



UNTIL WE MEET
ONCE MORE
JOSH LANYON



Until We Meet Once More
Revised edition, November 2011

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

UNTIL WE MEET ONCE MORE
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Until We Meet Once More

*Anchors Aweigh, my boys,
Anchors Aweigh.
Farwell to foreign shores,
We sail at break of day-ay-ay-ay.
Through our last night ashore,
Drink to the foam,
Until we meet once more.
Here's wishing you a happy voyage home*

Anchors Aweigh - Lt. Charles A. Zimmerman

Present day, 0001, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

“What we don’t want,” Lt. Colonel Marsden said, “is another Roberts’ Ridge.”

“Understood, sir.”

Army Ranger Captain Vic Black was thirty-two, a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair prematurely silver at the temples, and eyes a color a former lover had once referred to as “jungle green.” Those light green eyes studied his commanding officer as Marsden, his face lined with weariness, looked instinctively at the silent phone on his desk.

Vic understood only too well what Marsden was thinking. The parallels between this rescue operation and the disastrous Battle of Takur Gar -- commonly known as Roberts’ Ridge -- were painfully clear. In the Battle of Takur Gar the rescue of a Navy SEAL had resulted in two helicopters getting shot down and the deaths of seven U.S. soldiers -- including the Navy SEAL, Petty Officer First Class Neil C. Roberts. Yeah, the last thing anyone wanted was another Roberts’ Ridge.

Marsden admitted, "I know what you're thinking, but we're in better position to get their man out even if they didn't have their hands full with Akhtar Shah Omar on the other side of the valley."

"That's what we're here for," Vic said woodenly. Well, it was one of the things the rangers were there for. Rapid response. Rescue. Whatever was needed. Like the SEALs, the Rangers were an elite special operations force, highly trained and able to handle a variety of conventional and special op missions -- everything from air assault to recovery of personnel or special equipment. This missing Navy SEAL seemed to qualify as both of the latter.

"No QRF. No TACP. No USAF. Just a three man rescue team carried in by a MH-47 Chinook and inserted at 0200 hours 1000 meters on the Arma mountain range." Marsden pointed to a place on the map.

"Has there been any further communication from the surviving SEAL?" Vic asked, scrutinizing the map. Those impenetrable mountains were riddled with Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. Another enemy was the weather -- it was winter now -- and the brutal terrain. The Shah-i-Kot valley and surrounding mountains provided natural protection. For the last 2,000 years Afghan fighters had successfully resisted everyone from Alexander the Great in 330 B.C., to the British Army in 1800's to the Soviets in 1980.

"No," Marsden replied. "But this is a valuable man with valuable intel. They -- *we* -- need him back."

"That's what rangers do. Kick down the doors, take care of business, and bring the good guys home safe and sound."

Marsden met Vic's gaze -- reading him correctly -- and grimaced. "I know, Vic. I know. He may be dead. But his IR strobe is still active and a Predator drone live video feed showed him on his feet and making for the landing zone as of two hours ago."

"Good enough," Vic said. And he did mean that. If there was a chance of getting that poor bastard off that fucking mountain in one piece, he was willing to try.

"If we're all very, very lucky, you'll be in and out before the enemy ever knows you dropped by."

Vic nodded curtly. They would all certainly be very lucky if it went down like that. If he developed that kind of luck, he might take up betting on the ponies fulltime when he got back to the States next month. “Does this frogman have a name?” he inquired.

“Lt. Commander Sean Kennedy.”

The wallop was like...looking both ways only to get hit by a passing freight train.

“*Sean Kennedy?*” Vic repeated faintly.

“You know him?”

Marsden was staring at him, and no wonder. Vic’s nickname wasn’t “Stoney” for nothing. He managed to say evenly, “If it’s the same man. Yeah. I knew him. A long time ago.”

“Sean Kennedy is a common enough name.” Marsden was still eyeing Vic curiously. “Well, it’s a small world, and that’s a fact. Good friend, was Kennedy?”

“Yes.”

The best.

And more.

“Funny how things work out,” Marsden said, apparently in one of his philosophical moods. “Well, whether this Kennedy is your Kennedy or not, it looks like it’s your job to bring him home. You deploy at oh one hundred hours.”

oOo

Twelve years ago, 0005, Beneath the chapel of the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland

Eerie blue light bathed the marble sarcophagus of John Paul Jones.

“Jee-zus, you’re one crazy sonofabitch,” Midshipman Second Class Sean Kennedy said admiringly -- though this was very much the pot calling the kettle black. “Remind me not to gamble with you again.” He looked around the chamber with awe.

“Yeah, yeah. Pay up.”

“You want a blowjob in a crypt?”

Hell, provided Sean Kennedy was the guy at the other end of his dick, Vic would have welcomed a blowjob inside the sarcophagus.

“Are you chickening out?” Vic asked in a hard voice because if Sean was, Vic was liable to strangle him out of sheer frustration and murderous disappointment.

Ever since he’d seen fellow plebe Kennedy laughing down at him from the top of Herndon Monument -- sunlight gilding his chestnut hair and honey-colored skin, turning his hazel eyes gold -- he’d wanted him. Wanted him so bad it kept him up at nights. And it hadn’t helped when they’d become friends. Or roommates. And if it hadn’t been for the presence of their other bunkmate, Midshipman “Specs” Davis...

But then Vic had known he had a problem from the time he was fifteen. He was eighteen now. Oh, he liked girls okay. But not the way his friends did. In fact, he felt a little queasy listening to the stuff his friends talked about wanting to do to chicks. Vic liked to jack off in front of the mirror in his bedroom at home -- position himself so he couldn’t see his face, just watch his hand moving on his dick, watch his dick thicken and lengthen, and pretend it was someone else’s hand and someone else’s dick.

