

THE KIMBERLEY SECRET

A Historical Mystery Novella

"Before it all began ..."

Gabriel Farago

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Battle of Takur Ghar

4 March 2002

Operation Anaconda was in full swing. Australian and coalition forces were locked in a fierce battle with the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Paktia Province in Afghanistan. Pressing his precious camera to his flak jacket, Jack Rogan hit the ground as heavy machine-gun fire erupted from one of the caves on his right. This was soon followed by mortar fire from above. The battle raged for hours in the difficult terrain, riddled with heavily fortified caves and bunkers, but by nightfall, the Shai-Kot Valley had been secured. According to US estimates, between 500 and 800 rebel fighters had been killed.

Working as an experienced freelance war correspondent with an impressive track record – especially in sensitive hotspots in Africa – Jack had quickly earned the respect of the US forces operating in Afghanistan. Fearless, and maintaining his sense of humour even in the most dangerous situations, Jack’s easy-going – at times almost laconic – manner had endeared him to many of the fighters at the front. His photographs were legendary and his articles sought after by leading newspapers and magazines all over the world. His Voices from the Front Line articles were balanced and incisive, without sensationalising or over-dramatising events. Jack told it how he saw it, and he made sure he was right there where it all happened. His reporting had a raw, often quite confronting eyewitness quality that showed war as it really was: brutal, unforgiving, and often totally senseless and inhuman.

As soon as the guns fell silent, Jack took off his helmet, pulled his notebook out of his backpack and sat down on a rock ledge overlooking the valley. With the pungent smell of cordite and death still hanging in the air, he began to jot down his impressions of the battle he had just witnessed. Jack knew that to capture the authenticity of the moment was the most important part of his work; it gave his articles the edge. The next most important thing was timing. Still high on adrenaline, there was an almost feverish energy pulsating through Jack as he described the dramatic events of the past few hours. He knew that the newspaper which had commissioned the articles was standing by, waiting for his call. But before he could contact his editor in the US, his satellite phone rang inside his backpack.

The reception wasn’t good. Distorted by interference and constant crackling, the voice on the other end of the line sounded distant and could barely be heard.

‘Yes, yes. This is Jack Rogan,’ Jack almost shouted. ‘Who are you? Where are you calling from?’

‘The Felicitas Boarding House in Townsville. It’s about your father,’ said the voice.

‘What did you say?’

‘Your father.’

‘What about him?’

‘He wants to see you.’

‘I’m in Afghanistan, in the middle of a war,’ Jack said impatiently.

‘He’s dying.’

By calling in favours, Jack managed to hitch a ride on a helicopter taking the wounded back to Kabul. Leaving the barracks, he went straight to the room he rented near Bala Hissar, an ancient fortress to the south of the modern city centre, and quickly packed his duffel bag. Then he called a contact at the airport and made travel arrangements to take him home to Australia.

Waiting for his connecting flight in Singapore, Jack took a long shower at the airport and tried to get some sleep in the lounge. He had been travelling for many hours and felt drained and exhausted. However, the much-needed sleep wouldn’t come. Instead, memories of his childhood kept him awake as his mind drifted back to turbulent times spent on a remote cattle station in outback Queensland, where life was as harsh as the relentless sun and as unforgiving as the drought that punished the land all too often, causing unimaginable hardship and despair.

For a son to travel home after a long absence to see his dying father for the last time was a tough call, even for a battle-hardened war correspondent like Jack. Memories reach secret corners of the heart and stir up long-forgotten emotions that can easily overwhelm the unwary.

By the time Jack stepped off the plane in Townsville and caught a taxi to the modest boarding house on the outskirts of town, he thought he had steeled himself for the painful encounter he knew he was about to face. He had seen death in many guises, often too violent and brutal to photograph or describe. Death was never pretty. But when Jack entered his father’s darkened room and looked at the emaciated, motionless shell of a man staring into space, his heart sank and tears began to well up, impossible to suppress.

For a while Jack stood quietly by the door, trying to compose himself as he stared at that mountain of a man he used to admire, now reduced by deadly cancer to a crumbling hill about to turn to dust.

‘Dad?’ whispered Jack, choking with emotion.

His father turned his head towards his son as his eyes began to focus. ‘Jack?’

‘It’s me,’ said Jack. He walked over to the bed, sat down on the edge and reached for his father’s limp hand.

‘Good to see you, mate. Back from the war?’ said his father, his voice growing stronger.

