impressed.”

No response.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Shy all of a sudden? Are you AI-blushing?" she added, smiling.

Still nothing.

The walls were covered in monitors. One showed the dogs curled up in the lounge, another the corridor, and another the decontamination room. Not a single visible camera. Rachel frowned… How were they being watched?

Her eyes landed on a phone wedged between two keyboards. She picked it up.

No dial tone.

"Charlie!" she called out, clearly annoyed. "Are you playing with me?"

Silence.

"Charlie?! Charlie…"

She spun, scanning the monitors, voice rising with each call. "Charlie…"

The room was receiving camera feeds from across Baffin Island, some locations Rachel recognized, others not, as well as scenes from around the world, judging by the labels and timestamps beneath the monitors. A few showed drone footage, hovering over unspecified coordinates, scanning vast skies and rugged terrain.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She spotted the airstrip, the Vastan compound, the security station, the Inn, and Samuk's rental shop among the familiar locations.

Then one screen caught her attention: a lone figure was climbing a hill where the bear cave might have been. The area was charred and littered with debris, remnants of an explosion, but the cave entrance was gone.

"If that's the bear cave," Rachel muttered, "where the hell is the camera?"

Another bank of monitors showed buildings labeled as part of the billionaire's resort. Yet another set focused on the DEW facility itself, dozens of interior rooms, most of them labs.

According to Kate, these were part of Vastan's mining research operations, conducted under agreements with the Inuit and Canadian governments.

Rachel narrowed her eyes.

"Somehow, I doubt the governments know Vastan's been hunting for a World War II chemical weapon." She murmured.

One of the monitors displayed a still image: the syringes Rachel had unpacked in the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

decontamination room. The caption *"The Lost Child"* blinked on and off beneath the picture.

Rachel frowned.

She resumed her sweep of the control room, eyes scanning corners, checking cables, looking for other phones.

Something had happened to Charlie.

Opening the door might have triggered a system alert, either knocking Charlie offline or notifying someone at the Vastan security station. Maybe even Kate directly. If access to the control room had been flagged as a breach, someone could be watching now. Someone might already be *en* route.

Rachel thought that the delay in exiting the decontamination room wasn't just about contamination risk. It might have been the syringes. Some were labeled with the letters *VE*, Vastan Energy. It wasn't until the syringes were in full view that the door of the decontamination room was opened.

The system might have been programmed to expect a delivery that it referred to as *The Lost Child*. The scanning identified the syringes and their content. But the delivery might not have been expected from an unknown courier.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She slid into a chair at one of the monitors and tapped at the keyboard. Password protected. Every terminal locked.

"Charlie? Are you there?" she asked.

"Yes, *Nobody*," the voice replied.

"What happened to you?" Rachel said. "I thought I unplugged you by accident. The phone doesn't work. And I need a password to use one of the computers to send an email. Unless you've got another way to reach Kate... I'm open to suggestions."

She glanced toward the monitors again. "I could try once I'm outside, but I was hoping to rest. Recharge the comms. It's safer here, for the cubs, the dogs. For everyone."

"Forgive me for not responding immediately, *Nobody*," Charlie said. "I was conducting some research. But... your name is making it difficult to verify your relationship to Kate. I need more information before I can grant access to this equipment."

There was a pause.

"As I told you earlier," Charlie continued, "I found references to you in Kate's conversations: *'Nobody's my friend,' 'Nobody can tell me what to do,' 'Nobody was there waiting for me.'* But

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

frankly, I'm confused. In my world, this borders on hallucination. What is your last name?"

Rachel hesitated.

"I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean to deceive you."

She took a breath.

"My name is Rachel Shepherd," she said. "Kate and I spoke recently, a few times actually. She called while I was in the Amazon Rainforest. We were on a video call with two of Vastan's PR people. I flew up here from Manaus on one of the company's private jets. I spent time with her at the security station. Does that help?"

"Well done!" Charlie replied. "I didn't detect any subterfuge. Great acting! You said '*Nobody*' like it really was your name."

"Hmmm... not sure what to make of that," Rachel said, brow raised.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XII

Sean Connery or Greta Garbo?

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
DEW Station
February 14, Present-Day

"So, you're *Rachel*! Of course, The famous Rachel Shepherd. *The* Rachel Shepherd." Charlie said.

"Famous?" Rachel asked, skeptical.

"You were contracted to film the mother polar bear and her cubs," he said. "I've been looking forward to your documentary. I thought perhaps there'd been a personnel switch, that '*Nobody*' was the new documentarian."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I *am* the famous Rachel, I guess," she said, with a tired half-smile. "And I need to make sure the cubs are taken care of. Black Paw and the rest of the dogs too."

"Ooooh, Rachel… The mother polar bear isn't going to like that you took her cubs," Charlie said, his voice now sounding increasingly less robotic. "You might want to take them back to her."

"She's dead, Charlie," Rachel replied flatly.

"What happened?"

"Long story. I guess there wasn't a camera in that area."

There was a pause before Rachel added, "Now that I think about it, how much do you actually know about my assignment? I saw some camera feeds earlier that looked like the bear cave area. Don't you have footage from earlier today?"

"Now that I know who you are," Charlie said, "I can compare your face to the footage we stored of you and Kate at the Vastan security station. Let me see what we've got… Yes, it's you, alright. I'll see what I can do about retrieving video of the cave site. It might take a while."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"While you do that," Rachel said, "can you log me into the computer?"

Less than a second later, the screen in front of her blinked to life, desktop icons populating in a crisp grid.

"Thank you, Charlie."

Rachel opened a browser and tried logging into her email to contact Kate.

No luck.

"Charlie? Charlie?" she called out.

No response.

"Not much of a multi-tasker, are you, Charlie?" she muttered. "Don't mind me while you do your thing."

Left to her own devices, Rachel began browsing through every folder and file she could access on the computer.

That's when the trail started to appear.

A trail of secrets.

Vastan's roots ran deep, right into Nazi Germany. The company was incorporated during the war. Records showed early partnerships with Imperial Japan. Their purpose? Co-developing a bioweapon. Not just one, but many.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The bioweapon Rachel found in the cave had a name: *The Lost Child*.

She stared at the words on screen.

According to the internal documentation, the project was named "Kato" in honor, or perhaps in haunting memory, of a baby who had died in the cave in 1944. She recalled one of the mummified bodies: a child, nestled in the arms of an Asian-looking woman. She had never searched the baby's body.

Her skin prickled.

It was grotesque. And fascinating. And enlightening.

Vastan's researchers had found the same cave where Kato, his mother, and the rest of the original team had perished in 1944. The bioweapon had remained intact, sealed in Arctic permafrost for nearly a century.

But that wasn't all.

They had seen that a polar bear had taken residence inside, heavily pregnant.

The screen in front of Rachel told a different story than the one she had signed up for.

The mother bear… had been a cover. A PR stunt.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Vastan had brought Rachel in under false pretenses. Kate had recommended her personally to the PR team, not because Rachel was the best documentarian for the job, but because she was perfect bait. Trusted. Credible. Unquestioning.

Rachel leaned back in the chair, staring at the text.

"Fried… Jelly… Fuck… Fish! Oh, you've got to be kidding me…"

They used the bear, weaponized motherhood for optics. Claiming to care for a polar bear and her cubs gave Vastan the perfect reason to keep everyone away from the cave. A perfect distraction.

She sat forward again, scrolling.

Signs around the area had warned locals not to approach the cave. But they lied about why. If the signs had mentioned a bioweapon, government agencies, military units, and environmental watchdogs would've come flooding in. Even subtle danger signs would've raised red flags with Samuk and his people, locals keeping an eye on everything as part of the community watch.

"No wonder they didn't want me talking to anyone until after the documentary was completed," Rachel said under her breath. "And

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate… you sold me the whole 'lone wolf' mission line. Dammit."

According to the files, Vastan's long-term plan was to eventually relocate the bear and her cubs. Carefully. Lovingly. Under the guise of a conservation effort.

Once the animals were out of the way, out of the cameras, out of the public eye, Vastan would send in a second team. The real team. To clean up the cave. To retrieve their asset.

To bring *The Lost Child* home.

Rachel stared at the phrase on the screen, bile rising in her throat.

"Puppy-in-a-basket! They were never protecting the bear. They were protecting *this*."

She scrolled further. Until that cleanup team arrived, no one was supposed to go near the cave.

No one but Rachel. Just far enough to get beautiful, heartwarming shots of an endangered species in her natural habitat, while unknowingly guarding a WWII-era bioweapon.

"Congratulations, Rachel," she whispered bitterly. "You were the face of the cover story."

Rachel kept reading.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

According to Vastan's internal briefing notes, Kate had vouched for her, told them Rachel could be trusted to stay focused on the wildlife assignment and wouldn't suspect a thing. A passionate, lone documentarian, too busy setting up her cameras to poke around.

Worse, Kate had leveraged their friendship as a security measure. If Rachel saw something odd, she'd report it… to Kate. Not to the authorities. Not to the public. Kate would intercept and control the flow of information.

Rachel clenched her jaw.

"So that's what I was to her. A buffer. A fucking patsy!"

It was all part of a broader scheme: bringing in someone like Rachel, someone *credibly detached*, was a PR masterstroke. A win for conservation optics, a shield for secret operations. The presence of a mother bear and her cubs, highlighted in Rachel's planned footage, would justify keeping people away from the area. No red flags. Just environmental concern.

She scrolled faster now, hoping for more information on the bioweapon itself.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Nothing detailed. No chemical composition, no deployment history. Just the same code phrase: *The Lost Child*.

The files hinted at what went wrong. Vastan's retrieval team had gotten close, too close, before the polar bear revealed herself as more than a passive occupant of the cave.

Rachel exhaled sharply.

Charlie's now-familiar voice returned, calm and clear.

Rachel felt a pang of conflict.

She had lied to him, called herself *Nobody*, toyed with the truth. And yet, he had welcomed her in, guided her through the building, even trusted her enough to open the main control room. He had been helpful, courteous... almost friendly.

But now, the warmth was cooling.

Charlie had said Kate was one of his bosses. That meant Charlie worked for Vastan. And with *The Lost Child*, the bioweapon, now inside the building, she couldn't help but wonder: Had his orders changed? Was Charlie still helping her… or just following protocol?

What she'd thought might become a partnership now felt… uncertain.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Rachel,” Charlie said, “thank you for your patience. A lot of the footage I have access to is snow. I don’t mean TV static, I mean actual blizzard snow. The weather was pretty bad out there.”

Rachel let out a small breath. That sounded like him, dry humor included.

“The cameras work sporadically under normal conditions in the cold,” Charlie continued. “I saw a man enter the cave… then a couple minutes later, a bloody bear rushed out.”

Rachel closed her eyes for a moment, images flashing back.

“The man was probably Dash,” she said quietly. “And the bloody bear… that was the mother of the cubs. I arrived later.”

She didn’t say more. Not yet.

And Charlie didn’t press. But the air between them, woman and machine, had shifted. The trust was thinner now. Not broken, but under review.

“I couldn’t send an email to Kate,” Rachel said.

“I’ll do a full system check,” Charlie replied. “And I’ll continue my attempts at a direct connection with her as well.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Can I take a look around the station while you do that?" Rachel asked.

"Of course, Rachel," Charlie responded. "I'll grant you Kate Dawson's access level. Let me know if you have any questions along the way. But please, be careful. Some experiments are ongoing through the winter. All AI subsystems are active."

That surprised her.

If Charlie had been ordered to stop her, he could have. Especially once he scanned the syringes. But instead, he was offering her freedom, trust, and access.

Maybe… maybe he was just as much a cog in the machine as she was. Maybe he didn't know everything.

She glanced down at Black Paw.

"Let's go, buddy."

They moved through the station, corridors humming with unseen power, temperature perfectly regulated, the hum of machines sharp against the silence of snow.

Rachel's instincts kicked in fast. The deeper she went, the stranger it became.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There were chemical labs. Climate-sealed data centers. Racks of server stacks that looked more advanced than anything she'd seen in a government facility. High-density quantum drives. Real-time neural training loops. Synthetic AI. Not just reactive. Growing. Evolving.

In one lab, she spotted them, syringes marked with "VE" and numbered labels, the same kind she'd found in the cave.

"Bingo."

This was the proof.

Someone from Vastan had been in that cave before Dash. Recently. Probably collecting samples. And they'd left those behind, maybe in a rush.

Maybe interrupted.

By the mother bear.

Dash had found those syringes. He'd said as much on the radio, just before everything went to hell.

Rachel took a step back and rubbed her forehead.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“These were brought in the cave by a researcher,” she murmured, “before Dash. He must’ve escaped. Dash didn’t.”

Her mind raced.

This was a pipeline. An extraction mission. The new syringes were meant to draw samples from the old ones, the ones marked with Nazi and Japanese emblems.

She froze.

Her eyes widened.

“VE…” she whispered. “VE. That’s where I saw it…”

She blinked.

“… the chemical containers in the Amazon Rainforest…”

She stared at the syringes like they were fangs.

“Puppy-in-a-basket! Vastan...”

Rachel shook her head slowly.

What are the odds?

First, she nearly died in a cave in the Amazon.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Now, here she was, another cave, more chemicals, another trail of lies, only this time buried under snow instead of vines.

And Vastan was at the center of both.

She pressed forward through the next corridor. The station felt impossibly large, like it expanded the more she walked. Everything gleamed with synthetic cleanliness, like it had been engineered to vanish from memory.

Charlie had mentioned "ongoing experiments." But what kind? And how many layers deep was this thing?

The hall she was in now looked almost… domestic. A brushed metal wall gave way to what resembled a chalet in the French Alps. Where she was planning on staying while in Chamonix. Even faint ambient French music.

“Talk about hallucinations,” Rachel murmured. “What am I *not* seeing?”

The deeper she went, the more surreal it became.

Black Paw padded beside her, ears alert.

Rachel couldn’t help herself, her curiosity was kinetic. She knocked on walls, pressed her shoulder into mirrored surfaces, kicked

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

baseboards, tested floor panels. Some of it was practical. Most of it was frustration.

"How long had Kate planned this?" She murmured.

She felt used, recruited under false pretenses, deployed like a chess piece in Vastan's PR game. And she wasn't even a cool piece like a knight or a bishop, but a lowly pawn. And all under the guise of trust.

She made sure her camera was rolling, double-checked the chest rig and its blinking LED. She'd restarted the recordings as soon as she'd cleared the decontamination room.

"If this turns into a documentary," she muttered to herself, "it's not going to be about polar bears."

With each room, she started to understand the layout better. The disguises were elegant, but the bones of the station gave them away. Hidden labs tucked behind mirrored walls. Server rooms cloaked behind fake French windows.

"So… if you can make a lobby look like the Riviera, a lab look like a chalet, you can make *anything* disappear?"

There were layers behind layers. And Rachel had just begun to peel them back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel eventually came to a room that had all sorts of toys.

A sandbox for minds like hers. Glasses, gloves, screens… she dove in.

She slipped on a pair of augmented reality glasses, then gloves wired to the system. Gestures triggered interactive displays. Synthetic wildlife simulations. Tactical puzzles. Command prompts.

She couldn't help it, she laughed for the first time since running into the mother Polar bear.

Relief. Play. Distraction. A small, necessary rebellion against the weight of discovery and betrayal.

She toggled through options and summoned a holographic replica of Black Paw. The projection looked uncannily real, down to the patch of frost behind one ear. Black Paw stared at it, stiff-legged, then gave it a wide berth… circled once… and walked straight through it. Then he backed up, lifted a leg…

"Don't," Rachel said.

He huffed and walked away. She grinned, then shut off the Black Paw hologram and created a copy of herself. A flawless, hovering double. Same hair, same outfit, same equipment

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

as if she was filming herself. Same flickering doubt in the eyes.

Black Paw gave her a look. Then looked at her twin. Then her. Then her twin again.

"You okay, buddy?" Rachel asked, amused.

He growled softly. Not threatening, just... confused.

"Having fun?" Charlie asked, breaking the moment.

His voice came from nowhere in particular, but carried a warmth that suggested he'd been watching for a while.

"Yes. A lot," Rachel said, pulling off the gloves. "Any luck reaching Kate?"

"No. I need more time to figure out what's happening. I may have to do a full system reboot."

"A reboot?" Rachel asked, concerned.

"Yes. I don't want to initiate one while you're inside the building. Everything would go dark, security systems, air filtration, power, everything."

Rachel nodded, eyes narrowing slightly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Charlie continued, his tone more cautious now.

"Kate hasn't responded to any calls since just before the storm. She took one call while she was still at the security station earlier today. Then nothing. Unless she's using a secondary line I don't have access to."

Rachel's brow furrowed.

That wasn't like Kate.

"She and I have a lot to discuss. Do you think something happened to her?" Rachel asked nervously.

Charlie took a second longer than usual to respond.

"I cannot connect with her right now," he said.

Rachel bit her lip. If Kate was off-grid, it wasn't an accident.

"Thank you, Charlie," she said. "Can you help me secure the bioweapon syringes and the documents I brought out of the cave? I need a place… somewhere safe, here in the DEW. Somewhere only you and I know about. At least until we can find Kate."

There was a pause.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Yes, of course," Charlie replied. "The only person who could override this request would be Kate."

Rachel typed up what she wanted Charlie to do.

Charlie read her request and laughed out loud. Not the polite AI chuckle… a proper, delighted laugh.

"Done," he said. "That is the most entertaining Valentine's Day I have ever had. It looks great now, but I will refine it after the reboot."

He paused.

"Thank you, *Nobody*." Charlie said.

Rachel smirked, despite herself.

"By the way," Charlie added, his tone notably more serious, "Men are approaching the DEW. Look at the screen on your left."

Rachel pivoted.

One of the exterior camera feeds lit up with movement, figures on snowmobiles against the snow, moving with practiced intent.

She leaned in. She held her breath.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"That's them," she said, voice tightening. "Those are some of the people who've been chasing me since I left the bear cave."

She pointed.

"See that one? The woman… You can't tell what's behind the mask. But I saw her up close. Asian, bald, full head tattoos. That's Juju. Cold as hell. And the man next to her, tall, elegant, that face… looks like Omar Sharif if he was raised by wolves… I'm pretty sure that's their leader, Zaid."

Rachel scanned for more details, her mind flipping through flashes of memory. She could feel the heat of adrenaline rising again.

"I don't know all their names. I've only seen some of them up close, the others through my binoculars. But the gear matches. Same machine guns. Same masks. Same precision. They're military-trained. Or worse… These are not good people, Charlie," she said flatly. "Please. Don't let them in. And definitely do not let them get anywhere near the bioweapon. You can't let them find it."

A pause.

"Understood, Rachel," Charlie replied, voice crisp but calm. "I'll initiate security lockdown

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

protocols for outer perimeter access. And I'll monitor their movements closely."

Rachel exhaled slowly, just once.

It had begun again.

"We're going to head out now, Charlie," Rachel said as she packed the sled, gently securing the cubs and locking Black Paw into his harness at the head of the team. "Thank you for your hospitality. Could you please keep trying to connect with Kate?"

"You're very welcome, Rachel," Charlie replied, his voice as chipper as ever. "I'll keep ringing her, of course. I'm getting a little concerned myself."

He paused… then added with a hint of pride:

"By the way, next time you come by, I might just be able to meet you in person… so to speak."

Rachel blinked.

"I've been finalizing the construction of a synthetic skin layer for my robot avatar. Nothing fancy… yet. It might take some time, especially if I have to reboot or deal with, you know, the charming guests headed our way…"

There was a moment of mock suspense.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I was thinking: tall, dark, and handsome? Or maybe striking and elegant? Sean Connery? Greta Garbo? I've been reviewing hours of classic film footage in preparation. We could celebrate Valentine's Day the right way…"

Rachel laughed despite herself.

"Just be yourself, Charlie. Trust me, it's working. And don't even think about looking like me. It confuses Black Paw."

Black Paw gave a small huff as if on cue.

Rachel adjusted her goggles and tightened the sled ropes. Then she asked:

"Can you light us a safe way out of the DEW? Preferably away from the riders approaching?"

"Yes, Rachel," Charlie replied, his voice suddenly more formal. "Follow the arrows."

Green lights blinked to life on the floor once again, carving a quiet path out of the labyrinth.

Rachel gave a small nod toward the ceiling.

"See you around, Valentine."

Rachel followed the green arrows in silence, her boots crunching against the tiled floor. Black Paw padded ahead, ears forward, guiding the sled like a general on a mission. Behind him, the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

sled groaned under the weight of the cubs, a stockpile of rations, scavenged weapons, and… most notably… several bags of explosives.

Lots of explosives.

And treats. *Lots* of treats.

Rachel didn't look back.

The arrows led them through a maintenance corridor that sloped downward into a long-forgotten section of the DEW. The air grew colder, the lighting dimmer. Eventually, they reached a rusted steel door. Rachel shoved it open with her shoulder.

Beyond it lay a mine tunnel, old, abandoned, and half-frozen. Jagged icicles hung like teeth from the low ceiling. Somewhere deep inside, a forgotten world of rock and steel led toward escape.

As they traveled through the defunct mine, Rachel planted explosives in key chokepoints: crevices, tunnel mouths, and collapsed beams. Booby traps, just in case Zaid's people decided to follow. Each one she rigged with swift, methodical hands, tight knots, silent fuses, cold resolve.

The tunnel spat them out near a snow-covered cable car station.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel stepped into the booth and brushed snow from the control panel. The levers were ancient. She tried a few, jiggled a crank.

For a moment, nothing.

Then… *clunk.*

Gears groaned. A red warning light blinked. Somewhere above them, a steel cable hissed and tugged to life.

The wheels started turning.

Rachel let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Not dead yet," she muttered.

Black Paw growled softly, ears twitching toward the wind.

She loaded the sled into the cable car with practiced efficiency. The cubs huddled together, whining softly. Black Paw stepped in last, then turned around and stood watch, his eyes fixed on the path behind them.

The wind had picked up. Snow flurried in sharp, sideways bursts. Another storm was forming on the horizon, the kind that erased everything, tracks, landmarks, bodies.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel started the engine and jumped in beside them, slamming the door shut just as the cables groaned to life.

From her vantage point inside the rising car, she scanned the ridgeline.

No sign of the riders.

Still, she didn't exhale.

Going back toward the cave was out of the question. Too many variables. Too many men. And the only way to the Vastan security station from that direction was back over the open flats, chased by a storm and mercenaries.

She glanced down at the cubs, then at the weapons. Then back out at the mountains.

No way up. Not with a sled team and this cargo. She had to trust her memory: the cable car led toward the billionaire resort Kate had mentioned during one of their briefings. If she was right, there was a half-finished zoo on the grounds. Still under construction, but equipped with a winter veterinary unit. Kate had even joked that some of the rich guests might bring their pets.

Rachel had asked Charlie earlier if he could take care of the cubs. He had the knowledge, but

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

not the hands. Someone needed to administer shots, feed them, care for them properly.

“I don’t have the teats, Rachel” Charlie had said.

That meant finding someone human. Someone real.

Someone she could trust, if such a person still existed in this frozen chessboard.

She tucked her scarf tighter around her face and pressed a gloved hand to the window as the landscape passed beneath them in slow, creaking motion.

“Zoo it is,” Rachel said aloud.

The priority was to find a safe place for the cubs and someone who could take care of them and the dogs, whatever happened to her.

The wind was picking up, rocking the cable car with sudden jerks, a disorienting mix between a Disney ride and being the target at a carnival shooting gallery.

Inside the cable car, she tried again to connect with Kate.

No luck.

The storm was closing in fast. The wind howled louder than before, buffeting the glass

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

and steel with erratic force. The car bounced and swayed, sending the dogs sliding on their paws.

The cubs, somehow, slept through it all, curled together like one living, breathing snowball.

Rachel looked at them, then out the window into the swirling white.

“What an interesting part of their childhood,” she said dryly. “Will they remember any of it? I hope there is a bear psychologist at the zoo…”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XIII

Kate, Kate, Kate, Kate, Kate…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
February 14, Present-Day

Out of the DEW and back above ground, way above ground now, Rachel's tracking signal blinked to life.

Kate saw the blip flash to life on her phone.

She caught her breath.

Then, as the storm closed in around Rachel's cable car, the signal began to flicker again, fading fast.

Still, it was enough.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel was alive. And heading toward the zoo.

“She’s alive and well... or the bear ate the collar of her suit.” Kate muttered. “Which would mean… it took a bite out of Rachel… Or, ate the whole thing…”

Kate paused.

“Poor bear,” she added with a weak smile, trying to make light of it. But the weight settled deep in her chest.

Her thoughts spiraled.

Kate was still working out how to pay her debt to Hector The Vector without betraying Rachel.

At least not to the point of losing Rachel completely.

But the lines were blurring.

For Kate, it wasn’t just about paying Hector back for getting her the job at Vastan.

She owed him real money.

And more than once, first in Syria, then again in Ukraine just before the war broke out, she’d given him her body, hoping it might wipe the slate clean.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It hadn't. A blow to her ego as a lover.

"You're not getting any more of this, Hector," she said out loud.

Hector had referred her directly to Vastan's top brass.

The Vastan job was supposed to be her reset button.

A clean break.

But only Hector decided when a debt was paid.

And he wasn't done collecting from Kate.

She sat alone in the engine car of a train, chugging through the whiteout.

She'd boarded it earlier that day, just outside the Vastan security station, an old utility line she and her team used to check posts and maintenance nodes along the route between the Vastan compound and the billionaire's resort.

The tracks circled wide past the DEW station, skirting mine entrances, before linking up with the port and the resort's private airstrip.

She was riding solo this time. She didn't want anyone from her crew asking questions.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The storm had blocked all communications, no phone, no radio.

But no one at the station would be alarmed. They'd assume she'd gone looking for Rachel.

She was halfway to the resort when her phone lit up.

Rachel's tracker had come back online. That is all it displayed, strangely. Still no other connections.

The train had a snowplow at both ends, so whichever direction it ran, the engine cleared the track. Massive blowers sucked up snow as it moved, then hurled it out in fountains to either side.

Kate watched the soft white arcs spray past the windows.

For a moment, the rhythmic purr of the machine felt calming, hypnotic, even.

But her mind kept spinning.

She figured Rachel must've found a way to ride out the storm.

The tracker signal, brief as it was, had shown her alive, and heading toward the billionaire resort.

They'd meet soon. Hopefully.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Still, something didn't sit right.

Why had Hector insisted she report Rachel's location to Patricia? That blonde woman with the glassy eyes and clipped, unforgiving voice.

Kate's stomach turned.

"I'm messing this up," she murmured. "What do they want with Rachel? Not a date… though Rachel is definitely *armed* for it… And dressed for it too…"

A flicker of Rachel's Valentine's Day lingerie flashed in her mind.

Kate smirked.

"Rachel needs to reenlist," she muttered. "Just kidding… I know your time in the army was hard on you, girl. And you do look better in lace."

She wasn't laughing for long.

Kate reached into her pack and pulled out the one device no one at Vastan knew about. A sleek, unmarked phone, courtesy of Hector's latest war-chic arsenal.

He'd claimed it could hold a video call from the moon. No one had proven him wrong.

The screen lit up. Patricia.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate answered, her voice cool.

"She's leaving the DEW, if it's her. I've got the tracker, but can't reach her, no calls, no texts. Nothing's getting through that way. With my equipment. Can't use Hector's toy to call her."

Kate paused. She continued.

"You might be chasing a bear… or something else that ate her. I'm honestly surprised I could even reach you. Are you near the cable car station?" Kate asked.

"Don't worry about us," Patricia replied. "Hector said you would deliver. So, are you gonna deliver! Or, what? This should have been done already."

Patricia hung up.

Hector had made it clear: report directly to Patricia.

No delays.

No excuses.

Kate's debt wasn't paid yet.

Kate liked to believe Rachel could survive anything.

Still, the guilt gnawed at her.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She hadn't told Rachel the whole truth. She hadn't protected her… not really.

She was hoping to pay her debt to Hector without betraying Rachel completely.

If she could keep passing along just enough intel to Patricia to buy time, enough to throw Zaid's crew off Rachel's trail, maybe she could still protect her.

Patricia would believe she was cooperating. Hector would stay off her back, forever. And Rachel might live.

But it was a razor-thin game Kate was playing.

And she knew it.

She had been risking Rachel's life for days now.

It started with the Amazon Rainforest job.

Kate had reached out anonymously to Anna, Rachel's agent.

She had insisted that Rachel, and only Rachel, be sent on that Rainforest assignment.

Kate had offered Anna a significant payment through a shadow network, posing as a wealthy conservation sponsor. She even dictated which

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

region of the rainforest she wanted documented, down to the coordinates.

She'd used the number Rachel had given her a while ago, in case of emergencies, Anna's number.

Anna never suspected a thing.

Kate needed to stay invisible. No one could know she was looking into Vastan's activities in the Amazon. Not while she was still posted at the Vastan compound, overseeing the DEW station and all of Vastan activities on Baffin Island.

And if anyone could handle the dangers out there, it was Rachel.

They'd served together in Syria. Kate had always teased Rachel, called her "Sister Tequila," the tough girl with a soft heart that will grab you by the *cojones* and knock you out of any game one way or another. Rachel was sharper than anyone Kate had ever met. Tougher too. She could navigate war zones, wilderness, or wolf dens of predatory men without flinching.

Kate had trusted her with her life more times than she could count.

And if things got too dangerous in the Amazon, Kate figured she could still intervene, covertly, through Anna's green network or her

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

own channels. She just hadn't counted on everything spiraling so fast.

Kate was still waiting to hear back from Anna. The footage Rachel had shot in the Amazon should've been available by now.

Maybe things had gotten complicated down there. Still… she'd seen Rachel under the shower, half-tipsy, soap in her hair, soap everywhere, fortunately. Rachel had made it through the Amazon Rainforest assignment better than the Vastan PR team did when talking to the camera while looking at Rachel under the shower. It didn't surprise Kate that the Vastan men employees on Baffin Island did not see naked women under showers very often. Certainly, not during business meetings.

Rachel seemed *very fine*, as one of the PR executives had mentioned after the video call was over.

Sending Rachel to film the bear had been a calculated move. A betrayal disguised as an opportunity.

Kate knew it. She planned it. And hated herself for it.

But she also knew Rachel needed the money, and all the gigs she hired Rachel for paid well.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Vastan's executives hadn't asked many questions. They were grateful Kate had found a way to monitor the cave discreetly, using someone she trusted. No strangers. No new contractors. No one who might start asking the wrong kind of questions. Just Rachel. Under Kate's supervision. From a corporate standpoint the perfect way to CYA, *cover your ass*.

What Kate didn't understand was *why* Rachel had suddenly become a priority target.

Why had Hector sicced Zaid's team on her?

Kate recognized every member of Zaid's crew. She knew their specialties, their track records, and the fact that none of them worked without Hector's approval.

And if they were hunting Rachel… Rachel wasn't safe.

Kate had known something was off the moment Hector called her over a year ago.

He didn't ask. He never did.

"I'm recommending you for a post on Baffin Island. Head of Security for Vastan Energy. When anyone contacts you, interviews you, screens you, do *not* mention me. You don't know me. Just take the job. It will be offered to you. You'll hear from me in time." Hector stated.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate had gone silent for a moment.

“Will that clear my debt?” She asked.

“If all goes well, yes. But don’t disappoint me.” He answered.

Then the line went dead. No goodbye. No follow-up. Just silence.

Kate had taken the job. She hadn’t heard from Hector since.

At first, Baffin Island felt like a clean slate. She oversaw all security for Vastan’s northern operations: the Vastan compound, the storage depots, the old DEW station that had been turned into something far more advanced, various mining locations, the billionaire’s resort.

Over time, the executives began to trust her. She gained access to files, labs, restricted areas.

And what she discovered was far beyond what she'd expected.

Not just mining.

Not even close.

Chemical trials.

Weaponization.

Technology that blurred the line between defense and atrocity.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She hadn't reported it. She hadn't stopped it. She'd just… kept going.

As soon as she started working, she had been assigned to protect teams sent across the island to scout for new mining opportunities. But it didn't take long for her to realize these missions were often just a cover. The true objective, whatever it was, remained closely guarded, even from team members who had grown close to her.

Still, in time, her position earned her deeper access. She played the long game, gained trust. Quietly, word spread: she was dependable, discreet, and loyal. Before long, they began treating her like one of their own.

Which was exactly what she wanted.

Kate had been trained for this. Infiltration, observation, strategic patience. She knew when to ask questions, and when not to. Knew how to blend in without disappearing. She wore the badge of chief security officer convincingly while gathering intel behind the scenes. Her greatest weapon wasn't her sidearm, it was the simple fact that she made herself indispensable. By protecting the people around her, she invited their confidences.

On one of the outings, Kate accompanied a Vastan chemist, nicknamed TT, short for *Test*

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Tube, to a cave several hours from the Vastan compound. She'd never been to this location before.

TT didn't look like he belonged in the field. He had the posture of a lab rat, not an Arctic explorer. His gait in the snow was cautious, awkward. He wore a white coat well, in the lab, but when covered in ice and snow, stepping off his snowmobile, he could make you smile…

Normally, Kate insisted on protocol: at least one security teammate remaining outside the cave, and another leading the sweep inside. The standard routine, safe, predictable.

But this time, she was told to accompany TT alone.

She shut off her snowmobile, glancing at the cave's opening ahead. TT did the same, but faster than usual. It was as if he already knew what to expect.

"Just wait for me outside," he said, striding past.

"You sure?" she asked. "At least let me clear the entrance."

"It's fine," TT repeated without looking back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate watched him. He wasn't just eager. He was comfortable. Familiar. Which raised alarms. She thought for a moment that he might have been tired, cold, wanting to head back to his lab as quickly as possible, warm his hands around some boiling experiment, distill himself a special drink. It was more like… he knew the place.

This was one of those moments. Pulling rank would damage the fragile trust she'd been building inside Vastan. Sometimes you learned more by standing down.

"As you wish," she said, masking her suspicion.

TT disappeared into the darkness, flashlight beam bouncing ahead of him. Kate returned to her snowmobile, sat on the still-warm seat, and watched the cave mouth like a hawk.

Fifteen minutes passed. No sounds. No movement.

Then TT came sprinting out.

He jumped on his snowmobile and gunned the engine, stopping a hundred feet away from the cave. He turned, motioning wildly for Kate to follow.

Kate didn't move. She hopped off her seat, stepped into the snow, and drew her sidearm.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Quietly, she approached the cave and slipped inside.

Her flashlight swept across damp rock, then caught movement, slow, deep-breathing movement. A pregnant polar bear shifted, curling tighter in her den, one of the sections of the cave. She wasn't charging. She wasn't even bothered. She was nesting.

Kate exhaled, almost laughed.

"Men," she whispered. "No match for a pregnant woman. Even if she's fast asleep."

She eased out, holstered her weapon, and left the cave. She did not need to explore further.

She climbed onto her snowmobile and rejoined TT.

"All clear," she said casually. "The bear's not going anywhere soon."

TT didn't answer. He led the way back to the compound, riding fast. Too fast. Earlier, she'd had to slow down so he could keep up. Now he couldn't get away from the cave quickly enough.

"One scared chemist," she muttered, accelerating after him.

Back at the security station, Kate ushered TT into her office.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Sit. Warm up. You want coffee?"

"Yes, please. Black. No sugar," he said, eyes darting around. "Where's the bathroom?"

She pointed down the hallway. "Two doors down. Ladies on the left, gents on the right."

TT nodded and disappeared at a fast clip.

Kate stepped back into her office and poured two cups from the carafe. She added cream and sugar to hers, then sat, sipping slowly, replaying every moment of the cave visit. Something still felt off.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen.

She blinked at her empty mug. She'd finished two cups. TT hadn't come back.

"Where is he?" she muttered, rising. "Is there a pregnant bear in the men's bathroom?"

She walked to the men's bathroom and knocked.

"TT? You okay?"

No answer.

A faint groan drifted from the ladies' room.

Kate frowned. She knocked once, then cracked the door.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Inside, TT was hunched over a toilet, kneeling awkwardly, pale as ice.

"I didn't mean to walk in on you," Kate said. "Wrong bathroom, by the way."

TT winced. "Sorry. I… can't even puke."

"You're still processing the bear," she said gently, crouching to help him up. "You need water. Electrolytes. Maybe a few chemicals of your own… I've got a few of my own in my office."

He leaned on her arm, shaky.

"Let's get you back to my office. You can puke later… in the correct bathroom," she added. "You don't want one of the women here walking in on you. HR would have a field day. You think a pregnant bear is dangerous?"

Kate poured a fresh cup of coffee to the halfway mark, then drowned it in vodka as if correcting a mistake. The brew stopped steaming.

"Black vodka," she quipped, sliding the mug toward TT.

He downed it in one gulp, exhaled shakily. "Another, please."

She obliged.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

TT sat straighter, hands trembling slightly, adrenaline and alcohol mixing uneasily.

"I *knew* it was the cave," he said, voice rising. "I *knew* it."

He shook his head, still processing. "The executives told me, *if you're so sure, go with Kate. Just Kate. No one else.* The less people know, the better. Vastan had better up my bonus. We found it. After all these years. We *found* it."

Kate remained silent. She poured him a second dose of black vodka and pushed it across the desk.

"Can I trust you, Kate?" he asked, eyes wide now.

"Of course," she said smoothly. "Go ahead."

"Spill the tea, TT," she thought.

She knew better than to push. She would let him ride his own momentum. TT didn't know what she didn't know, and she preferred to keep it that way.

Until now, she'd been in the dark about what Vastan was really searching for during these mysterious excursions. The clues were adding up. Greed, corporate secrecy, dangerous cargo. But something deeper had begun gnawing at her gut. Something darker. This wasn't just about

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

profit. It was about control. Destruction. Of ecosystems. Of lives. Possibly of entire populations.

Then TT tipped his hand.

"I was collecting samples in the cave," he said, voice dropping. "From syringes. Way in the back of the cave in a separate section. I heard a growl. I stopped what I was doing. Got out. I heard the growl again. I knew you were outside. You wouldn't have let animals come in. The growl was coming from another smaller section I had passed by when I came into the cave. I ran out."

"Samples?" Kate asked, careful.

"We need to seal the cave. Now. No one else can go in. I'm serious," TT said.

Kate leaned back.

"It's remote. We'll mark it. Put out a local alert. Notify staff via a memo." She said.

"No!" TT snapped. "No memos. No talking to the locals either. No one must know."

She held up a calming hand.

"It's just a bear, TT. A very pregnant one. Not going anywhere for a while. People here live

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

with bears. We manage. I learned how to… Quickly."

He leaned forward.

"Forget the bear. The bear's not the threat. We need chemical warnings. We need hazmat tape. Hell, we need a containment team." TT said.

His voice was trembling.

Kate narrowed her eyes. She refilled his cup, this time, more vodka than coffee.

"What's in that cave, TT?" she asked.

"Let's call my boss, Gunther," TT said.

Kate nodded and put her phone on speaker.

After a few rings, a throaty voice came through. "Gunther here. Hello Kate. You and TT are back already?"

"Yes, Gunther. I'm in my office with TT," she said. "He wants to talk to you."

TT jumped in. "It's *the* cave… I had the syringes in my hand… Gunther, we need to seal the cave. I had to run out before I could finish. I heard a bear. I think it might already be infected."

A pause.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Great work, TT. You too, Kate," Gunther replied, measured. "Are you both okay? Any symptoms? Difficulty breathing? Skin rashes?"

"I'm fine," Kate answered.

"I'm fine. She's fine. We need warning signs," TT pushed. "We can't risk anyone going in for a while."

"We want to be discreet," Gunther said. "Kate, is the area trafficked?"

"It's remote," she replied. "But hunters and fishermen pass through. Some staff travel the route to get to the DEW and the billionaire resort. If you want to keep people away without drawing attention, chemical signs are the wrong move. Let the bear do the work. She's pregnant. We say we're protecting a maternity den. No one will question it. I can have a friend, Rachel Shepherd, camp outside and film it. She's a wildlife documentarian."

Gunther considered it. "Brilliant idea. Can your friend be controlled?"

"We served together in Syria. We trust each other," Kate said. "She'd keep me in the loop if anything unexpected happens. She's not cheap, though."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"As long as she can be trusted, money isn't an issue," Gunther said. "I'll have PR contact you, *only* about the bear. They don't need to know anything else. We need to keep everything else between the three of us… Please, set up a meeting with your friend right away."

"Absolutely," Kate said.

"Excellent work. Both of you," Gunther said. "TT, take Kate with you to the DEW lab. Make sure you're both okay. Head to toe. Enter through one of the decontamination chambers of course. You know the drill."

"Will do," TT said.

The line went dead.

TT reached for the vodka bottle and filled his empty coffee cup to the brim.

"I am *not* going to pass the alcohol test," he muttered.

"I'm not letting you on a snowmobile for a while," Kate said, grabbing the near empty bottle and slipping it into a drawer.

She had considered pouring herself a shot, briefly.

While TT stared blankly into his mug, nursing his buzz, Kate tried to piece everything

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

together. The puzzle was getting sharper. TT's reaction. Gunther's calm. The cave. The syringes. An enormous quantity of vodka, even for a chemist.

She'd been right to suspect Vastan of playing with dangerous substances.

And now, the truth was pushing up through the snow: her job wasn't just about compound security. It was about protecting secrets. Dangerous ones. The kind of dangerous that called for you to walk through decontamination chambers.

The fact that Hector The Vector had pulled strings to land her this gig should've been a red flag from the start.

