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Opening extract from

Torn

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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CHAPTER 1

Five a.m. I'm woken by yapping dogs and the first distant call to prayer, carried to me on a light breeze. My first morning in Afghanistan.

Private Elinor Nielson, recently qualified medic, first tour of active duty. That's what I keep telling myself – over and over like a demented idiot – to calm my nerves. *I'm just a normal nineteen-year-old English girl . . .* Of the kick-ass, life-saving variety, that is. What a laugh. I'm like the love child of House and Lara Croft.

Today, for the first time, I'll be going out on patrol here – with an SA80 assault rifle in one hand and haemorrhage-stopping supplies in the other. Can I really do it? I have to remind myself that I'm doing something with my life, that I'm going to help people. It's why I joined up.

But the reality of it all still hits me as I lie in my canvas bunk. Real blood. There will be real blood, real pain, real casualties depending on me. Not some squaddie pretending. *Don't think about it*, I tell myself. My new mantra. In fact, not thinking may be the best way for a medic to stay sane out here.

I haven't had much sleep – and not just because of the nerves. Note to self – go to bed in thermals rather than underwear. After the stifling heat yesterday when I arrived, I didn't realize that the nights would be so cold. And the changing temperature made the bunk's metal frame creak as it contracted. It's creaking again now, this time expanding as the sun rises. I wonder who slept in it last. Then I remember there was a 'sudden need' for another medic in Helmand province . . . I decide not to ask my room-mate about it.

She's Heidi Larson – another medic and a corporal – but is nowhere to be seen this morning. Her drying underwear and spare combats hang from a red nylon rope between our bunks, acting as a kind of gappy camouflage screen. I wonder if she's done it for privacy. If so, it isn't working. I didn't need to see the stripes on the jacket sleeve to figure out that she outranks me. When I arrived, she looked down her precise, upturned nose at me like I'd crawled out from beneath a rock. I get the feeling that if we are ever to be friends it will only be after a fire-fight or one of us has nearly died.

I swing my legs off the bed, wrap myself tightly in a towel and make my way through a corridor of huge, wire-meshed blast-bags to the open-air shower. It's in an

unused corner of the base and is reserved for the use of the women. The wiry, ginger-haired squaddie who insisted on showing me to my bunk yesterday pointed it out, and I intend to make the most of it. Apparently the washrooms would normally be in converted freight containers but the base is still waiting to have them installed. When we're on ops, my guide told me, I'll have to stay dirty like the men or make do with a quick splash from our water bottles.

The shower is in the middle of a tiny courtyard surrounded by peeling whitewashed and windowless walls. Its green copper pipe sticks out above curtains made from a scummy grey tarpaulin suspended from the shower head on a rusty hoop. I squeeze through the gap, pull the curtains together and slip off my towel – only to discover that the tap is outside, on the wall. *Crap. Double crap.* I grab my towel, hold it loosely to my chest and make a run for it. It takes two hands but when I turn the tap the pipe creaks and shudders, spitting out a yellow stream of what I think must be water.

After waiting for it to run clear I hurry back and chuck my towel over the curtain rail, trying not to scream when the cold water sucks all the heat from my body. As soon as I get used to it I lather my hair and close my eyes.

It is not until I throw back my head to squeeze the water from my hair that I realize two things – one, the shower is visible from the flat mud roof of the adjacent building, and two, there are three squaddies standing on it, looking right at me.

Whoops of laughter break out when they see they have

been discovered.

As they disappear from sight over the roof, one of the pervs yells, 'Thanks for the show, newbie!'

Corporal Larson is in our room when I get back. She could be a model – tall and thin, with skin even a Hollywood star would kill for – and she's all muscle. She has short hair – a crew-cut – but the lucky cow could shave the lot off and still look amazing. Her gun is in pieces beside her on her bed as she cleans and oils it.

'I would have appreciated a warning about the shower, Corporal . . .' I say, throwing my towel on the bed and struggling into my fatigues.

She shrugs. 'I forgot.'

'Thanks,' I mutter.

'You're welcome.'

She might be past caring who looks at her body, but I'm not. I've never been the type of girl to strip off at a party or go topless on the beach.