And then he’d met Midshipman Fourth Class Sean Kennedy and figured out whose hand he wanted -- and whose dick. Because it turned out that Kennedy had the same problem.

“I’m not chickening out,” Sean said evenly. “You won your bet.”

Yep. He’d won his bet -- and if they got caught, they were both out. Finished. Washed up. And goddamn if it didn’t feel worth the risk standing there in the creepy darkness of the crypt beneath the chapel, Sean’s eyes gleaming as they watched him. Not trusting himself to speak, hands shaking a little, Vic unzipped his uniform trousers.

Sean’s shadowy figure dropped to its knees before him and Sean’s mouth -- lips so soft and tongue so hot and wet -- closed around Vic’s cock.

Vic groaned. He couldn’t help it. But the sound reverberated off the marble floors and stone walls like old John Paul Jones had just noticed what was going on.

Sean disgorged him, spat out, “*Shut the fuck up!*”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not bilging out two years from graduation. Copy that?”

“Copy that. Shut up and suck me.”

He felt the huff of Sean’s laugh against his groin. “Bastard.”

And then, to his abject relief, that marvel of a mouth closed around him again. Vic closed his eyes and concentrated on that wondrous wet tongue licking and lapping at the head of his dick. Vic shifted, stepped further apart to give Sean better access. Sean's mouth closed around him and he began to suck in earnest. So good. So humbly good that fierce draw following the slow, reluctant repel, hard and soft, wet and hot.

Vic opened his eyes. It gave him a sense of power too; staring down at Sean's bent head, the dull gleam of his chestnut hair, the dark crescents of his eye lashes, and his mouth...

Oh, that mouth.

His gaze fell on one of the four giant bronze dolphins that braced the marble sarcophagus. The dolphin seemed to be sticking its tongue out at him. In the eerie blue light from above Vic could just make out the name "Ranger" carved in the marble floor above the "John" in *John Paul Jones*. All seven of the ships Jones had commanded were listed there.

Two things eventually occurred to Vic: never again was he going to be satisfied with a girl blowing him -- and Sean had done this before.

In fact, Sean gave head like a he did it for a living. Like a professional whore. It made Vic angry and it made him crazy for more because it was so good. 'Good' being a feeble word for the best goddamned thing in the world.

That beautiful sucking pull, that wet slide...a sweet tension was building, building with every synchronized pulse of heart and dick, building....

Oh yeah, and there it was, rolling through his nerves and muscles...bones and blood and every cell in his body...picking up weight and energy like a tidal wave surging up and then crashing down in wave after wave of shuddering sensation that sent sparks shooting behind his eyes.

Vic slumped against the black and white marble column. His legs were shaking so hard he wasn't sure he could stay on his feet. "Christ." His whisper seemed to echo in every corner of the crypt.

Sean was kneeling at his feet, breathing hard like he'd run a marathon, and Vic suddenly wanted to do it to him. Not just to taste him -- although he did, to his shame, want to taste Sean's cock -- but to give him that. That...rush.

But that hadn't been the bargain.

Anyway, Sean was pushing to his feet. Vic straightened, groped for his handkerchief and wiped himself off. He was astonished to see Sean unzip his pants and mop his own groin and genitals.

"You came *watching* me?"

Sean laughed a little unsteadily, nodded.

And because he was weirdly moved and excited by that, Vic said arrogantly, "Yeah, I have that affect on a lot of people."

"Making plebes pee their pants isn't the same thing, asshole." But Sean was chuckling, and something about him, about that husky laugh in the intimate gloom and the scent of him -- sex and soap and an aftershave that was too old for him -- Vic grabbed him, nearly knocking him down, and kissed him.

Caught off guard, Sean's mouth opened right up. Probably intending to protest, but Vic's mouth covered his. Sean's lips were warm and tasted of salty-sweet. A taste that was just a little too close to tears. Vic kissed him harder and kept kissing him until he recollected that officers and gentlemen did not kiss other officers and gentlemen.

At the same time, Sean pushed him away. "Down boy."

"You know you like it," Vic said aggressively.

And to his astonishment, Sean flicked him a funny look. "Yeah. I do."

When they finally went up through the chapel Sean pointed at the one of the stained glass windows facing the altar. Sir Galahad with his sword raised. "Hey," he whispered. "Notice a resemblance around the jaw?"

To put him in his place, Vic said, "No way. You've got a mouth like a girl."

This seemed to hit Sean's funny bone -- he always had a weird sense of humor. "Not *me*, asshole. I was kind of thinking he looks like you."

oOo

Present day, 0100, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan

Afghanistan in November was a cold day in hell.

At one o'clock in the morning the Chinook was spinning up on the tarmac, the craft shaking like a giant living, breathing bird. Warm exhaust gusted into Vic's face as he climbed aboard after combat controller Tech Sergeant Bill O'Riley and Specialist Paul Matturo.

This was Vic's handpicked rescue team. In addition to his mini quick reaction force, the Chinook helicopter was manned by five crew members including the pilot Major Kate Cheyney. Every one on this mission -- code name operation Blue Dolphin -- was a combat-seasoned veteran.

They buckled in and the chopper rose, whirling them off toward the snowcapped mountains.

They had a hundred and fifty mile flight to the rendezvous point. Everyone had their job and settled down to it, planning what to do when they hit the ground. The basic plan was to land, set up a perimeter, extract the Navy SEAL, and bug out.

Vic put on headphones and listened in on the radio chatter between Bagram and the battle zone. Well-armed, well-outfitted al Qaeda mountain fighters were well entrenched around their target. In other words, business as usual.

"So what the hell is this SEAL doing out here on his lonesome?" O'Riley asked, when Vic finally put the headphones aside.

"He was part of a recon team looking for Akhtar Shah Omar."

Akhtar Shah Omar was a Taliban leader in the Kunar province whose so-called Mountain Devil fighters had been delivering heavy casualties to the marines operating in eastern Afghanistan.