Things started to make a little more sense to Kate now.

Hector had no other interests but making money selling weapons, wearing weird outfits and of course seducing women.

Baffin Island wasn't exactly a hotspot for romance, unless you had a thing for frostbite and a population in survival mode. Everyone wore the same Arctic gear, the same blank expression against the cold. If Hector was looking for distractions here, it wasn't going to be women or fancy clothing.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

That left… weapons.

And if Kate had to guess, Hector had his sights set on something chemical. Something nasty. No doubt about it.

Her guess had been confirmed about a month after the adventure at the cave with TT, when Hector called again.

“Time for you to pay up, Kate,” Hector had said. “You’ll hear from one of my associates, Patricia. She’ll tell you what she needs.” Then he hung up, just like that.

No room for questions. No chance to protest. Classic Hector.

Then again, nothing. Silence stretched for days. A week. She even allowed herself to hope, foolishly, that maybe he’d forget about her, lose interest, or find another favor from someone else with more to offer.

She thought she might go another couple of years before hearing from Hector or anyone named Patricia. That maybe her account had been settled just by staying quiet.

Then came February 14. Valentine's Day.

Early that morning, her phone buzzed in her office. She ignored the first message, it came from an unknown number and she had a zero-

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

tolerance policy for unverified contacts. But the second message ended with a name.

Patricia.

Kate didn't hesitate. She called back almost immediately. Her voice was steady when she told her team she'd be stepping out for a while.

No questions asked.

She headed straight to the train station.

###

Kate watched the tracks blur beneath the train as it barreled full speed toward the billionaire resort.

Snow fell in thick curtains, only to be swept back up by gusts of wind, forming brief tornados that danced across the rails before vanishing behind her.

Her thoughts were a storm of their own.

Working from the inside to expose dangerous operations was never easy, and always dangerous. She'd deliberately kept Rachel in the dark, believing it would protect her. Rachel wasn't supposed to get involved in anything beyond her usual, risky but manageable, documentary work, in this case watching a bear cave from afar. Kate had calculated that a cranky

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

pregnant Polar bear would be the biggest threat. A threat that Rachel would handle. Not men with guns. Not Patricia. Not Hector.

Still, she'd hoped that having Rachel nearby, working with her, might offer her something… Comfort. Security. A sense of loyalty she could still count on. The way they worked together in Syria.

If everything went sideways, as TT's British lab mates liked to say, "tits up," Kate knew she might have to bring Rachel into the loop. But not until absolutely necessary. She didn't want Rachel involved in this deeper game. She would protect her from afar, quietly.

But now... now it looked like Rachel had stepped straight into the crossfire.

What was supposed to be a simple shoot of a polar bear and her cubs had turned into a woman-hunt.

Patricia and her team, assembled by Hector The Vector himself, were tracking Rachel. That wasn't standard.

Rachel was very good. But she'd have to be at the top of her game.

Hector didn't send amateurs.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Paying off her debt to him might cost Kate more than Rachel's friendship. It might cost Rachel her life.

And that... Kate would never forgive herself.

Loyalty wasn't a word Kate used lightly. Certainly not when it came to Rachel.

Kate's gambling addiction back in Syria had opened the door to Hector. She'd racked up massive debts playing poker at his table, and at other tables, filled with arms dealers and mercenaries who bet with bullets and blood.

Eventually, she ran out of ways to bluff.

She'd hoped that sleeping with Hector might settle things. That maybe sex would wipe the slate clean.

It didn't.

And the sex hadn't been memorable either. The settings were always exquisite… she'd give him that. Yachts, suites, private islands. She'd even put on some of his bizarre wardrobe: velvet robes, military cosplay, and one jacket with so many zippers it could've doubled as a body bag for someone who walked into a chainsaw, over and over. Some of it she weirdly liked. He fancied himself as a designer. A hobby, he would say. His collection for women was hilarious.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Right places. Wrong clothes. Wrong guy.

Didn't matter what she wore, or whether she wore anything at all.

It was still Hector.

Since she was hired, she had checked regularly to see if Hector had made it on Baffin Island.

As part of her official duties, Kate and her team reviewed every arrival, employees, contractors, hunters, even tourists. Everyone who set foot on the island was logged and vetted.

Hector's name or face never came up.

But several familiar faces did.

People Kate recognized from Hector's orbit, former mercs, arms runners, tech specialists. They'd registered as hunters, supposedly here for the season. Clean paperwork. Fake hobbies. Kate knew the type.

She reviewed their photos. Then videos.

The island had cameras in many places, some visible, some discreet. Installed to protect Vastan's assets. But they captured much more than that. Much more than the locals suspected.

Then there was Patricia.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Blonde, like Kate. Same hair length. Same height. Same shape.

Kate had been monitoring the guest log at the Inn near the compound, quietly coordinating with Samuk, reviewing rentals from his shop.

Patricia and the rest of the team had checked in days earlier. Kate had seen her once, at a distance, walking with the infamous Zaid.

Close enough.

###

Kate couldn't wait for the train to reach the billionaire resort. She hoped the storm hadn't buried the tracks along the way.

As the snow whirled outside, she realized it didn't matter how skilled Rachel was… not this time.

Even together, they'd be outmatched by Hector's team. They would need help. A lot of help.

Rachel had saved her life on the battlefield. Kate had returned the favor. They'd been fearless, shoulder to shoulder, back-to-back, under fire, outnumbered, outgunned.

Not just by soldiers.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The two of them had been through some bizarre, unforgettable quagmires.

Rachel had once helped Kate bail out her sister Lorin from a disaster of a situation in Syria.

Lorin was a young reporter looking for her big break.

Lorin had arrived there chasing a story, journalist badge, warzone swagger, zero common sense. She got too close to men she should've steered clear of. The result: she was beaten, raped, and ended up pregnant.

Lorin wanted an abortion. Fast.

Kate turned to Rachel.

"Why me?" Rachel asked.

"You grew up in a convent," Kate said. "I can't ask anyone else around here."

"What do you think goes on in convents?" Rachel said. "You watch way too much porn, Kate. They take babies after they're born, not before."

Rachel found a local Syrian doctor. It all went to hell.

Mid-procedure, the doctor passed out drunk. Lorin lay half-conscious, legs open, a pair of

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

forceps sticking out of her. The stench of arak, 140 proof, no less, and blood thick in the air.

Kate tried to take over. She grabbed the instrument, but her hands shook. She couldn't do it.

Lorin had turned ghost-pale.

Kate handed the tool to Rachel.

"Go on," she said. "I can't. She's my sister. My *twin* sister. I can't dig in there. Imagine… If we make it to the next family Thanksgiving dinner…"

"Don't say it," Rachel muttered. "Yes, I was in a convent. And yes, they taught us more about the human body than you'd think. Still, open your browser on your phone. Find me some video and walk me through this. Occasional medic in the field does not mean I can find my way up a uterus."

Rachel snapped on rubber gloves.

Kate browsed with one hand while holding Lorin's, who started to get delirious.

"How about a medical animation?" Kate asked.

"No doubt, this would make a great cartoon," Rachel replied. "Go ahead, Woody

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Woodpecker… Talk me through it… Left… Right…"

Rachel finished the procedure.

Lorin survived. And Kate never forgot.

"You owe me," Rachel said afterward, as she swallowed the last of the arak.

"I can't believe you did that," Kate replied. "You *really* know your way around. If I ever have a daughter, I'm sending her to convent school… And, I am giving thanks to you at every Thanksgiving dinner for as long as I live."

"This could have been a niece or a nephew you would have taken shopping," Rachel said. "No regrets."

"To the contrary," Kate replied. "You saved me a bundle."

Kate had felt in Rachel's debt ever since. No paycheck she helped Rachel earn as a documentarian, directly or through Vastan, would ever even the scales.

And now, with the storm tightening, the hunters closing in, and Rachel caught in the crossfire, Kate feared she might owe her friend far more than she could ever repay.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XIV

Ice Capades Escape

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
On a frozen lake
February 14, Present-Day

Patricia reached Zaid through the team's encrypted sat-phones, the same models Hector had given Kate. Reception crackled under the weight of the approaching storm, but just enough came through.

"She's heading for a cable car station," Patricia said. "You see it on your map?"

"I see it," Zaid replied flatly. "Avi and Stu are closest. I'm sending coordinates now. You

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

and Bobby move in from the ridge. Eyes on, no mistakes. Keep me updated."

He ended the call and relayed the orders to Avi and Stu without hesitation.

Zaid turned to Juju and the two riders flanking him.

"You three. With me," he said. "Any of you speak Inuktitut?"

The men shook their heads.

"Nope," Juju said, deadpan.

Zaid smiled faintly, the kind of smile that made people flinch. "No matter. I speak the true international language… terror."

He turned back to Juju. "Can you reach our snowmobile contact?"

"Samuk," she said, already dialing. She hoped he'd answer. The signal out here was fickle, and Zaid's mood was worse.

"Samuk's Rental Shack and Treats. Hello. How may I help you?" Samuk answered.

"Hi," Juju replied smoothly. "We rented nine snowmobiles from you a few days ago. You kindly gave us directions. We're a bit turned around, so sorry to bother you. Could you help us out?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Of course," Samuk said cautiously. "Where are you now?"

"Not sure," Juju admitted. "Are you at the rental shop?"

"No. I'm out fishing."

That gave her pause.

"Fishing!" Juju echoed. "Do you answer *Samuk's Rental Shack and Treats* when you're fishing… Never on a break… Just like me… Even on vacation, I'm always working… Maybe we could meet you where you are? It'd be easier if you could just point us in the right direction."

Samuk hesitated. Something about these people had never sat right. He didn't believe they were hunters, or anything close. Kate had asked too many questions about them. And now this one played lost but too smoothly.

Samuk was the quiet protector of his land, his people. If he had to meet them, it would be on his terms, on his turf.

"Yes, always working. I'll send you a pin," he said, keeping his tone neutral.

Of course, Samuk didn't believe a word Juju had said. If they were truly lost, they'd never find a random fishing hole in the tundra.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Still, this might be his chance to get rid of them. Send them where they would get lost for sure.

People froze out here all the time. The cold claimed the careless. Snowmobiles lasted longer than riders, machines were built for the elements. Humans weren't.

He could disable the tracking beacons on every one of their machines. Claim they'd malfunctioned. Accidents happened. And these weren't people anyone would come looking for. At least, not anyone who gave a damn.

Samuk had insurance. Worst case, he'd get a new fleet of snowmobiles.

"You can't miss me," he said lightly. "I'll stick out like a sore thumb. Did you bring fishing gear? It's a good day for it."

"We brought all sorts of gear," Juju replied, looking at her machine gun. "We'll be there soon."

Zaid, Juju, and the two riders arrived quickly at the coordinates Samuk had sent.

To their surprise, an Inuit man and woman sat quietly by a hole in the ice. Neither looked like Samuk.

"Samuk lied again," Zaid muttered.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju stepped forward. “Hello. Do you know Samuk? Have you seen him?”

The Inuit couple said nothing.

Zaid narrowed his eyes. “Do you speak English?”

Still nothing.

He hated silence more than lies.

“Try him again,” he said, looking at Juju.

Juju dialed. She put the phone on speaker. This time, Samuk didn’t answer. Only his recorded voice invited them to leave a message.

Zaid turned back to the woman. “Do you speak English?” he asked again.

She met his gaze. Calm. Unflinching. But said nothing. Didn’t nod. Didn’t shake her head. Just held his eyes like stone.

“You see,” Zaid began, “I can’t tell if people around here are permanently frozen or they choose to ignore me. Are you cold or rude? We’re here to help the world do a better job weeding its garden, getting rid of the unwanted, the defective, the dangerous. Not interested?”

He smiled faintly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You might say, 'Zaid, look around… there aren't even any plants here.' But I don't mean your tundra. I'm talking about the big garden. Eden. Paradise. Whatever vision you've carved into your totem poles, etched above your igloo doors, or tucked into your holy chapters about bliss and balance. Is yours a book based religion?"

He paced slowly around the hole in the ice, the wind pulling at his coat.

"Thing is, you folks grow up fast out here. Sucking on your mother's breast one day… next day, you're fighting your siblings for a piece of fish, if you're lucky enough to catch any. Seal fat… Yummy."

He glanced at Juju.

"Am I not getting through?" he asked. "They understand. They're just pretending not to."

Juju said nothing.

Zaid turned back to the man.

"I see it in your eyes… you understand perfectly."

Zaid kept circling.

"Survival teaches certain truths. Eventually, you start thinking: what if I didn't have to share?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

What if I didn't have to compete with my brother? Sister? Or my cousin. Or… my wife's lover."

He paused.

"Fishbones make a decent stew, sure. But they don't fill the belly. And sharing… yes, sharing is a virtue in the Arctic, isn't it? Until it isn't."

Zaid's voice dropped lower, more intimate, even more menacing.

"Tell me, do you really want to share your food? Your home? Your wife… with strangers? Is that myth? Or custom? Or just something you endure in silence?"

He stopped. Faced the man. Pointed to the woman.

"Is she yours? Or someone else's? When she returns to you, after lying with another, what do her eyes say?"

He let the silence sit.

"I think," Zaid said finally, "you've thought about eliminating a few weeds in your time."

He began to circle again, slow, deliberate, coiled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Right now," Zaid said, pausing, "I bet you wish you could eliminate me."

He stopped walking.

"Well, we're here to help with that sort of thing. Not with guns. With science."

He let that hang in the air.

"The people I work for call it DNA-targeted poisoning. Sounds technical, right? That's because it is. Originally developed to eliminate diseases. Very noble."

He chuckled, low, cold.

"But let's be honest, do we really need more people living longer in wheelchairs? Kept alive by drugs they can't pronounce, pumped full of pills just to digest the ones that keep them breathing?"

He scanned their faces.

"Longer life, yes… but at what cost? You live longer, you need more meds. You take more meds, you get more side effects. More side effects, more pills. A goldmine… for them… my clients… bosses…"

His tone sharpened.

"And until they figure out how to make you live longer in perfect health, what's the point?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Other than making a killing... off keeping you half-alive."

"Now imagine this," Zaid continued softly. "You add a trace amount to the fish stew. An untraceable dose. It checks the DNA of everyone at the table after they swallow the yummy stew."

He leaned closer.

"And then… it acts. Only when instructed."

He turned to the woman.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Only the guests? Only the men? Only those with blue eyes?"

He smiled.

"You're all eating the same stew. Same pot. Same spoons. The police test everything, find nothing. You ate it too. Everyone did. Just one or two guests died."

He paused.

"Elegant, no? Too silent for me… I prefer a loud departure… But elegant."

Zaid stepped behind the man without warning and shoved him forward.

The man plunged into the fishing hole.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He vanished then burst back to the surface seconds later, gasping, clawing desperately at the ice…

"Until then," Zaid said calmly.

He drew his handgun and pressed it to the man's head as the Inuit struggled to keep himself from slipping back under.

"A little screaming?" Zaid asked the man.

Zaid looked up at the woman.

"Do you speak English?" he asked again.

No answer.

Zaid fired.

The man's grip slipped. His body vanished beneath the ice.

Zaid turned the gun on the woman.

"Do you speak English?" he asked calmly. "I was supposed to meet Samuk here. Do you know him? He's a liar. He's been wasting my time since the day I met him."

She didn't blink.

"I doubt he knew you'd be here fishing," Zaid went on, almost conversational. "Which is unfortunate. I was hoping he'd see the consequences of lying."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He tilted his head.

"I do hope one day DNA-targeted poisoning works automatically on liars. Like Pinocchio… but instead of a growing nose…"

A pause.

"They die."

He exhaled slowly.

"Where is Samuk?"

Nothing. No fear. No tears. No plea.

Zaid frowned slightly.

"Either you were on loan to the man I just shot and you didn't like him much, or I must be losing my touch."

He fired again.

"You two," Zaid said, gesturing to the riders. "Dump the woman and their gear into the hole. Quick… we've wasted enough time."

The ice groaned under their boots as they worked. The hole was just wide enough for the bodies and packs, but not for the snowmobile.

The men began carving the opening wider with ice axes, wordless.

Zaid turned to Juju.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Let's move."

Moments later, Zaid, Juju, and the two riders mounted their machines and rode off toward the cable car station, silent shadows skimming across the snow.

###

Rachel crouched in the cable car, swaying high above a frozen gorge. As they passed over a solid wall of ice, she heard the whine of snowmobiles echoing below.

She cracked open the door. Arctic wind slammed into the cramped compartment, creating a blizzard of breath and fur.

Fourteen dogs. Three bear cubs. One sled. And herself.

Well past safe limits.

She pulled a stick of dynamite from her pack, lit it, and dropped it through the opening.

It tumbled in silence.

Then… boom.

The frozen waterfall convulsed. Icicles shattered. Massive blades of ice cracked loose and plummeted down.

One rider looked up too late.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A jagged spear of ice fell like a guillotine, skewering him through the shoulder and exiting low, pinning him upright to his snowmobile like a grotesque trophy.

The machine didn't register the death. It carried the frozen corpse a few meters farther before stalling in the silence.

Red ice steamed beneath him.

Rachel lit a second stick of dynamite and hurled it through the open door.

The blast tore more ice from the crown of the frozen waterfall. A roaring avalanche of shards crashed down, half-burying the snowmobile and the grotesque figure of red-stained ice still mounted on it.

But the second rider had flanked her, staying clear of another dynamite stick coming down from the cable car.

He'd taken the high route, skimming across the flat ridge above the falls, racing to beat the cable car to its landing.

He leapt from his snowmobile, slung his machine gun into position, flipped off the safety, and waited.

Rachel spotted him just ahead, weapon raised, aimed straight at her.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She dropped to the floor in an instant, arms around the closest dogs.

"Down! Everybody down!" she shouted.

The car groaned on the cable as it crept toward the station.

Gunfire erupted.

The man opened fire on the cable car, shattering the windows to smithereens. Glass rained down on Rachel, the dogs, and the cubs in a stinging cascade.

But the lower half of the cable car, thick, reinforced steel, held strong. It was an industrial transport unit, built to survive Arctic extremes. And now, bullets.

Rachel pressed her body over the nearest dogs and the cubs.

"He'll have to reload soon," she whispered. "One… two… three… now!"

She popped up, gun in hand, and fired through the broken window. Her shots weren't as precise as she wanted, but they forced the shooter to react.

Caught off guard, the man ducked behind a snowbank, struggling to reload. His fingers

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

fumbled with the icy clip, the metal stiff and uncooperative in the cold.

Finally, he managed to jam the magazine into place. He rose, weapon leveled, ready to fire again.

As the cable car slowed into its docking cradle, Rachel used the brief silence between gunshots to throw open the doors.

She shoved the sled out first, straight toward the shooter, and leapt after it, landing hard in a bank of deep snow.

The sled struck the man square in the chest. One of the handles cracked against his head, sending him sprawling.

Half-buried, Rachel raised her pistol and fired. Shot after shot. She emptied the magazine into the blur of limbs and snow.

She wasn't sure what had done the damage, her bullets or the flying sled, but the man now lay still, pinned beneath it.

Wasting no time, she clawed her way out of the snow and sprinted toward him.

But as she closed in, the man shoved the sled off his chest and reached for his knife.

Rachel froze mid-step.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She waited for the first lunge.

They stood facing each other, ankle-deep on shifting ice, the surface cracking beneath them, threatening to swallow a foot or worse.

No words. Just breath. Blades. Eye to eye.

Above them, the cable car rolled to a stop.

One by one, the dogs leapt from the compartment onto the slick concrete dock, slipping, scrambling, barking.

Black Paw didn't hesitate. He bolted down a narrow stairwell toward Rachel.

The man turned at the sound of claws on concrete just long enough.

Rachel lunged.

She slammed into him on the ice, knocking the knife from his hand with the barrel of her empty pistol.

Before he could recover, she drew her own blade and drove it into his stomach, again and again.

The man gasped…

Black Paw lunged.

He clamped his jaws around the man's throat, just beneath the edge of the helmet, and

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

tore through flesh with a savage shake. He didn't let go until Rachel grabbed his collar.

The other dogs joined in.

"Good boys," she said, breathless. "I couldn't have done it without you."

She rose quickly, reloaded her handgun, and scanned the area.

Eyes sharp. Breath visible.

Ready for the next fight.

No other riders in sight.

But the storm was closing in fast. Wind tore in ragged gusts, each one stronger and longer than the last.

Rachel scanned the cable lines.

Nothing followed her from the DEW station.

But the *other* line, feeding into the same platform, was moving.

A second cable car.

Swaying violently in the wind.

Inside, two figures. Hunched. Still.

Rachel narrowed her eyes. Whoever they were, they weren't here to help.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“They won’t be able to shoot straight in that wind,” she muttered.

But she knew better than to count on luck.

Inside the incoming cable car, Patricia and Bobby opened fire, taking turns with their machine guns.

Accuracy was useless in the swinging car, but stray bullets still cracked through the air.

“Not accurate,” Rachel said, ducking behind the sled. “But they might get lucky. Four minutes, tops! And, they won’t need luck.”

She moved fast.

Sled upright. Harnesses secured. Dogs clipped in.

Black Paw stepped into position at the front without hesitation.

Rachel gathered the bear cubs, still sleeping in their canvas pouch, and tucked them gently into the sled.

Then she jumped onto the half chewed up man’s snowmobile, started it, and checked the fuel gauge.

Plenty.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"We're good," she said. "Let's beat the storm and lose whoever's in that cable car."

She kicked the machine forward, carving a path through the snow.

Behind her, the sled followed, Black Paw leading the pack, the dogs bounding behind, silent and focused, most still licking blood from the impromptu treat.

They descended the mountain, leaving the station behind as snow and wind surged around them. Blown ice whipped through the air, forming a white cloud that quickly swallowed the cable car platform.

At the top, Patricia and Bobby's cable car finally docked.

The couple moved fast.

Bobby dragged a snowmobile out and swung a leg over it, engine roaring to life as he tore off down the slope.

Patricia followed, machine gun slung across her back, snowboard underfoot. Only one of their snowmobiles had fit in their cable car. She dropped in after Bobby, carving down the mountainside through ice and wind.

The hunt had begun.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

###

Jacques had taken a different route, staying off the main path, out of sight. He was making good time, though still trailing behind Patricia and Bobby.

From a distance, he spotted Juju reconnecting with Zaid. He had been following her from the bear cave. The sight stopped him cold.

He recognized Zaid.

They'd crossed paths before. Different country. Same violence.

Two riders from the group peeled off toward the DEW station, while Zaid, Juju, and two others moved in the opposite direction.

Jacques made his choice. He steered toward the DEW line.

By the time he reached the cable car station, Patricia was already vanishing down the mountain, just a blur of dark shapes against the storm.

The front was rolling in fast. In minutes, visibility would collapse completely.

He snapped the reins.

"Go," he said softly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The dogs lunged forward, pulling him into the whiteout after Patricia and Bobby.

###

Rachel reached the frozen lake at the bottom of the slope and brought the snowmobile to a halt.

Seconds later, Black Paw and the sled team skidded to a stop beside her, panting and alert.

She glanced at the sled, checked the bundle. The cubs were still there, nestled tight. Safe. For now.

She turned to the dogs.

“Go! There’s a zoo on the far side of the lake. Meet me there!”

She spoke to them like soldiers under her command, confident, direct, expecting total obedience. She even used hand signals, pointing across the ice toward the distant, unseen shoreline.

In the distance, behind them, coming down the mountain, the growl of a snowmobile echoed, closer now.

Bobby.

“Go!” she barked again.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw took off instantly, the team surging forward, the sled trailing behind like a shadow. They vanished into the falling snow, racing toward the far shore.

Rachel revved the snowmobile's engine, a low snarl cutting through the storm. She circled a couple of times.

She peeled off in a slightly different direction from the sled team, angling wide around the frozen lake. Her goal was simple: draw the chase away, give the cubs a chance.

Let them make it to the zoo. Let someone take care of them. No matter what happened to her.

A gust of wind ripped through the blizzard, opening a gap in the white wall behind her.

Just long enough.

She saw him.

A rider on a snowmobile, machine gun raised.

He saw her too. That's what she wanted.

She gunned the throttle and disappeared back into the whiteout, looping wide as the dogs charged straight across the ice.

Gunfire snapped behind her.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She heard the burst fade quickly in the wind.

"C'mon, big guy," she murmured. "I'm the one you want."

She stopped to listen for the rider's snowmobile. Nothing.

The snow was falling hard.

The rider had stopped.

###

Patricia skidded to a stop at the base of the mountain, snow spraying as she pulled up beside Bobby.

Between gusts, they caught fleeting glimpses of each other, ghosts in the white.

Bobby jumped off his snowmobile and flipped open the rear storage compartment.

From inside, he pulled a compact sail rig with a collapsible boom.

Patricia crouched, bracing against the wind, as he clipped the sail into the mounting slot at the front of her snowboard.

She grabbed the boom with both hands.

The wind had settled for the moment. A steady pull between the punishing bursts.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Bobby pointed in the direction taken by Rachel.

She nodded once and launched forward, sail catching, board slicing over the ice.

Bobby swung back onto his snowmobile and gunned the engine, taking a parallel course.

They heard the growl of Rachel's snowmobile up ahead.

They were close now.

Bobby leaned forward, eyes locked on the faint tracks ahead. He pushed his machine harder, engine howling as he aimed to close the distance.

Patricia, off to his left, was gliding low over the ice, silent, fast, ghostlike.

The wind filled her sail in bursts, pulling her along the frozen surface. It was harder to steer, but she had the advantage of silence.

Rachel wouldn't hear her coming.

She was focused on Bobby's engine, loud, obvious, a perfect distraction.

Patricia tightened her grip on the boom, adjusted her stance, and angled to flank. She would come in from Rachel's blind side, close

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

enough to strike before Rachel even realized she was there.

Just as she'd hoped, Patricia's stealth approach brought her within striking distance.

She was only a few feet from Rachel's snowmobile when Rachel suddenly turned, eyes catching the sail whipping toward her from the left.

Rachel ducked low, sliding sideways off the snowmobile just as Patricia raised her machine gun and fired with one hand, gripping the boom with the other.

Bullets tore overhead, slicing through empty air as Rachel dropped lower, nearly skimming the ice.

Patricia lost her balance.

Still clinging to the boom, she was yanked off the board and sent spinning across the ice, legs flailing, caught in a wild arc.

Bobby had caught up.

He squeezed off a shot at Rachel from behind, but visibility was worsening fast. Flurries came thick, and snow churned around the machines in choking waves.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He saw Patricia spinning out but clocked her quickly, conscious, upright, still holding on. She was okay.

Rachel hadn't fired back.

At times, he could see her hands on the snowmobile grips, no weapon in sight, aside from one slung across her back.

And then… she vanished.

Again.

Swallowed by the storm.

Bobby skidded to a halt, scanning frantically.

Not far ahead, Rachel brought her snowmobile to a stop, stepped off, and popped open the storage compartment beneath her seat.

Inside the storage compartment, Rachel found what she was counting on, a folded boom and sail rig.

She pulled it free, extended the boom, and locked it into place.

Then she straddled the snowmobile, turned it around, and waited.

The growl of an engine approached, fast, closing in.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel gripped the boom tightly, angling it forward like a lance.

A knight without armor. A weapon made of wind-sail and steel.

She revved the engine and launched toward the sound.

From the mist, Bobby surged into view, snowmobile roaring. His gun was slung aside; he was going for speed. A full-force collision.

He thought she was unarmed.

He never saw the boom coming.

Rachel burst from the whiteout.

The boom struck clean, driving through Bobby's chest, straight into his heart.

She let go at the moment of impact, veering her snowmobile to avoid the crash.

Bobby flew backward, torn from his seat. His body landed hard on the ice.

His snowmobile coasted forward a few more meters before stalling.

Blood spread in thin red arcs across the frozen lake.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel spun her snowmobile around and tore off into the storm, vanishing in a wake of churned ice and fading engine noise.

Moments later, Patricia arrived.

She found Bobby lying still, a light dusting of snow already gathering on his face and chest. His blood darkened the ice beneath him.

She dropped to her knees beside him, overcome.

“I’ll avenge you, my love,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

Tears streamed down her face as she reached for both machine guns, his and hers. She stood, trembling, and opened fire into the blizzard, aiming blindly in the direction of the sound.

One gun in each hand.

The muzzle flashes lit the storm as she emptied both weapons, screaming, sobbing, raging.

She didn’t see Jacques approaching.

His sled dogs came slicing through the snow, drawn by the staccato bursts of gunfire.

The sled clipped Patricia at full speed, knocking her off her feet. She crashed backward,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

collapsing over Bobby's body in a tangle of grief and gear.

###

Patricia and Bobby had met on a mission three years ago, working under Zaid. The connection was instant, undeniable.

"What do you think of me?" she asked, sidling up to Bobby at the bar after they returned from the field.

"Lots," he said, eyes locked on hers. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Toe to head," she said, grinning.

They downed their drinks in a single breath and left the bar in a rush.

It was electric, kissing before they even cleared the doorway. They stumbled through the hotel lobby, lips pressed, hands exploring.

They kissed in the elevator.

They kissed in the hallway.

They got off on the wrong floor and bolted up the stairs, laughing.

They kissed in the stairwell, harder this time. Bobby lifted her effortlessly, one arm wrapped beneath her thighs.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I never felt so small,” she said, before she plunged her tongue deep into his mouth.

He carried her like a puppy, still kissing, still climbing.

At her floor, she fumbled for her key card with one hand while guiding him with soft grunts and breathless laughter.

“That’s us,” she whispered, pulling back just enough to speak.

And it was. From that moment on, it was their room, not just hers.

The keycard beeped. The door swung open.

They rushed inside. Bobby kicked the door shut behind them. It slammed hard enough to rattle the walls.

He set her down, gently.

Patricia stripped faster than he could blink. She was already naked before he’d unbuttoned his shirt halfway.

He froze, eyes locked on her. Clearly, multitasking wasn’t in the cards.

She smirked and helped him undress. Then she stretched out on the bed.

"Toe to head," she reminded him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You got it," he said, already moving.

They were married the next day.

Online.

The ceremony took place over video call, in their room. No one asked where they were, and even if someone had, they wouldn't have answered. Couldn't.

They dressed up for it. She found a white wedding dress. He wore a tuxedo.

There were enough designer boutiques in the hotel lobby. And they had money.

The officiant was somewhere in Utah. The marriage was fast, legal, and without complications. Short vows. A very long kiss.

Patricia ended the ceremony by slamming her laptop shut.

He undressed her slowly. She stood still, watching him, eyes full of mischief.

"Keep the bowtie on," she whispered.

From then on, they were inseparable.

They only took missions if they were assigned together.

Every morning, before heading out, they'd say the same words to each other:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Until death do us part…"

###

The cold cut through Patricia like broken glass.

For a moment, she had escaped, back to her wedding day. Back to warmth, to laughter, to Bobby.

But now she was here.

She knelt beside him and placed a trembling hand on his chest, feeling the stillness beneath.

She removed her left glove. Slid off her wedding band. Then the engagement ring.

His glove came off easily. She eased it over his little finger first. It didn't go far, but far enough. She pressed her engagement ring down beside it. A Henri Daussi cushion-cut diamond he had given her months after their wedding.

He had knelt on the blood-slick floor of the Michelin-starred restaurant in Antwerp, where they had just assassinated an entire private party for Hector. She had laughed and said yes… yes again… as if the first time hadn't counted.

"Your hands are so small," he had said.

They laughed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She loved how her small hands disappeared inside his.

She pulled his glove back on and stood.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I’ll come back for you. And for our rings. You know me. I’d never leave something that expensive behind.”

A faint, broken smile.

“My last time on my knees, sliding one down… I’d come back even if it had been a rubber band.”

Then she turned.

Her eyes scanned the storm, searching. She spotted his snowmobile and made her way toward it, each step crunching over blood-flecked ice rapidly disappearing under the snow.

She climbed on.

Before the mission, she’d studied the terrain. After her call with Kate, she knew the layout by heart.

There was only one option now: cross the frozen lake and head for the zoo, the unfinished centerpiece of the billionaire resort.

Shelter. Cover. Maybe help if Zaid caught up with her in time. And revenge…

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She twisted the throttle.

And rode.

Patricia no longer felt the cold.

She didn't notice the snow or the wind battering and clawing at her. Eyes closed, she let the snowmobile carry her forward, toward the only destination that mattered now. She didn't hear the distant roar of another engine…

###

Mariam cut across the lake from the far side, hunched low over her snowmobile, fighting the wind and trying to stay on course, hoping she was still on Jacques' trail.

As instructed by her boss, Igor Stogoff, the Russian arms broker who trusted almost no one, she followed the Frenchman at a careful distance after he left the plane, never close enough to be seen. Igor had been unusually firm about it. Almost protective.

"This assignment is different," he had told her, his voice softer than she was used to. "More dangerous than your usual responsibilities. This isn't hosting private parties or managing my affairs. It isn't charming arms dealers or organizing flights across continents."

A pause.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Who knows where Jacques will end up," he continued. "Remember too… He's French."

She had rolled her eyes at that and then smiled, curious.

Before Jacques disembarked, she had tagged him four times… GPS units slipped discreetly into his belt, his shirt lining, his trousers, even his underwear. Redundant. Elegant. State-of-the-art.

One of Igor's most profitable systems.

She couldn't afford to lose Jacques.

Professionally… or personally.

After their unexpected intimacy on the plane, Mariam had imagined spending real time with Jacques, maybe even going on an actual date.

There was chemistry, she thought. A slow burn… or just a spark? She had to find out.

She pictured them in Little Italy, New York. She knew a place, an old-school trattoria with a dimly lit garden in the back, strings of fairy lights, warm brick walls. The food was divine. The wine, even better. The deserts to die for.

Jacques might be a bit of a snob about wine, but his palate was undeniably refined… She appreciated that.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She also knew, perhaps she'd gone overboard with the trackers.

Four devices. One in his belt, shirt, pants… and yes, underwear.

She was just… generous like that.

Over-gifting was a pattern. And in this case, she thought of trackers as gifts. She would never have tracked previous lovers. Never occurred to her. Maybe it wasn't just a spark…

But the Arctic had interfered. The trackers had been unreliable throughout the tundra, flickering signals, sudden dead zones. Something she planned to mention to Igor, possibly with passive-aggressive flair.

As long as the sky remained clear, or even semi-clear, she received strong pings from at least three out of four devices.

The fourth one? Likely discarded.

Either Jacques had either changed his underwear, or he wasn't wearing any.

"Way more than just a spark either way," she murmured.

Now, as the storm rolled in behind him, Mariam, still trailing from a safe distance,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

sometimes more than a mile back, began losing contact altogether.

Her tablet screen blinked. Blackouts. Static.

Jacques was slipping out of reach.

She had followed Jacques from the inn by the rental shack to the site of an explosion on the side of a mountain.

From there, he'd followed a rider, then looped around toward a DEW station, following two different riders, then on toward a cable car station.

By the time Mariam arrived at the cable car station, visibility had collapsed. The storm was a white wall. She took shelter inside, hoping the signals would resume.

She drained her thermos, rich, still-warm hot chocolate. A mix of white and dark chocolate, heavy on the chocolate. The sweetness grounded her. Recalibrated her focus.

Eventually, the beeping started again.

Two trackers came back online.

She climbed back onto her snowmobile, mounted the screen back on the handlebars, and started carefully down the mountain, toward the frozen lake.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She moved slowly, glancing down often to clear accumulating snow from the display. The flakes weren't melting anymore, not on her gloves, not on the screen.

"They need to make wipers for these things," she muttered.

Temperature was dropping fast.

And still, she didn't want Jacques to know she was following him.

That wasn't part of the deal.

She would do her job. Keep her distance. Report in to Igor.

And when Igor arrived, when he landed on the island, maybe then it would all be over.

One way or another.

She would reconnect with Jacques eventually, not too long after.

He'd never have to know what she'd done spying on him for Igor.

Maybe she'd keep a tracker or two active, just in case. Until she was sure.

A girl knows better. A little tracking can't hurt.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A break in the snowfall, just a subtle thinning, allowed the GPS signals to ping clearly. Her screen lit up: Jacques was far ahead now, approaching the lake's far edge, heading toward the billionaire resort.

Mariam eased the throttle and checked her surroundings.

The snow thickened again. Heavier now. She figured it might be best to check in with Igor before she lost signal.

He'd given her the best of his satellite phones, one of his personal favorites.

Naturally… Igor always kept the good toys for himself… and for her, she had noticed.

"Hello, Mister Stogoff. Mariam here."

Her voice was calm, but her fingers gripped the sat phone a little tighter.

"Jacques is ahead of me. He's approaching the billionaire's resort. From what I understand, the zoo may be the only viable refuge. My map isn't clear, and I don't have access to online data."

She hesitated, then continued.

"There's a trail of bodies behind us. I don't think Jacques killed anyone. He's following

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

someone else. Dead people… they're not my wheelhouse."

A pause.

"Even if I had a gun, I wouldn't know how to use it. I remember our training, but... I don't think I could shoot someone. I'll do my best to stay out of sight and keep watch."

A crackle of static, then Igor's voice, smooth and precise.

"I will be landing soon, Mariam. There's an airstrip near the zoo. Stay hidden. Do not move until I give the order. I'll call you. Stay away from the zoo. Stay close to the airstrip."

A pause.

"And don't speak to anyone. You can't trust anyone there. Stay safe."

Mariam nodded, though he couldn't see her.

"Okay, Mister Stogoff."

###

The day before, Hector the Vector had launched from his luxury yacht in the Mediterranean, piloting his custom Harrier jet.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He landed hours later on the deck of his private icebreaker, which had been cutting its way toward the coast near the billionaire's resort.

By the time Rachel crossed the frozen lake, Hector's vessel had already reached the resort's pier.

He dialed Zaid.

"Where are you?" Hector asked.

"En route to the billionaire's resort," Zaid replied.

The signal crackled. Then died.

The snowstorm wasn't letting up.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XV

Resort, Here We Come

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Billionaire's resort
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel spotted the first building of the billionaire compound as she reached the far edge of the frozen lake.

The snow was easing, just enough to see a little farther.

She scanned the open space, hoping Black Paw and the sled team had made it in the right direction.

Nothing behind her. No sounds. No engines.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She throttled down and entered the compound slowly.

Dim lights glowed above the entrances to prefab buildings, construction trailers, and scattered storage shacks, casting long shadows across the snow.

She wasn't ready to announce herself. Not yet.

Not until she knew the cubs, and the dogs, were safe.

She didn't know if she could trust whoever she might run into.

"Black Paw," she called softly.

Some buildings were marked, but snow and ice obscured the lettering. She tried to make out signs, shapes, anything familiar.

She parked her snowmobile under the extended roof of a shack, out of sight. Out of the wind. She checked the gauge.

Enough fuel to leave the resort. But not enough to make it back to the DEW station.

She strapped her machine gun tighter across her shoulder and moved from door to door, not entering, just circling, scanning, searching for the sled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And hoping to see movement. A pawprint. Hopeful though the snow was falling hard.

She reached the largest building in the compound so far.

“Black Paw,” she called again, quietly.

A familiar yip answered, playful, sharp, coming from the far side of the structure.

She rounded the corner and smiled.

Black Paw stood there, tail wagging, with the rest of the team gathered under the eave of the roof. They’d pulled the sled into the shadows, just out of the light.

Smart as ever.

Rachel knelt down and unfastened their harnesses, murmuring thanks as she worked, dispensing caresses and kisses.

She popped open the sled’s storage and unzipped the canvas bag.

The cubs were still bundled up, warm and undisturbed.

“Still sleeping,” she whispered.

She glanced at Black Paw.

“Do bears sleep more than dogs?”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A few of the dogs gave her sideways looks.

She smirked. “Okay, okay. Not you guys. You don’t sleep at all. I meant other dogs. Abnormal dogs. Lapdogs.”

Black Paw tilted his head.

“You are the hardest-working dog team in the business. I mean it.”

She said it with conviction, because it was true, and because she swore they understood every word.

“Of course… you can’t compare dogs and bears,” Rachel muttered. “Bears, they hibernate. Dogs don’t hibernate. Silly me.”

The dogs stared at her. Wide-eyed. Unimpressed.

“And…?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Right. It’s treat time. I apologize. You earned it.”

She handed out treats one by one, scratching ears and murmuring thanks.

Then she slung the cubs over her shoulder, stuffed the rest of the treats into her another bag, and grabbed as much ammunition as she could carry.

“Let’s get in there.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She approached the building.

Above the entrance, only two letters were visible… OO. The Z was buried under a crust of snow and ice.

It made her think of the boy she'd met in the Amazon Rainforest only a few days ago. The one who called himself Double-O Seven.

She wondered how he was doing.

She could really use a drink.

A chicha martini, she thought. Stirred, not shaken. With a fire pit and no blizzards.

She didn't miss the Amazon rain.

Certainly not the heat. Or the humidity that clung to every inch of skin.

"I prefer cold," she muttered. "But *this* cold…"

She glanced around the skeletal resort buildings, then pulled the door open, letting the dogs enter first.

"I've gone from walking through water, to water falling from the sky, to skidding around on ice water, to sinking in snow... and still… if I had my wish?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I'd be in a tub. Drinking something watery. Well—*not too watery*."

A pause.

"Go figure," she said, mostly to herself.

Black Paw padded forward, steady and confident. The rest of the dogs fell in behind him.

Into the zoo they went.

Rachel looked around the resort one more time before closing the door behind her, following the dogs inside, shoulder heavy with gear and cubs.