Heidi clips her gun together while I sit on the end of the bed to put my boots on. There is a loud click. I turn to see her shouldering her weapon, her finger on the trigger. It's aimed at the round mirror I've brought with me that stands on a pile of boxes by the wall. From where I sit, her head is framed in it.

Great. Just perfect. Trust me to end up bunking with a psycho.

It is a relief to escape to the noisy, makeshift canteen for breakfast. My short hair dries almost completely on the walk over.

The main part of FOB – Forward Operating Base – Freeman is a large compound surrounded by a few one-storey mud-brick buildings. They're all linked by corridors of blast-bags like the one I walked through to get to the shower.

In the canteen I pick up a tray and stock it with juice, toast and some disgusting goo labelled 'strawberry porridge'. As I scan the room for a seat, I see three guys sitting on their own grinning at me. All are in their late teens or early twenties: a lad with sun-bleached hair and a cocky smile, a very good-looking black guy wearing headphones, and – stupid me – my ginger-haired guide from last night. My peeping toms.

Why did this have to happen on my first day? Inside, I'm dying. Why didn't I check the roof? What was I thinking?

Of course, there is an empty seat at their table. I look around for another, but can I find one? It's like the whole platoon has got here before me. It's my own fault. I took too long getting back from the shower. I couldn't turn the damned tap off and all the time I was looking over my shoulder, paranoid the pervs were going to reappear. Just as I was about to give up, I realized you have to push the handle down while you twist.

The blond guy stands up and waves. 'Over here! Nielson, isn't it?'

There is nowhere else for me to take my tray. I mouth my complete stock of swear words at the floor and decide that the best form of defence is attack. Smiling, I make my way over to them, lifting my head and looking right into

the blond guy's eyes.

'So, you lot must be the camp jokers,' I say.

Ginger pushes back the empty seat with his boot and grins at me like a Cheshire cat. He holds out his hand, which I am definitely not going to touch, and says, 'I kept a seat for you. Remember me? The name's Yugi.'

No wonder he was so keen to show me where the shower was. Hope they had a long, uncomfortable wait. I don't ask him to explain his nickname, even though I can tell that he is itching to tell me.

He does it anyway. 'Cos I always keep a pack of cards stuffed up my sleeve – like in Yu-Gi-Oh!' Then he gets them out to show me, as if I don't know what a pack of cards looks like.

'I'm Gizmo,' the black guy mumbles sheepishly, taking off his headphones.

'And everyone calls me Chip,' Blond guy says, then he smiles at me as if introductions mean everything is sorted.

I smile back. 'Short for chipolata?' I suggest.

Yugi almost chokes on his tea, Gizmo lets out a huge roar of laughter that has all eyes looking our way, and Chip flushes red.

I'm already regretting the joke. After all, I've got to work with these guys.

'Nice,' Chip says, throwing his friends a dirty look, 'but no, it's because I'm a mean poker player. Proper cards – unlike Yugi's.'

'If you say so.' I sit down with my tray.

'Hey, we'll need a nickname for you, if you're really going to be a part of the team,' Yugi says. 'Something

shower-related. How about Buffy? You know, like *in the buff*?'

The others laugh.

'I'll tell you what,' I'm so nervous I'm almost shaking, but I manage to keep it out of my voice as I tell them firmly, 'You can call me Elinor, Ellie or Nielson, but if any of you ever call me Buffy, you'll be going home singing soprano.'

But they're still grinning. There's no point fighting it. I'm stuck with Buffy and, if I know soldiers, the nickname will have gone viral by the time breakfast is over.

Yugi leans into me. 'By the way,' he whispers, 'nice tattoo.'

'Yeah, good to meet you *in the flesh*,' adds Chip, back on track.

I have a tattoo along the small of my back – a line of jagged flames quite low down so it won't stop me wearing a backless wedding dress one day. (My two-timing ex was training to be a tattoo artist and needed practice.)

I can feel the colour drain from my face. 'You had binoculars?'

'The best, baby . . .' Chip draws a high-powered rifle scope from his pocket.

'I'm not your baby,' I return, trying to keep it light even though his constant joking is already starting to annoy me.

'Just a bit of harmless fun, OK?' Chip holds up his hands in mock surrender, but he doesn't look that sorry.

I raise my eyebrows. 'I'll remember that when you're screaming for a medic.'

I think their stunned silence means they get my point.