"Someone should have told them Omar's on the other side of the valley."

Vic nodded curtly. It was obvious they didn't have the full story yet, but that was par for the course. What he had been able to learn was that Sean had been leading a four man team. The three other SEALs had been killed after an extended firefight when their position had been discovered by mujahadeen militia. Sean had managed to survive and keep moving and was now within range of the landing zone, although there was no telling what kind of shape he was in.

"By now everybody in the fucking province, including Osama Bin Laden, will be looking for him. And they're going to be waiting for us," O'Riley said.

Vic looked from his weathered face to the dark, intense face of Matturo. “Yep. The Taliban know we always come back for our own. If they can, they’ll lay a trap for us, but we’re coming in fast and we’ve still got the advantage of darkness.”

Cheyney’s calm voice came over the intercom. “Six minutes out.”

As Vic unbuckled and moved into kneeling position, he could hear the pilot briefing her crew who were already on their feet, watching the windows, looking out for RPG launches.

Far below Vic could see the pale glimmer of the snowy slopes of the whaleback western ridge of the Shah-i-Kot Valley.

Cheyney finished, “Anybody have any questions? No? Let’s rock and roll.”

oOo

Eleven years ago, 1515, Village Motel, Annapolis, Maryland

“Let’s lock and load, baby,” Sean said, squirting a shiny glob of lube on his hands. He rubbed his fingers together, warming the gel.

Vic shifted, trying to get comfortable -- like that was even a possibility.

Sean ran his hand lightly over Vic’s ass, stroking him, and then he parted his buttock cheeks, tracing a light finger down his crack -- not quite teasing, but not invasive either. Delicately he touched the tight -- and clenching tighter -- entrance to Vic’s anus.

Vic sucked in a breath. Fists punching sharp indentations in the slick, flowered bedspread and mattress beneath, he looked uneasily over his shoulder. “I don’t know about this.”

Sean’s finger stopped that little stroking motion that was sending butterflies swarming into Vic’s hot, tight belly. “Are you welching on your bet?”

Was he?

Vic stared at Sean’s hard face. Sean would be pissed...but, yeah, he’d let Vic back out of it.

“Fuck no. I just...you do know what you’re doing, right?”

“A damn sight more than you knew when you shoved that canon up my ass the first time.”

Vic blushed. He'd heard loudly and at length how he needed to work on his technique that first time. Well, practice made perfect, and he didn't get any more complaints about his performance these days. Far from it. Nothing Sean liked better than taking Vic's dick up his skinny ass.

So why he'd had to suddenly make this into a big deal, turn everything around, insist on that goddamned bet on the Army-Navy Game -- and why Vic had had to *lose* the bet.

"A deal's a deal," he said gruffly.

He faced forward again, uncomfortable at the way Sean's face colored up and his eyes shone more brightly in the subdued hotel lighting.

"You'll like it, Stoney," Sean whispered and Vic shivered as Sean's lips pressed briefly, like warm velvet, to his spine. "You'll see."

Cocky sonofabitch. No way was Vic going to like this, although he had to admit to a little curiosity given the way Sean carried on when Vic was fucking him. Racked and helpless -- like it was just the best thing in the world to have Vic's dick shoving in and out of him. He'd even cried a little the first time -- and not because Vic had hurt him. They'd both pretended not to notice.

Sean started fingering him again in that embarrassingly intimate, *knowing* way. Vic jumped.

"Jesus, would you try to relax?"

"I *am* relaxed!"

Sean laughed, and Vic reluctantly laughed too although he was a little angry at being forced into this.

Okay, in fairness he wasn't being forced. Sean would accept it if he said he'd changed his mind. He wouldn't be happy but he'd take it. And he'd still let Vic have him. But...Vic couldn't do that to him because clearly this meant something to Sean. Proved something. God knew what.

He could feel Sean's dick, rigid as a snub-nosed lance brushing against his buttocks. His own dick was soft as a limp noodle. In fact if his genitals retreated any further from this assault he'd turn into a girl.

Actually...that felt kind of good, the way Sean's finger was touching him there, stroking so lightly. The tip of his finger was slippery with oil and it pushed gently into

Vic and then pulled out; he was getting a sort of rhythm going and Vic made himself relax into it. His sphincter muscle automatically gripped Sean's finger -- biology kicking in -- but the friction wasn't so bad. Wasn't bad at all if he was honest.

Yeah, that was nice...

And Sean was patient. And careful. He pushed his finger in deeply and continued stroking until Vic was actually relaxed enough to permit another finger to slip inside -- definitely a weird feeling, but after the initial uncertainty of whether his body would permit this transgression...it sort of felt good. Sean was touching him expertly as though feeling for something...

Vic gasped as a jolt of pure pleasure lit up inside him. All hands on deck. Sean nipped his shoulder, and oddly that felt good too.

"Do that again," Vic ordered, unevenly.

Sean did it again and Vic gulped. Sean took the opportunity to slide another finger inside Vic's body.

He was sort of getting used to it now, and he liked the way Sean's fingers were twisting and stroking inside his body -- weird though it was. He'd always liked Sean's hands.

Sean pulled his fingers out. The bedsprings squeaked beneath as he moved into position, and Vic felt the alien brush of latex as the blunt head of Sean's dick pushed at the door of his body.

The condom changed everything, made him self-conscious, made him remember what they were doing, what they were risking. He tensed, but Sean was soothing him with whispers and a caressing hand on his cock. Vic forced himself to relax, he wanted to get this over with now. Sean pushed in.

It hurt. Bright pain flashed behind Vic's eyes and he briefly considered murdering Sean for raping him, but even as the red tide of fury rose, the pain was easing and a strange quivering awareness replaced it. Not exactly pleasure but...well, not like anything he'd ever felt before.