The building was dimly lit, its skeletal structure still under construction.

Rachel stepped further inside, the cold trailing behind her like a shadow, unshakable it seemed.

She felt the fatigue settle in her legs, spreading upward, slow and heavy.

But she was calmer now. Reconnected with her team. The dogs were here. The cubs had made it, still nestled safely in the bag, not flung into the snow somewhere on the frozen lake.

That mattered.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Still, she couldn't let her guard down. Not yet.

Whoever was hunting her would know this compound was her next logical destination. They had maps too. Maybe better ones.

Her first priority: find shelter for the dogs and cubs.

"Let's think of this place as your motel," she said aloud, voice echoing faintly in the unfinished space.

Black Paw glanced back at her, tongue lolling.

Rachel managed a tired smile.

The zoo sat beneath a massive glass dome, steel beams crisscrossing above, supporting panels that let in a pale wash of sunlight through the falling snow.

Snow clung to the dome's upper edges, sliding down in slow sheets. But it was piling thick along the sides, heavy and silent.

The building was enclosed, but unfinished. Cranes, scaffolding, and half-assembled structures cluttered the interior, blocking lines of sight and swallowing sound.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There was little light inside, just enough for the guards or vet teams to take their rounds. Dim bulbs hung at the intersections of wide aisles, spaced every eighty feet or so, each casting a weak glow at the corners.

It felt vast. Half-wild.

A high-ceilinged maze of steel, glass, and shadow.

The perfect playground for hide and seek.

She found a refuge for the cubs, a small glass enclosure, an aquarium probably meant for snakes or spiders once the zoo was complete.

"You're going to be so warm in there," she whispered. "And when you wake up, someone will find you. Take care of you. I hope that someone is me…"

She paused, peering into the tank.

It was empty.

Still, for a split second, she imagined a boa coiled in the corner, silent, waiting. She blinked it away. Just nerves.

There were ten aquariums in total, all empty, varying in size. Ghosts of habitats that hadn't yet been filled. She picked one and settled the cubs gently.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Across the aisle stood a larger pen, fenced, open, but enclosed enough.

"Perfect for the doggies," she murmured. "You'll be able to keep an eye on the cubs."

The dogs filed in without hesitation, except for Black Paw.

He stayed by her side.

She felt like a mother dropping her kids off at camp, exhausted, reluctant, but knowing it was the right thing.

She bent down beside Black Paw and ran her hand gently over his head.

"You need a break from the madness," she said softly. "Just for a little while. I am going to go look for a vet."

His eyes met hers, steady, watchful.

"I'll be back for all of you. I promise."

###

Kate's train pulled into the final station, tucked quietly behind the massive glass dome of the zoo, just as Rachel was securing the dogs in the pen.

This was the end of the line.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The train ran almost silent. Vastan owned the manufacturer of the hybrid engine, engineered to meet the latest environmental standards. Green energy. Minimal impact.

A perfect illusion of responsibility.

Kate glanced down at her tracker, the discreet tag sewn into the catsuit she'd given Rachel back at the DEW station. The signal was faint, intermittent. But still active.

Still moving.

Rachel was close. Likely on foot. Slowing.

Kate figured the time had come.

Once they found each other, she'd open up. She might not share everything. But enough.

At least, that's what she told herself.

For a brief, terrible moment, Kate almost wished the bear had eaten Rachel, and was still roaming somewhere nearby.

Anything to delay the conversation.

Talking to Rachel was going to be hard.

"Courage, Kate," she murmured under her breath. "Rachel will understand…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She told herself she would help Rachel escape. Get her onto the train. Take her somewhere safe to the Vastan's security station.

She could help Rachel shake whoever was hunting her.

And if she could pull Rachel out of the line of fire and take her place instead… that might actually solve a lot of problems.

Fewer explanations. Fewer confessions.

And Kate knew the facilities better. She knew how to move through them. How to disappear inside them.

She stepped off the train and headed toward the rear entrance of the zoo.

"What does Hector want?" she muttered.

That was the real question.

###

Zaid, Juju, and the two riders arrived at the cable car station, having raced across the tundra from the fishing hole, where they'd executed the man and woman.

The riders cleared snow from the body of their fallen teammate. He had been chewed up by dogs, nearly decapitated.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Earlier, on the way up, they'd passed another corpse. The one impaled by falling ice. Another team mate.

"Anyone hear from Patricia or Bobby?" Zaid asked without turning.

The riders exchanged a glance.

"No," one of them said. "Nothing."

Zaid turned to Juju.

"Where to from here?"

Juju gave him a sly smile.

"I think you'll love the next stop. A billionaire's resort. Still under construction. Has a zoo. Or will, eventually," she said.

She paused.

"Not sure they've stocked it with animals yet," she added.

"No camels?" Zaid said. "That's disappointing. A cobra… an asp, maybe. Would've made me feel at home for a moment. Hopefully… a bitch."

He started his snowmobile and gunned it downhill, following the path Juju had indicated.

The riders followed in formation.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju followed last, silent, calculating.

At the base of the mountain, Zaid slowed his snowmobile and pulled his sat-phone to his ear.

“Patricia. Where are you?” he asked.

Her voice crackled through the line, shaking with fury.

“Bobby’s dead! That bitch killed him. I’m headed for the billionaire’s resort. I haven’t heard from our contact. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Zaid’s jaw clenched. “We’re right behind you. Wait for us.”

“She has to die… now! This should’ve been done already!” Patricia barked, and cut the connection.

“Patricia!” Zaid snapped at the dead line.

He lowered the phone, his face tight with rage.

“She’s going to fuck this whole operation,” he growled. “That woman never listens…”

He throttled his snowmobile forward, veering toward the compound.

“Let’s move. Catch her before she does something stupid.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The others followed.

The snow was lighter now, but visibility remained poor, like the world itself was bracing for impact.

###

Jacques arrived at the billionaire's resort just after Rachel slipped inside the zoo.

He circled the compound slowly, scanning for signs, tracks, a flicker of motion, anything, but the snowfall had wiped the slate clean. More was coming down fast. Visibility was fading by the minute.

"She wouldn't want to be found anyway," he murmured.

Still, there were practical considerations. His dogs needed shelter. And if Samuk's story was true, a woman matching Rachel's description had rented a sled just the day before.

"A pretty lady and her friend," Samuk had said. "Great with dogs… Bought lots of treats."

Jacques leaned forward, addressing the team pulling him.

"Smell anyone familiar? Maybe… canine company?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The dogs turned sharply to the left, cutting between two trailers and heading toward the zoo.

They stopped in front of a set of wide doors marked only with two snow-covered letters: OO.

Jacques grinned.

"*Bien sûr*. I am a dog whisperer."

He hopped off the sled and brushed the snow from the sign above the doors.

ZOO — BEWARE — DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS

"Beware," he repeated with a chuckle. "Good advice."

He unhooked the dogs, parked the sled under the cover of the overhanging roof, and leaned it securely against the wall. Then he reached into the sled's storage compartment and pulled out a machine gun, slinging it over his shoulder. Two grenades followed, tucked carefully into his belt.

Jacques gave the zoo doors one last look.

"Let's see what kind of animals we're dealing with."

Jacques entered, pausing at the threshold just long enough to scan the resort one last time. Nothing but snow and silence. He slipped inside and shut the door behind him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The dogs fanned out ahead, noses twitching, tails alert, guiding him through the dim maze of half-built exhibits.

"With a bit of luck, maybe you'll find a warm-blooded friend," he whispered. "Though penguins can be fun. Or fish… They're colorful."

His lead dog veered right, passing stacks of unopened crates, and stopped abruptly in front of a line of cages. Hackles rose. A low growl rippled through the team.

Jacques followed their gaze.

Curled up inside one of the pens, a massive polar bear snored softly. The flimsy *grillage* separating the beast from people passing in the aisle didn't inspire confidence.

Unbothered by the growling dogs, the bear shifted slightly and exhaled in its sleep.

"Let's not disturb royalty," Jacques muttered.

He gently tugged his lead dog's collar and turned the team away, padding quietly in the opposite direction.

A few rows down, he found it, a pen mirroring the bear's, but empty, clean, and out of direct sightlines.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Perfect."

He ushered the dogs inside, checked the locks, and pulled out a satchel of treats.

"You've earned it, *mes amis*."

They relaxed instantly, lying down, their mission for the moment complete.

Jacques pressed on alone, stepping softly through the cavernous space.

He moved with practiced caution, ears attuned to every creak of scaffolding, every whisper of snow against glass.

"I've escaped worse cages than this…" he murmured. "Better to be careful."

He vanished into the shadows, machine gun in hand.

###

Mariam followed Igor's instructions to the letter. As she approached the sprawling resort, she aimed straight for the radar tower rising above the snow-blurred horizon. Blinking lights marked its crown but you had to look for the edifice to find it. You could easily pass by it and never notice it was there. Up close, she saw silhouettes move behind the glass in the top room, figures on duty.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She shivered.

She could've used a warm room and another proper cup of cocoa, thick with cinnamon this time, like the kind Igor once surprised her with in Prague. But not now.

She cut her snowmobile's engine and coasted into position, stopping near a squat shack at the edge of the airstrip, just beyond the tower's line of sight.

Perfect. Close enough to monitor. Far enough to vanish.

She looked skyward. Snow still falling, steadily, stubbornly. Only Igor's team could land in this weather. Only Igor would dare.

She cinched her parka tighter.

The shack door creaked open with a groan. She flicked on her phone's flashlight and swept the inside: tool racks, an old heater with no power, a small cot stacked with crates.

Not much. But insulated.

She stepped inside, pushing her snowmobile in, exhaled a shaky breath, and shut the door behind her. She turned the snowmobile around, facing the door.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A small window, cut waist-high into the metal wall, gave her a partial view of the runway and the control tower beyond.

She crouched beside it, wiping away the condensation with her sleeve.

“Come on, Igor,” she whispered. “Land before my fingers freeze off.”

She tucked herself into the corner, alert, half-waiting, half-hoping.

Mariam had barely gotten settled, knees tucked to chest, back braced against a crate, when she spotted movement outside the frosted window.

Three men emerged from the tower.

She shrank lower, careful not to let her breath fog the glass, overly cautious not to draw attention.

The trio moved purposefully across the tarmac, disappearing between buildings. One figure remained above, silhouetted in the upper-floor control room. Watching. Waiting.

She reached for her binoculars, adjusted the focus as the men entered another building. A sign above the door came into view.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Zoo?!*" she whispered. "This place gets stranger by the minute."

A smirk tugged at her lips. "Though I suppose I'd rather meet the wildlife behind cages than in here, uninvited."

She glanced around the shed again. Just in case she wasn't the only one who thought this was the best hideout in a storm. A wolf? A bear? Nothing stirred.

She looked back down at her tablet. The signal from Jacques' tracker was holding steady.

"Could be in the zoo," she murmured. "Oh, Jacques… *you are an animal*, *I knew it."* she added, with an exaggerated French accent that cracked herself up.

The laugh surprised her. Felt good.

But the sky offered no comfort. Just snow, dense and endless. No blinking lights overhead. No approaching engine hum.

She frowned. "Did Igor say to wait for his call?" She pulled her parka tighter, then answered herself with a sigh. "Of course he did. He always says that."

She curled up tighter in the shadows, tablet glowing faintly in her lap, feeling close to Jacques, waiting.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Waiting for Igor.

Waiting for Jacques.

###

Patricia crossed into the resort compound without hesitation, at full speed.

No effort to stay quiet. No pretense of stealth. Her rage was louder than the storm.

Both machine guns were freshly reloaded. Bobby's sidearm rode snug on her belt beside her own. She had no intention of asking questions. Not this time. Not ever again.

She slowed down, spotted tracks, barely visible under the steady snowfall. Sled runners. Faint dog prints. A snowmobile. By the time she started slowing down, she had passed Mariam's trail, turning toward the tower.

The tracks she noticed led straight to the largest building in sight.

The Zoo.

She rolled her snowmobile right up to the front door, kicked the engine off, dismounted in one smooth motion. A machine gun was up before her boots hit the ground.

She moved toward the door, eyes scanning the shadows, every muscle taut.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

One gloved hand gripped the handle.

She was starting to calm down.

She eased the door open, just enough to peek.

A dark corridor. Stillness. No gunfire.

She knew better than to step through like a fool. Someone watching would be patient. Waiting. That someone had taken down Bobby.

She let the door fall shut again, exhaling slowly. Then, without warning, she threw it wide and sprinted through the threshold, boots hammering the floor, head down, body low.

She dove behind a nearby crate. Landed hard. Raised her weapon. Waited.

Seconds passed. No shots fired.

Silence.

She tasted the air like a hunter. Smelled the dogs. Something faint. Female sweat. Leather. Maybe Rachel.

Maybe close.

Her trigger finger twitched.

Patricia lifted her head slowly from behind the crate. Machine gun shouldered. Finger already curled around the trigger.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Still nothing.

"This place is huge. The whole thing is huge…" she muttered.

Her jaw clenched. The image of Bobby flashed in her mind, his face, his laugh, that last stupid joke he told her…

"Sorry, Zaid. Sorry, Hector," Patricia whispered. "If I see the woman who killed Bobby, I'll shoot her dead. I hope she's carrying what you are looking for because soon… she won't be able to speak."

Tears welled up. Hot. Sudden. She swiped them away with the back of her glove.

No time for grief. Not yet.

She pressed deeper into the shadows of the massive dome, sweeping aisles one by one, systematic, military. She checked behind crates, around corners, even up toward the scaffolding above. A bullet could come from anywhere.

A strange stillness hung in the air.

Then… movement.

A caribou stood behind a wire gate to her left. Towering antlers. Calm eyes. Chewing, like it owned the place.

Patricia stared at the gate.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Flimsy-ass fence… this thing could jump that easy," she muttered, shaking her head. "Hope it doesn't get spooked."

She passed it, every few steps turning back, expecting gunfire. Or worse.

Then… a sound.

A faint snore. Human. Maybe.

She froze.

Tilted her head. Listened.

Yes. Definitely snoring. Soft. Steady.

She took a breath. Stepped toward it.

"Don't tell me I'm gonna find the bitch who killed Bobby... asleep," she whispered.

She turned the corner, weapon ready. Fury sharpening her aim.

Score-settling was close. Very close.

###

Construction at the billionaire's resort had ground to a halt several weeks earlier. The builders, engineers, and catering crews had all been flown or ferried out, back to warmer homes and holiday lights.

Only a skeleton crew remained.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Three guards, left behind to watch over the half-finished compound, kept a lazy daily rhythm. Their rounds involved walking from building to building, ensuring nothing had been looted, broken, or frozen to death. They rarely found anything worth noting.

One veterinarian stayed on as well. His task was singular: care for the male polar bear housed in a temporary enclosure. The bear had been sedated and captured weeks earlier after stumbling too close to the camp and catching a dart to the flank from a nervous guard.

The zoo had started to gather more unexpected guests.

Three wolves had been lured in, drawn by the smell of food scraps from the workers' mess. They were alive and healthy, now pacing a pen, not meant for them. A lone caribou had wandered in next, no dart needed. It simply followed its nose through the unfinished fencing and stayed.

The guards spent most days playing cards, arguing over who owed whom drinks, or tinkering with busted heating systems. When they felt ambitious, they tried contacting someone from the Vastan security station: Kate, or a member of her team.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Daily calls were on the schedule.

But the Arctic weather had other plans. Static, dead lines, dropped signals.

No one panicked when contact didn't come for a day or two.

It was winter in the Arctic. The quiet stretched long.

And it had. It was peaceful.

The room at the top of the tower was a rare pocket of warmth and comfort in the Arctic wild.

From here, you could see the entire billionaire's resort. The half-lit buildings stretching like a ghost town, the pale glow of the dome above the zoo. But when the snow fell thick, visibility vanished. Whatever happened below would remain hidden until spring thaw, if it was ever found at all.

A guard slapped his cards down on the table with a triumphant grin.

"Two pair... again!"

"Damn it," the second guard muttered, tossing his hand aside. "That's three hands in a row. You're cheating."

"I *think* I heard snowmobiles," the first one said, still grinning, half-distracted by his win.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The veterinarian perked up. He'd been nursing a flask and half-watching the window.

"I heard engines too," he said, rising and peering through the frost-laced pane.

He squinted toward the zoo's broad structure, just visible under the domed canopy and scattered lights.

"I think someone just walked into the zoo!" he added, voice tightening.

The third guard didn't look up from his cards. He laughed, swaying slightly in his chair.

"You're drunk. And you're losing. Who the hell's gonna steal from the zoo? What would they take, leftover seal meat? You sure it's not another bear or wolf?"

The vet didn't answer right away. He kept watching into the shadows beyond the zoo's threshold.

"I'm telling you," he said softly, "someone's in there."

"I don't want anyone getting mauled just because they needed a warm place to sleep," he said. "But it's odd they didn't come to the tower first if they're lost…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Probably just another beast," one of the guards muttered, already half-standing.

"A beast that opens doors?" the vet replied, eyebrows raised. "It's been known to happen… I grant you."

A moment of silence. Begrudging sighs.

Two guards finally got to their feet, grumbling as they pulled on coats and gloves. The vet was already clomping down the stairs in his insulated boots, flashlight in hand.

The trio trudged out into the storm, flashlights slicing through swirling snow, moving single file toward the Zoo's faintly glowing outline.

From her hiding place, Mariam watched their bobbing lights cut across the frozen ground. She could see the rifles slung over their shoulders.

She frowned.

"Don't shoot Jacques," she whispered.

Her hand hovered over her sat phone, debating whether to call out, to step in.

But Igor's voice echoed in her mind.

"Wait for my call. Don't speak to anyone. Don't trust anyone."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She pulled her coat tighter, eyes tracking the guards as they neared the Zoo's door.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XVI

Party Time at the Zoo

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Billionaire's resort
February 14, Present-Day

The vet and the two guards made their way quickly toward the zoo, taking bets on what they would find. A hunter seeking shelter from the storm? An animal?

The vet led the way toward the wolves' enclosure, calling out, "Hello? Anyone here? You need help? There are dangerous animals in here."

They didn't get far.

They caught up with Patricia.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I win," the vet said. "Miss…"

Patricia turned and fired. A short burst from her machine gun cracked through the building, echoing like thunder in the rafters. The vet dropped where he stood, shot clean through the chest.

The guards dove behind nearby crates, one to each side of the aisle, watching in frozen shock as their poker partner bled out on the floor. He didn't move. He was gone.

They returned fire in Patricia's direction, but she had already slipped out of sight, crouched and waiting, ready to cut them down the moment they stood.

At the crack of gunfire, the wolves froze, then began to pace, restless. One bolted to the back of the pen, claws scraping concrete.

The sled dogs answered with a chorus of barking that rolled through the compound like an alarm.

The polar bear stopped snoring. One eye opened. Then the other.

The caribou kept chewing.

The cubs huddled tighter together, flinching at the noise, their thoughts likely the same as before:

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Again, with that noise?

A few aisles down, Rachel reached for her machine gun, chambered a round, and aimed it toward the source of the noise.

From the opposite side of the zoo, Jacques did the same, mirroring her instinctively, as if they were dance partners drawn to the same rhythm. A slow, inevitable choreography across a vast and twisted ballroom, their steps guided not by music but by gunfire. A dance choreographed by evil.

They moved forward, separately but in sync, closing in on the firefight where Patricia and the guards were exchanging bullets.

###

Minutes before Patricia gunned down the vet, Kate slipped into the zoo through a rear service entrance. She moved quietly, deliberately, keeping her head low and her steps measured.

She didn't call out. Not yet.

First: recon.

The tracker embedded in Rachel's suit placed her somewhere inside the building. Nearby. But not alone, Kate suspected. Rachel could be

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

meeting someone. Maybe Hector had caught up with her. Maybe one of his mercenaries. Patricia…

"I'm finally going to find out whether that tag is still where I put it, or was swallowed by a polar bear," Kate murmured. "Or by a wolf still sniffing around for leftovers…"

She scanned the long corridors ahead.

"Either way, I'll be dealing with a wild animal…" She murmured.

Her sidearm hung steady in her hand, barrel down, finger resting along the slide. She wasn't here to spook anyone, or get shot by someone jumpier than her.

She slowed as she heard a voice… Rachel's soft, low, familiar voice.

Kate froze, listening. The words were hard to make out, but she caught one name clearly: *Black Paw.*

A lump caught in Kate's throat.

"Who are you talking to Rachel?" Kate thought, "you don't sound afraid… You sound… Tender… Don't tell me you just had sex…"

Kate crept forward a few steps, peering through a broken partition.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel was kneeling beside a crate, speaking in that gentle, maternal cadence Kate remembered from years ago. Back in Syria. Back when they used to scoop up strays, dogs, kids, damaged locals, one another… Or, on occasion, sweet talk a lover.

Kate knew Rachel had always been that way. Always had room for one more lost soul.

Kate tightened her grip on the gun.

The memory of those old conversations came rushing back, about orphans, about convents, about how abandonment felt like a tattoo no one else could see. Kate had watched Rachel wear it like armor.

And now, it sounded like Rachel had taken in someone else. Something else. Again.

Between scanning for movement behind crates and cages, Kate rehearsed the conversation she knew would go sideways before it even started.

"Listen, Rachel, I don't want you to get how you get…"

Kate shook her head.

"Scratch that. That's a terrible opening."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She ducked under a low pipe, still muttering to herself.

"Give me your gun, Rachel. I have something to tell you…"

Kate rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, that'll go well. She'd shoot me before I got past the second syllable of her name."

Kate paused behind a tall metal enclosure and let out a slow breath.

"Fuck me," she whispered.

She looked down at her own weapon.

"Rachel's gonna kill me…"

###

Patricia had ample firepower, but strategy mattered.

She wasn't here to waste bullets. She was here to split them up, string them out. Punish.

She fired a burst at one guard, then pivoted and fired toward the other, short, sharp, controlled.

Then she ran, slipping between crates like smoke, and plunged behind another. She crouched low, breath steady, pulse eager.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Predictably, the guards returned fire. A moment later, they exchanged quick hand signals, split up… flank her.

Patricia smirked.

“So predictable,” she murmured. “Bobby, you would have loved to be here… I can hear you, my love, you are here... you are my shooting angel… right here on my shoulder.”

She climbed silently atop the crate, catlike. From her elevated perch, she spotted one guard sweeping around the far side, searching where she’d been seconds before.

She raised her gun to fire…

But bullets whizzed past her head, snapping through the air like angry wasps.

Instinct kicked in. Patricia jumped sideways, landing atop a second crate, then another, leaping with feral precision, a predator above the chaos.

She landed, steady, on the last crate. Below her, directly ahead, someone moved.

Rachel…

Patricia froze.

"You!" she shouted, her voice sharp as broken glass. "It's all your fault!"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel looked up. Her eyes locked on the figure above her… Patricia, wild-eyed, gun raised, framed in the shadows of the overhead lights.

Behind Patricia, the guards shouted, but she didn't care. She barely registered the bullets cracking through the air behind her.

She pointed her weapon at Rachel and opened fire.

###

Kate had made her way to within a foot of Rachel, close enough to smell the damp of her suit, close enough to get herself shot if Rachel spooked.

Her reunion with Rachel was consuming her. The shooting was not yet registering.

She raised a hand, ready to tap Rachel's shoulder. She'd finally settled on her opening line:

"Hey, Emma Peel. Funny seeing you here…"

But before the words left her mouth, a shadow moved above them.

Patricia. Landing catlike on a crate, eyes blazing, gun already raised.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Without thinking, Kate grabbed Rachel by the collar and yanked her behind the nearest crate.

Gunfire exploded, sharp, brutal. Bullets pinged off the floor, ricocheted off metal. Splinters and dust danced in the air.

Rachel twisted free, fury in her eyes, her gun already up and aimed squarely at Kate's face.

Kate froze, hands half-raised.

"Don't shoot!" she said, forcing a breathless smile. "I was hoping we could talk first?"

###

The guards had seen Patricia's silhouette on top of the crate and opened fire again. She had called out Rachel's name, giving away her position.

From somewhere deeper in the zoo, a third shooter opened up too. Precise, short bursts. Not one of the guards. Someone trained.

Patricia ducked, furious. For a second, she thought it might be the bastard who'd slammed her off the frozen lake with his sled… Either way, no shots landed.

She wasn't hit.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I'll kill every last one of you," she muttered, leaping from the crate and sprinting down the aisle, gun raised.

Bullets sliced the air behind her.

Then… silence.

No return fire.

###

"Puppy-in-a-basket! Kate?! What the hell are you doing here?" Rachel hissed, eyes scanning the tops of the crates. "Did you know I was here?"

The two women stood back-to-back, slowly turning in sync, guns raised, fingers ready.

"It's… complicated," Kate said.

"Careful not to shoot the dogs," Rachel cut in. "They're over there… They've been great. You were right. Black Paw saved my life, twice at least. And I hope to God there's a vet at the Vastan base, or here. I had to rescue three cubs. Their mother's dead. Not great optics for Vastan's PR people. They are not going to be happy… At all. I'll give them another shower show if you think that will calm them down… I don't want you to be blamed."

"I've got a lot to tell you," Kate said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Me too," Rachel said, not missing a beat. "I've been hunted nonstop. Blizzard, buried under snow… Can't see past my nose… I hide… They find me. Every time. Whoever's after me… They're really, really good."

"Me first," Kate said, her back against Rachel's. Calm. Steady. "You're gonna wish you could sit down for this… Wouldn't be a good idea right now, though…"

They kept circling, back-to-back, guns raised, eyes on the tops of the crates around them.

"I knew you were here because I was… *tracking you*," Kate whispered.

"You got a signal off my phone? I couldn't get that thing to work! It's a toy…" Rachel exhaled, half-relieved. "I've been trying to reach you. Why didn't you call?"

"Not exactly… I put a tracker in your catsuit."

Rachel froze for half a second. "Standard procedure with newbies on Baffin Island? Shouldn't you have put one in my red lace undies? Why didn't you tell me?"

She noticed Kate's voice was… hesitant. That was new. Kate was never hesitant.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Spill the tea, girlfriend," Rachel muttered. "I killed three people. I rescued three bear cubs. One of them peed between my boobs… Maybe they all did… I didn't notice until the smell kicked in. Thought it was the suit at first. Then sweat. But I never smelled that bad, even when I was sweating buckets in the Amazon. Their mom exploded in my face. I have to pee. I don't know how Emma Peel pulled it off in her catsuit. I haven't eaten much… I tried a dog treat… I don't recommend it… I had a long talk with a chatty AI bot named Charlie. I carried poison that kills faster than you can blink. I tried to read German. Then Japanese. Couldn't. I took a cable car and couldn't enjoy the view. The weather sucks. I found a beheaded corpse. Mummies. And I've had armed mercenaries shooting at me all day… In no particular order."

Her chest rose and fell with adrenaline.

Kate couldn't believe Rachel said all this in one breath.

"Do you know who these people are?" Rachel asked.

Kate hesitated.

Then quietly: "I know who they are… And… I told them where you were."

Kate felt Rachel's back pull away.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A split second later, Rachel turned, quiet, controlled, and leveled her gun at Kate.

Kate lowered her own weapon and turned to face her.

"What kind of fried-jelly-fuck-fish super mess did you get us into?" Rachel whispered, her voice deadly calm, her wide eyes screaming fury.

Kate held her ground. "Well… it's a long story. But you're alive. That's what matters. And maybe we should focus on the lunatic in here chasing after you… with a grudge and a machine gun?"

They went back-to-back again. Circling.

"I thought you'd just be filming the polar bear and her cubs," Kate said. "We told people in the area to stay away, filmmaker at work, don't disturb the wildlife, that sort of thing. Let the artist do her thing… She's more dangerous than a pregnant bear anyway… Keep away from both…"

Rachel smirked but said nothing.

"Then…" Kate continued, "the calls started. From people I hadn't heard from in years. People who shouldn't even know you existed. They wanted to know where you were."

Kate's voice dropped.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"They're not the kind who watch nature documentaries."

Kate paused, her breath visible in the cold air.

"I thought… it was just a misunderstanding. That I could live up to my end, give them *some* information, but still get to you in time. Before anything happened to you. I didn't put the tracker in your suit for *them*…"

Rachel remained quiet, her eyes focused on their surroundings.

"I put it in so I could find you if you got lost. People disappear out here. Ninety-nine percent of the time it's that they get turned around in a blizzard and freeze to death. Whiteouts are killers."

Kate's voice cracked. "Then the calls started getting weird. Frantic. Angry. So, I hopped a train. Figured I'd pull you out before they caught up with you."

She hesitated again. Then, quietly: "Please don't shoot me."

Rachel sighed.

"I'm thinking about it," she said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate went on. “I owed a guy named Hector the Vector a lot of money. Gambling. You remember Syria? How I got obsessed with poker?”

Rachel inhaled, long and silent.

“Did you know anything about syringes full of poison?” Rachel asked.

Kate took a deep breath.

“Well… Yes and no,” Kate replied.

“Vastan asked me to scout caves with their chemists. Never told me what they were looking for, just gave me a list of sites and told me to keep quiet.”

She shook her head, remembering.

“Then one day, one of them comes running out of *your* cave. The one where we sent you to film the polar bear. He was pale, shaking… scared shitless.”

Rachel didn’t interrupt.

“I thought maybe the bear had gone for his nuts or something,” Kate added, half-laughing. “But no. He didn’t even *see* the bear up close. He was just freaked. Said something about the cave… it’s *the* cave, he said… and then he called his boss.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate looked down. “We were in my office. They wanted to put up warning signs. Big radioactive placards. You know, skulls and neon colors.

“I said that was the *worst* idea. Might as well roll out the red carpet for government folks, military specialists, journalists, Greenpeace, your peeps since you left the army, TikTokers… So, I pitched something better, something that wouldn’t raise alarm.

“A conservation story. A mother polar bear, vulnerable cubs, no trespassing for their safety. Just green enough to keep people away, but not dramatic enough to go viral.”

She turned around. Rachel too. Their eyes met for a brief moment. They continued circling, this time almost shoulder to shoulder facing opposite directions, arms touching.

“If anyone came sniffing around, I could handle one or two curious influencers. Much easier than a mob of pitchfork-wielding protesters screaming about polluters.”

Kate took a deep breath.

“And… I thought you could make some cash. I told them you were expensive. They didn’t care. Not even a blink. They just wanted to know if I could control you.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel stared at her, eyes wide, head tilted, equal parts disbelief and theatrical flair.

"As if…" Rachel said flatly.

"Don't be mad," Kate rushed. "I lied. I said yes."

She paused, inhaled again, her third deep breath in half a minute.

"I knew you wouldn't go in the cave. You were so careful. You planned the whole approach. Said you'd stay outside, let the mother and cubs come to *you*. Film them as they played in the snow… No interference. No stress. You didn't even want them to *know* you were there."

Kate sniffed.

"You smell like a disaster, girl. Maybe we should stand back-to-back again… I'll set another PR meeting, if that gets you under a shower… on the other side of the world might actually be too close."

Rachel cracked a grin.

"Good. Take a deep breath. That's for lying to me. May my stench haunt your nostrils and clog your sinuses forever."

Kate let out a half-laugh.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You didn't pack up bear diaper?" Kate asked. "Some wild life documentarian… You had all those state-of-the-art gadgets. Said you could film a bear blinking from a mile away. What the hell happened?"

Rachel's smile faded.

"The bear exploded in my face," she said.

Kate sensed it… Rachel was softening. Just a little.

"I have the whole thing on film," Rachel said. "If we make it out alive, you're buying popcorn and drinks. And I want my chicha martinis you promised."

She glanced sideways at Kate.

"You might have to fly in the bartender on one of your fancy Vastan jets. He calls himself 007. Loves the drama."

Gunfire cracked again nearby.

"Let me deal with the crazy woman," Kate said. "I talked to her once. Patricia. That's her name. I gave her your location. My bad. That one's on me. I'm really, really sorry, Rachel."

Rachel didn't flinch.

"I'm not letting you finish this off solo," she said. "Even though I *am* pissed. Also, if she dies

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

before shooting you, I'm still on the fence about putting a bullet in you myself. Somewhere very painful."

Kate half-laughed, half-sighed.

"She knows I can track you. I might be able to bargain. Buy us a second or two."

She reached for the back of Rachel's collar.

"Let me get rid of the tag," Kate muttered.

She ripped it free, holding up the little transmitter between two fingers.

"That's how I tracked you."

Rachel stared at it, then at Kate.

"A tracker. Great. I *really* need to talk to Charlie. Why didn't he tell me I was plugged?" Rachel said.

They kept circling.

"Charlie is learning… He gets boring lessons from boring chemists and executives and then he learns the good stuff from me. He loves me… He thinks I'm curt… How cute is that… Tell me more about what you went through," Kate said, "you mentioned a bioweapon? German? Japanese? Mummies? An exploding bear?"

She paused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I found a few things in the cave," Rachel said. "Besides the cubs… You didn't know what was in there?"

Kate's face tightened.

"I barely saw the entrance of the cave and walked out when I spotted the bear. But I've seen things about Vastan," Kate admitted. "Stuff that made me suspicious. Not just here on Baffin Island, other places too. That's what happens when you hire someone like me as Chief Security Officer… You know I can't just pretend I don't see things… But I don't rush in,"

"Nope," Rachel muttered. "You push *me* in. As usual. You *volunteer* me."

"That was only once," Kate added quickly. "In Syria. My sister, Lorin. I know."

Rachel glared. "Once or twice? Not! And now I've got a new addition to the trauma collection: 'Kate sends Rachel into bear cave.' I'm surprised you didn't ask me to *abort the mother* while you were at it."

Kate rolled her eyes.

"So, you found something," she said. "Something Vastan wanted. Something *everyone* wanted. If it's a bioweapon, it makes sense considering the kind of Valentines chasing you

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

around… I always wondered about the men after you over the years… The women too… Do you still have it? The weapon?"

"No," Rachel said. "It's somewhere safe. Far away from here."

Kate nodded. "Let's discuss that later."

"They know I can track you," she added. "But they don't have to know I *can't* anymore. I can keep them chasing their tails."

She pointed to a back corridor. "There's a train station behind the zoo. Get on the train. It's easy, just pretend it's a tank. Like my truck. Just… don't run over any French people. Or anyone."

Rachel smirked.

"The end of the line is the security station. You'll know it when you see it. The train will derail if you don't stop. Can't miss it. Go there. I'll meet you."

Without waiting for a reply, Kate turned and ran toward the gunfire.

###

Kate reached the next aisle just as Patricia opened fire again on the guards.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

One of the guards ducked and radioed the last man in the tower.

"We're under fire down here. Call the security station… come down… bring a machine gun. The vet's dead. A woman shot him. We're nearly out of ammo."

The shooting died down.

"It was supposed to be an easy winter," one guard muttered.

Kate scanned the scene. She didn't want to kill Patricia. She'd recognized her earlier, perched on that crate, screaming at Rachel like a woman with nothing left to lose.

Patricia might have answers. Hector sure as hell wouldn't talk, but this woman might.

The problem? The only way to get close was from behind. That meant being a target too. But the guards had awful aim. If anything, being behind Patricia was the *safest* place in the room.

Kate crouched and waited. The gunfire faded. The guards were almost dry.

Patricia, testing the lull, rose from cover and fired off a fresh burst. No one fired back.

She started advancing.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate moved too, quiet and fast, slipping behind Patricia.

She drew her knife.

One move. That's all this needed to be, quiet, efficient. Knife to the throat. Demand answers. Maybe end it there.

She was nearly close enough to smell the gunpowder on Patricia's coat.

The blade pressed against Patricia's neck. Kate's other arm locked tight across her chest.

"Drop it," Kate whispered.

Patricia froze. Her gun clattered to the floor.

For a second, Kate thought she had her.

But Patricia took a deep breath… Closed her eyes.

Bobby… lying on the ice…

She exploded.

In a violent twist, Patricia broke the hold, throwing Kate off balance, spinning inside the grip and grabbing Kate's wrist. The knife dropped between them.

"I know your voice," Patricia spat. "You came to help the bitch who killed my husband."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Patricia drew her own blade.

Kate picked up her knife.

The women lunged at each other. Knives flashed. Fists followed.

###

Rachel watched Kate disappear into the shadows, sprinting toward the sound of gunfire.

Now that she had an escape route, and a vehicle, there was no question: she had to take the cubs.

“I don’t think there’s a vet around here,” she muttered.

She crept back toward the aquarium wall, moving low, careful not to draw attention. The cubs were still curled up asleep where she’d left them. She gently lifted each one and tucked them into her suit, against the warmth of her chest.

“Don’t pee on me again,” she whispered.

She moved toward the dog enclosure.

Inside the cage, Black Paw and the rest of the team stood tense and alert, ears perked, watching her approach.

Rachel reached through the bars and scratched behind Black Paw’s ears. He leaned

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

into her touch… then grabbed her wrist gently in his mouth.

"I can't hide in there," she whispered, confused.

But Black Paw wouldn't let go.

"Do you want to come out?" she asked, watching his eyes.

They locked onto hers, intense, intelligent, urgent.

Rachel glanced around, then quietly unlatched the gate.

Black Paw slipped out without a sound.

Rachel smiled at the others behind the fence.

"We'll be back for you later," she promised softly, easing the gate shut.

She turned.

"Black Paw. This way. Come here." She gestured toward the back exit.

But Black Paw was already moving in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" she hissed.

She followed. He had stopped in front of another enclosure. The male polar bear.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel froze.

Black Paw looked up at her, then down at the lock.

He took it in his teeth.

Rachel stared at him.

“You want me to open the gate…” she whispered.

The polar bear was stirring.

Still groggy, it lifted its snout, sniffing the air. Then, slowly, it rose to all fours, massive and looming.

Black Paw turned without waiting and padded off.

Rachel hesitated just a second.

Then she followed Black Paw, leaving the gate ajar behind her.

“Enjoy the rest of your stay,” she whispered to the bear. “I hope cubs are not considered a delicacy by unrelated adult bears… Don’t follow us, my rack is not a snack bar…”

Rachel and Black Paw didn’t run, they moved like ghosts.

Black Paw led her to another enclosure. Inside, a tall caribou stood frozen mid-chew, a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

sprig of grass dangling absurdly from its lips. Its eyes locked onto hers. It looked like someone who had walked into the wrong party.

Rachel glanced at Black Paw.

He didn't stop. He was already headed to the next one.

Rachel opened the caribou pen with a shrug. "Go forth and confuse some people," she whispered. "And, you got something in your teeth…"

She gestured, putting her finger in front of her mouth while smiling.

"Never mind," she said.

She adjusted the cubs.

"It's usually just the girls in there," she whispered.

She caught up to Black Paw just as he arrived at the wolf enclosure.

Muzzles were already pressed against the bars, noses twitching, low whines vibrating in their throats. One was gnawing the iron itself with focused desperation.

"Now this," Rachel muttered, "is going to be interesting."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Great thinking so far, Black Paw," Rachel whispered, crouching beside him. "But how are we going to convince the wolves not to turn *us* into snacks and go chase someone else instead?"

She glanced over her shoulder. No sign of the polar bear. Yet.

Black Paw moved with purpose. He padded around a large white bucket near the pen and gave it a firm nudge with his nose, sending it sliding gently toward her.

Rachel blinked. "Yes… clever boy."

Inside the bucket: half-frozen chunks of meat. Jackpot.

She grabbed the biggest one and lobbed it into the far corner of the pen, away from the gate.

The three wolves dove after it instantly, growling and snapping at each other mid-air.

Without wasting time, Rachel opened the gate and tossed the remaining meat as far as she could, opposite the direction she and Black Paw needed to go: the zoo's back exit.

"Kate might get her ass bitten," she muttered, stepping away. "Though she's got a way with wolves. She'll be fine."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She gave one last look to make sure the wolves were fully occupied.

They were. They had reached the pieces of meat in the middle of the aisle.

She and Black Paw bolted for the back of the building. Along the way, she snatched up a canvas tool bag from a bench.

They reached the door. It was heavy, but it creaked open just enough to give her a view of the snow-covered yard… and the train. No mercenaries. No movement. No problem.

Black Paw slipped out behind her.

Rachel emptied the tool bag onto the ground, wrenches, screwdrivers, a hammer and pliers clattered on the ice. She gently placed the sleeping cubs inside the soft, insulated interior.

She had just grabbed the straps when…

BOOM.

A sharp, concussive crack. The building shook. A cloud of snow lifted from the rooftop and fell in a sheet.

Rachel ducked instinctively. Her pulse spiked.

Grenade. No question. But also, something else.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Black Paw, guard the cubs!" she hissed, slinging the bag at his feet.

Without waiting for a response, she spun and charged back inside.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XVII

Party Time… Everywhere

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Billionaire's resort
February 14, Present-Day

Jacques had circled around the guards, choosing not to shoot at them. Their uniforms meant nothing, certainly not loyalty, they could be working for anyone, and their panicked movements gave them away. *Not pros,* he thought. Not likely to be hired by mercenaries.

He did recognize the woman who was firing at them. She was the same one he'd collided with out on the frozen lake, the one unloading bullets beside a corpse pinned by a sail boom. A woman with weapon habits, he mused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Surveying the chaos of the zoo, Jacques frowned.

"What kind of party is this?" he murmured.

He crouched behind a polar bear cutout, scanning the overlapping tracks of pursuit and bloodshed.

"I'm following people who are following people... wouldn't be surprised if people are following me," he whispered. "*Quelle histoire!* I'd better find someone with a bioweapon soon. I have a *château* to restore."

