



**FRANK
VICTORIA**

**THE
FOUNDERS'
PLOT**

“Masterful storytelling ...”

— Foreword Reviews – Clarion Reviews

Prologue

Present Day

FOUR MEN SAT IN a spacious fifth-floor suite at a plush high-end hotel. A floor-to-ceiling picture window overlooked the glittering lights of the city below. They'd arrived separately in fifteen-minute intervals and used the cargo elevator in the rear of the hotel. Each had a security detail, who took a strategic position outside the room.

"Are we all still agreed on this?" one of them asked.

"It's got to be done," another said.

The others nodded.

"Agreed," the first man said. "We can't let it continue."

Another stood. "We've got the perfect people in the ideal places at the right time. We won't let this chance slip past us."

The first man glanced at another of them. "You'll be in the lead. Ready to go?"

The other man gave a forceful nod. "Absolutely!"

"All right," the first man said. "Let's go over every detail."

The meeting lasted an hour. The four men shook hands and left, again fifteen minutes apart. Except for the security teams, no one would ever know the meeting took place.

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Kabul, Afghanistan – 2002

MIKE'S MOUTH WAS parched. If he could spit, it'd come out something like cotton. His gaze fixed on the colonel's collar, the silver eagles flickering in the harsh light of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Mike stood at ease, legs spread, and hands clasped loosely behind his back. But he was far from at ease.

"I can't accept it, Sir," he said.

The colonel frowned. "Why not?"

"I had a serious lapse of judgment, and I was responsible for—"

"I thought that was it," the colonel said. "Lieutenant DiGrasso, the investigation was thorough, and it cleared you of any wrongdoing. I understand your reluctance to take the medal. You lost a lot of marines."

An image of his men under fire flashed through Mike's mind. His jaw tightened.

"But you couldn't have foreseen what happened. And your behavior under fire warrants the Silver Star. Why don't you give this more thought, and we'll talk about it again?"

“I’ve given it a lot of thought already, Sir. I think about it all the time. And I can’t in all good conscience take that medal. That mistake cost—”

“Mistake? *You* think it was a mistake. No one else does. The way you acted in that fire fight was exemplary. Take the medal for that and put the rest out of your mind.”

“Yes. I reacted well. But that was *after* I misjudged. If I’d sized up that terrain properly—”

“*If*,” the colonel said. “*If* you had a crystal ball. *If* pigs had wings, they could fly. *If* my aunt had balls, she’d be my uncle.”

The colonel leaned forward and put his hands on the desk. “You’re doing yourself a disservice, Mike. Losing men in combat is tough. I know. I’ve gone through it. But you’ve got to get past this. You’re an outstanding officer. You’ve got a keen sense of duty and fair play. I’ve seen it in the way you handle your men and the way you work with other officers. You could make captain soon. So, you might want to ease off. This isn’t a black and white issue. Be a little compromising with yourself.”

Mike almost succumbed. It would be so simple. Just take the medal and forget about the whole thing. He looked away. “I can’t, Colonel. Sometimes you can’t compromise, Sir. Sometimes there is just black and white. I don’t have a right to that medal.”

The colonel sighed and shook his head. "Okay. That's it then. I can't very well order you to take the medal. What about the Purple Heart? I assume you'll at least accept that. How's the arm and leg?"

"They're fine, Sir. Thanks for asking. And yes, I think I've got that coming."

Mike reflected on that conversation now and then. Not very often, though. Even now, twenty-five years past it, the memory of that fire fight haunted him.

The medal itself was meaningless. Five months later, he accepted a Silver Star and another Purple Heart. Those he'd earned, having been hit by shrapnel while carrying wounded to a Medevac helicopter under heavy fire and refusing to board until his men were safe.

Looking back on it, Mike still believed he was right to refuse the first medal. He didn't deserve it. He'd gotten those men killed.

He eased back into the sofa of his dimly lit living room and sipped his wine, a wry smile creasing his lips. Why on earth was he thinking about this on the night before his inauguration as governor of California? He shrugged. Maybe he didn't think he deserved to be governor either.

Ahh, maybe a little too much vino.

He spent fifteen minutes going over his inauguration speech again and went to bed. As silently as he could, he slipped under the sheets. But Josephine was a light sleeper.

“Goodnight, *Governor*,” she said, putting her arm around him.

Mike grinned. “I think you sleep with one eye open.”

“Yeah. Well, look who I’m married to.”