"Sorry, sorry. It'll get better, you'll see," Sean was whispering, and his hands petted and fondled until Vic's dick was hard again, and he was relaxed.

The fullness, the sense of being overwhelmed by another body, was disconcerting, but even that wasn't...bad exactly. Just strange.

Sean moved, sliding in a little further, then pulling out. He cautiously rocked against Vic and Vic cautiously pushed back against him. Sean's thrusts grew stronger, and Vic shoved back harder, and now they had the rhythm of it, the push pull, the rise and fall.

There was a temptation to wrestle for control, but he could feel Sean's urgency, his need, and after all, this was about giving Sean what he wanted, so Vic let go and just went with it, let Sean drive it, letting it build speed like a steam engine picking up until it was rocketing along on its own momentum and he couldn't have stopped it if he'd wanted to.

Strangely, he didn't want to.

Sean's cock thrust in and out, faster and harder, and then he changed the angle and Vic felt something like a fireball of intense, fierce physical delight roll up his spine and burst in the back of his skull. At the same time orgasm rushed up through him and he came in hard spurts of milky white.

Sean was still humping against him, making small, desperate sounds, and Vic, still telling himself he just wanted this over and forgotten, rolled his hips and tried twisting back. Sean arched, slamming in and out until he suddenly shouted and Vic could feel that pulse of liquid heat -- contained -- but there nonetheless.

They collapsed together, a sweating tangle of arms and legs, gasping for breath. Vic felt a crazy sort of triumph that he had managed this, managed to give Sean what he wanted. After he'd caught his breath, he rolled over, groggy with release and weariness, reaching for Sean, pulling him close. Sean crawled clumsily into his arms, burying his head in the curve of Vic's shoulder and neck.

He was murmuring something hot and emotional into Vic's skin, the meaning half-blurred by the thundering pulse in Vic's ears.

"What did you say?" Vic asked uneasily.

But Sean shook his head, denying the words.

oOo

**Present day, 0220, Somewhere in the Aram Mountain Range, Kunar Province,
Afghanistan**

The chopper set down in a sparkling powder of fresh snow. Vic was the first one down the ramp and out into the thin, cold air, M4 held at ready. His team followed on his heels.

The silence in the makeshift LZ was almost eerie. Moonlight spotlighted snowy pine trees and surrounding rocky crags. Nothing moved.

“Where the hell is he?” O’Riley asked at last.

Vic shook his head, eyes raking the barren plateau for any sign of life. “Let’s fan out. Have a look for him. He’s supposed to be on his way.”

They spread out, moving quickly across the mountain top. Not so much as a ground squirrel stirred.

Vic jogged to the edge of the clearing, looking down the mountain side. He could see the nubby carpet of pine trees and conifers. Not a glimmer of light from anywhere but the moon overhead.

“Where are you?” he asked softly.

The wind made a ghostly sigh through the funnel of rocks.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vic saw the flash of white light. A blast rent the night. Vic turned as a giant, invisible hand seemed to gouge into the earth in front of the nose of the chopper, sending snow and rocks flying his way. He hit the ground as shrapnel slammed into the side of the chopper and pinged against the rotary blades.

Mortar fire.

He looked for his guys and saw them flattened behind cover. Matturo yelled across the clearing, “Two o’clock. The bastards are firing mortars from over that ridge.”

The ridge was on the other side of a gorge separating this mountain from the next.

One of the chopper’s door gunners returned fire with his M60 machine gun, though it was doubtful he had a viable target.

Vic considered the ridge as another flash indicated a second mortar was being lobbed their way. Light, probably hand-held mortar, and far enough away to make that strike near the nose of the chopper more a matter of luck than strategy -- which wouldn’t help

Vic's team if that luck held and they ended up stranded on this mountaintop -- surrounded by al Qaeda. He remembered Marsden's words about not wanting another Roberts' Ridge. Marsden was going to piss himself when he got word of this. Although anyone could have predicted what would happen putting a chopper down in the middle of these mountains.

Not like there was any choice about it. From the moment Vic had heard Sean Kennedy was the fox in the snare, he'd been determined to go.

The second mortar hit beneath the mountain top. Snow and rocks and shrapnel flew into the night and then rained down while Vic, Matturo, and Riley hunkered under what cover they could find.

Matturo was swearing a blue stream when he popped his head up again. "If this frogman doesn't show up, how long are we planning on hanging around here?"

"Working on it." No small arms fire. So far, so good. The dividing gorge between this mountain top and the ridge where the insurgents were holed up would slow al Qaeda down only briefly. And these mountains were filled with bad guys to whom the sound of those mortars and machine gun fire would be reveille.

"Looks like they were waiting for us," O'Riley shouted.

Vic shouted back, "If they were waiting for us this place would be swarming with al Qaeda."

"Well, it won't be long now."

That was sure as shit true.

Another mortar exploded in the mountain below them. Vic could feel the mountain shake as the round thudded into its face.

"Any sign of our boy?" O'Riley called again from his position behind a scraggy evergreen that looked like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. "I got nothing. Any sign of him?"

Vic looked across to Matturo. Matturo shook his head.

"Let's give him a little while," Vic said. "Maybe traffic was heavy on the 101."

O'Riley guffawed.

Every fifteen seconds another mortar round hit the hillside, usually beneath the crest but occasionally striking the cliffside above. Given the randomness of the impacts, Vic

suspected the mortar team lacked a forward observer. What they did seem to have was an endless supply of ammo and boundless enthusiasm for their mission.

If Sean was trying to get up this mountain, the mortar fire would be one hell of a disincentive. And if he wasn't trying to get up this mountain...

In the lull between rounds, Vic jumped up and zigzagged back to the Chinook, boots pounding gravel. Taking shelter on the other side of the ramp, he yelled into the chopper, "Somebody get on the radio and contact base. See if one of the CIA's drones can give us Kennedy's coordinates."