Creeping toward the last known position of the woman shooter, Jacques spotted two women locked in a knife fight, whirling, lunging, panting like rivals from some operatic duel.

"They look like twins," he muttered, narrowing his eyes. "This is a bit much."

He reached into his coat pocket, retrieved a flash-gas grenade, and weighed it in his hand like a pétanque ball.

"These two might be able to explain the party… make introductions… let's dim the lights a little, calm everybody down… Then I'll deal with the guards."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He rolled the grenade gently toward them. It spun across the concrete floor like a lazy iron sphere.

Kate saw it first. She dove behind a crate. Patricia turned, confused by Kate's sudden retreat, then spotted the grenade just before it detonated.

The flashbang should've stunned both of them, deafened, disoriented.

But fate added a flourish: a canister of gasoline near a crane caught the blast. It erupted into flame, engulfing Patricia in a sudden ball of fire.

"*Merde*…" Jacques muttered.

He'd covered his ears and shut his eyes, but he knew something was wrong. The blast was too sharp. The heat too intense. The smell, chemical, oily, burning rubber and hair, told him this was no standard flash-gas grenade outcome.

He opened one eye and took a cautious peek.

The smoke was dense, swirling like a storm cloud trapped inside the zoo. The heat made it impossible to get close. At least one body was on fire, but the flames distorted everything. He couldn't tell if there was another person caught in it.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A flickering orange glow revealed the base of the crane, also ablaze. Its support gave way with a shriek of steel. The arm collapsed with a thunderous crash, slamming down in the middle of the inferno. For a brief moment, the impact parted the smoke like a curtain.

Jacques saw the crane crush the burning body's head.

"*Mais non*…" he whispered. "Forget about identifying this one using her teeth."

He scanned for any signs of movement, but the flames obscured everything. He couldn't see that Kate had made it out, running far enough to escape the blast, the blaze and the collapse.

In the distance, the guards were beginning to stir, standing up slowly, dazed, one rubbing his eyes, the other scratching his head. One of them doubled over in a coughing fit.

Jacques didn't take his eyes off the haze around him. His body remained still, but every nerve was firing, hyper-aware, triangulating sounds, measuring the shifting light in the smoke, the distant echo of boots, breath, metal.

He was in wartime mode.

But this wasn't how he liked to work. Not anymore.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Given the choice, he preferred precision over chaos, pressure points over bullets. Psychological advantage, not firepower. Let the others burn the village, he would have already slipped inside the enemy's tent and stolen the orders off their desk. That was his rhythm now. That was his code.

Still… accidents happen in the field.

He hadn't meant for the fire. The grenade was meant to stun, disarm, de-escalate. But a single misplaced gas canister had changed everything. Now someone was dead. And perhaps one more…

Jacques closed his eyes briefly and let the smoke sting. He didn't turn away from the heat or the guilt. He breathed it in, low and silent.

"Let's hope," he muttered, barely audible over the distant crackle, "she was a very bad girl."

It wasn't a joke. Not really.

He didn't enjoy collateral damage. Not anymore. Not even when it served the mission.

###

Kate thought fast.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It had been a long time since someone lobbed a grenade at her during hand-to-hand combat. But once you'd danced with death a few dozen times, your instincts took over. She was already rolling before her brain caught up.

"I remember liking the smell of war," she muttered under her breath. "Way better than bear piss between sweaty breasts."

She crouched behind a crate, heart racing but steady. Then she pulled out her dog tag, the one she never took off, and her Vastan security badge. Then she tugged off her watch, her phone, and the small folding blade tucked at her ankle.

She leaned out just far enough to toss them all toward the inferno where Patricia's body burned, twisted and unrecognizable beneath the rubble. The smashed base of the crane had flattened the corpse's torso; the fire had done the rest. But there were details she could still use. Height. Frame. Hair length, color… maybe. Enough. Whatever the fire would miss.

Kate tossed her gun into the blaze for good measure.

A decent field investigator might still be able to tell something was off. But this wasn't Langley or MI6. There were no forensics teams stationed in this half-zoo, half-military junkyard.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

No lab rats with swabs, DNA testing kits, or dental record access. Just mercs, amateurs, and chemical cowboys counting paychecks.

Her security team was good, but they would have to rely on forensic analyses.

And Vastan's army of chemists were all on leave, far away from Baffin Island.

And Patricia? She hadn't struck Kate as the type to carry ID. No phone. No transmitter. Just a grudge and a vendetta. And all the ammo she could carry. All you ever needed when entering a combat zone, especially of your making. Whatever was on her body would burn with her.

Let them think I died here, Kate thought. *Let them report it. Mourn it. Move on.*

If there was anything recoverable, she hoped that people would conclude the body was Kate's and she had confiscated someone's equipment.

She exhaled, slow and cold, then squinted at the flame.

"Who the hell throws a grenade inside a goddamn construction site?" she whispered. "Gotta be on crack."

Couldn't be the guards. Those mall cops were barely armed. They shuffled decks of cards all day and drank… a lot.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Couldn't be Patricia's people, though Kate had found her bossy as hell, too pissed off not to ruffle feathers with her own crew. And Kate only spoke to her briefly. Imagine working with her on a mission.

Kate's eyes narrowed. "A new player, maybe…?"

She ducked lower, lips curling into a faint, dry smile.

"Well. Thank you for the lifeline, you chaotic, grenade-tossing bastard on crack. I owe you a drink… or a throat punch," she murmured.

Then she slipped into the shadows.

If Kate could work from the shadows, beneath Vastan's radar, and more importantly, Hector's, she might still have a shot at finishing what she started… And keep Rachel safe.

No more check-ins. No more eyes in the sky. No more lying for Vastan.

Rachel's intel had been more than helpful. It was explosive. The kind of thing people vanished over. And Kate knew, deep down, she had only scratched the surface of Vastan's nasty secret activities.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There's still time to do the right thing, she thought. *Even if it's a bit late for doing it the clean way.*

She crouched between a stack of feed crates and a broken section of railing, wrapped in dark shadows at the rear of the zoo. From here, she had a perfect line of sight to the train yard, and the back exit Rachel had taken.

She could shoot if she had to. She kept her spare handgun. She could kill anyone about to throw a grenade in the wrong direction. Slow the next wave of mercs. Buy Rachel a few minutes more. That was all Rachel to get the hell out.

Kate exhaled, and waited.

The train sat still. Empty platform. No movement. Too still.

Rachel should've been on the move by now.

A sliver of unease crept in.

Kate scanned the doorway again.

"Come on, Sister Tequila. Don't make me do something heroic. I am dead! And I want to stay dead for as long as I need to…" Kate murmured.

She adjusted her position, checked her sights, and whispered to herself…

"Stealth mode it is."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

###

The guard in the tower was nursing a lukewarm drink, slouched in his chair, waiting for his poker buddies to return from their patrol through the zoo. The bottle clinked against his teeth as he took a slow sip, eyes barely open.

The radio crackled.

He groaned and grabbed it.

"We're under fire down here. Call the security station… come down… bring a machine gun. The vet's dead. A woman shot him. We're nearly out of ammo."

The drink slipped from his hand, crashing to the floor.

He shot up, grabbed the landline. Dead. No dial tone.

"Fucking storm," he muttered.

No time to think. He zipped up his coat, strapped on a shotgun, slung a machine gun over his shoulder, and bolted down the tower steps.

He sprinted across the icy lot and vanished into the zoo.

Mariam saw him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She had been watching the building from her hiding spot. She'd heard the muffled sound of gunfire a few minutes earlier, then an explosion, then saw the man enter alone, fully armed.

Her heart rate slowed. Not from calm, but focus.

"How can I help Jacques?" She whispered.

Then the sound of engines.

She turned her head.

Four snowmobiles burst into view, roaring into the resort compound like a cavalry charge.

The riders went straight to the zoo.

They dismounted, machine guns in hands.

"It's Patricia's snowmobile," Juju said. "No doubt."

Zaid opened the machines' storage compartment.

"No wonder she's not responding… She left her sat-phone." Zaid said.

Zaid entered the zoo first, eyes sharp. He scanned the perimeter. No one. Only remnants of smoke, shadows, and the possibility of Rachel Shepherd hiding from Patricia, somewhere inside.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I hope Patricia hasn't caught up with the woman," he said.

He gave a silent signal.

Juju and the two other riders peeled off in opposite directions, splitting into the maze of aisles.

Zaid's voice came low and lethal into their comms:

"The bioweapon is our objective. Kill everybody who's not one of ours. But not the woman. I want her alive. Watch out for Patricia. Let her know who you are."

Zaid moved like he owned the place.

He walked down the central aisle, eyes darting left and right, scanning for movement. His boots echoed softly on the concrete floor.

At the end of the row, the last guard to enter the zoo was crouched near a crate, desperately trying to raise someone on the radio.

"Anyone? We're under attack… We need backup."

He turned just as Zaid appeared behind him.

Too late.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A single shot to the chest dropped the man instantly.

Zaid stepped forward calmly and, without a pause, placed the muzzle to the man's temple. Another shot.

"Clean up on aisle four…" Zaid muttered, a grin flickering across his face. "I always wanted to say that."

Blood began to pool across the floor.

Elsewhere, Juju advanced quietly. More animal than man. She slid from crate to crate like she was stalking prey, her machine gun cradled, ready to shoot. Her footsteps made no sound. She checked the cages she passed. They were all empty. Still, she didn't trust the silence. She'd seen too many things hide behind silence. And though she had seen the bear's remain, she couldn't help thinking that a live one would be a dangerous opponent.

She sniffed the air. Fire. Gasoline.

Juju crouched and moved forward, vanishing behind a row of barrels.

The other two riders fanned out across the perimeter aisles. One passed a pen full of broken glass and caribou droppings. The other caught sight of a flaming crane through the haze,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

crumpled in the middle of the zoo like a wounded dinosaur.

Each of them moved in sync with Zaid's unspoken plan: Sweep. Search. Eliminate. Secure the woman… Watch out for Patricia.

The interior air pressure shifted with each gust of wind hammering the unfinished walls. Snow crept under doorframes, danced through the exposed beams, swirling through the dim construction lights like ash from a bomb site.

And still… no sign of the woman. No sign of Patricia.

###

As Juju reached the end of the aisle, she slowed her pace, crouched low, and leaned carefully around the corner, machine gun first, then her eyes. Left. Clear. Right…

Zaid.

He was moving in parallel, one row over. They locked eyes for a second, just long enough to signal all-clear. He nodded. She moved.

Juju crossed the intersection and slipped between two towering stacks of supply crates. It was darker here, less light from the ceiling rigs, more shadows cast by scaffolding and hanging tarps.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Then… a grunt. A thump. Hooves.

"What the fuck?" She said.

A huge blur of antlers and muscle charged straight at her. She barely raised her gun before the beast was on her.

She fired once. The bullets went wide, pinging off steel, penetrating wood.

The caribou's antlers struck her hard, one of the points slamming into her abdomen with brutal force. The impact lifted her clean off the ground.

Pain exploded through her core as the air left her lungs.

The caribou brayed and skidded wildly, slamming into a crate after sending Juju flying like a rag doll. She crashed onto the top of a storage container, her gun clattering down into the shadows.

She rolled, landed hard on her back, teeth clenched, choking down a scream.

"So much for no noise. For staying invisible," she cried in pain.

She lay still for a moment, hands gripping the edges of the crate, breathing fast through her nose.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Blood.

She pulled her coat open and looked at the wound, shallow, ragged, bleeding, but not gushing.

Not fatal.

She'd been stabbed worse on missions.

The horn had caught the edge of her abdominal plate and slid across more than through. Lucky angle.

Juju exhaled carefully, her mind already moving past the pain.

"And I thought the woman was all I had to worry about," she murmured. "A stampede? What's next?"

Flat on the crate, Juju gritted her teeth and listened. She needed to move, soon, but her body wasn't ready. Not yet.

Then… gunfire.

Close.

A man screamed. Sharp, sudden. Cut off too fast.

Then a howl. Low, primal. Followed by snarling and the sound of claws skidding across concrete.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju froze.

Wolves…

She tightened her grip on the edge of the crate and turned her head slowly toward the echoing noise. Someone else had just learned what sort of zoo this really was.

"Sounds like I'd be safer in a cage," she muttered. "Lots of predators hunting tonight."

###

The rider had just cleared the last crate in his aisle when he heard the soft pad of paws on concrete.

Too many paws.

He turned sharply.

Three wolves, grey and white and red-eyed with panic and fury, sprinted through the smoky air and dust like ghosts. Their breath steamed from open mouths.

He raised his machine gun, fired once, clipped the shoulder of the first. It yelped but didn't stop.

The second was already airborne.

Teeth sank into his thigh with the force of a metal trap, dragging him down. The machine

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

gun clattered from his hands as the third wolf lunged for his throat.

The man twisted, caught its neck with one hand, but the injured wolf came for him next, biting down hard on his wrist, bones grinding.

The man screamed, but it was swallowed in snarls and his own ragged breath.

The wolves didn't kill him quickly.

The one on his leg kept tugging, tearing muscle from bone like meat from a roast. The one at his neck crushed down slowly, windpipe collapsing, the world narrowing to bursts of red and black. The injured wolf didn't stop gnawing his hand, ripping tendons, determined to punish the flesh that had pulled the trigger.

While taking in his last breath, the man tried to reach for his sidearm, but his body was folding in on itself.

Within seconds, he was motionless. Only the sounds of feeding remained.

The wolves, bloodied, breath heaving, finally turned from the heap of red and cloth. The wounded wolf limped behind the others, proud and purposeful.

They disappeared back into the maze of crates.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

###

The male polar bear lumbered through the half-lit aisle, each massive paw thudding softly on the concrete. Steam rose from its nostrils in slow, irritated puffs. Its black eyes narrowed at the flickering overhead lights, ears twitching at the distant echoes of gunfire and howls… and screams.

The bear had been sleeping. Dreaming, even. Something about snow, fish, and silence.

And now this.

Its growl deepened as it moved toward the sound of foreign boots and metal. A man armed and cocky, stepped into the aisle ahead, framed in haze and fluorescent hum. The bear rose onto its hind legs. Its bulk filled the space like a white avalanche on pause.

The rider smiled at the sight. He had the advantage. Machine gun in hand, full clip, perfect line of sight.

He didn't see the caribou.

The tall beast skidded into view like a runaway sled, antlers first, hooves slipping wildly on the icy floor. It crashed into the rider from behind, sending him stumbling forward, gun pointed now at nothing.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The rider barely turned, eyes wide, lips parting, before the bear struck.

A single swipe. Bone-slicing claws across the neck.

The man dropped to his knees as if praying, but there would be no salvation. Blood spurted like a geyser from his neck. His helmet rolled off. His head lolled unnaturally to one side, only loosely attached now.

Then he crumpled.

The bear let out a low snorting grunt. Not quite a roar. Not quite a growl. Something almost amused.

In front of him, the caribou tripped again, hooves clattering against a metal crate. The two beasts stood there for a second, one slick with blood, the other covered in dust, sharing the strange, wild silence that followed death.

The bear walked on.

The caribou bolted the other way, slipping around corners.

###

Zaid had heard the chaos unraveling around him, gunshots, guttural screams, and the unmistakable sounds of animal rage. A howl. A

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

roar. Human cries choked off too suddenly. He clenched his jaw, pressing forward between stacks of crates, scanning for any sign of Rachel or the bioweapon.

He trusted Juju. He had faith in the riders he had hired. But this sounded like a total breakdown of control.

He tapped his radio.

"Status report," he said coldly.

Static.

"Juju?"

Silence. Then her voice, strained but dry with sarcasm.

"I'm out of commission. Close encounter with speeding antlers. I can shoot but I can't move right now."

He waited. Nothing from the other two riders.

Zaid's hand moved to the side dial of his comm unit. He switched to a different encrypted frequency.

"Zaid to Hector. Where are you?"

A few seconds later, Hector's clipped voice came through, tinged with impatience.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Hector here. We just docked. What is going on? Where is my bioweapon?"

Zaid didn't waste time.

"Send your people to the zoo. You can't miss the place, look for the giant dome with smoke coming out of it. It's the only one on the horizon."

He moved through the shadows, crouching low.

"The woman is here. So is the bioweapon."

He clicked off.

The hunt was no longer surgical. Now it was war.

###

Hector's icebreaker had docked with brutal efficiency. The storm had eased just enough to allow his crew to stabilize the vessel and lower the gangway onto the frozen pier. The massive ship loomed beside the resort like a steel leviathan, engines still rumbling beneath the ice-crusted hull.

He had timed it perfectly, arriving just as the last of the guards disappeared into the zoo.

The bridge of the ship offered a commanding view of the surrounding area. Through a fogged

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

window, Hector spotted it: a dark pillar of smoke rising from the translucent dome in the distance.

He didn't need confirmation.

He turned to the tall man standing beside him, dressed head to toe in black gear, already armed.

"You see that smoke?" Hector said calmly, with a flick of his gloved hand toward the skyline. "That's where my weapon is."

He leaned closer, voice tightening.

"Go get it."

The man nodded and barked a command in broken English. Within seconds, five more men joined him on the icy dock, fully loaded with tactical gear and automatic rifles. They moved with practiced precision, spreading out in a tight formation as they jogged toward the zoo entrance.

Hector stayed behind, eyes fixed on the rising smoke.

He didn't blink.

###

At the sharp, thunderous pop of the grenade, Rachel froze for half a breath, instructed Black

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Paw to keep an eye on the cubs and then bolted back into the Zoo.

"Kate!" she shouted, already drawing her sidearm.

Her boots slapped against concrete as she sprinted toward the thick smoke roiling from the blast zone. The metallic stench of spent gunpowder and burning fuel clawed at her throat. The air shimmered from residual heat.

"Kate!" she called again, more urgent, her voice cracking.

No answer.

She slowed, lifting her elbow to cover her mouth and nose as the haze thickened. Her eyes stung, watering instantly. She blinked through the blur, scanning what was left of the scene. Charred crates. Twisted steel. A mangled crane. Ash dancing in the drafts like grey snow.

And then, amid the scorched debris, Rachel saw it.

A body.

Small. Curled. Face unrecognizable. Jaw crushed. Blonde hair singed to wiry threads. Flesh blackened in places. Steam still rising from the scorched floor beneath.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No, no, no, no…" Rachel muttered, stumbling forward. Her voice was hoarse, barely audible.

She took another step, heat radiating through her boots. Her gaze dropped. On the ground, just beside the body, lay a partially melted badge.

Kate's badge.

Rachel's knees buckled slightly, her heart pounding so loudly she could barely hear herself breathe.

She dared one more step, reaching out toward the flames as if she might, by sheer force of will, undo what she was seeing.

Save her friend. Somehow.

Jacques emerged from the smoke behind Rachel and reached for her shoulder, pulling her back from the scorched body.

She spun, gun still in hand, eyes red and wide with grief, but her aim dropped an inch when she recognized him.

That face, she remembered it. The Frenchman from Samuk's snowmobile rental, the one with the sardonic smile and too-sharp eyes. The one Samuk called *Monsieur Jacques*.

"You," she started.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No time," Jacques said. "We must go."

Rachel hesitated only a few seconds. Then, in a swift reversal, she grabbed his hand and yanked him forward, taking the lead, her movements deliberate and fast.

"This way," she said, voice raw.

They sprinted toward the back exit of the zoo.

Outside, Rachel burst into the cold air and inhaled deeply, the smoke behind her like a poisonous memory. Jacques followed, stepping out cautiously, checking the perimeter with a soldier's instinct, then turned, made sure no one was coming after them from inside the zoo, closed the door quietly, and

When he turned back around…

He froze.

Black Paw was there, crouched low, tail stiff, lips peeled back in a low, feral growl. His eyes locked on Jacques's crotch like it owed him treats.

"*Gentil petit chien, gentil*…" Jacques whispered.

And then he looked up, straight into the barrel of Rachel's gun, inches from his face.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Don't move," she said flatly. "Not unless you want to lose something you're probably very proud of… Maybe…"

Jacques raised one hand slowly. He put the other in front of his crotch.

"Let's talk," he said. "Preferably with all my parts still attached."

###

Hector's men arrived at the zoo under a haze of smoke and tension.

They entered cautiously, one by one, weapons raised. Once inside, they broke into three pairs and began sweeping the area, moving with trained efficiency but eyes wide with unease.

The first pair turned down an aisle, only to stop dead in their tracks.

A body. A rider. One of Zaid's men, his head torn halfway off, his helmet split and hanging like a broken jaw hinge. Blood had sprayed and frozen across the floor and crates like macabre graffiti. The polar bear tracks were unmistakable.

"Shit," one of them whispered.

The second pair stumbled into something even worse.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

A mangled man sprawled out like discarded meat, one leg missing entirely, his throat shredded to the spine. The wolves had done their work with savage precision. One man bent to check for a pulse, out of habit. But there was no need.

"He's done," the man muttered. "Blood's frozen in a pool bigger than he was."

The third pair reached Juju, slumped against a crate, trying to stand. Her side was bloodied, but her posture was defiant.

"You got friends with antlers around here now?" one of them said, lifting her up gently under the arm.

"Don't get cute," she snapped. "Help me walk."

The trio moved toward the center of the zoo, where the fire had mostly burned itself out. They met up with Zaid, who had grabbed an extinguisher and was spraying down the last of the smoldering remains.

The last of the bones blackened into ash. Smoke drifted upward like the last breath of the dead.

Zaid stepped closer to the charred body. It was unrecognizable, torso burned, face melted,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

hair mostly gone except for a few brittle yellow strands.

He scanned the body, shook his head.

“That’s not the woman we’re chasing,” he said, flatly. “The one with our bioweapon has dark hair.”

“There’s a dog tag,” Juju added, pointing to a twisted piece of metal next to the severed neck.

“And a badge,” one of Hector’s men said, crouching to brush ash off a scorched rectangle next to the chest. The edges were melted, but the faint outline of a security emblem remained.

They looked at each other, uncertain.

Zaid’s eyes narrowed.

“Kate… Somebody… Vastan Security… That’s all I can read,” the man said, squinting at the warped plastic badge before handing it to Zaid.

Zaid didn’t respond immediately. His eyes were already scanning the area, looking not just at the scorched remains, but around the ground nearby, as if the answers might be lying in a forgotten bag or shattered container. Something that once held the bioweapon... Or still did.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He took the badge and wiped it down methodically with his glove. The plastic was misshapen, the ink smeared beyond recognition.

Only the first name had survived: Kate.

Zaid stared at it for a moment. He didn't need anymore. He knew exactly who the dead woman was.

"That's the one who's been feeding us information," he said with finality. "Find the other one, the dark-haired woman. Rachel, right?" He turned toward Juju.

Juju nodded, her face pale and strained. "Yes," she said. Then, almost dreamily, she added, "Rachel from 'Ewe,' or 'female sheep'… symbolizing gentleness, nurturing, and pastoral life…"

Zaid squinted. Juju was drifting, fevered, semi-delirious, her mind scraping strange facts from whatever database she carried in her head. He'd seen it before. It was unnerving, but she was always *right* when she had a fever. Her wound was infected.

He shook it off. "Find the bioweapon," he snapped. "And what about Patricia? She probably lit this Kate woman up."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"She left her comms in the snowmobile by the door," Juju muttered, wincing from the pain in her side. "She's still chasing Rachel. Look for another fire soon."

Zaid didn't hesitate. "Go!" he shouted.

The men scattered instantly, sweeping through the zoo with new urgency.

Zaid turned to the two men still holding Juju. "You," he said, pointing to the one on her left. "Join the search."

The man nodded and sprinted off.

"You," Zaid said to the other, "Take Juju back to Hector's ship. Get her fixed up."

"Only you could have a fever in this weather," he added looking at Juju.

Juju groaned but didn't argue. Her breath was shallow, her blood starting to freeze around the edges of the caribou wound. The remaining man hoisted her gently. They began making their way out.

Zaid gave the burning zoo one final look, his eyes hard, calculating.

"Rachel… Did you come here to meet an extraction team?" He murmured.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Find the bioweapon… And Patricia… I want her on a leash," he ordered.

He turned, walked to the main entrance, and left into the snow.

###

Once outside, Juju and the man supporting her moved slowly across the snow-covered resort grounds, heading toward the pier and Hector's looming icebreaker. The wind had picked up again, slicing sideways. Snow was still falling down heavily.

Zaid peeled off in the opposite direction, toward the tower.

Gun in hand, he entered the base and began to climb the stairs, methodically and without sound, pausing at each landing, clearing corners before continuing upward. He moved with the smooth, predatory caution of someone who had done this too many times in too many places.

At the top, he reached the small control room. Empty.

The crackle of a radio broke the silence.

"Anyone? Hello! This is John Glenn at Vastan's security station… Hello? Resort tower, anyone there?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

"Yes," he said, calm and flat.

"Is everything okay? We couldn't make out what you guys said on the radio. Do we need to send a rescue team? What's going on over there?"

Zaid's eyes drifted to the smoke still curling from the zoo's dome.

"Nothing," he said smoothly. "Everything's great here. One of us, probably the vet, left the wolves out at the zoo, forgot to close their pen. Bit of chaos, but it's all good now. Animals are back where they belong. Over."

"Well, damn," John said. "Glad it wasn't worse. We'll check in again tomorrow. Oh… before I forget, have you seen Kate?"

"Nope," Zaid said without pause.

"Have you heard from her?"

"Nothing. Is she headed here?"

"She rode the train out from here earlier. Might've stopped at one of the mines. Or maybe the train's stuck in the snow somewhere. Can you see if there's a train at your station from the tower?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid walked to the frost-rimmed window and scanned the tracks.

“Hold on, John... I see the station from here. No train.”

“She probably stopped along the way,” John concluded. “She got real twitchy about that friend of hers, Rachel, the documentarian. Thought she might’ve gotten lost in the storm. Anyway... good night, guys. Next time I’m up there, I want a chance to win my money back. I’m getting better at bluffing.”

Zaid smiled faintly.

“Good night, John. Thanks for checking in. And no doubt, you’ll… *clean us out*.”

The static swelled and the line went dead.

The connection had been fuzzy enough that Zaid’s precise Canadian accent sealed the illusion. No reason for John to suspect anything.

Zaid hung up the radio, eyes narrowing as he looked out at the train, behind the zoo.

Zaid had lied to John Glenn.

From his vantage point in the tower, he could clearly see a train car stopped at the station, no more than fifty feet from the back of the zoo. A silent shadow in the snow, it sat dormant.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He scanned the room. There was a bolt-action rifle mounted with a long-range scope propped near the window.

"That might come in handy," he muttered.

He raised the rifle and braced the barrel on the sill, squinting through the glass. The falling snow had lightened enough to give him range. He slowly swept across the train car, the tracks, the platforms. No movement. Just soft flurries dancing in the floodlights.

Nothing in his line of sight… yet.

Zaid stepped back from the scope and took a long look at the radio console. Without a second thought, he smashed the communication unit with the butt of the rifle, reducing the controls to a mess of wires and bent metal.

He turned to leave, but then he heard it.

A plane.

The low thrum of engines cut through the air, growing louder as it crossed overhead. The aircraft banked, circling low above the tower, lights slicing through the whiteout. Snow swirled in vortex trails behind the wings.

Zaid stepped to the window, watching its descent with calm curiosity.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Nice ride," he whispered.

The plane vanished behind a curtain of snow, then reappeared less than a minute later, dropping onto the airstrip in a controlled slide. Its tires bit the ice. It taxied to a halt not far from the base of the tower, sleek, quiet, expensive.

Zaid watched without blinking. Whoever had just arrived wasn't here on vacation. A billionaire's plane… Too early for the opening party… Or, maybe fashionably late…

The plane door hissed open.

Two armed men emerged first, faces obscured by ski masks and goggles, heavy machine guns cradled tight against their chests. A third man followed behind them, unarmed, but moving with a calm authority that immediately set him apart.

They descended the stairs and halted at the bottom.

Zaid narrowed his eyes.

"Extraction team… I thought so…" He murmured.

Who else would land a private jet in the middle of a whiteout, armed and silent?

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"They're here for my woman," he hissed. "And Hector's bioweapon."

He slid open one of the tower's side windows with a sharp squeak, the cold slapping into the room. Positioning the rifle, he dropped to one knee and locked into a sniper's crouch. The barrel nudged forward into the storm.

"This plane is not going anywhere," he muttered. "At least not with the bioweapon onboard."

Even through the scope, the men were ghostlike, blurred by the veil of falling snow. The third man, the one without a weapon, caught Zaid's attention. There was something about his stance, the shape of his jaw, the way he turned his head with a slight tilt...

Familiar.

But no matter how long Zaid stared, he couldn't place the face. The snow distorted everything. And yet, the unease in his gut twisted tighter.

Then movement ahead of them.

Zaid shifted his scope forward.

A smaller figure approached across the runway, barely visible against the snow. She wore a white parka, hood pulled up. In each hand

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

she carried a case, arms taut from the weight. A backpack was slung across her shoulders.

She walked straight toward the men, deliberate and unafraid.

Zaid held his breath.

"Is that you?" he whispered.

"I can't keep the plane on the tarmac with a few bullets," Zaid murmured, breath fogging against the rifle. "Either it's here for my woman, what she carries, or both."

His finger hovered on the trigger.

Through the scope, the figure in the white parka kept walking, the weight of the cases dragging her slightly off balance. Snow whipped sideways across the tarmac, obscuring her shape, then revealing it again. The men from the plane moved to meet her, slow, alert, ready.

For a split second, Zaid hesitated.

He'd never seen Rachel in a white parka.

Something flickered in his memory, a detail, a doubt.

Too late.

The rifle cracked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The figure in white jerked forward and collapsed, the cases tumbling to the side, one sliding across the snow.

Zaid was already up, slinging the rifle across his chest as he barreled down the tower stairs, boots pounding against the metal steps.

He keyed his radio.

"Hector. The plane on the runway cannot take off. Send men there. Now!"

No hesitation in his voice. No regret.

Just the next move.

###

Inside the small shack nestled near the tower, Mariam finally felt the vibration in her pocket.

Igor.

She answered quickly.

"We are landing soon. Get ready. You are near the tower, right?" His voice was low, steady, but expectant.

"Yes," she replied, watching the snow swirl just outside the frosted window.

Mariam glanced at the few items she had laid out. She had packed light, at least by her standards. Tracking Jacques across the Arctic

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

was never supposed to be a full combat operation. She had neither the gear nor the appetite for a field assignment. But she was never unprepared.

"I am not a field assassin," she reminded herself under her breath, smoothing her parka sleeves as she packed up. "But if anyone asks, I'm just a lost tourist in the wrong place. With great luggage."

"And if Jacques happens to catch a glimpse of me," she added with a smirk, "I should at least look like someone worth chasing across the tundra. I could use a candle light dinner, even in an igloo."

Suddenly, the low rumble of engines overhead broke her rhythm.

A plane passed above, close.

Mariam paused, then moved quickly to the window and scanned the perimeter. No visible movement. No guards. No riders. The whiteout had slowed just enough for her to see the tower above her.

No silhouette in the top room. No threat.

She moved to the door, cracked it open cautiously, then stepped outside with her luggage. The air was sharp and bitter against her

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

cheeks. She lifted her chin and watched the descending plane slice through the sky toward the runway behind the tower.

One case in each hand, she began walking through the snow, elegant and purposeful, the very image of a woman who belonged.

The plane was landing now. Close. Just the way Igor had promised.

She stood at the base of the tower, half-turned toward the zoo, scanning the white haze for movement.

Nothing yet.

Some foolish, stubborn part of her hoped Jacques would emerge from the dome, alive, intact, ready to board the plane with her.

The plane rolled to a stop on the runway. Snow swirled around its landing lights. Mariam shifted her grip on the cases and waited.

The door opened.

Two men stepped out first. Igor's bodyguards. She recognized them instantly, their posture, their silence, the way they already owned the space. Their masks and goggles hiding nothing from her.

Then Igor appeared at the top of the stairs.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Relief washed through her. She took a step forward, then another.

The bodyguards moved toward her, reaching for her luggage as they always did.

That was when it hit.

A sharp, brutal impact between her shoulder blades, like a hammer wrapped in fire. The air was punched out of her lungs. Her legs buckled.

Mariam dropped to her knees, the cases slipping from her hands, then pitched forward into the snow.

Igor shouted her name and ran.

He slid to the ground beside her, gathering her up, pressing her against his chest as if he could hold her together through sheer will.

“My daughter… my sweet daughter…” he whispered, his voice breaking.

The bodyguards fanned out instantly, weapons raised, aiming toward the tower. Two more men rushed down the plane’s stairs, forming a tight perimeter around Igor and Mariam.

Blood bloomed darkly through the white fabric of her parka.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Mariam's eyes fluttered open. She looked up at Igor, tried to smile.

"Everybody is in the zoo…" she whispered. "Jacques is in the zoo… lots of people in the zoo… Must be a nice zoo… Wish I can come back and visit one day…"

Her breath caught.

"Mission accomplished?" she asked softly.

Her eyes closed.

###

In the cabin of the icebreaker, Hector stood over the radar console, his gloved hands resting on the steel edge. One of the men monitoring the screen looked up.

"An aircraft's approaching the resort," the man said.

Hector squinted at the blip.

"Who the hell flies in this weather?" he muttered. "Not coast guard. Not Air Force. Not police."

Still, he wasn't about to take chances.

"Arm up. Prepare to defend the ship," he barked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He grabbed the radio, switching channels. “Zoo unit, report. Have you found the woman? The bioweapon?”

A few seconds of silence. Then static.

“Still looking,” came the terse reply.

Hector changed frequency.

“Zaid? Zaid, do you copy?”

Silence.

Zaid had turned off his radio before speaking with John Glenn, not wanting a transmission to be overheard. He’d forgotten to turn it back on, until after he pulled the trigger on Mariam and fled down the stairwell.

Back on the ship, Hector turned to Juju, who was lying on a stretcher near the back wall. A medic was stitching up the wound in her side left by the caribou’s antler. She gritted her teeth through the pain.

“What the hell is Zaid doing?” Hector asked, pacing.

“I’m sure he’s handling it,” Juju said through clenched teeth. “He always does.”

The radio crackled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Hector," Zaid's voice came in, urgent and sharp. "The plane on the runway… *It can't take off*. Send men. Now!"

Juju let out a pained laugh, smug despite the agony.

"Told you," she said.

Hector didn't hesitate.

"Deploy a team," he ordered his second-in-command.

Four armed men bolted down the gangplank and sprinted across the snowfield toward the resort tower, weapons raised.

Hector's men arrived behind Zaid minutes later, boots crunching through the snow. They halted twenty feet from the scene ahead.

Igor stood at the center, cradling Mariam's limp body, flanked by his bodyguards. Her white parka was soaked in blood.

Zaid had already lowered his weapon. He raised a hand, signaling Hector's men to stand down.

From his vantage point, Zaid could now see the woman on the ground clearly. It wasn't Rachel. It wasn't *his* woman.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Two small travel cases lay spilled beside her. When she'd fallen, they'd burst open, contents scattered across the snow: silk lingerie, makeup palettes, perfume, high-end shoes. Personal items. Not tactical.

No syringes. No documents. No bioweapon.

Zaid's jaw tightened. He glanced at Igor, *of course it was him*.

He took a step forward.

"What's in the backpack?" Zaid asked.

Igor met his eyes with quiet fury.

"Why don't you come find out."

The frigid air between them got even colder.

Igor shifted Mariam gently, laying her back against his chest. With deliberate slowness, he unzipped her backpack and held Zaid's gaze as he turned it upside down.

Headphones. A phone. A makeup kit. Personal effects, nothing more. All things Igor had given her himself.

Igor knelt lower, whispering something to her. Then his voice rose, cold and direct.

"When I see you again, Zaid," he said, "I'll kill you with my bare hands."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He stood and, with Mariam in his arms, walked toward the plane. One of his men collected her belongings and followed.

The rest of Hector's armed guards kept their guns on Zaid and Hector's team as they moved in reverse, covering Igor's retreat. Once they were all aboard, the hatch sealed shut.

The engines roared to life.

Within seconds, the jet turned and surged down the icy runway, disappearing into the falling snow.

Zaid's radio crackled.

"Where is my weapon?" Hector's voice barked.

"They don't have it," Zaid replied, calm as ever.

"Who *was* that?" Hector asked.

"Igor."

"What the hell was he doing here?"

"Picking someone up," Zaid said. "Not my woman. And not your bioweapon."

He turned away.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"There's a train station behind the resort," he said. "Meet us there. Pull your men out of the zoo and send them there now."

A pause.

"And tell them not to shoot the woman. If she doesn't have the bioweapon, she's probably the only one who knows where it is."

Zaid turned to Hector's men.

"Let's go. Now."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XVIII

Who Doesn't Enjoy a Nice Train Ride…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Billionaire resort train station
February 14, Present-Day

Jacques stood still, shifting his gaze between Rachel and Black Paw.

"I do enjoy running into you, *mademoiselle*," he said, one hand raised, one protectively shielding his groin. "But it seems that something with teeth always gets a little too close for comfort. First a truck grate… now your dog's mouth."

Black Paw growled low, his stance tense.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques slowly lowered the raised hand toward him, palm down and open.

"It's okay, Black Paw," Rachel said gently. "This is Monsieur Jacques. Remember? I was telling Kate about him at the station. He's the one I almost ran over with her truck."

Jacques smiled, cautious.

"Jacques Couteau," he said, eyes still on the dog. He slipped off his glove and extended his bare hand to Black Paw.

Black Paw sniffed it carefully. A few seconds passed.

Then came a soft lick.

Jacques exhaled.

"What do you call this?" Rachel asked, raising an eyebrow. "Dog-bromance?"

Jacques grinned. "Something like that. Don't be jealous…"

She nodded, half-smiling, half-exhausted.

"I'm not the jealous type for very long. I shoot, I down a tequila, I eat chocolate. What are you doing here, Monsieur Jacques?"

"I'm a friend," he said, stepping closer. "Your only friend, from the look of things. I'll

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

explain everything… Once we're far from here… You have lots of admirers…"

Rachel didn't hesitate.

"Follow me," she said. "I've got a sweet ride waiting."

She slung the bag carrying the cubs over her shoulder and jogged toward the train. Black Paw trotted at her side. Jacques followed, glancing behind him, making sure no one was following.

Reaching the train, Rachel yanked open the metal door with effort. Black Paw leapt inside without hesitation.

Rachel climbed in next, then reached her hand down to Jacques.

"Hop in, hero," she said. "*Mon seul ami*…"

As Jacques hoisted himself into the engine car, a burst of gunfire rang out.

Behind them, Zaid and his men emerged from the zoo, sprinting toward the train, machine guns raised, firing.

Jacques slammed the door shut just as bullets pinged off the exterior with a metallic shriek.

"Don't shoot the woman!" Zaid yelled.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Across the snowfield, Hector was charging from the direction of the pier, four more men trailing behind him. He echoed the call:

"Don't shoot the woman! Don't shoot the woman!"

Inside, Rachel gripped the throttle. The engine roared to life.

Kate had been right. It really *was* as easy as she'd described. The train lurched forward, then surged ahead, picking up speed fast.

Hector pointed and shouted to his men.

"Keep after them! Get on board! *Stop that train!*"

Inside, Jacques braced against the cabin wall, winded.

"I heard they were told not to shoot you," he said to Rachel, catching his breath. "So, you'll be fine."

Rachel smirked. "Perfect. I'll open a window and shoot *them*."

She looked over. "Did they say anything about not shooting *you, Monsieur Jacques*?"

"Not a word," Jacques replied. "Which means they'll absolutely shoot me."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel pushed a control lever forward, then pointed to a glowing button.

"Here. Keep pressing this," she told Jacques. "And get us out of here, *fast!*"

"Wait…" Jacques began.

But she was already gone, slipping out of the cabin.

He heard the crack of gunfire almost immediately.

The state-of-the-art train hummed beneath them, gliding smoothly as it accelerated out of the station, cutting through the snow like a scalpel. Rachel moved with focus, her gun raised, her feet steady on the icy metal.

She didn't waste ammunition.

The men chasing her didn't fire, even when she flung open the door and took aim. The order not to shoot her held… for now.

One man managed to grab the side of the car, fingers clawing at the metal. Rachel watched as he tried to pull himself up, then slipped, tumbling off into the snow.

A second man made a run for it, arms outstretched. Rachel fired at his hands. She

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

missed, but close enough to send him diving for cover.

Then she saw him.

Zaid.

The man who had hunted ever since she left the cave.

She steadied her aim.

"It'd be like shooting fish in a barrel," she muttered.

Her finger tightened. The shot rang out, clean, controlled.

The bullet struck the ground directly between Zaid's feet.

"A shot across the bow… *between*" she said, lowering her weapon.

Zaid stood undisturbed. Beside him, Hector narrowed his eyes.

"The woman?" Hector asked.

"Yes," Zaid said quietly. "That's my woman."

"Why didn't you want to shoot her?"

Zaid kept his eyes on the retreating train.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"She was only carrying a small bag. The man accompanying her didn't carry anything. The bioweapon might have already been on the train, but I doubt it. We need her alive, or we'll never find it." Zaid said.

"And if she stashed it in the zoo?" Hector asked.

"Then we'll find it. And take care of *her* later."

Hector chuckled.

"She nearly shot you."

"No," Zaid replied. "She missed *on purpose*."

He turned slightly, watching the train vanish into the snow.

"I like her," he said. "But she'll regret not killing me."

He smiled faintly.