Jack nodded.

‘I’ve got to tell you something important. There isn’t much time ...’

‘What?’

‘This will come as a bit of a shock, but you have to know,’ said his father, squeezing Jack’s hand. ‘I’ve had a lot of time to think about this, lying here. How to tell you ...’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’ve always loved you as my own ...’

Jack looked at his father and wondered where this was going.

‘But you’re not,’ continued his father, his voice growing faint.

‘I don’t understand.’

His father took a deep breath – his chest heaving – and looked at Jack. ‘You’re not my son; you’re not *our* son.’

Jack looked confused. *He’s delirious*, he thought, certain he had misunderstood.

‘You were brought to us as a baby. You were so tiny; only a few days old. Mum couldn’t have children. It was the tragedy of her life. It’s what drove her away. That and other things ...’

‘Jesus, Dad! What are you saying?’ demanded Jack as the words began to sink in.

‘We took you into our hearts and our home. We thought you were a precious gift – the answer to our prayers.’

He’s serious, thought Jack, his mind racing. *Could this be true?* ‘You’re not kidding, are you?’ he said.

‘No. I agonised over this for a long time. Whether to tell you ...’

‘So, why did you? What difference does it make today? You and Mum are my parents. Always have been. Always will be,’ said Jack, tears in his eyes.

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘I believe you are entitled to know who you are.’

‘I know who I am.’

‘Perhaps. But the truth is still the truth, whichever way we look at it.’

‘And you are just going to leave this here? Just like that? Or are you going to tell me more?’

‘There isn’t much more I can tell you. We never found out who your biological parents were.’

‘What, I just appeared at your doorstep out of nowhere? Is that it?’

‘Just about.’

‘Come on, Dad ... *How?*’

‘Someone brought you to our home ...’

‘Who?’ demanded Jack.

‘Gurrul.’

Gurrul was an Aboriginal stockman who had worked at the Rogan family cattle station all his life. He had been Jack’s friend and mentor ever since Jack could remember.

‘So, he would know?’

‘Where you came from? Who your parents ...?’ Obviously exhausted, Jack’s father closed his eyes and his voice became weaker. ‘Yes, I believe he would know,’ he whispered. ‘But he made a promise ...’

‘What promise?’

‘He promised not to tell, and we had to promise not to ask.’

‘Did you?’

‘Yes.’

Jack realised time was running out fast. ‘Is there anything else you can tell me? About where I came from, I mean.’

‘This may help,’ said his father and pointed to a piece of paper on the bedside table. ‘Give it to me.’

Jack picked up the paper and gave it to his father. ‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘When you came to us, wrapped in a towel, you had something around your neck. Something beautiful and precious.’

‘What?’

‘When things got really tough during one of the terrible droughts, I took it to—’

‘What was it, Dad? *Tell me!*’ interrupted Jack. ‘You took it where?’

His father opened his eyes and looked at Jack for the last time. It was a look Jack would never forget; a look of bittersweet love and regret. Then his father’s eyes began to glaze over as his mind drifted back to his beloved homestead he had inherited from his father. ‘I have only one regret,’ he whispered. ‘I lost our land, the cattle, our home, your inheritance ... the link to our past ...’

For a terrible moment, Jack’s father’s breathing became violent. He was gasping for breath like a man drowning and stared at Jack with unseeing eyes as the grip of death tightened around his emaciated chest, squeezing life out of his disease-riddled body. Then suddenly, it was over and everything stopped.

For a while, Jack just sat there in silence, tears streaming down his ashen face. Then he

reached across, closed his father's eyes and began to pray. It was a little prayer his mother had taught him as a boy. Not a religious man, Jack hadn't prayed in years, but somehow the simple, familiar words seemed to comfort him. When he leaned across to kiss his father's forehead, he noticed the piece of paper he had handed to him earlier. Jack took the paper gently out of his father's hand and looked at it. It was a receipt issued by a pawnbroker in Brisbane.

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

As Jack Rogan delves deeper into the mysteries of his own past, the truth becomes ever more elusive and captivating. What secrets will the wilderness of outback Australia yield? Will Rogan's quest for identity lead him to peace or plunge him deeper into the unknown? The answers lie just beyond, in the heart of *The Kimberley Secret*. Uncover the hidden truths with Rogan — continue the journey and unravel the mystery that defines a man's destiny. Your adventure into the unknown awaits in the full book. Don't let the story end here; grab your copy now!

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