In the distance he could hear the mortar firing. The longest minutes of his life ticked by while he waited for an answer.

When it came, it was not good.

"They're not picking anything up."

Sean. Don't do this to me.

"He's not moving or they can't find him?"

Another eternity while he waited.

"They can't find him."

Okay. That could mean a couple of things. If one word defined the SEALs it was silence. And the fact that Sean had gone silent could mean the drone wasn't positioned where it needed to be or there was a problem with it or with the live feed. It could mean Sean was lying low somewhere where the surveillance drones couldn't see him.

It could mean he had been captured.

Or killed.

But Vic wasn't going to accept that until he had proof. He turned to jog back to the clearing but the pilot, Cheyney, appeared at the top of the open ramp. She called after him, "Captain Black! We can't hang around here any longer."

Vic threw back, "We're not leaving without Kennedy, so simmer down."

"I'll simmer *you* down, Stoney," Cheyney snapped. "Any minute one of these ragheads is going to show up with an RPG and punch a hole in my bird. We're taking off."

Vic thought fast.

"Fair enough. Leave me here. I'll meet you at the bottom of the mountain."

She made a sound that in another woman might have been considered a squeak.
“*Leave* you here? Are you out of your goddamned mind? This mountainside is going to be crawling with hostiles within the hour.”

“Someone needs to wait here for Kennedy.”

“Look, Stoney, I don’t like it either, but --”

“If he’s here, I’ll find him.”

“*Stoney*. What are you -- you know as well as I do that he’s -- that there’s a good chance he’s been captured or killed. The live feed isn’t picking up any activity.”

“No way.”

“*No way*? What do you mean, *no way*? Stoney, no way can I leave you here. I’ve got my orders too, you know? And even if I didn’t --”

He couldn’t hear this. He liked her. They’d had some good times together, but... no. He said, “Katie, give me three hours. I’ll head for the valley below. It’s a natural landing zone. You can pick me up there at...0500.”

“That’s getting way too close to sunrise.”

“We’ll still have a little margin.”

She was shaking her head.

“Listen, if Kennedy’s still alive we can’t fly out of here and leave him on this rock with hundreds of insurgents closing in on him.”

“And what if he’s not still alive? Stoney -- Vic -- no one is writing off Kennedy. But there are other ways to handle this.”

“If al Qaeda finds him before we do, they’ll execute him. You know that.”

“I know that. I also know...” Her voice trailed. “You’re out of your goddamned mind.”

“Three hours. That’s all I’m asking.”

“It’s not that simple. We’ve got another storm front moving in fast. Snow is on the way. We’re losing our window.”

“Then you better not be late.”

She was motionless for a long moment, a dark shadow against the blinking lights and movement within the chopper.

“I must be out of *my* mind. How the hell am I supposed to explain --?”

But she was talking to herself.

oOo

Eleven years ago, 1345, Bancroft Hall, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland

“So when were you going to tell me?”

The one look at Sean’s face he’d risked had hurt too much, so Vic was staring out the window of their dorm in Bancroft Hall, staring over the summer-green tops of trees. It made it worse because Sean was trying so hard not to show anything -- after all those times Vic had warned him his face gave too much away. “I’m telling you now.”

“Now.” Sean’s voice was flat. “Okay. You’re telling me now. We’re...how many weeks from graduation? And you tell me *now* you’re thinking about the Rangers?”

“If I can get in.”

Sean jumped up from the bed and began to circle the room. “You’re going to cross commission to the fucking *army*? Your family’s been navy since your great-great-great crawled out of the ooze. And you’re suddenly talking about becoming an Army Ranger? You did notice we’re in fucking Annapolis, right?”

Vic turned then. “What do you *want* from me?”

Sean gaped at him. “What do I want? Well, Black, I guess I wanted what we’ve been talking about for three years. You and me in the marines together --”

“You jackass,” Vic yelled. He got his voice under control with an effort. “And how did you think that was going to work, Kennedy? It’s not even like we were going to be in the same unit. What the hell were you thinking? We were going to go steady? We were going get married?”

“What the hell was *I* thinking?”

“We’re career military. We can’t just...we’re not the kind of guys who...”

“Come out?”

Vic stopped cold. After a silence that seemed as deep and raw as the Mariana Trench, he said carefully, “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Sean just stared back at him with those clear, light eyes.

Vic said -- making it just as plain and to the point as he could -- “Maybe it’s different for you. You got in here on an appointment and there’s only your aunt to think about. My grandfather was an admiral in the Second World War. My dad -- my whole family -- is expecting me to live up to --” The look on Sean’s face stopped him. Vic said roughly, “I don’t mean that, Sean.”

Sean was smiling now, and that fierce white curve of his mouth was far worse than the hurt that had twisted his face a moment before. “Why not? It’s the truth. It’s what you think. I’m glad you said it. It makes it --”

Vic grabbed his shoulders, pressing his mouth to Sean’s stopping him from saying it. He didn’t want to hurt Sean. That was the last thing he’d ever want. He’d have given his soul to take it all back, to erase the last half hour, to change the future. But regardless of what he said or didn’t say, this was the way it had to be. There wasn’t any other way for them. He’d always known it, and he’d told himself that Sean did too. That despite what Sean said, what they’d *both* said, Sean knew the truth as well as Vic did. But maybe Vic had been seeing what he wanted to see because Sean...had always had that stubborn, irrational streak of idealism. Or stupidity.

Sean tore free and got on the other side of the room. He was shaking -- and so, Vic was surprised to note, was he.