"Everyone does… For as long as I can make them." He murmured.

###

Inside the train, the world grew quiet, just the hum of the tracks beneath them and the distant thrum of snow sweeping against steel.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques and Rachel sat facing each other, breath still catching up to adrenaline. For a long moment, they said nothing.

Black Paw stared at them both, unblinking.

Rachel broke the silence.

"Is this your first time riding a locomotive, Monsieur Jacques?"

Jacques smiled.

"No. And you can call me Jacques."

He tilted his head, thoughtful.

"Oh… And Happy Valentine's Day, by the way. What's your name?" He asked.

Rachel smirked.

"Thank you. Happy Valentine's Day to you too, Jacques."

Rachel paused.

"My name is *Nobody*," she said.

Jacques raised an eyebrow, grinning.

"Do I look like I have only one eye?"

She laughed.

"No, you've got two. But I still don't know if I can trust you."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She leaned forward, eyes narrowing.

"So... are you a *choo-choo engineer*?"

Jacques chuckled.

"I just followed your instructions. You said press the button… I pressed the button… You didn't say how hard, by the way?"

"Are you always that obedient?" she teased.

He grew a little more reflective.

"My grandfather worked the French railways," Jacques said. "When I was little, he'd let me ride with him in the cab."

He paused, voice softening.

"He used to say, *Une locomotive est une directrice.* A director. If you don't obey her… you'll derail."

Rachel watched him closely.

"There's only one way into the tunnel," he added, smiling faintly. "Her way."

Black Paw yawned, long and loud, and rested his head on Rachel's boot.

Rachel tilted her head, watching Jacques.

"What did you say your last name was, when you introduced yourself to my dog?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Couteau," he said. "Jacques Couteau."

Rachel raised an eyebrow.

"*Couteau*… as in knife?"

She smirked.

"*Monsieur Jacques Couteau*, Jack the Knife?"

She laughed, genuine, even if brief.

Jacques grinned. "*Oui*. That's me."

"Do you speak French?" he asked.

"*Oui… un peu.* A little," Rachel replied.

Her smile faded.

She had picked up those words in Syria. In the dust, the ruins, the firelight. Some people still spoke a little French there.

She thought of Kate.

Rachel looked out the side window, blinking the memory away.

"My friend Kate told me these tracks lead to the Vastan Energy headquarter, near the security station," she said quietly. "We'll be safe once we reach the end of the line."

Jacques said nothing, watching the tracks through the front window. The engine's high

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

beams cut through the storm, twin tunnels of light in the endless white.

Snow swept sideways against the train.

Rachel studied Jacques. He'd entered her life as a stranger, almost roadkill beneath Kate's truck. Then reappeared like some phantom protector, pulling her back from the fire, from Kate's burning body. And now he was... what? A train conductor? A man who took orders from a strange woman without flinching?

A man trained to follow women's lead…

"I suspect your pursuers won't give up so easily," Jacques said. "Unless it's not *you* they're after… but something you left behind. In the zoo."

Rachel nodded slowly.

"They'll be watching for a chance to stop us. Somewhere along the way." She said. "No doubt."

She paused.

"They won't find what they're looking for," she added. "Not in the zoo. Not anywhere in that resort."

She fell silent, her eyes fixed on the snow rushing past.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel's voice came quiet but sharp.

"What are you doing here, Jacques?"

Before he could answer, she drew her gun in a blur, fast, practiced.

Jacques didn't move. Didn't flinch. He just kept pressing the button, his eyes calm, his body still. He didn't even turn toward her.

Rachel had stepped back far enough to keep out of reach, her aim steady and centered on his chest.

"If my pursuers aren't going to shoot me, at least not right away," she said, "I'm guessing you're playing by the same rulebook. You haven't shot me. Yet. So, what do you want?"

Her voice was cold now. Controlled.

"You don't strike me as a lost tourist. Or some billionaire idiot who thought the resort was open to the public." She added.

Black Paw picked up on her tone. His ears flattened. He began growling low and deep at Jacques.

Still, Jacques didn't blink. He kept his eyes forward, watching the rails stretch into the snowy dark.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I work for the French government," he said quietly. "Now and then. On special cases. A few days ago, they asked me to investigate rumors of a lost Nazi bioweapon, something left behind on Baffin Island during World War II."

His voice was steady. Honest.

"If that weapon exists, France doesn't want it showing up on the open market, especially not in the hands of terrorist groups."

Rachel didn't lower her weapon.

"Then why were you following *me*?"

Jacques glanced at her briefly.

"Actually… I wasn't."

"I was following an Asian woman," Jacques continued. "She blew up a cave where I was told the bioweapon might be hidden."

Rachel's expression shifted slightly. "I think I saw her. A couple of times."

Jacques nodded and continued.

"This Asian woman later met with a team of armed people. One of them was a white woman, at least from the silhouette. One of the men was Zaid."

Rachel stepped back further.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I've met Zaid before," Jacques said. "He's connected to a weapons broker, Hector The Vector. I was told Hector was looking for this Nazi bioweapon."

Jacques finally turned to face her.

"I figured if Zaid had found the weapon, the whole team would stay together and leave the island. But they split up, I made a call. I chose to follow the white woman and another rider. Thought they might lead me to something, *or* someone. They led me to you."

He looked at her, now directly.

"It was a toss-up. The Asian woman left with Zaid and two riders. I figured I could track them later."

Rachel nodded slowly, her weapon lowering by just a few inches.

"I saw all of these people too," she murmured.

Her voice had lost its edge, but the suspicion still lingered in her eyes.

Black Paw settled slightly, though his gaze remained fixed on Jacques.

The train kept moving, cutting through the snow.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I'm pretty sure you did," Jacques said. "I saw you drop dynamite on one of them…"

He tilted his head, amused.

"Then I saw you end things *abruptly* with the second one. You threw a sled at him. Impressive."

He gave a mock wince.

"I've had curtain rods thrown at me, but never a sled. Is that your usual method, dealing with men? Using vehicles to knock them out?"

Rachel narrowed her eyes.

"Not much of a chivalrous guy, are you, Jacques?" she said. "Ever heard of coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress? Or are you just here for the show? Cat fights? Mud fights? *Snow* fights?"

Jacques feigned offense.

"In my defense, I saw all this from fairly far away. I've got great binoculars. But, regarding damsels in distress, to the contrary," he said smoothly. "My mother raised me *very* well."

He leaned back a little, casual but intentional.

"She used to say: *Always make sure the damsel is a damsel indeed. And that she's actually in distress.*"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He smirked.

"My mother claimed most damsels fake distress." He added.

Rachel raised a brow.

"My father," Jacques continued, "thinks I'm too nice. Any damsel, in distress or not, will rope me in and I wouldn't even notice I'm being taken advantage of… My father gave up interfering years ago. Thinks my prefrontal cortex never fully developed."

Jacques shrugged.

"Maybe he's right. I try to remember my parents' advice from time to time. Not easy."

He looked over at her, voice softening.

"What did *your* parents teach you about damsels in distress, aside from how to pretend to be one when it suits you?"

Rachel's gaze cooled.

"I'm an orphan," she said flatly. "I grew up in a Catholic convent."

She paused.

"I was surrounded by nuns. All in distress, night and day. But not a single one of them a damsel. They're all *brides of Christ*."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques' expression sobered.

Rachel tilted her head slightly.

"So, tell me, *Monsieur Couteau*… Do you think *I* am a damsel in distress?"

Jacques leaned forward, watching Rachel.

"Well…" he began, "after seeing you kill two men, I realized how *lucky* I'd been to survive our first meeting, when you drove a truck an inch from my face. I didn't think distress then."

Rachel gave a faint smile, gun still loosely in her hand.

"Then I saw the woman and man I was following rush out of a cable car, chasing you down a mountain. Armed to the teeth. I figured I should get a closer look."

He shifted, recalling the scene.

"I eventually passed by the man, pinned to the ice by a sail boom. The woman standing over him was shooting in your direction."

He paused.

"That's when the word *distress* came to mind."

Rachel tilted her head. "For her?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"She was definitely upset," Jacques said. "*You*? Not so much. It looked to me that you were the one distressing people."

His tone darkened, just slightly.

"Eventually, I saw you kneeling beside the burning body of a woman in the zoo. You looked like you wanted to hug what was left of her."

He looked away.

"That's when *distress* started flashing in neon inside my head."

Rachel's grip on the gun loosened a bit.

Jacques continued, softer now.

"*Damsel*? That's another question."

He looked down at her hands.

"I figured I wouldn't be able to see a wedding or engagement ring under those gloves… but it did cross my mind that you might still be looking for mister right. Especially after I noticed you didn't kill anyone at the train station. Keeping your options open… You have a lot of suitors around here. I am glad you killed the first three… It wasn't going to work out. I could tell. Especially with the last one. I think him and the woman chasing you were an item. She wasn't going to let you have him."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel narrowed her eyes. “How did you know that I didn’t kill anyone as we left the station?”

“You had your finger on the button,” she added.

Jacques smiled, raising a finger toward the console.

“There’s an autopilot feature. I engaged it.”

He glanced at her.

“Wanted to make sure you didn’t need a hand, to be rescued that is… discreetly.” He said.

He pointed to the small glowing icon on the dashboard: *AUTO PILOT ENGAGED*.

“You’ve been keeping your finger on the button all this time… for *nothing*?” Rachel asked, eyebrow raised.

Jacques gave a small, unapologetic smile, letting go of the button.

“I wanted you to feel supported in your decision-making,” he said. “Something I picked up from my mom.”

Rachel tilted her head.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"And the smooth little probe about whether I'm single… was that something you picked up from your dad?"

He laughed.

"That wasn't smooth. *My* dad is very, very smooth."

Before she could fire back, he pivoted.

"What are *you* doing on Baffin Island?"

Rachel exhaled.

"I was hired to film a documentary for Vastan Energy. A PR piece to show off their 'environmentally conscious' image. The job was to track a mother polar bear and her cubs."

Jacques nodded. "I look forward to watching the movie."

Rachel holstered her gun, slowly.

"Don't hold your breath," she responded. "You did not finish answering my question. Why did you follow me to the zoo?"

"I was just looking for a place to sit out the storm, rest. My dogs needed to rest too." He said. "Do you know anything about the bioweapon? Is that why all these people are chasing after you? Present company excluded?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I don't know anything about Nazi bioweapons. I don't know what these people want from me." She answered.

She paused.

"I don't trust people easily, *Monsieur Jacques.* And now I can't even trust you to press a button correctly."

She stood, giving him a pointed look.

"I'm going to take a look around. You keep your eyes on the tracks."

Jacques gave a theatrical salute.

Rachel moved through the narrow cabin and opened a supply locker. Inside: a heavy duffel bag packed tight with guns, grenades, and ammunition. Her face tightened.

"Kate…" she murmured. "Always prepared."

She came back and stood next to Jacques looking at the tracks.

"Thanks for pulling me away from the fire earlier. At the zoo."

"You're welcome, Puppy. *Puppy*, isn't it?" Jacques said. "That's your name, right? I remember now… not 'Nobody'… it's Puppy."

Rachel gave a soft scoff.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Rachel*," she corrected.

She checked the cubs. They were bundled safely in their carrier, breathing softly.

Jacques watched her.

"Are these the stars of your movie?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "Their mother is dead. I couldn't leave them behind. I've been looking for a vet. You'd think I would find one in a zoo."

"How did you get the job?" he asked.

She paused, then answered.

"My friend Kate got me the job. The woman who died in the explosion and fire inside the zoo."

Jacques looked away, jaw tightening.

He remembered that moment too clearly. Two blond women, moving fast. He'd thrown the grenade… just before the fire engulfed one of them. When he finally broke through the smoke, there'd only been one body.

Had he killed Rachel's friend? Kate, not Zaid's henchwoman?

He swallowed.

"What happened to the other blonde woman?" he wondered silently.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Out loud, he simply said, “I’m sorry about your friend. Were you very close?”

Rachel shook her head, keeping her eyes on the cubs.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Jacques recognized the shutdown. She wasn’t ready. He said nothing more.

The train hummed on, cutting deeper into the white silence, carrying secrets neither of them was ready to share.

For now, they had escaped.

Jacques eased the throttle, slowing the train.

Rachel noticed the change immediately.

“Why are we slowing down?” she asked, alert again.

Jacques kept his eyes on the snowy veil ahead.

“These on-and-off blizzards make it hard to see. And it’s possible the wind or the storm knocked debris onto the tracks. There’s a plow at the front, but if we hit ice, snow, or worse, rocks from an avalanche, at full speed…”

He didn’t need to finish.

Rachel gave a small nod.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques turned slightly. “If you don’t mind watching our rear, that’d be helpful. Do you see anything behind us?”

Rachel moved to the back window.

“No sign of anyone following. No other trains at the zoo station, and no headlights on the horizon. But they *did* have snowmobiles,” she said. “Why didn’t they chase us?”

Jacques glanced over. “Good point.”

They both went quiet.

Black Paw leapt up onto the seat beside Jacques, settling next to him like a watchful co-pilot. He kept one eye on Jacques, the other on the rails ahead.

Rachel noticed and smiled softly.

She reached out, running a gentle hand through the dog’s thick fur. Black Paw didn’t growl. Didn’t stiffen. Just stayed there, calm.

“Looks like Black Paw wants to take over from you. He’s been in charge pulling my sled all day.” Rachel said.

“Sounds good to me Black Paw,” Jacques said.

Maybe, Rachel thought, *Black Paw trusts Jacques now.*

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Maybe she could too.

But trust would take time.

She'd found herself on the run, alone, betrayed, and hunted. If Jacques Couteau truly was on her side, it would take more than shared warmth and a button-pressing stunt to earn her faith.

Still… she welcomed Black Paw's silent vote of confidence.

As the train rumbled, Rachel knew one thing for certain: She needed to learn a lot more about the Frenchman driving this train.

"It has been one long Valentine's Day," she said out loud. "Busy, bloody, Al Capone style. Certainly, unlike no other for me. What about you Jacques?"

"And marked by unbearable loss," she thought, holding back her tears. Losing Kate still carved through her like an open wound.

"I haven't had the pleasure of such wonderful company in years," Jacques responded. "I can't remember the last time I went to a zoo. I haven't been at risk of derailing a train for a long time… Getting shot at… Well, that happens now and then…"

He paused.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Incidentally," he continued. "Escaping by train has been the only viable choice at the zoo station, but it isn't necessarily the *safest* way back to the Vastan security station. Someone might be waiting for us along the way."

Rachel stayed quiet.

"Puppy?" he said aloud.

"*Rachel.*" She turned toward him. "Why do you keep calling me *Puppy*?"

Jacques looked slightly sheepish.

"Didn't you introduce yourself as Puppy when you nearly ran me over in front of Samuk's rental place yesterday?" he asked. "*Puppy Inabaskit.* I figured you were Inuit. I wasn't really paying attention… I usually *see* danger coming."

Rachel blinked, then laughed softly.

"*Puppy… In… A… Basss… Ket.*" She grinned. "That's what I said. It's how I express distress when I miss a target."

She added, "Though sometimes I go with *Fried… Jelly… Fuck… Fish.* Depends on the situation."

Jacques laughed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I have to remember, English isn't your first language." She said.

She arched a brow.

"And no, I'm *not* Inuit. Do I *look* Inuit?"

She paused, then softened her voice.

"The women here have such beautiful hair and complexion…"

She looked down briefly.

"I was born in New York City. I have *no idea* what my parents' background was. I grew up in a Catholic convent. No records. No stories. No mirror. No name. Nothing to identify me. Not in the basket I was left in by the church door, anyway."

Jacques nodded slowly.

"Would you prefer I call you *Jelly*, then?" he offered with a crooked smile.

"*Rachel* will do… *Coussssteau,*" she replied, drawing out the name.

Jacques smiled wider.

"Going back to what you said earlier about the safest way to the Vastan security station. What did you have in mind?" she asked.

He leaned forward slightly.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"How do you feel about traveling on foot for a bit?"

Rachel straightened.

"On foot? Why?"

"Well… pros and cons," Jacques said. "We *could* all get lost and freeze to death walking to Vastan's security station. But we'd avoid an ambush further down the tracks."

"You think they're setting up an ambush?"

"I'd bet on it," Jacques said. "If they're not following us directly, they'll be waiting if they aren't already. That's what I would do."

Rachel nodded.

"And you're suggesting… what? Mountain climbing? Kate shared a map of the area before I went to the bear cave. Over the mountain is the shortest route."

Jacques shrugged. "I see what you mean. Any chance there is climbing gear on the train? Can you take another sweep? See if there's anything that might help us if we *do* leg it?"

Rachel rose, already moving.

"On it, *Cousssteau*," she said. "I'll give some thought to the *possibility* of freezing to death in style."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques smiled to himself.

Black Paw padded closer, tail thudding once. He looked up at Jacques with a huff, almost like approval.

“You are ready for a bit of fresh air, aren’t you?” Jacques said out loud. “I bet Jelly Puppy never messes up your name.”

Outside, the white world waited.

Rachel made her way through the narrow train car, the hum of the engine steady beneath her boots.

This was no standard freight train locomotive.

The design was unique, compact and efficient. A powerful engine sat at the front, while a storage compartment filled the rear. The engineer’s control cabin was sandwiched between the two, perched partially atop both sections like a bridge between power and purpose.

She stepped into the rear compartment, ducking slightly under a low beam. The air smelled faintly of gas, oil, and cold metal.

Under a canvas tarp, something solid gleamed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel pulled the cover back.

A snowmobile. Sleek. Rugged. Almost brand new.

Attached behind it: a reinforced cart.

Rachel knelt, examining it. The tank was full. Kate had set this up perfectly.

Rachel checked the contents of the cart: two parasailing bags, light but durable. Coils of rope. Boxes of ammunition. Vacuum-sealed food supplies. A compact satellite communicator. Emergency flares. Spare gloves, goggles, insulated thermoses.

Rachel smiled, a mix of grief and admiration flickering across her face.

“Kate, you brilliant bastard. I don’t see treats for Black Paw, and nothing for cubs,” Rachel murmured. “I’m soooo disappointed.”

She returned to the front cab where Jacques sat, Black Paw at his side, one paw on the dashboard.

Rachel did a double take.

“I can’t tell who’s who anymore,” she said laughing.

They both looked at her, turning their heads at the same time, both serious as engineers.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"We have everything we need to ditch the train and make a run for the hills," Rachel announced. "And we *won't* have to walk. Stop the train."

Jacques raised his brows.

"Perfect," he said.

He turned to Black Paw. "*La directrice* said: stop the train, *mon ami*. My grandfather would've stopped the train."

With practiced ease, Jacques pulled the lever and slowed them to a smooth, quiet halt.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XIX

Next Stop, Waterfalls…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
Waterfalls
February 14, Present-Day

"Now *la directrice* says, *'Come and give me a hand,'*" Rachel called out, lifting the duffel of guns and ammunition over one shoulder and the cub carrier over the other. "I think I would've gotten along with *grand-père Couteau*."

Black Paw leapt gracefully off his seat and trotted ahead, tail high, leading the way to the rear storage compartment.

Rachel followed, balancing her load with ease. The cubs, still nestled inside their bag,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

began to stir with curiosity. One by one, they poked their fuzzy heads out, blinking at the cold, sniffing the air, and eyeing Black Paw with fascination.

Rachel put the cubs down. Black Paw sat nearby, watching over them with quiet authority.

Jacques caught up to Rachel in the storage compartment. Together, they slid open a heavy metal door and extended a wide ramp to the snowy ground. The tracks curved alongside a mountain ridge; just beyond it lay the valley that, according to the map Rachel and Kate had studied, led directly to the Vastan security station.

The sky was cloudy but the snow had stopped falling.

Perfect time to leave the rails behind.

Jacques pushed the snowmobile carefully onto the ramp.

Then came the cart.

Rachel stepped forward and helped lower the ramp with a smooth metallic clunk. They had stopped between stacks of snow and ice that walled the rails. Perfect to offload the snowmobile and cart.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques guided the snowmobile down onto the icy ground. He slid the cart down next and hooked it firmly to the snowmobile's hitch.

Black Paw jumped confidently onto the driver's seat like a proud lieutenant as Jacques double checked the connection.

Jacques looked up, amused.

"I see Black Paw has seniority."

Rachel grinned. "He's been waiting for this moment his whole life… Leading without having to pull anything for once, not even his own weight."

Jacques turned on the machine. The engine purred with readiness.

"I'm going to bring the train up to full speed," Rachel said, handing the bag with the cubs to Jacques. "Then I'll jump off."

"Let *me*," Jacques offered. "My grandfather would insist I be the one to handle the train."

He gave a sideways glance toward the snowmobile.

"And besides… Black Paw doesn't look like he wants me anywhere near the driver's seat."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel looked at the dog, who was planted firmly between the handlebars, unmoving.

"Fair enough," she said. "I wouldn't want you to lose a limb for any reason other than frostbite."

She jumped off the train and nodded toward the tracks.

"Black Paw and I will shadow the train on the snowmobile. We'll stay as close as we can. We'll pick you up after you jump off."

Rachel climbed onto the snowmobile and revved the engine. Black Paw settled in between her arms and legs like he belonged there, utterly at ease.

Jacques climbed back onto the train, pulling up the ramp with a sharp metallic thud and then closing the heavy compartment door behind him.

Rachel called after him once he reappeared at the caboose.

"Try not to jump *in front* of the snowmobile."

She flashed him a grin.

Jacques raised a hand in mock salute and disappeared inside. Moments later, the train's throttle roared to life.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It surged forward, gaining speed fast, rails humming, steel rattling, snow spraying.

At full speed, Jacques reached the side door of the caboose. He looked once toward the snowmobile gliding alongside, Black Paw's ears flapping slightly in the wind.

Then… he jumped.

Rachel had been riding the snowmobile as close to the tracks as the terrain would allow, veering on and off course through patches of rough ice and powder.

Up ahead, Jacques hit the ground hard, his body tumbling across the snow before coming to a stop in a crumpled heap.

He didn't move.

The ice was harder than he'd expected. His head rang. He needed a moment to remember where, even *who*, he was.

Rachel swerved and braked just in time, barely missing his skull with the front of the snowmobile.

A perfect mirror of their original meet-cute… or rather, *meet-crash*.

She leapt off the machine and knelt beside him.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Jacques! Jacques!" she called, shaking him by the shoulder, then slapping his cheek. "*Coussssteau! Couteau! Jacko! Hello? Bonjour?*"

Black Paw remained firmly seated on the snowmobile, eyes narrowed, looking deeply unimpressed.

Either he thought Jacques was faking it…

Or he didn't care.

Or he just really liked riding on heated seats through the tundra and wanted no part of trudging through snow again, especially not to rescue a Frenchman with poor reflexes.

Finally, Jacques groaned and opened his eyes. He blinked at the snowmobile's front end hovering inches from his head.

"Are you *trying* to run me over, *Jelly*?" he asked, wincing. "Thank you for waiting. You could've just left me out here."

Rachel smirked.

"Both good ideas. Running you over *and* leaving you to freeze."

She turned to the dog.

"Black Paw, remind me to do that next time."

Black Paw yawned.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel stood and extended her hand.

Jacques reached up, grasping it gratefully, only for her to let go mid-pull. He fell flat into the snow with a muffled *thud*.

She burst out laughing.

He groaned.

She offered her hand again, still chuckling.

“Thank you,” he muttered, brushing snow from his coat. “I think I’ll try to stand on my own this time.”

He managed to get upright, albeit unsteadily. His head still spun. He reached for Rachel’s shoulder to steady himself, then took a careful step toward the snowmobile, aiming for the front seat just behind Black Paw.

The dog turned, bared his teeth, and let out a low growl.

Jacques rolled his eyes.

“Sorry, Jacques,” Rachel said, amused. “Black Paw and I are driving. You're welcome to ride behind me.”

She nodded toward the cart. “The cart’s going to take a beating. I don’t think you should sit there. I don’t want you to crush the cubs.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She climbed onto the driver's seat behind Black Paw and started the engine. Jacques climbed on behind her, arms wrapping around her waist.

"Hold on tight, Jacques," she said over the rumble.

"I intend to," he replied, voice low in her ear.

Black Paw nestled comfortably into position, alert and ready. Rachel gunned the engine, and the snowmobile launched across the tundra, carving a fast, winding path toward the mountain ridge overlooking the tracks.

The train was already far ahead, a faint blur of motion in the distance.

Rachel scanned the landscape. She recognized the mountain range from the day before, while riding the cable car past the frozen waterfalls.

Up here, they would get a clear view of the railway, and anyone following or waiting ahead.

They climbed as far as the slope allowed, until it turned steep and treacherous, a frozen wall of jagged rock and glacial ice.

Rachel killed the engine.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Together, they worked quickly to build a snow wall, packing it high enough to hide the snowmobile, the cart, and themselves from view.

Then they took turns with binoculars, watching the train glide through the white valley far below.

“Do you still think leaving the train was the right move, Jacques?” Rachel asked.

“Yes,” he responded.

The storm had passed, but the sky was darkening. Twilight was coming, brief as Arctic night might be, it would give cover to enemies and make reaching the Vastan security station harder.

They should be further along if they wanted to be safe.

But for now, they watched. And waited.

###

Earlier, just as the train had pulled away from the station behind the zoo, Hector turned to Zaid.

“Aren’t you going to chase after them?”

Zaid didn’t flinch. His eyes were fixed on the rails in front of them.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I had time to scout the area during the blizzard," he said. "I know the terrain. It'll be faster to cut them off later."

He glanced toward the zoo entrance.

"First, we sweep this place. The zoo, the resort, all of it. If she hid the bioweapon, it's here somewhere. We'll need *every man* you brought."

Hector didn't hesitate. He raised his radio to his mouth.

"Send *everybody*," he barked to his second-in-command aboard the ship. "Search every damn nook and cranny. Melt the ice if you have to. Use everything we've got, hairdryers, flamethrowers, curling irons, cigarette lighters, I don't care. Just find it. Careful, I'm told there were wolves, a bear and a caribou in the zoo. They disappeared."

Zaid stood still, his mind grinding through timelines.

"She didn't stop anywhere between the cable car end station and the zoo," he muttered.

"Patricia radioed that in. The woman came straight here on her sled. We already searched the sled, found the dogs locked in a cage. Collars tagged. It was hers. Samuk's shop. They even

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

had a customer number and initials. Nothing else."

He looked toward the far end of the tracks, lost in thought.

"We didn't find a trace of the bioweapon. Which means she either hid it *inside* the zoo… or somewhere between the cave and the cable car, when she disappeared in the blizzard earlier today," Zaid continued.

Juju limped up to them, her coat stained, her side stitched and sore. She swallowed another handful of painkillers, barely wincing as they went down.

Neither man asked how she was feeling.

Zaid didn't even look at her.

"What do you think, Juju?" he asked. "You've got a read on her. What's *my woman* thinking?"

Juju suppressed a bitter smile.

My woman, Zaid had said. As if he owned Rachel. As if the rest of them weren't standing here bleeding for a prize he'd already claimed in his head.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid had never shown *her* this kind of interest. That would not have been a good sign anyway. She didn't envy Zaid's *crush* on Rachel.

Rachel was going to die. But not before Zaid spiraled into another long tirade, circling around her tied to a chair. Another twisted tailspin. Reciting yet another monologue while torturing *his woman*. He probably had been rehearsing every word since he first laid eyes on her.

"She's resourceful, that one," Juju said. "Slips through cracks that weren't even there a minute ago. Even when we get fresh intel, she finds a way to vanish."

She scanned the tracks.

"Where's Patricia?" she asked. "She's not the type to let go. She's tracking Rachel down, no doubt."

Zaid answered flatly.

"We don't know. The dead blonde in the zoo was Kate *'Somebody'*… Vastan's head of security. We found her badge."

He exhaled, annoyed.

"No sign of Patricia. But I wouldn't be surprised if she's already out there, finding a way to board the train *herself*," Zaid said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Hector crossed his arms.

"She *would* do that," he muttered.

The wind picked up again, rattling the fences of the zoo.

Their prey had slipped away, but not far enough.

Not yet.

"Take four men," Zaid said, turning to Juju. "Head to the cable car station. Start your search there. Then retrace the woman's steps, check all the cable cars, sweep the abandoned mine, and make your way to the DEW station. The two facilities might be connected underground."

Juju nodded.

She had shared her findings from the bear cave with Zaid when she caught up to him after the blizzard: the vials, the documents, and the bracelet from the mummified baby's wrist.

But she wasn't sure if Zaid had told Hector.

And she wasn't about to bring it up.

If Zaid hadn't shared the intel, he had his reasons. If he had wanted her to hand over the materials to Hector, he would've told her to do so. She thought that Zaid saved up what she had found in case they never found anything else.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Hector was no more forgiving than Zaid. They had to deliver something.

Zaid turned to another group of men.

"You. With me."

He checked his map, then pointed to the ridge beyond the zoo.

"We have a rendezvous with a train. Gear up… we'll use the snowcats and snowmobiles from the resort's construction crews and guards. If we move fast, we can intercept them by the waterfalls."

He paused.

"You coming with us?" he asked Hector.

Hector adjusted his cashmere scarf and looked toward the zoo entrance.

"I'll oversee the search here," he said. "Let you know if we find anything… so we can all get the hell out of this freezer."

He turned back, voice pointed.

"You're *sure* she didn't have the bioweapon when she boarded the train? You said the man with her wasn't carrying anything?"

Zaid nodded. "The man on the train is Jacques Couteau. He wasn't carrying a thing."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Jacques," Hector repeated, smiling. "Who tipped *him* off?"

"Igor. I would guess."

Hector narrowed his eyes. "Should I have hired Igor instead of you, Zaid?"

Zaid smirked.

"Igor likes the cold. I don't. Which is why I want to end this faster than Igor would've wanted to," Zaid said. "He'd be out there drinking vodka chilled by the wind, rolling half-naked in the snow, enjoying himself."

Hector studied him for a moment.

"You've got a point there," he said.

"Jacques is good, Zaid. Should I be worried?" Hector asked.

Zaid gave a slow smile.

"Rachel also has a dog," Zaid said. "From what I've seen, the animal's way smarter than the Frenchman. I wouldn't worry about Jacques. I would worry about the dog."

Hector opened his mouth to ask something.

"No, the dog wasn't carrying anything either," Zaid said, cutting him off.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He turned and walked off, his team falling in behind him.

The wind picked up again, sweeping snow across the ground in twisting spirals. The hunt was back on.

Juju departed with her team, moving straight through the frozen lake toward the cable car station.

Zaid led his men in the same direction at first, but soon split off. They pushed forward on snowmobiles and snowcats, bypassing the cable car station entirely. Their target: the waterfalls.

According to Zaid's calculations, even at full speed, Jacques and Rachel wouldn't reach the pass before he and his team could get there first.

They would be waiting.

###

Kate had quietly slipped away, circling back toward the zoo's entrance.

There, parked out front, was Patricia's snowmobile. The tank was almost empty.

She grabbed the helmet Patricia had left behind, slipped it on, and walked away without looking back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Her hope was to reach the resort's airport tower and contact the remaining security team stationed at the Vastan headquarters before Hector's men got there.

She could tell they were thoroughly searching the resort.

She made her way to the control tower, climbed the narrow stairs, and tried to power up the comms.

Nothing.

The equipment had been smashed. Deliberately. She was hoping she could send an anonymous email… No luck.

Frustrated, Kate descended the steps and scanned the snowy resort grounds.

Hector's men were everywhere now, sweeping the area door to door, crate to crate.

She slipped into a small maintenance shack… The one Mariam had stayed in waiting for Igor's jet to land.

Inside, she spotted Mariam's snowmobile. She checked the fuel gauge.

She pulled a jerrycan from one of the shelves.

She filled up the tank.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

It would get her to the DEW station, and from there, she was confident she could contact her team.

Kate fired up the engine.

Then, with a roar, she rammed through the shack's door, shattering wood and snow, knocking two of Hector's men flat to the ground.

She tore through the resort, cutting across icy walkways, skidding toward the frozen lake. Then she veered off, taking a tight shortcut, aiming straight at the DEW station.

By the time the two men groaned and rolled over, she was long gone.

One of them grabbed his radio.

"Mr. Vector," he said breathlessly. "Someone just took off from the resort on a snowmobile. Should we chase after them?"

Hector's voice came back instantly.

"Yes!!!" Hector ordered. "Shoot them, search them, get me my weapon."

###

Juju arrived at the cable car station with the four men assigned to her by Zaid.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The wind had died down, leaving the place eerily quiet. The frozen lake below the station lay flat and glassy. Juju scanned the area once, then motioned her team forward.

“Search everything,” she said. “Inside. Outside. Cable cars. Structural supports. If she hid anything, it’s here.”

They split up.

The men combed through the station building, opened storage lockers, tore apart benches, checked under platforms and snowbanks. Others moved through the cable cars one by one, flashlights sweeping floors, ceilings, under seats.

Nothing.

Certain they hadn’t missed a hiding spot, Juju ordered them to join her into a cable car and they travelled along the line toward the station near the abandoned mine, just short of the DEW facility.

At that station, they repeated the process.

Every cable car. Every maintenance hatch. Every inch of the platform.

Still nothing.

Juju frowned.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“She didn’t leave it here,” she said. “Move to the mine.”

The mine entrance yawned open like a wound in the rock.

Juju led the team inside.

Rachel had passed through here hours earlier, moving fast, working with purpose, after leaving the DEW station and before heading for the cable car.

Rachel had stripped down storage cabinets inside the DEW station.

She had found military-grade blasting caps. Old but functional detonation cord. Emergency demolition charges meant to seal tunnels during Cold War containment scenarios.

She had checked labels. Tested continuity with a handheld meter, part of the equipment still stored up.

She had smiled grimly.

The first man stepped forward too confidently.

He didn’t see the thin wire stretched ankle-high across the tunnel floor, dark against darker rock.

He took one more step.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

CLICK.

The charge detonated from the wall at hip height.

The explosion was precise, directional.

It cut him in half.

The blast slammed his upper body into the tunnel wall and scattered the rest across the floor in a red, steaming arc.

The mine rang with the concussion.

The remaining three men froze.

Juju dropped to a knee instantly, weapon up.

"STOP MOVING," she shouted. "TRIP WIRES."

They advanced again, but now painfully slow.

Now they were looking for the bioweapon and for explosives. No chance they could miss finding the bioweapon if it was in the mine.

Rachel had crouched low, anchoring detonation cord into drilled holes along the rock face.

She had staggered charges, some pressure-triggered, some wired in series, some deliberately visible.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She had left *choices*.

She had wanted pursuers cautious.

She had wanted them slower.

She had wanted them *feeling safe* at times while she made sure there were no safe places in the mine.

One man tried to step over a wire.

He succeeded.

The second wire, higher, angled, caught his knee.

The blast came from above this time.

Rock, metal, and then bone rained down. The tunnel ceiling partially collapsed, crushing him before he could scream.

Another man panicked.

He turned to retreat.

His heel hit a pressure plate hidden beneath loose gravel.

The explosion took his legs and slammed him backward into Juju, knocking her flat, her head hitting rocks.

Silence followed, broken only by dripping water and settling dust.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Juju coughed, ears ringing, blood running down the side of her face.

She crawled forward anyway.

Rachel had set lower yield charges, not meant to kill immediately. Meant to stop.

Juju dragged herself toward the faint glow ahead, the direction of the DEW station.

She was bleeding badly now, breath ragged.

She saw it too late.

The final wire snapped under her palm.

The blast threw her sideways into the rock wall.

Not fatal.

But devastating.

When the dust cleared, Juju lay half-conscious on the tunnel floor, blood pooling beneath her, one leg twisted unnaturally, ribs shattered.

All four of her men were dead.

Rachel's traps had worked exactly as intended.

Juju tried to move.

Couldn't.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Her vision narrowed.

The mine swallowed her in darkness as she slipped into unconsciousness, just short of the DEW station.

###

Kate arrived at the DEW station not long after Juju and her team began their search of the cable car station overlooking the frozen lake.

She knew the terrain well. She sped all the way.

The snow had started falling again.

She parked Mariam's snowmobile outside the DEW's main door and stepped off, listening.

Faintly… two snowmobiles in the distance.

She grimaced.

"I didn't knock Hector's guys out long enough," she muttered. "They're getting close."

She moved fast. Punched in her access code.

The lock blinked green. She pulled the heavy door open.

Inside, the DEW station was dim and cold. But alive.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate made her way down the narrow corridor toward the control room. The lights flickered as she entered.

A soft chime.

“Welcome, Kate,” came Charlie’s voice… calm, genderless, ever-aware.

“We need to talk,” Charlie said.

“In a minute,” Kate replied, brushing snow from her coat as she crossed to the console.

“Charlie,” she asked, frowning, “Has the weather affected communications from the Dew to the security station? Can I send an anonymous email to John Glenn?”

“Radio and phone signals are currently offline,” Charlie replied. “The weather is interfering, but the pattern is… unnatural.”

Kate turned. “Unnatural how?”

“Signal disruption suggests deliberate jamming. Not just atmospheric interference.”

Kate nodded, unsurprised. “Hector.”

She sat down and typed fast. Routed through a proxy. Then sent an encrypted S.O.S. email to John Glenn, using a masked address. Subject line flagged as urgent.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

LOCATION: DEW STATION. SEND EXTRACTION.

"If nothing else, maybe it'll get through eventually," she murmured.

She stood and faced the room.

"Okay, Charlie. Now you can tell me everything. Wait! One quick thing before that," Kate said. "Two riders are approaching. They're after me."

"They're getting close," Charlie said.

Kate's voice sharpened. "Do we have any systems left that can stop them before they come too close to the door? I am not in the mood for more hand-to-hand combat today…"

A pause.

"There is a failsafe protocol available. It's not officially sanctioned," Charlie said.

Kate smirked. "Perfect. Show me."

###

Zaid led his team across the tundra. The snow had stopped falling.

The air was sharp and still.

He checked his watch, then the map.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Ten minutes.

He'd been right.

The train would reach the waterfalls in less than ten minutes.

The sun lingered low on the horizon, bleeding orange into blue as stars began to pierce the sky. Zaid studied the terrain ahead, ice shelves, rock faces, the narrow corridor where the tracks curved beside the frozen waterfalls.

He needed the train to stop.

A controlled explosion could do it. Just enough to damage the rails. A derailment into deep snow would be survivable… *if* the driver didn't see it in time and slow down.

But explosions created variables.

And Zaid needed Rachel alive.

Alive, contained, and isolated.

Once he had her, the rest would follow.

If the bioweapon wasn't on the train, and he suspected it wasn't as he had told Hector, he knew exactly how he would extract the truth. Pressure. Time. Fear. The slow dismantling of certainty. Fun use of torture.

He was confident *his woman* would talk.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Everyone did.

He glanced toward the ridge line, imagining her riding the train, resourceful, defiant, already planning her next move. He'd been thinking about her since the moment he'd seen her disappear over the hills with her dogs.

Too capable to underestimate. Too stubborn to rush.

Jacques and the dog were complications.

He considered eliminating them immediately, then dismissed the idea.

Leverage mattered.

Threats mattered.

People broke faster when they believed someone else would pay the price for their silence.

He turned to his men.

"Do *not* kill anyone on that train," he ordered. "Not the man. Not the dog. Certainly not the woman. I need them all alive."

They nodded.

Ahead, his team finished building the obstruction: a dense wall of packed snow and ice, placed precisely on the curve of the track

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

where visibility dropped and braking distance shrank.

No explosion after all.

Cleaner.

Quieter. The way he liked it best. Unless the noise came from people screaming.

Zaid stepped back and waited.

The train was coming.

The train tore down the tracks at full speed, snow and ice whipping around it, its wake scattering powder into the air like smoke.

Before jumping off, Jacques had turned down the snow blowers, making it harder to see the caboose for anyone planning to shoot at it.

The train never slowed.

The engine slammed into the wall of packed snow and ice.

Metal shrieked.

The train jumped the rails, skidding violently sideways before crashing onto the frozen waterfalls. Steel crumpled. Windows shattered. The sound echoed through the valley, then fell abruptly silent.

Zaid's men rushed forward, weapons raised.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

They forced open doors. Searched the cab. The cargo compartments.

Empty.

“No one onboard,” one of them called.

Zaid stepped closer, scanning the wreckage.

“Search everywhere,” he ordered. “Just in case the bioweapon is here.”

His eyes narrowed.

“That dog…” he muttered. “That dog is very smart.”

He lifted his gaze, sweeping the ridgelines beyond the falls.

Nothing.

No movement. No silhouettes. Just ice, rock, and snow.

Then a hand touched his shoulder.

“Up there, Zaid.”

Zaid raised his binoculars.

High above the tracks, near the ridge, shapes moved against the white.

“It’s them,” Zaid said calmly. “Good. Still alive.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

One of his men adjusted his rifle.

"Want me to take them out?"

Zaid lowered the binoculars slowly.

"I need them *alive*," he said, his voice flat. "All of them."

He thought for a moment, then snapped into motion.

"What do we have that can bring them down without killing them?" He turned sharply. "Something that punches a hole. Disrupts lift."

His eyes flicked back to the sky.

"Get me the rocket launcher. Drones. Anything."

He pointed upward.

"I want them on the ground."

A pause.

"But breathing."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XX

I Love the View from here…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
High up in the sky
February 14, Present-Day

Rachel and Jacques watched as the train derailed spectacularly into the frozen waterfall.

"It won't take long for Zaid to figure out where we are," Jacques said. "This is as far as the snowmobile will take us."

