

MOIRA
Matt Wright

I've imagined my death a thousand times and in a thousand ways. Rabies wasn't one of them.

Moira said it's because of that dog I kicked yesterday. It bit me and now I got the fever and chills. She knows an American doctor in Marrakesh. I told her I'd rather get shot than suffer through this, so she's going to help me get medicine or shoot me. Not sure which.

I keep my gun close in reach. I make sure she doesn't touch my food.

Before we left, Moira said the drugs were in my saddlebags. I just know Moira stashed some away when I wasn't looking. I just know it. I crick my head to the side and glimpse the bags still tied shut. Inside is enough heroin to light up the sky at night. We need to get it to my buyer in Morocco City. If we get searched, we're both goners. I'd rather die right here than spend five minutes in a Moroccan prison.

I won't trust Moira with the heroin. She'll take it and run, maybe.

But we're headed into the mountains on our mules, and the sun hangs right over our heads. It's scorching even in the shade, and I have a blanket draped over my shoulders. My teeth click together, and I strain to clench the wool. We need to get to Marrakesh. They'll have the vaccine.

I get an idea. I pull the blanket closer around me, shivering.

"We need to hide it," I say.

Moira looks over at me. "What?"

"My saddlebag. Bury it. Mark it. Return when I'm better."

She's thinking. Her bright blue eyes peer up at a distant point on the mountain. She wears

a crude straw hat so that the checkered shadows on her face make her look mysterious. She knows she can't push anything in Morocco without the connections I've made. I won't trust her with the heroin by herself.

Sweat drips down my face, and all of a sudden, I'm too hot to breathe. I shrug my blanket off. It crumples up in the back of my saddle. I stretch my neck, and now I'm too cold again. *Dammit.* I look up at the pale wispy clouds in the sky and bite down a groan.

"We'll find somewhere along the way," she says with a nod. "I know how to make things disappear."

Course you do.

One of those thousand imagined deaths was a bullet in the back from Moira's gun. I like her, I really do. She's the kind of woman I like having with me. When I'm not sick. She helps me push the drugs, and we watch each other's backs. But I'd be a fool not to take precautions. I trusted her—but that was before that damn dog.

"Okay," I say.

"Just tell me where," she says.

She's strangely beautiful in the afternoon sun. She tied her blond hair up in that messy way that seems coquettish to me. She's not a high-class woman like the kind in soirees, but I can smell her expensive Chanel perfume from here. I may have loved her, once. Before all this. Now she's become a contradiction.

The road we followed is more of a beaten path along the dying river Oued N'Fis. These are the Atlas Mountains. I think we're near Toubkal, but I can't be sure. I can't be too sure about anything right now. I need a bed and some hot tea. A cure for rabies wouldn't hurt.

The path follows the river and half-dead shrubs until it reaches a small lake and nameless

town. We pass by on the outskirts, through the choking brush, ignoring the stares we get from the locals. Moira's unfazed and focused. Like she's thinking about murder.

If I'm right, we have half a day left before we get to Marrakesh...

...I may have passed out because I'm opening my eyes and I'm almost falling off my mule. The fever makes me cold and hot and weak all at once. I hate everything, but I pull myself back up. I'll make it.

As we press on, I watch the sun set behind the mountains and the long, gray dusk settles over us. I've known strange things to happen during this time, especially out here. I've seen shadows come to life. They might be Algerian guerillas or not. They play tricks on the mind, and what you're looking at sometimes isn't what you see.

I'm looking at Moira now. She looks lost even though the path is right in front of us. She looks nervous. She's laughing, frowning. I blink a few times, but the twilight blurs her body. She's still there, riding her mule, just a few feet in front of me. She looks over at me.

"Jack, you okay?"

She probably says something else, but maybe she'll take my saddlebags from me and leave me to die. She looks from me to the path and back to me. I shake my head and it hurts real bad. I need sleep, but maybe she'll slit my throat. What if she has her gun out right now?

"I can't truss you...heroin."

She pulls the reins on her mule. "What do you—" She looks at me and I have my gun out. I see the whites of her eyes even in this darkness.

"*Jack!*" Then she has her gun out.

I pull the trigger. Blood sprays from her left breast, and she falls from her mule like someone kicked her. The mule takes off, braying, and I want to shoot it too, but my head spins,

and I fall from the saddle. The fall hurts—oh, *God*, it hurts.

I want to scream but can't. My mule and saddlebag are gone. My blanket...and I feel my face in the mud. But I'm too tired—too weak. *Dammit*. Won't make it. Not this time.

I never once thought I'd die falling from a mule.