“Listen,” Vic said, keeping his voice low. “This isn’t anything to do with how I-I feel--”

Sean yanked off the class ring he wore. Vic’s ring, actually, because they had secretly exchanged their class rings as Second Class Midshipmen. He hurled it with vicious accuracy at Vic. The heavy ring hit Vic squarely on the bridge of his nose and bounced away.

oOo

**Present day, 0240, Somewhere in the Aram Mountain Range, Kunar Province,
Afghanistan**

Vic was already a hundred meters down the steep, rocky slope when he saw the Chinook wheeling away like a great black bird. It silhouetted briefly against the enormous red moon and then was gone.

The mortar crew continued to take petulant shots at it until it had vanished, the sound echoing off the stone walls, and then rolling away into a silence as absolute as the grave.

Vic reached for a handhold and something skittered away from his hand.

Cautiously, and very quietly, half-walking, half-sliding he got down the steep hillside until he reached a trail of sorts. He kept his eyes peeled because Sean Kennedy was somewhere on this mountain and Vic was going to find him if it was the last thing he did.

Sean was smart and savvy and stubborn. No one knew better than Vic how stubborn Sean Kennedy was -- if eleven years of radio silence were anything to go by. Sean wouldn't give up. He'd keep fighting to get to the LZ.

If he was able.

And so Vic continued down a ledge that would have given a mountain goat pause for thought.

There was a clack of stone on stone, the sound echoing like a gunshot in the stillness of the night. Vic froze. The sound came from about twenty meters in front of him. Someone scrabbling up the cliffside. He reached for his combat knife. If this was a fight, it needed to be a quiet one or he was liable to have all of al Qaeda down on him. And if it wasn't a fight...his heart thudded hard in a hopeful mixture of adrenaline and anticipation.

Silent and deadly, he sprinted forward, and as he watched, two dirt grimed hands -- one wrapped in a blood-stained handkerchief -- groped blindly along the edge of the cliff.

Vic was ready, ready for the worst and hoping for the best as the man hauled himself, panting, over the lip of the trail and dragged himself to his feet, swaying as he tried not to put weight on his right foot. Vic saw the sweat dark hair, the stained headband, and the gaunt, bearded face.

"Sean," he said in a voice that sounded nothing like his own.

Sean Kennedy's head snapped up and he nearly stepped backward off the mountain side. Vic lunged for him, caught his arm and towed him forward. For an instant they were

in each other's arms, clutching tight, and then they were apart, standing on what felt like the edge of the world, teetering, off-balance physically and emotionally.

"*Stoney?*" Sean said at last. "Is that you?"

"Yeah." Vic was grinning like a fool. "Yeah, it's me."

"Jee-zus. It *is* you." Sean closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them and peered owlishly into Vic's face. "*You're* the cavalry?"

"You were expecting the navy?"

"Ha." Unexpectedly, Sean's legs gave and he half-sat, half fell onto the ribbon of goat track, head dropping back with exhaustion.

Vic knelt beside him. "How bad are you hurt?" He patted Sean down -- any excuse to touch him, if he was honest. To reassure himself that it really was Sean, that he really was alive. All the times he'd dreamed of this moment -- none of the dreams had come anywhere near this terrifying reality.

Sean's shoulders had broadened and his body was the hard body of a man. Beneath Vic's searching hands -- and the battered body armor -- Sean was all bone and muscle. His face was much older...a thousand years older, and something inside Vic grieved for that. The last time he'd seen Sean he'd been a lanky kid with hair the color of autumn and eyes younger than spring.

Eyes still shut, wincing beneath Vic's exploration, Sean said, "It's all relative. Was that my taxi I saw flying away a little while ago?"

"Just taking her for a spin around the block."

"I hope it's a short block."

Vic found where a bullet had grazed Sean's shoulder, a crease along his upper arm, another nick along his side where he'd been hit beneath the edge of his vest. An assortment of cuts and scrapes and bruises. Nothing vital had been hit and the blood was drying, crusting. It was as though al Qaeda had been chipping bits and pieces out of him for days. "Christ, how many times have you been shot?"

Sean opened his eyes, frowning into Vic's face as though he was having trouble focusing. "How far are we from the top?"

"About two hundred meters. But we're headed down."

“I don’t think we want to head down. I’ve got Taliban fighters on my tail.” He sounded remarkably calm about it.

Vic let go of him abruptly, pulled his binoculars from around his neck and threw himself down at the edge of the mountain, scanning the dark slopes below.

Nothing moved.

Not a flicker of motion.

“Are you sure?” he threw softly over his shoulder. Not that it was a mistake Sean was liable to make.

Sean said nothing.

“Sean?”

When he still didn’t answer, Vic glanced around and saw that he was sleeping. He turned the binoculars back on the mountainside beneath them.

Nothing.

But that didn’t mean they weren’t out there.

He crawled back to Sean, hesitating for an instant at the sight of that strained and weary face in repose. He rested his hand on Sean’s shoulder and instantly caught the gleam of Sean’s eyes.

“We got to move.”

Sean said, “I thought I dreamed you up.”

“You dream about me a lot?”

Sean’s laugh was stifled but it was his old laugh, and Vic’s heart seemed to swell.

“Not anymore. I got bigger boogeymen to worry about than you these days.”

Yeah, wasn’t that the truth. Vic took the slam absently, already recalculating. “Can you walk?”

“I got myself this far didn’t I?” And Sean began to gather himself, pushing upright, though accepting Vic’s help to stand.

“What’s the matter with your leg?”

“Sprained my ankle like the goddamned heroine in a monster movie.”

It was just getting better by the moment.

“Well, we can’t go up. I don’t think anyone knows I’m on the mountain, but they’re going to be wondering what that chopper was doing here. We can’t risk landing topside again, but Grizzly 01 is going to meet us in the valley at oh five hundred.”

Sean pulled away slightly to examine Vic’s face. “You’ve got a chopper going to touch down in the valley?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not kidding?”

“You know me better than that.”

Sean was shaking his head in disbelief. “What time is it?”