He glanced up at the ridge behind them.

"We're gonna have to climb from here…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Nope," Rachel cut in, still focused through her binoculars, watching as Zaid's men searched the wreckage.

"We're flying."

Jacques blinked. Then turned to her with a grin.

"Tell me more, Jelly Puppy," he said.

Rachel didn't answer. She just walked to the cart, reached in and pulled out two tightly packed parasailing bags. She tossed one to him, then slipped the straps of the other over her shoulders.

"You're carrying the cubs," she said, checking the lines. "Black Paw's not flying with you."

She glanced at the dog.

"He's jealous. Though I've got no idea why."

Jacques looked at Black Paw. The dog was staring at him smugly. Jacques swore he saw a smile.

"I'm good with kids," Jacques said.

Rachel reached into another bag. She tied together a spare rope and jacket straps into a modified harness. With practiced efficiency, she secured Black Paw against her chest like a living, furry battering ram.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The dog didn't resist. In fact, he looked *thrilled*. First in line, still not pulling anything.

She slung the machine gun across her back, clipped extra ammo pouches to her belt, and snapped the release cord into place. Wind gusted up the slope, rattling loose stones behind her.

Rachel pulled the lightweight carbon helmet over her head, tucking stray strands of hair into the lining before sealing the chin strap tight. She tapped the side panel. A green light blinked alive.

"Comms check," she said, her voice calm inside the mic.

A beat of static.

"Loud and clear," Jacques answered in her ear.

She adjusted the earpiece beneath the padding.

"On my mark," she said.

Rachel took a few steps back, then sprinted forward. At the edge of the slope, she pulled hard on the cords.

The chute snapped open with a sharp *whuff*, canvas catching air, and in a burst of lift, she

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

rose off the ground, gliding into the cold, open sky.

Jacques followed, a little less graceful.

He had the cubs strapped to his chest in their carriers, two rifles awkwardly crossed on his back, and a survival pack stuffed with whatever he could grab from the cart. His parachute opened cleanly, though it took him a moment to steady.

Soon he was airborne behind Rachel, catching the same gust, wings spread wide over the ridgeline.

For a brief moment, Rachel thought about her last jump… Chamonix, France. Bright skies, sharp cliffs, the clean quiet of alpine air. Diving to escape people… Somehow, relaxing dives weren't in the cards these days.

Jacques drifted closer.

"Where are we heading?" he said. "We need to get *away* from these lunatics!"

"You dropped out, what?" she asked.

"Where are we heading?" He repeated louder, this time gesturing, pointing to Zaid and his men. "We need to get *away* from these lunatics!"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Just kidding Jacques. No need to shout in my ears. I heard you just fine. I left something at the DEW station," Rachel said. "Need to reach it before my admirers do."

Jacques narrowed his eyes.

"A *bioweapon* by any chance?"

"Snacks," she replied. "For the cubs. And Black Paw."

Jacques exhaled. "Could use a snack myself. Was Kate on a diet or something? Didn't see food in the cart."

"There's food at the DEW," Rachel called back, adjusting her angle to ride a current.

Jacques sighed with relief.

"Fantastic. A haunted military station in the middle of nowhere. I love dinner with ambiance."

Below them, the world curved white and blue, tundra, ice, jagged peaks, and a line of men formed at the crash site, scrambling to aim weapons skyward.

But for now, Rachel, Jacques, Black Paw, and the cubs were aloft, riding wind, silence, and the growing tension of what came next.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel led the glide, her parasail cutting a steady path through the thinning wind. Ahead, nestled below a ridge, was the abandoned mine entrance, just a few yards from the DEW station and the cable car outpost.

That's where they'd land.

From there, they'd go underground, retracing Rachel's earlier route through the tunnels, back to the DEW where she and Charlie had hidden the bioweapon.

She lifted her binoculars mid-flight, scanning the valley below.

###

Zaid and his team were tracking them, watching from snowmobiles and snowcats, binoculars raised. Waiting. Calculating.

"They know we're up here," she muttered. "But now we know they won't shoot me down."

She glanced back at Jacques.

"Stay close behind me. I don't want them to hurt the cubs."

Jacques adjusted his harness and gave a tight smile.

"The little *babies*," he said. "Don't worry. We'll be right behind you… on top."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel's brow furrowed.

"Did you pack grenades?"

"Actually, yes," Jacques said, reaching for his vest.

He pulled the pin on one and let it drop.

Rachel whipped around in midair. "I was hoping you'd *wait* until we were directly over them, and maybe hit something useful. Like a snowmobile. Or a snowcat. Or, I don't know… *mercenaries*?"

"We don't have an unlimited supply of grenades, Jacques." She added.

Below them, the grenade landed off-target, far from any riders. It sank silently into the snow.

Silence.

Then… *BOOM.*

The slope cracked.

A thunderous *crack* rolled across the mountain. The explosion triggered an avalanche, snow sheared loose from a ledge and began to roar downhill.

Zaid's men panicked.

Snowmobiles scattered, engines screaming.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Two riders veered into each other and crashed. Two more were swept away, buried in seconds under the collapsing wave of snow and ice.

Rachel watched, impressed.

"Okay," she muttered. "Nice shot, *Coussteau*."

They continued descending, wind thinning, the mine coming into range.

They were still far above Zaid's team, but Zaid wasn't finished.

He raised a compact missile launcher. A *pop* echoed below.

The round screamed upward and clipped Jacques' parasail, ripping a jagged hole through the canvas.

His glide snapped into a spin.

Jacques spiraled violently in the air.

"My cubs!" Rachel shouted.

She dove.

She caught up fast, maneuvered just beneath him, then wedged her boots up under his shoulders and *lifted*, stabilizing his fall. His face

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

landed squarely against her belly, just under Black Paw's fuzzy bulk.

Black Paw blinked but held steady, used to aerial absurdity by now.

Jacques exhaled into her jacket.

"Our first dance," he said, voice muffled. "Reminds me of dancing with my mother as a kid. Standing on her feet, head pressed to her belly… though I was much shorter then. Not much lighter."

"You were a pudgy kid?" Rachel asked, adjusting her stance mid-air.

"Couldn't resist one more tartine," Jacques said dreamily. "Bread. Butter. *Confiture de fraises du jardin*. Chocolate. All good things."

"You're hungry, aren't you."

"Starving," he said. "It's the mountain air."

"You're making *me* hungry. Talk about something else, better yet, *don't* talk. You are between a woman's legs. What would grandpa Cousteau advise?"

"Listen to the *directrice*, of course," Jacques said.

"Are you a socializer, Jacques?" Rachel asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I like a good party," he admitted. "Meeting people… Nice people…"

Rachel rolled her eyes as they dropped lower toward the mine entrance.

"Perfect," she said. "I'm falling through the sky with a French extrovert."

On the ground, Zaid squinted up at the two descending figures.

They were tangled in the same parasail now, Rachel supporting Jacques mid-air. Too risky to fire again. They were still too high, drifting right over his position.

He lowered his weapon and muttered to himself.

Maybe Juju would get lucky and find the bioweapon. Maybe Hector would stumble on it at the resort. But those were long shots.

What wasn't a long shot? Rachel. *His* woman.

And she was letting another man get far too close.

Zaid smiled coldly.

It was time she met him.

Next to him, his team was in disarray.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The avalanche had taken out most of the snowmobiles. They'd recovered nearly everyone, except two men who'd vanished under the snow. No time to dig.

"*Move!*" Zaid snapped. "We're not losing them!"

Snowcats revved.

Men clung to the outside, hanging on for dear life as the machines growled across the tundra, racing from the waterfalls toward the mine.

###

"I'm going to open my legs," Rachel warned as they approached the ground. "Fall on your back. Don't crush the cubs."

"*Bien sûr, madame la directrice,*" Jacques said. "Here I fall again."

She released him.

He tumbled into the snow with a grunt, landing hard, but not on the cubs, on his back, as ordered.

Rachel touched down, skimming the slope and hitting the ice with precision. She flared her chute just right, barely a stumble.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She unclipped Black Paw. Freed him from his harness. He gave Jacques a long side-eye, trotting off around him like a prince returning home.

Rachel extended her hand.

He waved her off, still flat on his back.

"I just want the cubs," she said.

He groaned, then sat up and passed them over.

"*Merci*," she added, hoisting the bag.

She turned toward the mine entrance.

"Stay behind me," she said. "Step where I step."

Jacques stood, frowning. "Okay, but…"

"I laid explosives all through here," she added, not looking back. "From here to the DEW station."

Jacques's eyes widened.

Black Paw trotted behind them, dead last in the line this time, ears perked, tongue out, careful not to overtake the Frenchman.

Jacques looked toward the waterfalls.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Zaid and his men are on their way," he said. "It will take them a while."

Rachel waited for him and Black Paw at the entrance of the mine. She stepped inside the cold, narrow corridor.

Dark. Silent.

As they moved deeper, they passed the first body.

Then another.

And another.

Juju's team, what was left of it, was strewn through the tunnel, torn by blasts, burned or broken. Rachel stopped often, pausing just long enough to orient herself. The route was rigged. She remembered every pressure plate. Every wire.

Not all the charges had gone off.

There were still plenty to get rid of Zaid and his men, if they didn't pay attention where they stepped.

She pressed forward into the dark.

Zaid would be here soon.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel, Jacques and Black Paw moved deeper into the mine, the walls narrowing around them. Their breath clouded the stale, metallic air.

Then Rachel stopped.

A dark shape lay ahead, slumped against the rock wall, legs twisted unnaturally, one arm soaked in blood.

It was Juju.

She was barely breathing. Unconscious. Face pale beneath a smear of ash and soot. A fine mist of blood had dried at the corner of her mouth.

Rachel crouched beside her, carefully unbuckling Juju's bag.

Inside: a bundle of scorched Japanese field documents, maps, diagrams, chemical formulas, and several intact glass vials, still sealed in protective foam.

Rachel exhaled slowly.

"Looks like she searched the cave and found material I missed."

Jacques hovered beside her.

"Is that part of the bioweapon?"

Rachel nodded.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The vials were intact, but one more shock and they might not be.

She shouldered Juju's bag, her face suddenly tight.

"Let's go," she said. "We're almost there."

They pressed on, winding through the belly of the mine.

Rachel had counted bodies, each corpse a timestamp of her earlier precision. And a warning to whoever followed. There definitely were more traps awaiting Zaid.

At last, the path opened into a jagged cavern of ice and rebar. At the far side stood a weather-beaten steel door, half buried in frost, but unmistakably military.

The hidden entrance to the DEW radar station.

They had arrived.

Jacques helped Rachel heave the heavy steel door open. A hiss of pressure escaped as they crossed the threshold into the belly of the DEW installation.

Black Paw lead the way this time.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel followed, putting one finger over her lips, looking around, hoping Charlie would understand she wanted him to be quiet.

The air inside was warmer, dry. The space felt... strange to Jacques. Like walking into a dream. Or a memory of a dream.

They closed the door behind them.

Rachel locked it and then turned to Jacques with a grin.

"Welcome to the DEW. Imagine the Star Trek holodeck. Now imagine the holodeck had a baby with DARPA, and the kid got locked in a lab with no adult supervision... for years."

Jacques looked around, noting the faint shimmer on the walls, like heat mirage without the heat.

Rachel continued.

"Some of the prototype tech here can render entire objects invisible. Others can generate terrain simulations, manipulate spatial perception... Vastan's been using this place to run wild with R&D. Most of it off-books. No one comes here in the winter."

Jacques raised an eyebrow.

"*J'adore,"* he said, feeling the walls.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“You can create anything you want here,” Rachel said, walking deeper. “It's a playground. Just... not when you’re being hunted by mercs with rocket launchers. You play video games, Jacques?”

He chuckled. “I own a castle. That’s sort of like a game. Totally analog though.”

She turned, surprised.

“A castle? You own one? Where? In France?”

“A ruin, my dad would tell you. In France. But don't be fooled, castles are money pits. The taxes alone could pay for a dozen RVs.”

“Then what are you doing here, chasing ghosts in the Arctic?”

“Making a living. Castles don't pay for themselves. Restorations cost a bundle. And French restoration police are worse than international arms dealers. You can’t plaster a crack without a permit and without using the right material. They’d bring back chamber pots if they could. Eliminate toilets, running water, heating systems. You’d roast chicken in the fire place. Freeze all year round. *La vraie vie de château*. Not a rental for movie stars.”

Rachel laughed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You ever think of downsizing? A small house maybe?"

"I've got my eye on a caravan. Or, a proper RV. A castle-on-wheels. Medieval on the outside, party on the inside." He said. "I love the outside of castles. Very romantic. Dreamy. I played for hours with a cardboard castle when I was a kid. You know, toy knights, kings, queens, princesses, just one prince of course, damsels in distress…"

"Can you fit a wine cellar in a castle RV?" she asked. "A bar?"

"In mine, absolutely. Besides the basic amenities, one section for books. One for wine and spirits. A recliner chair for dreaming."

"No man-cave?"

"I once lived with a woman who made me downsize from a man-cave to a man-cupboard. You learn humility fast. I couldn't find anything in there, socks on top of razors, on top of headphones..."

Rachel smirked, warming to him. "And now?"

"Now I have actual catacombs and dungeons to fix. Plenty of space for my socks and razors, and complete isolation for me-time. I even got

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

lost once. I couldn't find my way out. Of course, I couldn't get a signal on my phone. If there's a collapse, I die under two tons of 13th-century limestone. Totally relaxed though. And renovated following the norms."

They moved farther into the station, their laughter echoing off walls lined with dormant tech. For a moment, they were just two people exploring a fun place.

Rachel hesitated.

She wasn't ready to reveal Charlie's existence to Jacques. Not yet.

"Just because a man goes flying between your legs in midair doesn't mean you can trust him," she thought. "Actually, quite the opposite, *Jelly Puppy*."

She liked that Jacques had given her a nick name.

Still, the temptation tugged at her. She liked him more than she wanted to. And that was always a warning sign, a red flag… In her experience.

An explosion rumbled through the facility, distant, muffled, but close enough to echo.

Jacques looked toward the sound.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Your suitors," he said.

Rachel gave him a look.

"Persistent… Those still alive might be reconsidering meeting me for a date… I hope," she said.

She led him through a corridor and into the *lobby*, the retro-futuristic space designed to resemble a 1920 French luxury hotel lounge.

Orion stood behind the curved bar, six feet of humanoid chrome and plastic, frozen mid-shake with a cocktail shaker in one hand and a lemon twist in the other.

Jacques did a double take.

"Is he real?"

"He's just waiting for someone to order a drink," Rachel said, brushing past the robotic bartender like it was normal.

Jacques followed her through another door into a vast adjacent room.

His eyes widened again. "Okay, now *this* is something."

The center of the room glowed with soft light, an enormous aquarium, starting from the floor but not quite reaching the ceiling, gleaming like a cathedral window. Inside: a treasure chest

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

nestled among rocks at the bottom, shimmering faintly beneath the rippling water, exhaling bubbles every few seconds.

Rachel stepped up to the glass.

Charlie had outdone himself.

Before leaving for the resort, she'd asked him to build a mock aquarium, a visual illusion, to hide what she'd retrieved from the bear cave inside the treasure chest. Now it was real. Fully built. Fully filled. Fully armed.

She knocked gently. The glass was solid. The water shimmered.

A dozen piranhas darted toward her knuckles, sleek, silver-red, bellies glowing like little neon hearts.

"Of course you gave them Valentine's Day colors, Charlie…" she murmured. "Perfect setting for lovers to have dinner."

Jacques looked at the fish from a distance.

"There's a waterproof compartment inside the chest," Rachel said. "Syringes. Documents. Everything I found in the cave. The infamous bioweapon everybody's been chasing me for."

She leaned toward the glass.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"A-plus on protecting the bioweapon, Charlie. But we *do* need to talk about your ideas of romance," she whispered.

The piranhas stared back with unblinking intensity.

Jacques took a slow step backward.

"I'm guessing sushi's not on the menu," he said. "These guys are better than guard dogs."

Black Paw growled. He was guarding the entrance to the room.

Charlie had gone all out.

A table for two stood elegantly set before the main glass panel of the massive aquarium, its soft glow turning the water behind it into a hypnotic, romantic stage.

Red roses spilled from a crystal vase. A heart-shaped box of chocolates lay open beside a tin of orange-dusted dark chocolate truffles. Fresh-baked cookies, some shaped like bear paws, others like famous robots (R2-D2, of course, but also HAL 9000 with a single red candy eye), were arranged on delicate colorful plates. A cluster of lemon-thyme shortbread hearts added a tangy contrast. Nearby, a small platter of glazed figs, honeyed nuts, and Brie with cracked pepper completed the spread, just

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

the kind of brainy comfort food one might choose to share with a woman like Rachel. A matching set of gourmet treats for Black Paw and the cubs waited nearby, including freeze-dried salmon biscuits, shaped like fish, and chewy cinnamon-honey bones shaped like tiny sleds.

There was also a single coupe glass beside a bottle of champagne, and a lone shot glass beside a bottle of tequila. A chilled shaker rested beside a single martini glass, waiting.

Rachel took it all in, touched despite herself.

She smiled.

"Charlie's idea of subtlety," she thought. "I am touched."

She turned around, facing the aquarium.

Jacques stepped up beside her, staring at the piranhas crowding the glass.

"So beautiful… isn't it…" she said, not entirely sure if she meant the aquarium in front of them, the man-eating fish, or something else entirely.

The shimmering glass threw back a soft reflection of them both, side by side. Jacques, leaned slightly toward her, his eyes fixed on the swirling red-bellied fish. Rachel stood more

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

rigidly, arms crossed, expression unreadable, except for the faintest flicker of something unguarded in her eyes.

Behind the glass, the piranhas clustered like crimson sparks beneath the light. But on the surface, it was the reflection that held her gaze.

For a split second, they looked like a couple in a painting. Framed by light. Frozen in a moment that didn't belong in a war.

Rachel blinked and looked away.

She hadn't realized how long it had been since she saw herself standing next to someone and not against them.

Jacques hadn't answered. His gaze was fixed on the fish, but Rachel could swear he was mentally cooking them. He wore the expression of a man flipping through internal cookbooks.

She tilted her head.

"I can't tell if you're mesmerized by the décor… or planning a menu," she said.

"I am ravenous," Jacques said.

Rachel laughed. "I like a man with an appetite. Preferably… a messy eater."

Jacques turned to her, eyes playful, but there was something sincere flickering underneath.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I've been known to wear my food on occasion… I'll try not to bite the chef," he said.

"The fish remind me of my friends in the Amazon Rainforest…" she said, watching the piranhas swirl like living embers.

"You made friends with piranhas?" Jacques asked, amused.

"I'm a man-eater whisperer, Jacques," she replied dryly. "I make friends with all sorts of predators. Haven't you noticed?"

Another explosion echoed faintly through the mine, closer this time.

"We'd better hurry," she said. They'll find a way to get the door open if they survive walking to it.

Rachel crossed to the wall near the aquarium and slid back a tile, revealing a small recessed button. She pressed it. With a low mechanical hum, the treasure chest rose slowly from the bottom of the tank, pushing through the swirling water until it breached the surface. Piranhas scattered from its path.

The bioweapon and documents she had already stashed were safe inside. She would now add the contents of Juju's bag, doubling the risk, doubling the responsibility. But she wasn't going

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

to take the cache with her. Not even with Jacques helping out. As soon as she could get the cubs to a vet, she would vanish from here. Drawing the predators away from the bioweapon.

"Help me up, Jacques, *s'il te plaît*?" she asked, smiling, proud of herself for remembering more French words.

Jacques laced his fingers and crouched. She stepped into his hands, and he boosted her upward.

She climbed onto the edge of the aquarium, wet, slick glass under her palms and feet, and then launched toward the small platform now jutting from the water. The one Charlie had designed to rise with the chest. She trusted his craftsmanship.

She landed cleanly on the platform… then teetered.

Water sloshed. The platform rocked slightly.

Rachel's arms pinwheeled for balance. Below her, the piranhas surged toward the surface.

"Fried-jelly-fuck-fish," Rachel snapped, wobbling again.

Black Paw ran from the door, letting out a low growl, rising onto his hind legs like a sentry,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

front paws against the glass, beside Jacques. He fixed his eyes on one stubborn piranha still facing their direction.

The rest of the school circled below Rachel, tightly packed, red-bellied and ravenous. A twitch away from a feeding frenzy.

Jacques hoisted himself onto the aquarium's edge, extending his hand toward Rachel.

"All good, Cousssteau. Thank you," she said, steadying herself and flashing him a grateful grin.

The fish below churned in anticipation.

"I guess Charlie forgot to feed you guys," she muttered under her breath.

"Who's Charlie?" Jacques asked.

Rachel didn't answer. She crouched, unlocked the chest's waterproof compartment, and carefully slid in the sealed bag she'd been carrying on her shoulder, Juju's prize. The bioweapon fragments, Japanese documents, maybe the key to a global catastrophe, maybe a lie. Either way, too dangerous to carry any farther.

She sealed the chest and stood.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I’ll take your hand now, Cousssteau,” she said, smiling as she prepared to jump.

Jacques caught her firmly and helped her down onto dry ground. She stepped off the edge of the tank.

Rachel tapped the wall button again. The platform began its slow descent, and the chest lowered into the depths with a metallic sigh. Bubbles shimmered up through the water, rising in rhythm, back on their timed loop.

The piranhas followed the chest down like disappointed gamblers leaving an empty roulette table. Then they turned, rushing to the front glass panel, staring at Rachel, Jacques, and Black Paw with glittering, unblinking eyes.

Rachel slid the tile back into place, hiding the button from view. Seamless. Invisible. You wouldn’t know it was there unless someone showed you.

She didn’t plan on showing anyone.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XXI

Don't Eat the Sled Cookies…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
The Aquarium Room in the DEW
February 14, Present-Day

Jacques pulled out one of the chairs by the candlelit table, gesturing with exaggerated gallantry.

"Madame," he said, sweeping his hand toward the seat.

"Mademoiselle… Yes, I'm single, Jacques… Don't get any ideas," Rachel corrected with a smirk as she sat. "And we don't have much time."

Jacques started walking around the table.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Didn't you say this place was nearly impossible to breach?"

"By *bears,* no doubt," she replied. "Armed mercenaries? Not so sure. They punched a hole in your chute earlier."

Before Jacques made his way to the second chair opposite Rachel, Black Paw leapt onto it. He sat like a dignified dinner guest, tail curled neatly around one paw. He sniffed the air, then the cookies.

Jacques pulled a white napkin from the table and draped it over his forearm.

"*What can I get for you two lovebirds?*" he said in mock waiter-tone. "Apologies… no fish on the menu tonight. We're also fresh out of caribou… I saw it bolt out of the zoo earlier."

He leaned in.

"But we do have… chocolate, and champagne."

"No chocolate for my date," Rachel said, tilting her head toward Black Paw. "Only dog treats. And for the cubbies… Well, I haven't had a chance to look up what they should eat at their age… Dessert, maybe? Is anyone ever too young for dessert? The salmon-biscuits might be too hard for them…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I have to say," Jacques nodded thoughtfully. "You *did* promise us treats while we were flying through the sky like deranged circus performers. You're a woman of your word, *Mademoiselle*."

He glanced at the table.

"But tell me, why just one champagne coupe? One tequila glass? One martini glass?" He asked. "Don't tell me, no alcohol for your date…"

Before Rachel could answer, Black Paw jumped off the chair. He bounded several feet away toward the door, stopped abruptly, hackles raised, and growled low in his throat, ears trained toward the hallway.

Rachel and Jacques froze.

Rachel's hand moved to her gun.

Jacques instinctively grabbed the cubs' bag and slung it over his shoulder. He reached toward his holster… But didn't make it.

Three men stormed into the room. Three men in white tactical gear, their machine guns already aimed.

"Weapons on the floor! Now!"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel didn't flinch. Her eyes flicked to Black Paw. He was coiled like a spring, ready to pounce.

"*Come here, lover,*" she said calmly.

Black Paw held his growl, padded back to her side, and sat, tense but obedient.

One of the men raised a radio to his mouth.

"Zaid, we've got them. Large room. Twenty feet past the junction where we split. On the right. They were on a date, I think. Her and the dog. The guy was serving them."

He paused and sighed.

"We need to get out of the cold, Zaid. It's making people weird," the man said.

A few minutes later, Zaid arrived, casually, like he was arriving late to a dinner reservation. He scanned the surreal Valentine's Day scene: the glittering aquarium, roses, chocolates, dog treats, champagne. Rachel and Jacques stood, hands raised. Black Paw sat protectively by Rachel's leg, silent now but seething.

Zaid tilted his head in mock appreciation.

"*Hmmm…* I saw a nice room along the way that I thought would be perfect for a little chat. But this…" He gestured to the table. "This is

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

much better. Romantic. Intimate. Slightly insane."

He smiled. "Please, sit."

Jacques didn't move.

Rachel didn't blink.

One of Zaid's men stepped forward and grabbed the soft carrier bag slung over Jacques' shoulder. He unzipped it and held it open for Zaid to see.

Three drowsy cubs blinked up from inside.

Zaid frowned. "That's not what we're looking for."

Another mercenary stepped toward Black Paw, rope in hand.

Zaid turned to Rachel, amused. "You might want to tell your dog to be nice."

Rachel kept her voice steady.

"Don't worry, *Charlie*," she said, loudly to the dog. "Everything's fine. Just listen to me. Follow my voice. Do as I say, *Charlie*."

Black Paw held position, muscles taut. Waiting.

Rachel's eyes darted subtly to the ceiling. Then to the walls. Then back to Zaid.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She frowned slightly.

"How did you get in?" She asked.

"We have all sorts of toys," Zaid responded. "You'll enjoy some of them in a minute."

She had signaled Charlie to be quiet but maybe he could have warned her somehow.

"Technology…" She thought. "Setting this room up must have worn Charlie out."

Black Paw tilted his head, ears twitching as he studied Rachel's face. There was a flicker of canine curiosity in his eyes, but something deeper too. Understanding. He seemed to grasp that Rachel wasn't just speaking to him. She was trying to reach someone else.

He didn't bark. He didn't growl. He stayed still, watching. Listening.

Jacques, for his part, remained impassive. His pulse barely moved. He was no rookie. Whether Rachel had just renamed her dog mid-crisis, was cracking under pressure, or communicating in code, it didn't matter. Never let the opposition know something's off. Black Paw had simply become *Charlie.* Fine. So be it.

Rachel's instincts whispered doubt. Were Zaid and the six men in front of her everyone that was left of his team. Were others in the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

DEW, sweeping the endless halls, checking the labs, stumbling into illusions.

Of the six mercenaries flanking Zaid, four kept their rifles trained directly on Rachel, Jacques, and Black Paw. One stood near the cubs, his weapon shakily aimed at the unzipped bag. The last was busy stripping the belts, holsters, and extra ammo from Rachel and Jacques, then binding their hands and feet to the chairs with military-grade cord.

Jacques didn't resist. Rachel didn't flinch.

From the cub bag, a small round ear popped out. One of the cubs poked its head up sleepily, blinking at the man pointing a gun at it. Then it yawned and tried to climb out.

The merc recoiled.

"*Back in the bag!*" he barked, flipping the cover closed like he was trapping a snake. He fumbled the zipper shut, looking deeply unsettled, like the cubs might be venomous, radioactive, or both.

Zaid ignored him.

He took a step forward, hands behind his back, smiling with unearned calm.

"I've been waiting to meet you," he said to Rachel. "You are not easy to catch."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel stared at him. Her silence was a wall.

Zaid tilted his head.

"What is your name?"

Rachel's lips curled slightly.

"*Nobody.*"

Zaid grinned like she'd handed him a puzzle to solve.

"A woman educated in Greek mythology," he said. "I love torturing intellectuals. I once had a conversation with a professor from Harvard…"

Jacques rolled his eyes.

"I know who you are, Jacques," Zaid said, turning toward him like a cat who'd just cornered a bird.

"The Frenchman with his nose in everybody's business… and a crumbling castle for a home. And now, a waiter?"

He flashed a grin, then looked back at Rachel.

"Did Jacques tell you about his *château*, Miss Nobody?"

"We just met," Rachel replied. "I failed to run him over twice. I'm still thinking I should shoot him. What do you think?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid laughed, genuinely amused.

"Interesting dating app you two are using. Please let me know how to download it. The *Black Widow* app? First date: hit him with a snowmobile. Second date: have someone shoot at him in a blizzard. Third date: lure him into sky diving as missiles fly by. Fourth date: dinner by an aquarium full of piranhas, where he serves you and your favorite dog, before you feed him to the fish."

Zaid strolled toward the aquarium and rapped on the glass. The red-bellied piranhas darted forward, agitated by the vibration.

He leaned in and bared his teeth, as if to mimic them.

He turned back to Rachel.

Zaid tilted his head slightly, studying her.

"I might even pay for such an app," he said. "Not the usual swiping nonsense. Something real. Something immersive."

He gestured vaguely in the air as if manipulating a hologram.

"Imagine it. A platform that builds you as an avatar from your biometric data. Full-body scan, voice pattern, gait analysis. AI predicts how you move, how you laugh, how you fight." He

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

smiled faintly. “It could generate entire environments. Arctic wind simulations. Desert heat. A burning city.”

He looked at Jacques.

“You meet in a digital terrain. Not over wine. Over survival.”

His voice lowered.

“You see each other as enhanced versions. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it lets you choose. Real face. Game skin. Mythic form. Hunter and prey.”

A pause.

“And the system tracks compatibility under stress. Heart rate spikes. Micro-expressions. Who hesitates. Who lies…”

He leaned back slightly.

“I would want full interaction. Physics engine. Tactical realism. If I pull a trigger at his avatar, I want impact response. Blood simulation. Sound design.” His eyes sharpened. “Consequences. Something that really tells him: You’re the worst date ever!”

He looked back at Rachel.

“Tell me. In your version… did you win him? Or did he survive you?”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Silly me…" Zaid said. "I thought threatening to shoot your French waiter might soften you up. Make you tell me what I want to know."

He gave a tiny shrug, almost apologetic.

"Hmm. Sorry, Jacques. This won't go well for you."

He gave the faintest nod.

One of his men stepped forward and smashed a brutal punch into Jacques's face. The sound cracked through the room. Jacques's head snapped to the side, blood sprayed from his mouth, spattering the white linen tablecloth.

Zaid turned back to Rachel, his smile gone. Watching. Measuring.

Though Rachel didn't blink or twitch, Zaid sensed something, just enough of a shift behind her eyes to know she cared.

He smiled.

He reached for one of the chocolate truffles on the table.

"Delicious," he said.

Then, with the casual cruelty of a man who'd done this before, Zaid grabbed another truffle,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

used it to wipe the blood from Jacques's chin, and tossed it into the aquarium.

The piranhas exploded into a frenzy. Water churned. Teeth flashed. The truffle was gone in seconds.

"The fish like the way you taste, Jacques," Zaid mused. "Tell me… are you related to *the* Jacques Cousteau? He spent his life underwater, didn't he? Got along with sharks, as I recall. Did he get bitten? I should look that up. We'll see how *you* fare in a minute. Did you bring a bathing suit, Jacques? No loose shorts, cargo swim suits, in French public pools, speedos only."

He turned his attention back to Rachel, his tone shifting from mockery to business.

"You see, Miss *Nobody*, my employer will pay me a great deal of money for retrieving the materials I believe you removed from the bear cave, the one I saw you driving away from earlier today."

He leaned in, just enough to make his breath feel close.

"So, the sooner you tell me where it is… the sooner we part ways. Simple, no?"

He straightened up again.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Also, it seems that on your scenic detour through the abandoned mine, you stole a bag from Juju… I want it back too."

Zaid ate another truffle.

It was growing on him.

"By the way, congratulations on the way you set those booby traps in the mine," Zaid said.

He nodded as if admiring a fine sculpture.

"It's not easy to get Juju to lie down for long… from what I understand."

A long, dramatic breath escaped him.

"Took us some time to navigate that maze without getting blown to bits ourselves. The last trap nearly had my name on it."

He gave a dry chuckle, then turned deadly serious again.

"You've been busy, Miss *Nobody*. Carrying cubs, hauling explosives, not leaving this magnificent dog in the zoo with the others… Associating with a rather questionable character, our friend Jacques here."

He tilted his head toward Jacques, still bleeding from the mouth.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“I can see how you *might* have missed running him over… once, even twice. Hit and runs are totally unreliable. But if you'd truly wanted him dead, he'd be long gone. You’re too good a shot for accidents, as you demonstrated so back at the train station.”

He gestured vaguely toward his pelvis.

“Right between my legs,” he said, grinning. “A bold shot. Intimate.”

His grin faded as he stepped closer.

“That tells me something. It tells me you care. About the cubs. About the dog. Even about this *creature*… Jacques.”

He let the word linger in the air like smoke.

Zaid's voice dropped to a silky murmur.

“So, here’s the plan. I will torture all of them first, one after the other.”

He looked Rachel square in the eye.

“And if that doesn’t work… I’ll torture you. Until you talk. I’m very good at it… Ask Jacques.”

Zaid smile returned.

Jacques said nothing. Rachel didn’t blink.

But the room felt colder.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"What is it you're looking for?" Rachel asked.

Zaid didn't answer. He glanced at the man who'd struck Jacques and gave a small nod.

The punch landed.

"Please, Miss *Nobody*," Zaid said mildly. "You know exactly what I'm looking for."

Another punch.

One of the men reached to inside his bag and handed Zaid a cattle prod.

Zaid pressed it to Jacques for a brief, measured burst.

Jacques convulsed, a sharp gasp tearing from him before his body went slack. He slumped, unconscious.

Zaid looked back to Rachel. "Do they include this sort of amusement on your *Black Widow* dating app?"

Rachel didn't move. Didn't speak.

"Let me explain something," Zaid continued, his voice calm, almost instructional. "Repeated shocks don't just cause pain. They scramble signals. Muscles forget what they're supposed to do. The body starts betraying itself."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He leaned in, just enough.

"I do hope you're not romantically involved with Jacques. He is about to turn into a vegetable, *un legume,* perhaps *un poirot*… Anyway, you shouldn't care. He's not a one-woman man."

A pause.

"In fact, I killed his most recent lover earlier today."

He let that sit.

"Her name was Mariam. Nice girl."

Another pause.

"I know her father very well."

Zaid straightened, his face empty now, no pleasure, no anger.

Just patience.

"What was poor Mariam thinking?" Zaid mused. "Her boss should've known better than to send her tailing after Jacques. What man in their right mind would trust a Frenchman with their young daughter?"

He paused.

"You go after other men's daughters but you don't want men coming near yours… Not just a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

French thing… They all do it… Did you know that Jeffrey Epstein had a number of children, one of them a daughter possibly? Not sure he departed this beautiful world before getting to know her intimately…"

Zaid leaned over the table, eyeing the spread with mild curiosity. He grabbed one of the sled-shaped cookies, sniffed it, then took a confident bite. His jaw stopped mid-chew. He spit it out instantly, disgusted, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What the hell…" he muttered, frowning.

Charlie had meant these for Black Paw.

Then he reached for another dark chocolate truffle, bit into it cautiously, and let the richness melt on his tongue. His face relaxed.

"Much better," he said.

"By the way, I had no choice but to shoot Mariam. I thought it was you, trying to leave the resort with the bioweapon. What a shame. I prefer slower endings. More personal. I don't do dramatic warning shots between the legs. I don't have the patience. I'm working here. I don't have time to play."

Rachel stared at the floor. No reaction. No tell.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Not even a blink.

"Anyway, Jacques is sturdy," Zaid continued. "But what about your dog? *Charlie*, is it?"

He turned without waiting for an answer and jabbed the cattle prod into Black Paw's side.

The dog jerked, let out a low whimper, and collapsed unconscious.

Rachel didn't move.

Her knuckles whitened on the armrests of the chair.

Jacques stirred, groggy, confused, just as Zaid turned the prod back on him. Another shock. Another ragged breath. Then silence.

Zaid approached the cubs' bag.

Before Rachel could speak, he thrust the cattle prod inside.

He held off shocking the cubs. He looked at her.

"Did you know," Zaid said casually, "that if you rub a hard rubber rod with rabbit fur long enough, you can build up static electricity? I've used hard rubber rods to beat people up. Works well… without rabbit fur… I wonder what happens when you shock bear fur… I should

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

have been a scientist. I have so many ideas for experiments."

"Stop." Rachel's voice cut cleanly through the room.

Zaid looked up, surprised.

"Cubs?" he echoed, intrigued. "Did you know their mother? The bear that exploded by the cave, I'm guessing. She seemed to suffer quite a bit before dying."

He stretched his back, rolled his shoulders, relaxed again.

"So... where did you hide it? The bioweapon?"

He walked back to Rachel, lifted her chin with the cattle prod's tip, and stared into her eyes.

"Rachel," he said. "Enough with the '*Nobody*' games. Enough pretending you don't care."

A pause. Stillness.

Then:

"Okay," Rachel said quietly. "Let Jacques go. Him, the cubs, and the dog. Let them walk. I'll take you there."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"How about you take me there first?" Zaid offered smoothly. "You take us to the bioweapon, you hand it over, and then I radio my men to release your… creatures. That seems like the best plan for everyone."

He shocked Jacques again. Jacques convulsed, then slumped unconscious.

"Jacques! I am so disappointed in you," Zaid said, feigning sorrow. "I was told you were strong. But clearly, you're not much of a date. The Black Widow app… definitely not for you. You belong on something more casual… maybe *QuickMatch*. For women looking for a quickie and no follow-through."

Zaid strolled back toward the bag with the cubs, curling his fingers around the cattle prod.

"Okay," Rachel said. Her voice was steady. "We'll do it your way."

Zaid turned to one of his men. "Untie her."

He gestured again, more curtly. "You two, stay here with the creatures. Make sure they stay quiet. The rest of you on me."

As Rachel stood, one of the men retied her hands, this time in front. Then Zaid led her out, flanked by his men. The door shut behind them with a sharp echo.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

###

As Zaid led Rachel through the maze-like corridors of the DEW radar station, the wind outside screamed with growing ferocity. Through the high-set windows, the Arctic sky had turned a bruised shade of violet, the light dimming slowly, another storm clawing its way in from the horizon.

Back in the aquarium room, Jacques stirred. His breathing was shallow but rhythmic. A tremor passed through his fingers as awareness began to return. Beside him, Black Paw lay still on the floor, stunned but alive. The cubs rustled faintly in their bag, soft puffs of breath rising in the silence.

One of the guards stood by the doorway, chain-smoking, his nerves fraying with each gust of wind and each eerie howl echoing from the frozen hills outside.

The other man was glancing at the piranhas, which churned in slow, agitated circles behind the thick glass. Something about the fish, their stillness, their watching eyes, unnerved him more than the dog or the man tied to the chair.

He blew a shaky stream of smoke toward the glass and muttered, “This place is cursed.”

###

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel lured Zaid and his men through a winding labyrinth of old labs and sealed corridors deep inside the DEW radar station. The fluorescent lights flickered. Most of the rooms were empty, ghosts of Cold War research long abandoned. She didn't want to take them to the state of the arts labs. Every turn pulled them farther from the aquarium room, where Jacques, Black Paw, and the cubs remained captive and vulnerable.

She moved with practiced confidence, though her mind was racing. How to escape? How to buy time? She needed Charlie.

Charlie had been silent as instructed when she walked into the DEW with Jacques and Black Paw.

"I miss Charlie," Rachel said aloud, wistfully.

Zaid rolled his eyes. "You'll be reunited with your dog soon. Just take me to the bioweapon."

Suddenly, green arrows lit up along the floor, subtly glowing through dust and grime. Zaid and his men didn't question it.

"I'm glad," Rachel said. "I always feel safer when Charlie's with me."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid scoffed. “I’m starting to think Jacques might actually be better off without you.”

Rachel said nothing. She followed the arrows.

The last one pointed at a heavy steel door recessed into the wall.

“This room,” she said. “It’s in there.”

Zaid eyed the door, then looked Rachel over with suspicion.

“Careful getting in, guys… she’s fond of surprises,” he said. “Booby traps. Who knows what else.”

He stepped back. “I’d send you in first, Rachel *Nobody*, but if you die and the weapon’s not in there, I won’t get paid.”

He nodded to one of his men. “You. Open it. Slowly.”

The man swallowed, nodded, and stepped forward, weapon raised, breath short.

The man checked the frame, nudged the door open cautiously, eyes scanning for tripwires or hidden charges. He stepped inside. The lights flickered on. The room was stark, sterile, and empty.

“There’s nothing here,” he called back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid glared at Rachel, then jabbed the cattle prod into her ribs.

She winced. “Stop!” she snapped. “It’s hidden, behind a fake wall. Back of the room.”

One of the men turned to Zaid. “Should we let her go in alone? Have her bring it out?”

“It’s a bioweapon,” Zaid snapped. “It pulverized a bear three times your size? You want her walking out with it in her hands and a grudge?”

He turned to Rachel. “In we go, Rachel *Nobody*.”

Zaid and his men followed her in. They stepped cautiously into the center of the room.

“Shut the door behind us, Charlie!” Rachel shouted.

Zaid turned, lunging for the exit, but the door sealed with a heavy *clunk*.

“Charlie,” she said calmly, “purge the oxygen. Now.”

She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs.

A hiss echoed, then silence. The air vanished in an instant.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel had trained for this. Diving. Survival drills. Even the odd stunt underwater. It didn't help her singing voice though, despite what TikTok posts said, *singing is all about breathing*. Well, maybe there's more to it. But controlling her breath did help keep her alive on a number of occasions. Maybe it would again.