“We’ve got two and a half hours to get down there.”

“Too bad you couldn’t have come up with this plan *before* I climbed up here.”

“Sorry. Your line was busy.”

“Is this pilot in love with you or something?”

“Isn’t everybody?” Vic wrapped an arm around Sean’s waist. “Put your arm over my shoulders. Can you make it like this?”

“I can try.” Sean added grimly, “But if I can’t I don’t want you wasting time up here with a chopper crew waiting in that valley for you.”

They moved slowly down the trail, Sean half hopping, trying not to lean too heavily on Vic.

“I think our best bet is the north face,” Vic said. “It’ll be a tougher climb but whoever is tracking you won’t be looking for you over there.”

“They won’t be looking for me coming back down at all.”

“We’ll have to double back around to the LZ, and we’ll lose some time there....” Vic was still calculating odds. “How much ammo do you have left?”

“Maybe 50 rounds.”

SEALs typically carried 4000 rounds. Vic nodded, accepting this, not commenting on the battle that Sean had waged to get this far. “If we’re lucky we’ll lift out without a firefight.”

They traveled along the narrow trail, having to stop at one point to go single file down a ledge that was like a knife edge. It would have been tricky in the daylight. It was

harrowing in the dark. Vic kept one hand clutched on Sean's arm terrified that Sean would slip or misstep. Having finally found him again, no way was he losing him.

They finally made it across the ridge and Sean slid down. "I've got to rest."

Blood loss, shock, exhaustion. Yeah, he'd earned a rest. Unfortunately, they didn't have that kind of time.

"Take five," Vic said, although it was going to have to be more like take three. He squatted as Sean slid down the frosty rock face and leaned back. A couple of gentle snow flakes drifted down.

Fuck.

Vic stretched his arm out. "Here, let's conserve body heat."

Sean gave a laugh that was mostly a snort, but he leaned into Vic. Vic folded his arms tight around him. He had always dreamed of this meeting as a new beginning. It was feeling more and more like an ending.

"I lost my entire team," Sean said suddenly, the words vibrating against Vic's chest.

Vic nodded, not trusting himself to words.

"We had a direct action. Take out Akhtar Shah Omar. Limited time on target."

Not recon then. Assassination. He'd wondered if it was something more like that. He thought of the boy he'd known at Annapolis. His eyes prickled. And how insane was that when he wasn't exactly teaching Sunday School himself. And anyone who knew him would be laughing their asses off. So much for the Stone Man.

There was a long pause and he wondered if Sean had fallen asleep again; he was breathing long, steady breaths -- and then Vic realized that he was struggling with emotion.

"What happened?" he whispered against Sean's cold ear. Tempting to kiss him, but...no. No. He'd lost that right a long time ago.

"We got walked on."

Walked on. Compromised on a mission. He let his ears brush the chilled shell of Sean's ear. "It happens."

Sean said muffledly, "It does. And we all knew what we needed to do. But...it was this little girl. This little goatherd girl. And I couldn't do it, Vic."

"Couldn't do what?"

Sean looked up, his eyes looked wide and so clear they looked almost silver in the paling light. “It was my call and I said we had to let her go.”

Vic said calmly, “Hey, what was the option there? You’ve got to follow the Rules of Engagement. She wasn’t Taliban. She wasn’t al Qaeda.”

“No, she was fucking Heidi. And I let her go and she ran straight to the mujahadeen militia.” He turned away and wiped at his eyes with his forearm. “And my men ended up dead.”

For a few seconds Vic couldn’t say anything. Finally, he said unemotionally, “Sometimes they’re on our side. How’d you end up with the Taliban chasing you?”

“We had to fall back once the mujahadeen showed up. Basic move and shoot maneuver. Pitched battles aren’t our thing.”

No. SEALs were not main force units. SEALs worked best as shock troops. Stun the target with maximum violence, accomplish the most destruction with minimal effort, and then fade away in the confusion.

“We were okay, but naturally it made a little noise. The Taliban noticed and decided to join the party. We lost Bobby right away. Voss was our communications guy. He got hit trying to radio for help. They shot him a couple of times, but he stayed on the high ground trying to make comms. Salvio and I went to drag him back and Salvio got hit in the head. He died in my arms.”

“Close your eyes and sleep for a couple minutes.”

“No time.”

But when Vic tugged him back, Sean leaned into him and closed his eyes. His breath was warm against Vic’s throat, his hair brushed softly against Vic’s chin.

Vic let him sleep ten minutes. About seven minutes longer than he should have but he justified it as a power nap.

Far down the mountainside he could see stealthy movement, hear the faintest scrape of boots on rock. Every sound carried in this cold, crisp mountain air. Taliban soldiers were slowly navigating their way up the uneven slope. They were being surprisingly cautious. Sean must have made quite an impact on them.

He had a way of doing that.

Vic said against Sean’s ear, “Rise and shine.”

Sean's eyes opened instantly. He nodded.

The next two hours were a test of endurance. Somehow they made it across the scraggy face of the cliff, literally crawling at points, and then climbed with excruciating difficulty down a series of boulders. Vic knew he was going to have nightmares about that climb for weeks to come.

Assuming he still had weeks to come and they didn't end up in pieces on the mountain in the next half hour or so.

By the time they shinnied down the final boulder, they were both shaking and soaked in sweat. Sean was needing more and more help although he never asked for it once.

Reaching the bottom, they dropped on their bellies and tried to recover their breath.

"Did you ever get married?" Sean asked suddenly, softly.

"No. You?"

Sean snorted.

"I mean...did you find someone...?" *Who appreciated you, who treated you like you should have been treated, who had the brains to recognize what you were worth?*

"Oh, sure. I found a lot of people."

Neither spoke for a time.

Sean's voice was abrupt. "I heard you did."

"Did what?"