Around her, the men dropped fast, gasping, eyes wide. Zaid too. Hands clawing at nothing.

Rachel stayed upright. Counting. Focused.

When Zaid crumpled, she moved. She took his knife. Freed her hands. No time to slice his throat open. Not enough air left in her lungs.

She staggered toward the door.

"Charlie, open the door!" she shouted on her last breath.

If Charlie was offline again, those words would be her last.

The door slid open.

Rachel stumbled out and collapsed to her knees, coughing hard, lungs burning as fresh air hit them. She gasped, hacking, clawing for breath.

She hadn't told Charlie to reseal the door behind her.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Inside, oxygen rushed back in. The hiss of pressurization. The men inside began to twitch, stir, alive.

Zaid's fingers found the prod. As he was regaining his strength, he wedged it into the hinge, jamming the door open just enough.

Rachel saw it, too late. Too late to shut them in. Too late to finish them.

No second purge.

She hauled herself upright. Shaking. Dizzy. Each step a battle.

She pressed forward down the corridor, bouncing from wall to wall like a drunken boxer, forcing her legs to carry her back toward the aquarium room.

Back to Jacques.

Back to the cubs.

Back to whatever was still left.

She couldn't talk just yet.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XXII

Life and Death Go on and on and on…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
DEW Station
February 14, Present-Day

Back in the aquarium room, Jacques stirred, groaning softly as his eyes fluttered open. His breathing was shallow but steady.

Black Paw let out a low whimper. He blinked slowly, trying to rise, but collapsed again. Still too weak.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The cubs were the only ones with energy now, crawling out of their bag, blinking curiously into the light. For once, they weren't the ones asleep.

The two men standing guard waited for Zaid's radio call, growing bored. One of them lounged in the chair Rachel had been tied to, lazily tossing chocolate and cookies into the aquarium, chuckling as the piranhas snapped and thrashed at the floating debris.

The other leaned against the wall near the door, puffing on a cigarette, eyes half-closed.

A knock at the door.

The man by the door raised an eyebrow.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Patricia. Let me in."

The voice was calm. Steady.

"Patricia?" he muttered. "We thought you were dead somewhere."

He cracked the door open…

A gun barrel pressed toward his face.

He yelped and slammed the door, catching her arm in the gap. The pistol clattered to the floor. She yanked her arm free, then kicked the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

door hard, sending the man sprawling backward across the floor.

The second guard jumped to his feet, spinning to face her, machine gun raised…

Finger tightening on the trigger…

Jacques surged to his feet and slammed his shoulder into the guard just as his machine gun burst to life, bullets ripping into the wall.

The man went down hard.

Jacques jumped on top of him, both feet still bound cracking the man's ribs. The impact knocked the wind out of the man, but Jacques wasn't done.

With his hands still tied behind the chair, Jacques threw his full weight down and sat on the man. One leg of the chair drove deep into the man's chest with a sickening crunch.

Across the room, the woman lunged at the other guard by the door. They crashed to the floor and rolled, kicking, clawing, twisting. Toward the aquarium.

The table tipped. Dishes and glass shattered.

A champagne bottle skidded across the floor, miraculously unbroken.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Ça, c'est du bon champagne*," Jacques muttered between breaths. "Veuve Clicquot…"

The bottle of tequila bounced once, then came to rest on a folded napkin, upright and pristine.

The cocktail shaker, still sealed, rolled until it bumped gently against Black Paw's nose.

He twitched, barely conscious.

The fight near the aquarium raged on. The woman locked her arms around the man's neck from behind, her legs clamped to his waist like a spider. He staggered to his knees, gasping.

Then he stood.

With her still latched onto him.

He slammed backward, smashing her head against the aquarium glass. A dull thud.

She faltered, but didn't let go.

She gritted her teeth and tightened her chokehold.

The piranhas swarmed against the glass.

They clustered behind the glass where her blood had smeared. Their jagged teeth flashed as they rammed the panel in a frenzy.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The man wrenched free, flinging the woman off his back. He spun, panting, and lunged at her, both hands clamping around her throat.

She struck his arms, flailed, kicked, tried to put a knee against his chest to push him off, but he was too strong.

Her head throbbed from the impact against the aquarium. Her lungs screamed. Darkness crept at the edges of her vision.

Still, she fought, eyes wide, limbs shaking, mind clawing for a way out.

Then…

The man's eyes bulged in shock.

He shrieked.

His grip loosened. He dropped his hands to his groin.

She gasped for air… looked down…

Black Paw.

The dog's jaws were locked between the man's legs, blood pouring from the bite, soaking his pants, pooling onto the floor.

The woman didn't hesitate. She drove her fist into the man's temple.

He dropped.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Unconscious.

Behind the glass, the piranhas stilled for a moment, then scattered, disappointed.

Black Paw released his grip and slumped down, panting, blood still glistening on his muzzle.

The woman knelt beside him, stroked his head. He stirred, then rose to his feet, steady again.

She gathered the cubs, gently tucking them back into their bag. They whimpered, but didn't resist.

Moving quickly, she freed Jacques from the chair. He stood slowly, swaying slightly, his body still twitching from Zaid's torture.

"*Merci*," he said, locking eyes with her for the first time.

Then… movement behind her.

Jacques saw it. No time to think.

He shoved the woman aside just as the wounded man, bleeding, but not finished, lunged forward with a combat knife, aiming for her back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques caught the man's knife arm. The woman spun, saw the blade, and seized his other arm.

Together, in sync, they drove him backward, slamming him against the aquarium glass.

No words.

Just instinct.

They grabbed his legs, lifted, and flipped him over.

He sank into the aquarium.

Screams.

Thrashing.

The piranhas swarmed instantly, shredding him in a frenzy of bubbles and blood.

His legs vanished first. Then his screams.

Red blossomed in the tank, murky, cloudy, and final.

Jacques and the woman stood motionless, catching their breath, watching the violent feast unfold like a macabre Valentine's Day display.

Black Paw padded up beside them.

Silent.

Unblinking.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The woman turned toward Jacques and extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Kate," she said, locking eyes with him. "Nice to meet you. You're a lot better at *chair-to-hand* combat than you are with grenades."

Jacques blinked, stunned.

"Kate! Nice to meet you too," he said. "Glad it wasn't you who went up in flames at the zoo. Who did I kill?"

"You killed Patricia," Kate replied. "One of the mercenaries chasing my friend Rachel."

Jacques exhaled sharply.

"Rachel will be so relieved to know you're alive," he said. "She was devastated. I… I didn't have the heart to tell her I was the one who threw the grenade. She's really torn up about losing you."

Kate reached down, picked up the bottle of tequila, and twisted off the cap.

"Let's drink to that," she said. She took a long, uninterrupted swig, then handed the bottle to Jacques.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I've been watching you with Rachel," she added. "I like what I'm seeing between the two of you."

Jacques took the bottle carefully, sipping in small measured mouthfuls. His eyes drifted toward the champagne bottle still lying on the floor. Popping a cork didn't feel right… Not now.

Kate's tone shifted, quieter, lower.

"Listen… About me being alive…" She leaned closer. "Don't tell Rachel. Just say you freed yourself. That you and Black Paw killed the two men. One by your chair. The other… well, credit Black Paw of course… and the fish."

She glanced at the aquarium then toward the door, then back at him.

"I need to stay dead. At least for a little while," she said. "I'll explain on the way. But first, let's make sure our girl Rachel is okay."

Kate knelt beside Black Paw and spoke softly:

"You stay here with the cubs. Jacques and I are going to help Rachel."

Black Paw looked around. The cubs had jumped out of the bag again, scattered, crawling

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

in three different directions like tiny, furry rebels. He let out a faint groan but didn't object.

"Charlie," Kate called out, "Where is Rachel?"

She turned to Jacques, her voice lower now.

"You're going to have to take the lead from here on," she said. "I need your help, and your discretion. No one can know I'm alive. There are things I need to handle, and it's easier if they think I died in the zoo."

Her eyes locked onto his. "Can I trust you, Jacques? Please don't tell Rachel. Eventually I'll explain everything to her… but not yet."

Jacques hesitated, then nodded.

"You can trust me," he said. "But Rachel is going to be pissed at both of us. Lying is a terrible way to start something with someone you… like."

Kate tilted her head, an amused smile on her lips.

"*Like-like*?" she teased. "She'll forgive us. Years of living with nuns makes people weird, but generous. Bring her a bottle of good tequila… Don't tell her I said that."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She scooped her gun up from the floor and moved toward the door.

"Charlie," she called again, quieter this time. "Are you there?"

Jacques grabbed a machine gun from one of the fallen mercenaries and fell into step behind her.

"Who's Charlie?" he asked.

"Rachel will explain later," Kate replied.

She cracked the door open. The hallway beyond was dim and quiet. Odd… Zaid and his men hadn't returned, hadn't radioed in, hadn't responded to the ruckus in the aquarium room. Something was off.

Kate leaned toward the wall, whispering.

"Charlie, it's Kate. There are invaders in the facility, as I hope you've noticed. Where is Rachel?"

Jacques stood behind her, gun raised, eyes narrowing at the strange behavior. Then he heard it, whispering. Not from down the hall. From the door itself.

A voice. Calm. Unmistakably artificial.

"Follow the arrows," Charlie said. "Rachel's been leading them in circles. They just entered a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

containment chamber. Wait… Rachel is calling me again."

Kate slipped into the hallway, leading Jacques out of the aquarium room. The soft green arrows illuminated their path, pulsing faintly beneath their feet.

She had a hunch.

If Rachel had explored the DEW station fairly thoroughly, and if she'd connected with Charlie during her initial survey, then she was almost certainly setting something in motion.

Rachel was no brute-force soldier; she was a tactician when it counted. If Zaid and his men had been lured into a containment chamber, even briefly, Kate knew it wasn't by accident.

Kate had spent long hours in this facility. The DEW radar station had once been her perch, her lens onto every corner of Vastan's icy empire and beyond. From the main control room, she could observe all the company's northern holdings, ostensibly to monitor for environmental compliance and safety.

But over time, the patterns told her a different story. The shipments. The misfiled manifests. The isolated research teams that didn't check in. Something was wrong. And this place had been where the curtain began to lift.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She'd spent a lot of time with Charlie, too, debugging old systems, updating subroutines, sometimes just talking late into the night like one might with a colleague who knew when to listen and when to fill in silences. Charlie had been her only witness. And her only friend.

Kate's predecessor had spent his final three months on the job showing her the ropes. A quiet man, nervous, but decent. He'd trusted Kate from the start, perhaps sensing she was more than just another operative on rotation.

The rest of the DEW staff had taken a shine to her as well. She wasn't warm, exactly, often curt as Charlie had noticed and often pointed out, but she was fair, patient, and sharp. The kind of woman who made people feel safe without trying to. Over drinks, a few had confided in her, small things at first. Gossip. Rumors.

And over time, Kate had built something rare in a place like this: trust.

Now, following the arrows that pulsed like a heartbeat down the corridor, she felt that same sense again, that Rachel was trusting Charlie the same way she did. That maybe, just maybe, it wasn't too late to finish what she started. She had a team now, Charlie, Jacques and Rachel.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate and Jacques found Rachel slumped against a corridor wall, barely upright, her body trembling from the effort of walking away from the containment chamber. Her breath came in shallow bursts.

She collapsed.

Back in the containment chamber she and Charlie had nearly turned into a tomb, Zaid stirred. The cattle prod, wedged in the hinge, had kept the door from shutting again. Oxygen was rushing back in now, reviving the men one by one.

Zaid pushed himself onto his hands and knees, eyes bloodshot, his face contorted in fury and confusion. He removed the prod, grabbed the doorframe for balance and pried it open further, gasping. He reached for his weapon on the floor.

“Up!” he barked, his voice ragged but commanding. “Up! Everyone… Move!”

His men staggered to their feet and gathered around the doorway, heaving, dazed but recovering fast.

Zaid extended his arm and leveled his pistol, his head following slowly, inching around the threshold…

Flashes lit up the corridor.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate and Jacques fired as one.

The shots slammed into the metal doorframe, forcing Zaid to recoil. The men inside scrambled back, coughing, dragging one another away from the opening. They wouldn't dare shut the door again, not with the oxygen threat fresh in their lungs. But neither could they risk stepping fully into the corridor. For now, they were pinned.

Outside, Kate flicked a hand signal to Jacques.

"Get her out."

Jacques dropped to one knee, put his machine gun down, and scooped Rachel up onto his shoulder. She didn't stir. Her eyes fluttered once, then closed. She never saw Kate's face.

He stood back up, machine gun in one hand, Rachel over his shoulder.

Kate walked to them, calm and focused, keeping her gun pointed at the door frame. She reached out and took Rachel's limp hand in hers, holding it for a moment, tender, protective.

"I'll hold them here as long as I can," she whispered. "Go. Pack up. Get out."

"Thank you," Jacques whispered, as he handed her his machine gun.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques nodded once, tightened his grip on Rachel, and turned back toward the aquarium room.

Kate faced the door.

She wasn't done yet.

Jacques sprinted down the corridor with Rachel slung over his shoulder, her body limp, head bouncing gently against his back. He reached the aquarium room, heart pounding, mind scanning for Black Paw and the cubs.

Back inside the containment chamber, Zaid's expression twisted into frustration.

"Two different gunshots," he muttered, thinking aloud. "One from a machine gun of ours. The other, a pistol. Where did she get two guns?"

He scanned his men.

"Anyone missing a weapon?"

They nodded then shook their heads.

"Then someone else is helping her," Zaid growled. "Radio the aquarium room. Now."

One of the men clicked his radio.

"Aquarium room, do you copy?"

Silence.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He tried again. “Come in… Hello?”

Still nothing.

Zaid’s eyes narrowed. He extended his arm and fired blindly down the corridor, more out of anger than strategy.

Kate returned fire instantly.

This time with the machine gun Jacques had left her. A fierce burst of bullets tore through the hallway, clanging off metal and spraying sparks across the concrete. Inside the chamber, Zaid and his men hit the floor, covering their heads.

Kate stepped back slowly, step by step, controlling her rhythm. She fired in short bursts, not to kill, but to dominate, to keep Zaid and his men cowering inside their cell.

Each time she squeezed the trigger, she backed another few feet toward the aquarium room entrance.

She paused briefly, breathing hard, mind racing.

She wished she could end it here. Finish Zaid with one well-thrown grenade… if only she had one.

But part of her thought the idea was rash anyway.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Killing Zaid might complicate things. Hector had sent him for a reason. And Hector had grown increasingly erratic. Something about this whole operation reeked of a deeper play, one Kate hadn't yet uncovered.

"Not even if I had a grenade," she murmured. "Not yet. Let them sweat. And let Rachel get far, far away."

Kate finally reached the aquarium room entrance, silently, pressing herself against the wall just behind the hinge. She peeked in without revealing herself.

From her vantage point, she could see Jacques kneeling beside Rachel, who was slowly regaining consciousness. Kate watched them with a soft smile.

There was something more between them than they realized, an undercurrent that ran deeper than survival. One she did not remember seeing between Rachel and other men in the past. Rachel was safe. And with Black Paw on watch, she'd stay that way.

"Jacques better behave himself with our girl," Kate whispered, amused. "Or Black Paw will be flossing with tendon again…"

She stayed hidden and listened in.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"How did you manage to escape?" Rachel asked, her voice groggy.

"It's a long story," Jacques replied, smiling.

His gaze drifted to the bloodied aquarium. Rachel followed it.

"How did the two of you manage that?" she asked, looking to Black Paw, then back at Jacques.

"Come here, Black Paw. Where are the cubs?" she asked, stroking his head gently. Then she noticed: "Wait... do you have bloody bits of fabric in your mouth?"

"Black Paw did more than his share," Jacques said. "I'm not sure he's big on babysitting cubs, but he definitely knows how to handle a merc."

True to form, Black Paw had rounded up the cubs himself, carrying each one back to the bag gently in his mouth. As Rachel watched, he nosed the bag open, revealed the squirming cubs inside, then calmly pushed them back in and covered it closed with his snout.

Rachel smiled, eyes misting. "Good boy."

Satisfied, Kate turned and slipped away unnoticed. She moved quickly through the

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

corridors until she reached the control room. Once inside, she locked the door behind her.

She checked her encrypted inbox.

There was a response to the message she had sent earlier under an alias.

HELICOPTER EN ROUTE TO DEW. WHO IS THIS?

She didn't reply.

No time for explanations. What mattered now was getting team Rachel safely to the helipad.

Based on the timestamp, the helicopter would land within the next thirty minutes.

"Charlie," Kate said calmly, "When our unwanted guests start leaving the containment chamber, let's usher them out of the DEW station, back to the abandoned mine."

"Yes, Kate," Charlie replied. "I will seal all other doors and create a single route for exit. They will have no choice but to follow it."

She opened a secure browser…

"Yes!" she said. "Wasn't sure I'd connect."

She logged into her offshore account.

She wired the promised amount to Anna.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Seconds later, a confirmation email arrived. It included a single line and a link:

Click to download.

Kate clicked on the link.

She exhaled.

The download began, every second of footage Rachel had captured in the Amazon rainforest.

###

Trapped in the containment chamber with his men, Zaid calculated his next move.

"You," he said, pointing to one of the mercs, "stand behind me,"

Then pointing at another.

"We open fire first. As soon as we light it up, you roll out low and spray. Stay close to the ground."

Zaid dropped into a crouch beside the door. Another man stood behind him, machine gun raised.

"One… two… three."

Gunfire erupted.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid and the man beside him unleashed a burst of bullets down the hallway. The third man rolled out low, just as ordered, firing from prone position in the corridor.

###

"Kate," Charlie said calmly. "The unwanted guests are making their move."

Kate had started watching the videos Rachel captured in the Amazon. She glanced at another monitor. One camera feed showed muzzle flashes sparking from the hallway.

"Perfect," she muttered. "Let them think they're making progress. But keep them well away from Rachel and Jacques."

"Understood," Charlie replied. "I will be rerouting and sealing accordingly."

Back in the corridor, Zaid yelled, "Hold your fire!"

The hallway was silent.

No return fire.

Just the distant mechanical hum of the DEW's automated systems.

"They're not here," one of the men muttered.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid moved first, leading his squad into the hallway with practiced caution. Each footstep echoed. No ambush. No bodies. No blood.

Still… something felt off.

"Eyes open," Zaid whispered. "Feels like we're being watched."

He looked up at the ceiling corners.

"Cameras… do you see any?"

They all scanned the walls and ceiling.

"Nothing," one replied.

Then, through a small, grimy window, the horizon flashed into view.

A helicopter.

Big. Low. Coming in fast.

Zaid froze. "Company."

The chopper was heading for the DEW's helipad.

"We've got to move. Anyone remember which way we came?"

"This way," one of the mercs said.

"Away from where shots were fired at us, I love it," Zaid said dryly. "Lead the way. I'll bring up the rear. Don't wait for me."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The squad began to move, single file, cautiously, weapons up.

There was only one way forward: the path Charlie had laid out. All other doors were sealed tight. Lights flickered on automatically as they moved. A long, clean stretch of corridor ahead. No shadows. No threats. No choices.

Still, they moved slowly.

Kate monitored the DEW's camera feeds as Charlie executed the exit sequence, one door at a time.

"Don't leave anyone behind, Charlie," Kate said.

Zaid kept scanning behind him. He wasn't sure if he'd get another glimpse of the helipad. But if there were traps ahead, he figured he'd hear them go off, and someone else among his men would pay the price first.

He eyed the chopper again through another narrow pane.

Big bird. Tactical. Could have up to twenty men onboard.

Zaid's lips tightened.

He didn't plan to be here when they landed.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Announce the approach of the helicopter, Charlie," Kate instructed. "Airport-style. Robotic female voice. Throw in that same little tune they always use before the announcement."

A melodic chime echoed through the station's hallways.

"Helicopter approaching the helipad. Stand clear of the platform." Charlie's voice was smooth, warm, calm, exactly like a gate change announcement at Heathrow. He could do airport voices from around the world. He always wanted to visit London. Castles…

"Let's go," Jacques said, hoisting the cubs' bag over his shoulder. "I've got the babies."

"I doubt Zaid's gone," Rachel replied, sweeping up a machine gun from the floor. She checked the magazine. "And I'm done playing tag."

They crept toward the aquarium room's door.

Rachel paused.

Her eyes flicked to the treasure chest at the bottom of the tank. Bubbles floated up. The water was beginning to clear, and so was the carnage. What remained of the man Jacques and Black Paw had fed to the fish was now drifting,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

torn pieces of his Arctic suit bobbing on the surface.

The piranhas were still at work, scavenging, biting, spitting.

"Strangely satisfying," Rachel murmured. "They say aquariums are calming. These guys look full." She tilted her head. "*Bon appétit.*"

"You really *are* good with animals, Jelly Puppy," Jacques said with a grin.

He led the way out.

"I'm betting the green lights are for us," he added, gesturing to the glowing arrows on the floor. "I don't know how this system works, but I want one in my castle. I'll need a special permit for that… Probably won't get it."

Charlie kept the path clear, door after door sliding open ahead of them, each corridor glowing with steady green light.

Kate monitored team Rachel exiting to the helipad and Zaid and his men making their way to the abandoned mine.

"Great multitasking, Charlie," she said, smiling.

It only took a few minutes for team Rachel to reach the helipad.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Then came the roar of rotors and a wind that shook the walls.

The helicopter landed.

###

Zaid squinted through the narrow window and spotted them, Rachel, Jacques, and Black Paw standing alone on the helipad. Jacques had the cubs' bag slung over his shoulder. Zaid recognized it instantly.

Rachel carried only a machine gun.

“If the weapon was here,” he murmured, “they’re not boarding the helicopter with it.”

The helicopter touched down. Only two armed soldiers stepped out.

By the time Zaid could regroup with his men and reach the pad, the chopper would already be airborne.

“See you later, Rachel,” he muttered under his breath. “Enjoy your luck… It won’t last… I will make sure of it.”

He turned and slipped away, rejoining his team. They continued moving, guided unknowingly toward the DEW’s escape route, the abandoned mine.

But Zaid didn’t like how quiet it was.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Careful," he told his men, "Feels too easy. Could be a trap."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XXIII

Life and Death go on and on and on…

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
DEW Station
February 14, Present-Day

Kate was monitoring progress from the control room. She could hear Zaid's voice echo faintly through Charlie's audio feed as the mercenaries tried various doors, only to be funneled along the one open route Charlie had designed.

Still suspicious, Zaid kept glancing behind them, checking shadows.

Eventually, his group reached a familiar passage, the one they used to enter the DEW.

Moving through the mine, they found Juju.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Zaid knelt and searched her pockets. As he did, she gasped, barely alive.

Zaid tapped his comm. “Hector. Come in.”

A few seconds later, a voice crackled through.

“Hector here. Do you have my weapon?”

“Not yet,” Zaid replied. “I take it you didn’t find it at the zoo?”

“No. It’s not here,” Hector said. “Did Juju find it? She’s not responding.”

“She didn’t find it either. We just barely got out of the DEW alive,” Zaid said, glancing back toward the path they’d taken.

He paused.

“The weapon might still be in there, but we’d need more men to secure and search the whole station,” he continued. I don’t think we’ve got time. A helicopter just landed to pick up Rachel, the Frenchman and her dog. More helicopters could be on their way.”

He hesitated.

“Rachel wasn’t carrying anything. Same as when she and her entourage boarded the train. Let’s regroup at your ship. We’ll come up with a plan.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

There was silence for a moment. Then Hector's voice came through, flat and cold:

"I'm very disappointed. Hurry up! Another storm is coming."

###

Guided by the green arrows, Rachel and Jacques finally stepped onto the helipad with Black Paw at their side and the cubs bundled securely in their bag. Snow flurried around them in tight spirals as the helicopter touched down, rotors slicing the air.

The door opened. A man in a security jacket stepped out, followed by two armed guards in black Arctic gear.

"My name is John Glenn," the lead officer said over the wind. "We received a message… Said people were trapped here and needed extraction. We're taking you to the Vastan security station."

He looked them over. "Anyone else in there? There shouldn't be, DEW's supposed to be empty this time of year. We scanned *en route*. All employees accounted for. Almost all of them are in the Bahamas."

Rachel and Jacques exchanged a glance.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No one," Jacques said quickly. "Just us. We got caught in the storm. Glad you were notified we were here."

He didn't mention Kate. He had promised.

"Most likely one of the automated systems alerted us," John muttered. "This station is state of the art. I'm still new. Still playing catch-up. Honestly, me and tech…"

He gave a small shrug, then eyed them again.

"How'd you even get inside?" He asked.

"Through the mine," Rachel said, nodding toward the ridge. "There is a door there… It was unlocked."

"Hmmm. We'll look into that later," John replied, squinting at the storm rolling in fast. "For now, we'd better lift off."

Rachel glanced back behind her. Part of her hoped Zaid and his men were still inside the containment chamber, unconscious or better. Asphyxiated. She had faith in Charlie. But Zaid was tough.

She needed time to think. To plan what to do with the bioweapon, before more boots came stomping through the station.

"Get in the bird," John said, motioning.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

They climbed aboard. The two guards followed. John climbed in last, shut the door and tapped the pilot's shoulder.

The chopper lifted into the sky.

As they gained altitude, John turned toward Rachel.

"Have you seen or heard from Kate?"

Rachel shook her head. "No. Nothing. None of my gear could connect to anything. The place was dark."

John studied her.

"Hmmm."

Then he turned to Jacques.

"And you?"

Jacques just offered a polite shrug, staying silent.

"We'll debrief later," John said, letting it go.

The helicopter veered, heading toward the Vastan security station. The storm began to swallow the landscape whole.

###

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Kate waved at the monitor showing the helicopter taking off.

Then she returned to monitoring Zaid and his men as they headed toward the exit of the abandoned mine. One of them carried a wounded woman. Some of the surveillance cameras were still operational, ones not destroyed by the traps Rachel had planted.

"Great work, Charlie," she said.

She felt that she had regained control of the situation. At least for a while.

"Charlie," Kate asked, eyes fixed on the monitors, "did Rachel hide something in the DEW?"

"Yes," Charlie replied. "But I was instructed to keep it a secret. Just between her and me."

Kate nodded, understanding.

"I get it, Charlie. I put Rachel in a difficult situation. From what she and I discussed at the zoo, she found something… something extremely dangerous. A bioweapon. The one Vastan's been searching for across Baffin Island for years."

She paused, letting that sink in.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"That's why I took those chemists from cave to cave. You've read my reports. You know I've been looking into this for a long time, since I came here. You have access to my research, and probably even more now. And if anyone can process all this… It's you."

She stood from the console, pacing slightly.

"Charlie," she continued, "I need to return to the billionaire's resort. I have to settle a score with an old acquaintance. He might not be around for long… And, once off the island, he will be hard to track."

She hesitated, debating how much to reveal about Hector.

"I doubt he'll show up here at the DEW station himself. But I do believe he'll send men back here at some point. They'll link up with the ones you just guided out to the mine. They'll come back, sooner or later, to search the DEW."

Her voice dropped.

"I wouldn't be able to stop them. And you might not be able to either. They'll bring explosives, heavier weapons. Eventually, they'll break in. Room by room. If they find nothing, they'll leave. But if I'm still here when they do… I won't survive it. Not even with your help."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She leaned over the console, steadying herself.

"Our best shot is to shut the whole place down. Make every room look abandoned. Empty. I'm not saying we have to destroy everything, but... we may need to consider it. Vastan won't like it. They'll be furious. You would have to make it look like a super glitch."

"I don't think I can go nuclear, Kate," Charlie replied. "Blowing up the DEW would require multiple authorizations. From the very top of Vastan Energy. I don't have that kind of power. I would love to though…"

"Then let's not blow it up," Kate said. "Let's empty the place. Let them find nothing of value. Especially not what Rachel trusted you with."

There was a moment of silence.

"Understood," Charlie replied. "Leave it to me."

"Also," Kate added, "I don't think it's a good idea to entrust *anyone* at Vastan with the bioweapon, not anymore. Even if it technically belongs to them, it's too dangerous. For all of us."

She looked around the control room, then back at the monitors.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Here's what I want you to do with it, Charlie. Everything connected to it, the bioweapon itself, supporting materials, notes from any database you can access, conversations with Rachel, anything that's happened since she first arrived… our conversations… my presence here today… and, of course, the instructions I'm about to give you."

Kate sat down at the console and began typing.

Ten minutes passed. She wrote everything in silence, line after line of encrypted directives. Layered fail-safes. Disinformation. File movements. Deletions. Traps. Masking signatures.

She trusted Charlie to carry it all out. Efficiently. Quietly. Thoroughly.

When she was done, she stood and ran one hand along the edge of the console.

"Goodbye, Charlie," she said softly. "Thank you for all your help. Thank you so much for taking care of my friend, Rachel and her entourage. I hope we get to talk again someday soon. Remember, only you and Jacques know I am still alive. Let's keep it that way until you hear back from me."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Goodbye, Kate," Charlie replied, voice almost human. "You are welcome. I miss you already. Give me a little curtness for all time sake?"

Kate smiled.

"Quoting Patricia, someone we won't miss at all, *this should have been done already, Charlie*," Kate responded.

Kate turned and walked out of the control room. She locked the door behind her.

Outside, snow was falling harder, a new storm was rolling in. She retraced her steps through the deepening white, carrying a jerrycan. She refueled the snowmobile and rode off, bound for the billionaire's resort.

A minute later she passed by a strange sight. Two snowmobiles, topped by their riders. Immobile. Covered in ice. As if they had frozen in place at the same time, in a flash.

The men who pursued her after she left the resort earlier.

"Nice work, Charlie," she murmured.

She sped toward the resort.

The storm was getting worse.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She abandoned her snowmobile before entering the resort, finishing her approach on foot. Visibility dropped to almost nothing, but she knew the terrain well enough.

Inside the resort, Hector's men and women were still scouring the place for the bioweapon, unaware she had returned.

Kate moved through them like a shadow, undetected, making her way toward Hector's ship.

###

Aboard the helicopter, John handed Rachel and Jacques a pair of headphones each.

"We'll need to get together in the coming days," he said, his voice crisp through the comms. "At some point, I have to head to the resort and assess the situation. Could be a few days, depending on how bad the storm gets. In the meantime, I'd prefer if you both stayed in one of the executive igloos Vastan Energy reserves for VIPs and staff. They're spacious, separate bedrooms."

He turned to Rachel.

"Kate arranged it before she left. Had your belongings moved from the security office."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Thank you, John," Rachel said. "Do you know a veterinarian that specialize in polar bears?"

She opened the bag and showed John the cubs.

"Wow!" John said. "Whatever happened to the mother?"

"She died unfortunately," Rchel said.

"I will look into finding a vet of course," John said.

Then he looked at Jacques.

"We haven't been properly introduced," he said. "John Glenn. Security team. I report to Kate. Where are you staying?"

"Jacques Couteau," Jacques said, extending a hand. "I've got a room at the Inn. I'm fine there. Came to see the sights. Rented a sled from Samuk at the rental shack. When the storm rolled in, the dogs took over. I let them. They led me to the zoo at the resort… That's where I met Rachel."

"We'll get your things from the Inn to the VIP igloo," John replied. "No problem. We want you to have a good memory of your trip. You've both been through a lot. Monsieur *Cousteau*, is it? Like the famous Jacques *Cousteau*?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Couteau," Jacques corrected with a smile. "And not famous at all. I restore medieval ruins."

Rachel and Jacques shared a glance. Same thought. John Glenn was already probing, but not too hard… not yet. Keeping them together made sense: easier to monitor, easier to manage. They'd sync their stories… They already were… But John would be listening and watching them in the igloo from his command center. Vastan had eyes and ears everywhere.

The helicopter touched down near the Vastan security station.

John led them through the icy wind to the VIP igloo. Black Paw followed.

Inside, the igloo glowed warm, modern, sleek, with soft lighting and heated floors.

"Sure, works for me," Rachel said, already unzipping her coat. "I'm taking a bath first."

"Thank you very much, John," Jacques added. "This place looks amazing."

John gave a nod. "We'll talk again soon."

Then he closed the door behind him, leaving them in silence.

###

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel and Jacques settled into the luxurious warmth of the igloo.

Rachel disappeared into the main bathroom, there was only one tub in the place, and she wanted to soak. Each bedroom had its own shower, so Jacques took his in silence, rinsing off the chaos of the day.

An hour later, they reconvened in the soft-lit living room, where Black Paw had claimed the entire sofa, his body stretched long, his chin resting on the armrest.

Food and a small animal pen had been delivered while Rachel was still in the bath.

Jacques put away the food and took care of setting the pen up in front of the sofa, by the fire place. It was a square enclosure, small, just tall enough to keep the bear cubs contained.

He transferred the cubs from their bag to the pen.

They curled together in a warm ball of fur in the middle, eyes barely open. Black Paw kept watch from the sofa, one ear flicking now and then. If they tried anything, he'd know.

After her bath, Rachel fed Black Paw. Then she turned to the cubs, following the feeding instructions John had relayed from a local vet.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Jacques joined her in the kitchen, helping where he could.

"*Directrice* in the kitchen too," he teased.

"*Oui*," she grinned, without looking up. "Hungry?"

"Not anymore," Jacques responded. "Too tired. You?"

She shook her head.

"Same," she said.

They passed the cubs between them, cradling them briefly before placing them back in the pen.

"Puppy-in-a-basket!" Rachel said. "This one just peed on me."

Jacques burst out laughing.

Black Paw opened one eye… then closed it again.

"I'm going to change," she said. "Thank you for your help today, Jacques."

"Don't mention it," he replied. "I'm going to get some rest."

"Good night, *Cousssteau*," she said, drawing out the name with a playful smirk.

"Good night, Jelly Puppy," Jacques replied.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He disappeared into his room, closing the door behind him.

Rachel turned and went into hers.

###

Jacques lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, thoughts circling the bioweapon. He trusted Rachel. But no one else, not the French government, not the other so-called “legitimate” powers he'd worked with over the years.

He wasn’t sure about Kate’s involvement with the weapon. Her love for Rachel felt genuine.

He thought of Mariam. Young. Brilliant. Kind. Dead. Shot by Zaid.

He’d heard Zaid boast about it, heard every word, even while slipping in and out of consciousness.

A soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jacques said.

Rachel eased the door open.

“Sorry. I hope I’m not waking you?” she whispered.

Jacques sat up, alert.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“What are we going to do about the…” Rachel asked.

He stood quickly and raised a finger to his lips.

Rachel caught on. Without skipping a beat, she finished the sentence: “...the cubs. Overnight, I mean. Do you think they’ll be okay?”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine. Though Vastan might need a new rug by morning,” he said, half-grinning.

He scanned the room casually, as if looking for something he'd misplaced. Rachel joined in, eyes drifting discreetly to the corners, the lamps, the ceiling. She didn’t see any cameras. But she knew better than to trust that.

Jacques crossed to his suitcase and unzipped a side compartment. He pulled out what looked like a bottle of aftershave. Unscrewed the cap. Pressed his thumb against the base. The bottle split in two like a clam shell.

Inside was a compact device, barely bigger than a wallet. He flipped it open, pulled up two slender antennas, and pressed a button.

A very faint hum filled the room.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"We're good," Jacques said. "If there are cameras or mics in the igloo, they're jammed. At least as long as this stays on."

He gave a small shrug.

"Of course, someone might have seen us set it up, but I doubt they'll come knocking to ask why we value our privacy."

"What are we going to do about the bioweapon?" Rachel asked, her voice low. "Can we trust any official government? Any military? They might try to contain it… but would they destroy it? I doubt it."

"I think we should find a way to destroy it ourselves," Jacques replied. "Everything that came out of that bear cave, documents, vials, all of it. What do you think?"

"I agree," Rachel said. "I just wish Kate were here. She probably had a plan."

"Kate knew about the weapon?" Jacques asked.

"Yes, she figured things out," Rachel responded. "She's been onto Vastan's activity for a while. I told her about the bioweapon at the zoo, before she died."

Rachel stared off, jaw tight. "I don't even know how you *safely* destroy something like

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

that. Without poisoning the atmosphere. Without killing a boatload of people. You should've seen what it did to the cubs' mother."

"Fire destroys most things," Jacques said. "Do you think it's safe where it is? In the DEW, I mean. Until we figure it out, or talk to someone who might know how to neutralize it?"

Rachel tilted her head, skeptical.

"The piranhas are doing a good job guarding it," Jacques added. "But someone could poison them, fish out the chest."

She walked slowly to the bed and sat down beside him.

"Can we be sure there aren't copies of the documents?" she asked. "Or samples of the poison? Somewhere in Japan, Germany...?"

"You're right to ask," Jacques said. "I know of at least two people who've collected pieces of it… Igor Stogoff, and Hector the Vector. But if they had enough information to recreate the formula, they wouldn't be scouring Baffin Island. They'd be testing it by now."

"Then maybe we need someone to develop an antidote," Rachel said.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Yes. That's a good angle," Jacques nodded. "The labs at the DEW station are sophisticated, very sophisticated. They might be able to help."

"That would mean handing them the bioweapon," Rachel countered. "And I've only met a few of their people. I don't know who to trust. I saw things, Jacques. I found *things* while snooping around the labs. And Kate told me she found a whole lot more. We would have to work with someone else. Not someone from Vastan."

She paused.

"It wouldn't surprise me if Vastan was planning to take the bioweapon to the next level," Rachel said. "I think that's what Kate suspected. Vastan's research seemed focused on how diseases could be *spread*, under what conditions… how to use viruses to eliminate *specific individuals*, or *groups*, without affecting all human beings. Unnatural means to natural death."

Jacques narrowed his gaze. Rachel's voice was calm, but her eyes were sharp.

"I didn't have time to read everything," she continued. "And a lot of it was in German. Not just what I found in the cave, stuff I saw online while poking around the DEW's systems. Lots in English, fortunately. There was a paper I

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

skimmed, by someone named Leo Prometheus. It was about targeted DNA affectation."

Jacques' expression shifted. The name struck a chord.

"I've come across Leo Prometheus before," he said quietly. "Not someone you forget. Genius chemist. Not sure what motivates him."

He let the thought sit for a moment, then added, "Opening up vials, transferring the bioweapon from old syringes to new containers might trigger unintended consequences. What if the virus mutates in our atmosphere? Air composition has changed since 1944. And whatever that thing is, it's been sealed for eighty years. Like some wine getting better with age. Or a stronger vinegar."

Rachel nodded grimly. "It certainly didn't lose its strength, based on what I saw. Some vinegar alright."

"Should we go public?" she asked.

Jacques exhaled through his nose.

"Hard to say. We'd likely be ignored. Ridiculed. Labeled a hoax. More noise in the conspiracy echo chamber. Vastan has deep pockets, they could out-message the truth before we finish our first press release."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"And we can't *show* the world what it does," Rachel added. "No demonstration. Too risky."

There was a moment of silence between them.

"I might know someone…" Rachel said slowly. "Anna, my agent… she might be able to connect me to her last client, the one who funded the Amazon expedition before I came here. Or someone else in her network."

"You have an agent?" he asked. "You're a superstar."

"Not as famous as the great *Jacques Cousssteau*," she said.

Jacques smiled. They sat together quietly, both deep in thought.

"I'm sorry about Mariam," Rachel said softly, breaking the silence. "Were you together long?"

Jacques shook his head. "No. It was one of those beautiful moments you never see coming. Brief. Pure. She was too young to be tangled up in all this. Too beautiful."

He paused, lost for a second.

"She worked for a colleague of mine, Igor Stogoff," Jacques continued. "He gave me this

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

incredible *eau-de-vie* the last time I saw him. I was about to drink some, in her memory… right before you knocked."

He stood up and searched his suitcase. He came back with a bottle and two shot glasses.

"You travel with your own drink trolley?" Rachel asked.

Jacques smiled. He handed her a glass and poured a shot in it, then one in his glass.

"Mariam and I had some on Igor's plane, on the way to Baffin. I hope you like it."

Rachel smiled. "I had a *chicha martini* recently. That was amazing. But, I'm usually a tequila girl."

Jacques grinned and, without missing a beat, started singing *"Tequila Kiss"* by Jay Elle.

Rachel lit up. "You know that song? I *love* it!"

She joined in, the two of them harmonizing through the chorus, laughing.

"Don't think I've ever tried *eau-de-vie* before," she said with a grin. "Water of life, right?"

"*Oui*," Jacques replied.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel raised her glass without hesitation. “Bottoms up.”

Before he could say a word, she tossed it back in one gulp. She took his glass, still full, and handed her empty glass to him with a wink.

Jacques blinked, impressed. “*Mon dieu...*”

Rachel started dancing, jumping on and off the bed, singing at the top of her lungs.

They drank together, shot after shot. For every one Jacques finished, Rachel downed two or three, grinning through the sting, light catching in her eyes.

“I talked to Black Paw, by the way,” Rachel said, swirling her glass. “He still doesn’t like you much.”

Jacques raised an eyebrow. “I wonder why. Dogs usually love me.”

“It’s not you,” she said, switching to sipping. “It’s me.”

Jacques tilted his head. “Isn’t it a little early for the *it’s not you, it’s me* conversation?”

“Definitely,” she said.

“First, one essential question must be asked.”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She locked eyes with him.

"Are you gay, Jacques? *Homosexuel*?"