"Got married." He sounded just faintly impatient.

"No. Where'd you hear that?"

"Specs Davis. I ran into him a couple of years back. He said you were engaged."

"No." Stoney pointed to the tiny scar between his eyebrows. "As you can see, I'm still wearing your ring."

Sean stared at him and then laughed.

Vic laughed too, threw him a look beneath his brows. "It took two stitches."

Bullets raked along the flat-topped stone and they rolled apart. Sean dropped over the side and Vic followed, hearing the crash of him landing in bushes. He pulled his M4 spraying the hillside behind them, hearing screams of pain. He turned and followed Sean whom he could hear scrabbling down another staircase of stone.

The next few seconds were chaos. Vic kept moving and shooting -- all the while aware of Sean less than a yard ahead. Bullets whined overhead. All at once the enemy was everywhere and the graying night was lit by muzzle flash and mini flares.

“Down,” Sean yelled and Vic hit the frozen ground.

He heard the whisper of a suppressed shot and knew Sean was using his MK23.

He crawled into the brush. They both opened fire, ducking down as the Taliban opened fire again with machine guns. They shot, reloaded while the bullets buzzed and whizzed around them, hitting the rocks and ricocheting with lethal force.

“We’ve got to move,” Vic yelled.

He felt rather than heard Sean’s assent.

They took turns firing and covering each other’s retreat the rest of the way down the slope in a run, crawl, walk maneuver.

They were never going to make it.

Vic felt a brief and furious grief that they were not going to have that second chance after all. Maybe he didn’t deserve it, but Sean sure as hell did. He determined to take as many of these murdering bastards with them as he could.

But as they reached the ledge they heard the pound of chopper blades and looked upward to see the Chinook rocking into position above them. Time flies when you’re having fun -- and Cheyney was not a girl who liked to be kept waiting. The door slid open and O’Riley was throwing down a line while Matturo and one of the door gunners laid a steady covering fire.

Sean was turning to cover him and Vic shoved him toward the line. “Climb.” He turned his M4 on the hillside.

Sean dragged himself up the line with what seemed to be agonizing slowness while the mountain fighters continued to fire between Vic’s bursts of fire -- and the protective fire of the chopper gunners.

When Sean had neared the top, O’Riley and Matturo leaned out and hauled him into the chopper.

Vic ran for the line, climbing hand over hand. The chopper was already rising and swinging him away over the mountainside. He continued to climb as from behind the

ridge the mortars were launched again. Vic hauled himself onto the cold metal flooring of the chopper and gasped.

O'Riley and Matturo were beside Sean working fast to stem what looked like a gushing artery from his thigh.

Seeing that fountain of blood Vic felt the strength go out of him. He dropped down beside Sean whose face was blanched of color in the yellow dawn, his breathing rapid and shallow.

"How bad?"

"Bad enough," Matturo said. The tourniquet he was trying to fashion was already soaked with scarlet.

Sean's eyes opened. They looked black. He tried to smile.

"Don't you *dare* fucking die on me, Sean."

Sean asked faintly, "How come you came back for me, Stoney?"

Vic had to work to get the words out. "I was always coming back for you."

oOo

Present day, 1750, The Craig Joint Theater Hospital at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

"He's asking for you," the weary-faced surgeon said. "Five minutes. Don't tire him."

Vic rose. "Is he --"" He abruptly ran out of air, but the surgeon followed him easily enough -- it was a question he was familiar with by now.

"He's still critical but...that's one tough sailor. We're transporting him to Germany tonight."

Vic stepped into the trauma bay. There were four beds and a hell of a lot of state of the art equipment, and then he spotted Sean. He lay in a bed that looked like a miniature space pod and he was hooked up to a confusing web of monitors, an IV and oxygen. He looked very brown against the bleached sheets.

Vic leaned over the railing. He said softly, "Hey."

Sean's lashes flicked and rose. His pupils were huge with whatever drugs they were pumping into him. "Hey..."

“You okay?” Vic asked anxiously.

Sean’s face twisted a little and he bit his lip. “Please don’t...make me laugh.”

“I just mean...”

“Yeah.” Sean’s eyes closed again, his colorless mouth formed the word. “Stoney...”

“I’m right here,” Vic said, leaning still closer. He was aware of the medical personnel but only as so much equipment -- stuff useful for keeping Sean alive.

“Thanks.” It was so soft he barely heard it. “For coming back. I mean...you know.”

“I should have come back a long time ago.” Vic said with sudden fierceness. “I was too big a coward. Not -- not the way you think. I got over worrying about all that bullshit a long time ago.”

Sean’s face was so still. Was he even listening? It didn’t matter. Vic had been waiting a long time to say it.

“I was ashamed, Sean. I let you down. I let us both down. I didn’t think you’d ever forgive me, and I didn’t have the guts to face you. You’re such a tough sonofabitch.”

Sean’s face tightened in pain. “I forgave you a long time ago, you jackass.” His eyes opened, starred with emotion. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Vic said steadily and he didn’t give a damn who else heard it so long as Sean believed it.

Sean gave a ghost of his old laugh. “And it only took you twelve years to figure it out?”

“I never said I was fast. Just faithful.”

“Mmm.” Sean was tiring fast, but he whispered, “You planning to do anything about it?”

“You know it,” Vic said. He slipped his class ring off and gently slid it on the ring finger of Sean’s lax left hand. “The very next time we meet.”

About the Author

A distinct voice in gay fiction, multi-award-winning author JOSH LANYON has been writing gay mystery, adventure and romance for over a decade. In addition to numerous short stories, novellas, and novels, Josh is the author of the critically acclaimed Adrien English series, including *The Hell You Say*, winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT Fiction. Josh is an Eppie Award winner and a three-time Lambda Literary Award finalist.

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purchase fiction that writers can still afford to write.*

~ Josh Lanyon~