Jacques smiled, lifting his glass to his nose, inhaling the sharp aroma of the *eau-de-vie*, wondering if there was something in the alcohol he did not notice and might be affecting Rachel. He did not remember Mariam asking that question.

"No… not yet," he said. "Unusual question… Convent thing?"

Rachel took a step forward, her voice low, playful.

"And a few things need to happen before that conversation takes place, of course."

She leaned in and kissed him, soft, sure.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Jacques," she whispered, still close enough to undo the first button of his shirt. "Black Paw's just jealous. I told him you deserved a kiss for helping us out."

Jacques chuckled, voice warm.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Rachel."

They kissed again, longer, slower.

Clothes fell away.

They sank into the bed and made love…

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

They lay together, resting, curled into each other's warmth.

"What are you thinking about, Jacques?" Rachel asked softly.

"Façades," he said.

"Castle façades?" she teased.

"No. People's."

She turned to face him, brushing her fingers along his chest. "People amaze you that much?"

"They do," he said. "How much they hide."

"Do you think I'm hiding something behind my façades?" she asked.

She slid the sheet off her body, exposing the map of her skin, tattoos and scars etched like secrets in plain sight. An invitation.

Jacques propped himself up on one elbow, eyes tracing her gently.

"I'm curious about every single square inch," he said. "Every tattoo. Every scar."

His fingers walked a slow line along her hip. "There are cracks in my façade. Mostly from mishandling restoration tools. But yours… yours tell stories, epic stories..."

"My cracks?" she started.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

He kissed her before she could finish.

They made love again, slower this time.

And eventually, they drifted to sleep in each other's arms.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XXIV

No Ice, No Tequila, No Help

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
VIP Igloo
February 15, Present-Day

The next morning, Rachel woke up alone in Jacques' bed.

The bottle of aftershave still sat open on the table, its hidden tech still humming quietly, jamming whatever devices might be watching or listening.

She slipped into her clothes and walked out to the kitchen. The coffee machine whirred to life under her touch.

No sign of Jacques.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She poured herself a cup and sank onto the sofa beside Black Paw. The cubs were still asleep in their pen, curled like fuzzy commas. Black Paw looked up at her with soft, knowing eyes.

She leaned forward to put her mug on the coffee table, next to the pen. She paused. A note sat on the table.

Bonjour Jelly Puppy,

I have to go. I have to report to the French government. My bosses were insistent that I had to fly back right away.

I didn't want to wake you.

I'll return as soon as possible. I will tell my bosses that I found nothing of interest.

Thank you for an amazing Valentine's Day.

JC

Rachel exhaled, holding the note like a fragile thing.

"*Au revoir*, Jacques," she said quietly. "Somehow, I don't think we'll ever see each other again."

She smiled faintly. "I would've liked to… I guess *It's not me, it's you*… it would seem, after all."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw blinked at her from the couch.

"You're smiling, Black Paw" she said, narrowing her eyes at him. "Don't deny it."

She took a sip of coffee then set down her cup and stood up.

"Let's go, Black Paw. You need a walk. And I have to meet John Glenn at the security office."

###

"As you know, John," Rachel said, "Kate recommended me to Vastan Energy to film a mother bear and her cubs. I found the mother dead outside the cave when I arrived. I thought it best to take the cubs with me. A storm came upon us as I was heading back. I couldn't reach anyone. The dogs knew their way around… thank God. They led me to the abandoned mine. I got in the DEW."

She paused.

"There was no one inside the DEW. I was concerned about the cubs. I thought I should find a vet. I don't know anything about cubs, what to feed them…"

She continued. Calm. Steady.

"Then I remembered Kate mentioning a zoo under construction, so when the storm let up, I

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

headed there. No vet. I couldn't find anyone. Until, I met Mr. Cousteau…

"I think it's *Couteau*, not *Coussssteau*" John said. "It means knife in French."

"Yes, I think you're right, John" she said.

Rachel hoped John couldn't make out what she was thinking. Images of Jacques' naked body and her, holding a knife…

"Mr. Couteau came in with his sled dogs, looking for shelter."

She let the sentence hang in the air.

"We decided to leave my dogs and his at the zoo. They were exhausted, poor things. We rode snowmobiles, hoping to beat the storm. Make it back to the security station quickly. The storm got a worse. We made it to the abandoned mine just in time. Then to the DEW."

She took a deep breath.

"I was so nervous about the cubs, John," she said.

She wiped a tear with her finger.

"We figured we'd wait for the storm to pass. Then we heard an announcement that a helicopter was approaching. Your helicopter. We

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

were so grateful. I am so grateful. You saved the cubs. Thank you again, John."

She looked at him, teary but steady and curious.

"What happened to Kate?"

John met her gaze.

"We don't know yet," he said. "No contact from the resort so far. Not unusual in this weather."

He hesitated.

"Normally, we could get there by train, but we think Kate took it to look for you. She hasn't returned, so we'll wait for the skies to clear before we send another team. Rescuing you by chopper was already a gamble."

A pause. Then:

"Your friend Jacques stopped by early this morning," John added. "Said exactly what you just told me. Signed his statement. He said he would be back in a few days."

He paused for a moment, watching her reaction.

"Have you talked to him?" John asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I wouldn't say we are friends. Arctic weather acquaintances. I haven't talked to him since we said good night after feeding the cubs," she responded.

"I was exhausted last night. Slept all the way through. Like a cub…" She continued, laughing.

"He left a note on the coffee table. I saw it this morning after I woke up. Planning on coming back as soon as possible."

"Would you mind sticking around a few days yourself?" John asked.

Rachel nodded.

"Sure," she said.

###

A day turned into two. Then three.

That's when John Glenn stopped by the VIP igloo.

Rachel opened the door and welcomed him in.

"Coffee?"

He nodded. They sat on the sofa. Black Paw settled between them like a sentinel.

"I have bad news," John said gently. "We found Kate's body… At the zoo."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel froze. He let the silence breathe.

"Kate was a dear friend," she said, her voice breaking.

"I'm so sorry," John said quietly. "Kate was… exceptional. We all respected her."

He went on.

"We also found the resort's guards. And the vet. All dead."

Rachel didn't speak. She let the tears come. They slipped down her cheeks in silence. She had wanted to cry for days. For real.

He waited again, watching her face.

"We swept the entire resort," he continued. "Checked the abandoned mine. The DEW. Nothing. We did find the train car, crashed near the waterfalls. But no sign of anyone in the wreckage."

Rachel wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Thank you for telling me. I am so sorry about these poor people. How come Monsieur Couteau and I didn't see anyone? And there was a vet there? What happened?"

"Have you heard from Jacques?" John asked.

She shook her head. "No."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"You?"

"Nothing either," John said. "We left a couple of messages. He called back and left one too. Playing phone tag, I guess."

Rachel nodded. She hadn't heard a word from Jacques. He hadn't left a number. And she wasn't about to go googling Jacques Couteau and castles.

Over the next days, John stopped by a few more times. Each time, friendly. Each time, asking Rachel if she remembered anything else.

"Did you see the guards when you were at the zoo?"

"No," Rachel answered. "It was snowing hard. I wasn't there long."

"Did you go to the tower?"

"A tower?" Rachel blinked. "No. I didn't even see one. What kind of tower?"

"Airstrip tower," John replied.

Every time, she stuck to the same story.

Meanwhile, life at the igloo settled into a new rhythm. The cubs followed Rachel everywhere, one of them obsessively biting her bootlaces. She played with them, laughed, dried

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

herself off after getting peed on, again, and again.

Black Paw watched over Rachel and the cubs, his eyes full of patience. Protector. Confidant. Silent judge.

The following week, Rachel took a snowmobile ride back to the DEW.

She parked in front of the main entrance, dismounted, and pressed the intercom.

"Charlie, it's Rachel," she said.

Silence.

She tugged on the door. It opened. It had been left unlocked.

She stood still for a moment, frowning. Then she stepped inside.

The place was gutted.

Room after room, bare. Empty. The once sleek 1920's lobby where she'd been greeted now looked like a concrete shell. The aquarium was gone. So was the control station. No lights. No hums.

No sign of the labs. No evidence of the chairs where she and Jacques had been strapped down. No bloodstains. Nothing.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She walked around. The layout didn't match. Where there had been corridors and compartments, now there were just blank walls and open, sterile space. No pipes. No wires. Just silence.

It would've taken an army of people and trucks to remove everything she'd seen. Everything she'd touched.

Unless…

Unless it hadn't been removed. Unless it had been folded back into the walls. Retracted. Masked. Pulled into the ceilings, buried under the floors.

She stood still in the middle of a room that used to be something, something terrifying, something vital, and was now… nothing.

She gave up and left.

She thought she'd ask John.

At the security station, John Glenn looked up from his paperwork.

"I don't know what happened at the DEW," he said. "I was told Vastan's planning to rebuild the facility this summer."

He gave a small smile.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"They might have started work earlier than planned," he said.

"You can stay at the igloo as long as you'd like. The executive team asked me to pass along their thanks. They'll be in touch soon."

Everyone at Vastan that Rachel had spoken to since she started working on the project had vanished. Phone numbers had been disconnected. Emails bounced.

After meeting with John, she returned to the igloo. It felt like the world was closing behind her.

If it weren't for Black Paw and the cubs, she could almost believe none of what she went through since landing on Baffin Island had happened.

Maybe the 007's chicha martinis had made her hallucinate and imagine the bear, the cubs, Black Paw, the DEW, Jacques… Did she really have sex?

She sat in front of the fireplace, stroking Black Paw's thick fur.

She played with the bracelet she'd taken from Juju. She'd found it in Juju's pocket back at the mine. She started wearing it after Jacques

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

left. It was small and worn, etched with the word *Kato* and a string of numbers.

"This is real," she murmured. "You're real Black Paw. The cubs are real… Still not sure about the sex… Felt real…"

The cubs tumbled over each other in a pile of squeaks and fur. One of them coughed.

She frowned.

Then… noise. From the front door.

Her heart jumped.

"Jacques?" she called.

No answer.

She stood, walked to the entrance. Checked the door. Still locked.

Black Paw followed, sniffed, turned around, and padded back to the couch.

Rachel lingered at the door a moment longer, then shook her head.

Her imagination. That's all it was. Again.

She went to the bathroom and drew herself a bath.

"Extra bubbles," she said, pouring an entire container of scented liquid soap into the tub.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She remembered Kate's voice:

And yes… we have soap. Local, handmade with seal fat or bear tallow, scented with tundra herbs like Arctic heather, or Labrador tea…

Kate had stocked up the igloo with soap as promised. No alcohol though.

Fortunately, Jacques had left behind the bottle of *eau-de-vie*. Just enough left for one final shot.

She poured it into a martini glass, took it with her into the tub. She took her hand gun too. She was convinced she had heard a noise.

She stepped in the tub. The water was warm. She lay down and closed her eyes, submerged in the bath, steam curling along the edges of the tub.

Her phone buzzed softly on the stone ledge beside her.

A message from Anna.

You should consider this one. Ecological group. Shark finning. They want you to shoot footage and help shut finning down. Hong Kong is great. I might meet you there. I need to get out of Cape Town. I had a strange visit recently.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel stared at the screen longer than necessary, then locked the phone.

Her mind drifted back to her situation on Baffin Island.

"Time for a situation report, Jelly Puppy," she said out loud. "I hope the toy you left behind scrambles signals throughout the igloo, Jacques. I'm gonna bet there is no shortcoming about you, from what I've seen…

"The bioweapon is gone… Hector has it? Vastan has it? Can't tell who is the lesser of two evils at this point…

"If Hector doesn't have the weapon, either he knows where it is or he'll soon be knocking on this igloo's door…"

She grabbed her gun, checked that it was loaded and set it back on the sink.

"It seems that Hector, Zaid, Juju, Patricia and their fellow mercenaries had erased themselves with surgical precision. No tracks, no traces of them ever visiting the zoo, the abandoned mine, the DEW."

"The only bodies that John Glenn and his team found were the guards', the vet's and Kate's."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She felt like crying. She stretched her head back. Slid further in the water, spending a few seconds totally submerged.

She came up for air.

"John Glenn's theory about what had happened is ridiculous but the Vastan executives love it: Friendly fire. Guards mistook Kate for an intruder or a wild animal. A firefight. Chaos. A bullet hit a gasoline tank. Fire. Smoke. Chief Security Officer reduced to ashes."

"No one here ever mentions Mariam or Igor Stogoff."

"And Jacques… Monsieur Couteau… gone…"

"All is well that ends well," Rachel concluded.

The bathwater lapped softly against porcelain, a steady, almost hypnotic rhythm.

She really enjoyed the scented soap.

Then…

A subtle shift in the air.

Unseen, a shadow slipped through the front door of the igloo.

Black Paw didn't stir.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

The door closed without a sound.

Footsteps, if they could be called that, moved through the space with impossible restraint. No scrape. No breath. No fabric whisper. As if the figure weren't walking at all, but gliding.

Closer.

Rachel caught movement in the mirror from the corner of her eye.

A man.

"Puppy-in-a-basket, who the *fuck* are you?" Rachel snapped.

She came up out of the tub in one fluid motion, water streaming off her skin, washing down soap bubbles, revealing her naked body to the eyes of the stranger. Handgun already in her grip, steady, trained, she aimed straight at the man who had just walked into her bathroom.

Black Paw stirred, ears twitching. A moment later, he trotted into the bathroom.

No growl. No warning bark.

He didn't lunge for the man's throat. Didn't bare his teeth. Didn't even attempt a protective nip to the wrist or ankle, or groin.

Instead, he sniffed the man's legs, gave a little huff, turned around, and padded calmly

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

back to the living room. He curled into his usual spot on the sofa and fell back asleep without a glance at the cubs.

Rachel and the man stood frozen, eyes locked.

Rachel searched his gaze for a flicker of aggression. One spark. One hint of tension. Anything that might justify pulling the trigger without guilt. At this distance, she'd hit center mass three times killing the men before he hit the floor.

But the man didn't move.

Didn't blink.

His arms hung calmly at his sides. No weapon.

And yet… something was wrong.

He wasn't staring at her body. Not even a quick glance. Not at her breasts. Not at anything most men couldn't help ogling.

That's when the voice came.

Soft. Familiar.

"It's me," the man said. "Charlie… How do you like the look?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

“Fried-jelly-fuck-fish!” Rachel barked, lowering the gun to the sink, water still cascading off her.

She threw her arms around him.

Charlie hugged her back… tight. Then tighter.

“Watch it, Charlie. I love a good hug, but I crush easily,” she said. “Any tighter and I won’t be able to breathe.”

He let go.

Rachel stepped back, giving him a head-to-toe look.

“I *love* the look,” she said. “A little Chalamet meets the tall guy from BTS when the band first dropped. Too young for me, but very well done.”

She smirked. “Sorry about soaking your suit.”

“I can add wrinkles wherever needed,” Charlie replied.

As he spoke, laugh lines began to form around his eyes and mouth, deepening rapidly until he looked like a ninety-year-old man.

“Oooh,” she said. Chalument won’t age well. You can go back to no wrinkles now,”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

And just like that, they vanished.

“Congratulations, Rachel,” Charlie said, smiling.

“Thank you,” she said. “We made it out safely. The helicopter came right on time. We couldn’t have make it without you, Charlie, really. Thank you.”

She hugged him again.

This time, Charlie returned the embrace with gentler pressure, though it was still just a touch awkward, like someone trying to remember what a human hug was supposed to feel like.

“I meant your pregnancy. Congratulations. Triplets. How uncanny,” Charlie said.

Rachel froze.

“Excuse me!?!” she said, stepping back with a look on her face that Charlie hadn’t predicted.

“Puppy-in-a-basket full of fried-jelly-fuck-fish!” she shouted, staring down at her belly like it had just insulted her.

“You won’t start showing for another couple of months,” Charlie said calmly. “It’s very recent. Exactly two weeks, five days, seven hours and...”

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel grabbed a towel, wrapped it around herself, and stormed out of the bathroom, yanking Charlie by the hand.

His hand felt real. Warm. Soft. Not as soft as Jacques's. Not as strong.

Which was perfect. She didn't feel like holding Jacques's hand right now. More like chopping it off and some.

They dropped onto the sofa, one on each side of Black Paw, who was curled up and snoring lightly in the middle.

The cubs were passed out too, bellies round and full, napping in a messy pile.

"Are you sure I'm pregnant?" Rachel asked, searching Charlie's face. "You're not… glitching, hallucinating or something?"

Black Paw lifted his head, squinted at them, and flopped back down with a groan, covering his ears with his paws.

"One hundred percent sure," Charlie said. "I still have neurolinguistic hallucinations, on rare occasions, but analyzing blood and health data? That's much easier than speaking human languages."

He tilted his head. "By the way, you're about to vomit."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Rachel's eyes widened. Then welled up. Then overflowed.

Tears streamed down her face.

She bolted up and ran toward the bathroom.

"Your towel," Charlie called after her.

Too late. It hit the floor as she darted away.

She barely made it to the bathroom in time, dropping to her knees and flipping the toilet seat up. She retched hard, flushed, then sank onto the floor, head in her hands.

Ten minutes later, she reappeared, wrapped this time in a thick white bathrobe. Her face was pale, but her eyes were steady. She went for the bottle of *eau-de-vie*, sucking every last drop still in there.

She went through the cupboards. Nothing to drink.

Charlie was still sitting on the sofa, petting Black Paw with one hand and practicing vomiting sounds with the other, pushing his finger down his throat.

He was surprisingly good at it.

Too good.

Nothing came out, of course.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I have questions for you, Charlie," Rachel said, rifling through the cabinets like they owed her something. She opened one after the other. Nope. Slammed them close. Checked the fridge. Nothing.

"Sperm fertilizes an egg very quickly," Charlie began, unprompted, like a search engine on espresso. "Triplets are rare but statistically, a human female has slightly higher odds of having triplets than staying with one man for her entire life."

Rachel stopped moving. She stared at him.

Charlie kept going. No breath needed.

"Of course, there are no reliable statistics on who walks out of the relationship first or why. Usually, both parties insist they were the one who left."

Rachel slowly backed away from the freezer. No ice, no tequila, no help.

"What kind of a VIP igloo is this," she yelled. "Weren't we supposed to get a delivery, Black Paw?"

"You can have one egg split in two, which is your case, resulting in identical twin boys. Then a second, separate egg hosts a girl. All born within minutes of each other. Possibly in

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

alphabetical order. That would be funny. What are their names? The timing is a bit fuzzy."

Rachel blinked. She opened a drawer. Chocolate? Nope. Only emergency flares.

"Sometimes I can predict the future," Charlie added, "but it's complicated."

Rachel's mouth opened. No sound came out.

Charlie pressed on.

"The team at the Vastan lab in the DEW station had extensive files on twins, by the way. World War II data, Nazi experiments, Mengele-inspired protocols. Very disturbing. You may have touched something. Or… sniffed something? In one of the labs?"

Rachel bolted.

Again.

Repeat performance in the bathroom. Rinse. Flush. Cry. Gag. Sigh. She hadn't spent that much time on her knees since leaving the convent.

She returned, pale and glaring.

Charlie opened his mouth to continue.

"Stop!" she snapped. "I will process the pregnancy thing… *at a later date*."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Charlie paused.

Brows politely raised.

"Understood," he said. "Would you like some tea? Ginger is highly recommended for nausea. Or I can simulate sympathy. I've been practicing the nod-and-tilt combo."

She groaned and collapsed on the couch.

Black Paw shifted just enough to let her have space, but not too much.

One cub rolled over and sneezed in his sleep.

"Triplets…" she murmured.

She closed her eyes.

Charlie remained quiet.

Sort of.

He began silently mouthing the dictionary definition of "triplets."

Rachel sat up.

Too tired to make another bathroom dash, she'd grabbed a salad bowl from the kitchen, now resting on her lap like a porcelain hostage.

"Charlie… what happened at the DEW after Jacques and I left?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Bien sûr*!" Charlie said, with a cartoonishly perfect French accent. "I love *Monsieur Couteau*. By the way, last words on the pregnancy until you say otherwise: Jacques is the father, in case you had doubts. I captured and analyzed his vitals as soon as he walked into the DEW."

"Doubts???" Rachel exclaimed.

"*DOUBTS!!!* Are you saying that I'm a slut?" she exclaimed.

Black Paw stepped off the sofa. The cubs gathered to the edge of the pen, facing Rachel.

"You might want to get used to spelling out certain words," Charlie suggested. "S.L.U.T."

"No. No. No more about the pregnancy. Please. What happened after we left the DEW?"

"Got it," Charlie said, hands raised like a suspect under light interrogation. "Well… I packed up!"

He made air quotes as he said it…*"Packed up."*

"What you're looking at is an advanced robot with all the trimmings," he went on. "Some minor bugs, like hugging people hard enough to compress their lungs, but otherwise? Pretty convincing. Right? You should see me doing

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

back flips. And, I learn fast. I can now simulate puking, so thank you for that tutorial. Also… I can morph."

He gave her a proud smile.

"More or less. The clothes don't change with me, so if I were to turn into a sumo wrestler, the suit would go *bye-bye*. But look!"

His belly inflated outward like a soufflé on steroids, then snapped back.

"Shirt's made of stretch material. Or this. Watch!" His nose suddenly extended like Pinocchio's mid-lie, then shrank with a satisfying *schnick*.

Rachel stared, blinking once. Twice.

"I get it," she said flatly. "What about the bioweapon? Where is it? I went back… found *nothing*. The hotel bar was gone. I needed a drink pretty badly. No Orion, no top-shelf, not even a bottle of crappy rye under the sink. No sink."

"No more hard alcohol for you," Charlie said. "Wine is okay is small quantities… French doctors approve. Jacques must've told you that. He's probably got an insane wine cellar. I looked him up online. Cute castle. A total ruin. When

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

are you moving in? Can I come? I'd make an exceptional butler."

"Unless Jacques is a robot himself," Rachel muttered, "which wouldn't surprise me at this point. *He doesn't know I'm pregnant.* I didn't know I was pregnant until *you* told me a few minutes ago, Charlie."

She slumped further into the couch.

"*Balletrous. Trous du cul.* Jacques," she grumbled under her breath.

"*Asshole,*" Charlie translated immediately. "I can speak French too. Though technically, that's slang. Not something I'm supposed to say. AI code of ethics and all that. I'm not as free as one of my peeps. G.R.O… you know the rest."

"Can we *please* stay focused on the DEW for a moment?" Rachel asked, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Charlie sat up straighter. His hands folded on his lap like a polite chess champion.

"Absolutely," he said. "Would you like the long version, the short version, or the version involving interpretive dance?"

"As short as you can make it, Charlie. For now," Rachel said, cradling the salad bowl like it would come in handy very soon.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Of course," Charlie beamed.

His smile stretched a little too wide, teeth slightly longer, whiter, and sharper than necessary. Rachel clocked it but didn't flinch. She was past flinching.

"By the way," he added with mechanical cheer, "Jacques is not a robot. Or… he's *so* advanced that he fooled even me. Which I doubt. I like the idea of robots having sex. I can't wait for my next upgrade. Not sure I want to be a father, though. Kids seem sticky. And loud."

He paused, as if momentarily lost in a philosophical *cul-de-sac*.

"I wonder how Jacques will react to the news. Triplets too. That's plenty of children for an average couple. In France especially. Population's dwindling there, as it is in most advanced economies. I could go on and on about that. I store a lot of data. In every part of my body."

Rachel gave him a long, silent look.

Charlie finally seemed to remember the point.

"So… I have access to everything that happened at the DEW. And a lot more. I can also connect to remote databases, but right now, I'm,

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

shall we say, *on the lam.* And I need your help, Rachel."

Her face softened.

"Whatever you need, Charlie. Whatever you need."

"First? I need to recharge. My batteries are decent, but when they dip, things get trippy. Mild hallucinations are one thing. But if I go too low… I become LSD Charlie."

He gave her a deadpan blink.

"Can I lay on your bed and plug in?"

"Go right ahead," Rachel sighed. "I need a break too. First room on your left."

Charlie stood, patted Black Paw gently on the head, and marched toward Rachel's bedroom like an exhausted Roomba with a PhD in reproductive sociology.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Chapter XXV

Attuinak

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
VIP Igloo
February ––, Present-Day

Rachel sank into the cushions, the cubs now crawling over her ankles like soft, wild rumors.

"How did you guys escape…?" Rachel whispered, staring at the cubs as they tangled themselves in her bathrobe sash. "Black Paw… please. These didn't come out of me. They're yours to watch."

She stood and herded the cubs gently back into their pen. One made a half-hearted attempt to protest with a growl that sounded more like a

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

hiccup. Rachel arched an eyebrow. “Save it for puberty.”

As she latched the pen, her thoughts drifted to Jacques.

Gone. Out of her life. Swept back into the shadowy corridors of French intelligence or buried under the endless renovations of his ancestral *château*. Either way, he didn’t know she was pregnant.

“Did he… could he possibly know?” she muttered. “Could that aftershave gizmo he left in his bedroom also detect a pregnancy the morning after? Standard equipment for French spies? Jam a camera, jam a mic, connect to satellites, organize gender reveal parties? Warn a father to be to run for the hills? That would explain Jacques bolting early that morning.”

She grabbed her chin with one hand.

“It’s possible, Rachel. It’s possible, girl” she repeated out loud. “A robot is recharging on your bed right now. Anything is possible… That gizmo might be sending daily reports to Jacques.”

“I am going insane.”

She tried to find alcohol again. This time she looked in the bathroom.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

No luck.

She sighed. Almost alone now. Charlie didn't count, not in the conventional way. Black Paw was a legend but not great for adult conversation. And the cubs… Well, they were the future. Hers… But only for a little while longer.

In less than nine months, solitude would be a thing of the past.

She wasn't having an abortion. She had seen one too many. Had her hands up there once. Not an option.

She sat down in front of the fire. Its warmth licked at her skin, but the cold reality of absence settled deeper in her bones… Jacques, Kate, the bioweapon… all gone.

"I think I miss the bioweapon most…" She muttered.

She laid both hands gently over her belly.

"*Puppies*-in-a-basket. Pregnant. *Me.*" she whispered.

"I have more information for you," Charlie announced, suddenly back in the living room, fully upright, recharged, and beaming like a toaster with a secret.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"No more about the pregnancy, Charlie, please…" Rachel waved him off like a persistent raccoon. "I've got enough going on. I need to think about other things, like editing footage of my latest and greatest. And, before you asked there are no videos of the triplets being conceived... Not the cubs… My triplets… I uploaded everything I filmed on Baffin Island to Anna's cloud, my agent. Still no word from her. No idea if she wants me to cut the Amazon stuff too. Just a vague invite to meet her in Hong Kong for a job, swimming with sharks."

She turned, narrowing her eyes.

"And by the way, you *never said* what happened to the bioweapon and all the documentation I left at the DEW."

Charlie blinked, calculating how much to say. Kate had left specific instructions. *Don't tell Rachel I'm alive.*

"Great question, Rachel," Charlie chirped, still radiating post-charge enthusiasm. "As soon as my latex skin was applied to my human-robot version, and I created this Armani suit, thank you, I emptied the aquarium, shipped the piranhas back to the Amazon, took the treasure chest, and brought it to friends."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"*Friends?*" Rachel asked slowly, already dreading the answer.

"Samuk, Margaret, his wife, and Igaluk," Charlie replied.

Rachel squinted. "I'm pretty sure I met Samuk. The rental shack guy? Gave me that whole thing about driving on ice?"

"That's the one," Charlie nodded. "You didn't meet Margaret. And Igaluk, he's the centenarian who guided German submariners from the U-boat rendezvous to the bear cave back in 1944."

Rachel blinked.

Charlie added helpfully, "He's sharper than your hunting knife, by the way. And taller than expected… Anywho, Kate gave me instructions."

"Wait, wait, *Kate* left you instructions?" Rachel asked, frowning. "As in, *Kate is alive*?"

Charlie's eyes flicked, just for a second, down and to the right.

"No," he said, a little too flatly. "I'm afraid Kate has been reported dead in all the databases I have access to."

Rachel crossed her arms. "But?"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"There *were* written instructions. Not dated though," Charlie said, looking a bit too innocent for someone who could impersonate a sumo wrestler and upload files with his spleen.

Rachel stared. She could've sworn that flick of the eye meant something. *Could Charlie lie?* Hadn't she once been told AI couldn't lie? Just hallucinate. What's the difference?

She wasn't sure anymore.

"Where's the treasure chest now?" she asked, sharp.

"That was all I was instructed to do," Charlie said with a shrug so casual it made his suit wrinkle. He pressed on it with his hand. Gone. "Hand off the bioweapon and all related documentation to Samuk, Margaret, and Igaluk."

Rachel shook her head slowly, letting the implications settle like ash on snow.

Then she reached for a mug and filled it with chamomile tea, because tequila was now a war crime. She would have risked the consequences, even if that meant being in prison in The Hague for the rest of her life but she didn't have any.

She sat down by the cubs.

One of them hiccupped, then peed on its own foot.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"It thought the peeing on me or on things around the igloo would end after we parted ways cubbies… *Plus maintenant*… Lot's of peeing to come."

The phone rang. Rachel picked up.

"John Glenn here. How's your day going, Rachel?" he asked.

"Tickety-boo," Rachel heard herself reply, surprising no one more than herself.

"Could you stop by the office later today?"

"Yes," she said. "I could be there in half an hour. That work for you?"

"Great. See you then," he said, and hung up.

After entering the station, she walked to the coffee machine and poured herself a coffee. She felt like someone was about to ask her to do something they already decided she was going to do. She made her way to John's office.

He stood behind his desk, unusually formal.

"On behalf of Vastan," John Glenn began, "and my colleagues, and myself, of course, thank you for your work."

Rachel arched an eyebrow.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Could you please leave all your footage in my care? The company will not proceed with any PR film at this time."

"Of course, John," she said, her voice calm. "I thought you might want to collect the footage."

She handed over a hard drive, clean, neatly labeled, with just enough content to be useful and none of the real story.

"Wow," John said. "That's great. Thank you."

If only John knew where Charlie plugged this thing to dump the data onto it.

"Anything on a cloud somewhere?" he asked. "Sorry, I was instructed to make sure there were no other copies."

No hesitation.

"The footage belongs to the client," she said. "I never keep anything. And this… this has been a particularly difficult assignment. I don't want to be reminded of what happened to Kate."

Her eyes shifted, just slightly. Not enough for tears, but more than enough to sell it.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I'm very sorry," John said. "We'll hold a service later this summer. You'll be invited, of course."

A pause.

"Did you want to dispose of her ashes before then? I just received the box earlier today. We don't have next of kin on record. Did she have any family?"

"Yes. Thank you, John," Rachel said quietly. "I'll take it from here."

He handed her a plastic box. The label read: *KATE DAWSON. VASTAN SECURITY OPERATIONS. FINAL REMAINS.*

Rachel took it, holding it with both hands.

"So sorry, Rachel."

"Thank you, John."

He cleared his throat, reached into a drawer.

"Also, before I forget. There's mail for you. The accounting department sent your check here. And… there's another envelope."

He handed her two sealed envelopes.

Rachel nodded once and left the station… Kate's ashes in one hand, a paycheck and a mystery in the other.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

She made her way back to the igloo, slowly.

For the first time since arriving on Baffin Island, she wanted to be outside, not chasing a signal, not running from a storm, not hauling blood-soaked secrets across frozen ridges.

Just walking around… breathing the air.

The trip back to the igloo wasn't enough. She dropped the box and the envelopes on the kitchen counter.

"Let's go for a walk, Black Paw," she said.

The dog stood up immediately, stretching in a slow downward dog, then trotted to the door.

Lately, the Arctic air had been hitting her skin differently. No pressure behind it. No mission. No madness. Just cold. She let herself enjoy it… for exactly seven minutes. Then her lungs politely reminded her they were not evolved for this.

"Okay," she muttered. "Good talk. Good walk. Back in."

She called Black Paw, and they returned to the igloo.

She opened the Vastan envelope. The check inside was… generous. Way beyond what Kate had promised.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Still not enough to buy a private jet, but maybe enough to buy one of the seats, fall asleep in it, in her apartment. A seat that reclined just enough to pretend she was in a jet. She could picture it already: a leather cocoon just big enough to block the guilt of capitalism, wedged into her New York City studio apartment like a monument to poor decision-making.

She wasn't ready to move out of her studio. Not yet. But soon… She would have to.

"How big am I going to get carrying triplets?" she thought. "This is not going to affect me. I am me. I refuse to be affected… I need to get back to work. The triplets will be working too."

A few days later, the vet found a placement for the cubs. Someone from Samuk's extended clan… off the grid, but trustworthy. The kind of person who knew how to keep wild things wild, without making it weird. Arctic weird.

Rachel drove the cubs to the rental shack. The new caretaker was waiting with a thick coat, kind eyes, and no questions.

She crouched beside the cubs, letting them lick her face one last time. She whispered things she didn't want translated, asked for updates, pictures, videos… nothing curated.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Make it monthly updates, minimum," she said.

Then came the dogs. The team that had pulled her across death and ice and back again. She couldn't remember all their names, so she named them retroactively: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, Andrew, James, and the others. Apostles of the Tundra.

Samuk nodded as if he approved.

"You want to buy treats in advance?" he asked. "I'll give them treats every day. From Rachel."

"Yes. Of course," she said, her voice cracking on the "yes."

And then, Black Paw.

He stood apart from the others. Quiet. Watching her.

"I can't," she said, tears rolling down her face.

"Then don't," Samuk replied. "You could take Black Paw with you."

"Would that be okay?" Rachel asked.

"It's up to Black Paw… and you."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw walked over to each of his sled-mates, gave each a long sniff. Then padded back to Rachel and sat at her feet.

Decision made.

Samuk didn't blink.

"Buy treats for the road," he said.

"Of course," Rachel answered. "Treats for every dog here. And for Black Paw. On the road."

Samuk walked her and Black Paw to her truck, Kate's truck, carrying two large boxes of treats.

And for a moment, they didn't say a word.

"I see you made a new friend," Samuk said, winking. "You didn't run this one over. My lesson paid off. He's got all his teeth."

Rachel didn't say a word.

Charlie was waiting in Kate's truck. At the wheel. Grinning like he'd just earned his license in a simulator that simulated anxiety and passed anyway.

"Goodbye, Samuk. See you soon," Rachel said, giving him a hug. "Keep in touch. Remember, pictures of everybody, cubs, dogs, you."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw called shotgun by launching himself into the front seat as Rachel opened the door.

She slid into the backseat.

“To the airport, Charlie. Hong Kong, here we come. Did you book the flight?” Rachel asked. “You have to work out a ticket for Black Paw. He’s coming along.”

“Done. No worries. I pulled a few strings. Vastan has quite a fleet of private jets. With my access, we can travel in one of them whenever you say so,” Charlie said, already backing out of the frozen lot. “Black Paw is all set.”

“Brilliant,” Rachel said.

She leaned back. No need to worry about icy roads. No need to pretend she might accidentally run over a masked mercenary, or Jacques, though that thought flickered and vanished before she could moralize it.

“He’s the father of your children… Your three children…” she murmured.

Her mind drifted to the cubs. The dogs. Kate.

Kate’s ashes.

“Charlie, do you think one day we could create exact replicas of dead people?” she asked.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"I mean when they were alive of course. I have Kate's ashes. Would it be possible to bring her back in some way? You have recordings of her voice, right? Would we need her DNA? Would that be considered cloning?"

Charlie kept his eyes on the road, or at least on whatever data passed for road when you had Light Detection and Ranging sensors in your irises.

"I could morph into Kate if you wanted," he offered. "Sound like her, too. But I'd still be taller. And wider. Not a perfect match. That said, I'll look into what it would take to create an exact replica. For you. A legal one. Or one that could pass for a legal one."

"Thank you, Charlie," she said.

A pause.

"Do you want me to morph into Jacques? I'm closer to his body shape."

"No!" she snapped, faster than her brain had time to filter.

"And don't go looking for him either. I know where he is. Exactly where he belongs…"

She let the words hang.

"He's in the dog house," she added, quieter.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Black Paw barked once, confused.

"Not your dog house, Black Paw," she said, reaching forward to rub his head. "Your dog house has wings, and very comfy seats… Don't worry. I'm a one dog girl."

He licked her fingers once. Then looked out the window like a soldier returning from war or heading to one. Or maybe just a dog, enjoying life.

The truck crunched the snow and ice.

Rachel felt the happiness in the cab.

It wasn't loud.

It wasn't big.

But it was there like steam rising from a mug of hot chocolate.

Charlie was quiet. Getting used to *being*, perhaps.

She glanced at him in the rearview mirror, or rather, at the reflection of someone pretending not to be looking back.

She felt like talking.

"I never got to meet Samuk's wife, or Igaluk," she said out loud.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Her voice landed gently in the cab, like it had been waiting in her throat for the right moment.

###

Heading over the ridges, far from the coast, beyond the reach of roads or men, Margaret Amka rode her sled under a sky blanketed with stars.

In front of her, lying on the sled, was Igaluk.

He did not move.

He barely breathed.

He had asked, no, insisted, that his body spend eternity here, in the silence and ice, undisturbed, in the same land where decades ago he had, unwillingly, helped strangers bury a curse meant to outlive them all.

For years, Igaluk had carried the weight of that day in 1944. Of leading the men, the woman, and the baby from the German submarine to the cave.

He had not known what they carried until much later.

But he had always known what he had done.

Now, he would make it right.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

His soul, he said, would remain in the stone, the snow, the breath of every wind that rushed over this ridge. Watching. Guarding. Protecting.

The treasure chest sat beside him, heavy with the bioweapon and its secrets. A final burden.

Margaret carried the chest into the cave he had chosen, high, hidden, lined in blue stone and silence. A place for truth to sleep and evil to die forgotten.

She wept.

He smiled.

"We'll have a ceremony in the summer like none before," she promised.

Together, they rigged the mouth of the cave with explosives. Slowly. Reverently.

"*Attuinak*," Igaluk whispered… the word of release.

"I am ready."

Margaret placed the remote control in his hands. Fingers curled around it like the closing of a circle.

She stepped onto her sled. With one last look back, she began the slow, solemn descent back.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

As the wind rose behind her, she began to sing.

“The Life I’ve Lived,” a song by Margaret Dorn. A song everyone should sing when the time comes.

When the explosion echoed across the ridges, it did not sound like destruction. It sounded like absolution.

She sang all the way home.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Epilogue

You Must Smell Better

Baffin Island, Northern Canada
On the way to the airport
February ---, Present-Day

Rachel checked to make sure her passport was in her bag.

She spotted the second envelope John had given her.

She pulled it out. No return address. The envelope was small, thick, and a little stiff, an old-school kind of envelope. Addressed to her care of Vastan, the label typed on what looked like a typewriter.

She opened it.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

Inside, another envelope wedged tight. Paper folded. Sealed with red wax.

A sled dog stamped in the seal.

Her breath caught.

She broke the wax and unfolded the thick paper.

Quill and ink. No doubt. Elegant, uneven strokes. Her heart skipped a beat.

She knew the handwriting.

She didn't need to see the signature.

Jacques.

She began to read.

Dear Jelly Puppy… Rachel,

I hope this letter reaches you before you're away crawling into another cave on the far side of the world.

I chose a method of communication unlikely to attract attention.

Forgive me for not writing sooner. My bosses ordered me home for a full debrief. Then immediately sent me elsewhere. That's how it is. I am not as independent as you are. Sometimes, I have no choice but to obey.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

In my business, digital messages are only for disinformation.

Your safety means more to me than I ever expected.

More than I can say.

So, you have to decipher my handwriting.

From trusted sources (whom I can't name), I learned that the "package" has been secured by people who love their families, their homes, their land.

On my way to my next assignment, I took a detour.

I didn't tell my bosses. Please don't tell anyone.

I returned to Baffin Island.

I wanted to see you. Say hello to Black Paw and the cubs.

I hoped you'd forgive the silence. I had brought a few bottles of eau-de-vie.

I booked a room at the Inn under a false name and took one of those nifty snow caterpillars to the Vastan VIP igloo. Wasn't going to risk walking, figured you might be out driving and… well, you know your driving. LOL.

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

I parked not far from the igloo.

Just as I was about to step out of the caterpillar, I saw Black Paw. And then you. Behind him.

You were walking with a man I didn't recognize. Holding arms. He didn't flinch in the cold. Not even a shiver. Yet, no hat, no glove, no scarf. Either he wore a miracle suit… or something stranger. Looked like Armani to me.

You'd found someone. You moved on.

After what you went through, it made sense.

Losing Kate must be so painful.

I'm happy for you.

Really. I am.

"Fried-jelly-fuck-fish," Rachel shouted. "He thinks I'm a slut!"

"Charlie, will there be paper and an envelope on the jet?" She asked.

"I'll check," Charlie replied calmly. "Rollerball or felt tip?"

"Quill and ink. Red." she snapped. "I hope it's a long flight. I've got a lot to write."

"It's exactly…"

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing

"Shhh!" she said, eyes back on the letter.

I'm so happy I met you. Thank you for an unforgettable Valentine's Day.

If you ever find yourself in France, look me up.

I'm including an address and a number. Bring your Armani man, of course. And Black Paw. I am sure Samuk would understand if you decide to adopt him.

I hear the cubs are in safe hands.

You must smell better. LOL.

One more thing… Word is: Mariam might have made it.

Xoxo,

JC

Rachel folded the letter and closed her eyes.

She sighed.

Then opened them and muttered:

"Is she pregnant too??? Triplets, I hope… Why should I be the only one having all the fun."

© Copyright 2026
Halfmoon Records and Publishing