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The rain turned to steam as soon as it hit the ground, or so it seemed to Cooper as he ran down the street, stopping only long enough to help a woman load a box onto a pickup truck before dashing off again. He heard a girl shout from a doorway, “You going to see Little Sister, American Cooper?” and he turned around to run backward, water splashing at his heels as he spread his hands, silently asking, *What choice do I have?*

The girl flashed her white teeth in a big smile. A second prostitute, the same young age as the first, cried out, “Why you go all that way, American Cooper, when you got a Little Sister right here?”

Their laughter trailed him all the way to The Mining Pan. When he pushed through the saloon doors, everyone in the bar, by a discreet glance or hiccup in their conversation, took note of his entrance. Staying alert is how you survived in Lalanga, but by the time the doors stopped swinging behind him, Cooper’s small ripple effect had already passed through the room, and he made his way to the long bar. The storm had knocked out the power, and water streamed in through the damaged roof where a mortar shell had landed during the last rebel offensive—if one mortar shell and two dead drunks merited being called an offensive—but no one seemed worried about the puddle creeping across the floor, certainly not the men preoccupied with fixing themselves up with a girl. They had more pressing matters than rain puddles and civil wars on their minds.

Cooper brushed water from his buzz cut but didn’t have a sleeve to

wipe off his face. He'd torn those off his army-issued shirt as soon as he'd arrived in the godforsaken country and felt its waterlogged air. He slid onto a barstool and ordered. "A G and T, Juma, and this time, try to remember the ice."

The barman, his eyes bloodshot from the perfumed smoke perpetually hanging around his head, took a hit off a joint before handing it back to a customer. "Americans always want too much ice," he complained. Juma was tall, with a shaved head and a pirate's gold-loop earring.

Cooper swiveled his head to the left and right. "If you're worried about running short, I don't see a lot of my compatriots around."

Juma scooped some cubes into a glass from the wheezing ice machine. "Too much ice makes the gin no good."

"It's no good anyway."

"It's distilled properly for our weather."

"You got that right; it sucks and leaves you thirsty."

The barman passed him his drink, and Cooper took a long swallow. He knew he'd been in Lalanga too long when the flat tonic and gunpowdery gin had started to taste good. Rolling the cold glass across his forehead, he swung around on his seat to check out the room. The usual hookers and thieves were there, but no Lulay. She called herself Lucy for the johns, but he preferred her real name: Lulay.

When the power flickered back on, Juma plugged a coin into the jukebox so his girls could keep their johns dancing between drinking. Conversations grew brighter. There was raucous laughter from a corner where a couple of sotted Thick Necks, holed up at a table, were pawing two girls and grabbing the asses of any others who came within range. Cooper had seen the oilmen's whole whiskey-and-groping scene so many times it felt exponential. He assumed they were oilmen; as far as he knew, no other white men had remained in the country except for oilmen, and every one of them seemed to have a thick neck.

He swung back around so as not to see them but couldn't help

COOPER'S PROMISE

looking in the mirror running the length of the bar when one of the Thick Necks started banging his bottle on the table to order a second. Cooper recognized him from his fancy moustache, twisted at the ends like a dandy's—though as acne-scarred as he was, he was hardly a dandy. Rarely without the stump of a cigar clenched between his teeth, he had a habit of getting very drunk and more than a little rough with the girls.

“Must be payday,” Cooper remarked.

Juma pulled a bottle off the shelf. “They’re celebrating,” he said.

“What’s to celebrate?”

“They found oil.”

“Sure they did. Just like the last time and the ten times before that.”

“This time,” Sam Brown said, sliding onto the next barstool, “it’s been confirmed by experts.” He wasn’t brown but black, and not African but American—soul patch included—and he had scars on his cheeks that could have been mistaken for tribal marks if they’d been more symmetrical. He had started showing up at the bar two weeks earlier and had become a regular pain in the ass, acting like they should be friends, both being Americans and all.

Cooper didn’t bother to look at him when he asked, “What the fuck do you want?”

“They have nice girls in here, or haven’t you noticed?”

At that moment Lulay splashed her way out through the tinkling beaded curtain. Behind it was a labyrinth of rooms that offered mattresses and little privacy. An almond-eyed beauty with skin the color of a dark nut, she had every man’s attention as she headed straight for the bar, where Juma held out a glass of ice water for her. She popped her bubblegum as she reached for it, and he nodded discreetly at a fat man sitting alone in a booth. Lulay glanced around at him. Cooper did too. He didn’t want to think of Lulay going with the fat man, but he knew she would; he knew they’d be together. It was something he couldn’t stop, not every time, not without enough money to buy Lulay a free hour, let

alone all her hours.

“She’s a pretty one, for instance,” Sam Brown commented.

“She’s a kid.”

“She’s still pretty.”

Cooper knew if he said anything more, about how it wasn’t right to look at kids in that way, they’d probably come to blows, and coming to blows with Sam Brown wouldn’t change Lulay’s foul circumstances. He’d only manage to get himself exiled from the bar. Juma had strict rules about not causing trouble.

Lulay drank her glass of water slowly, rattling the ice in it, buying herself some time. She touched her hair and straightened her skirt and snuggled her toes in her flip flops to make them fit tighter as she crossed the room. Cooper knew that she knew he was watching her by the way she sashayed her bottom, exaggerating her own pigeon-toed way of walking before sliding onto the bench across from the fat john. He seemed genuinely surprised that she had appeared and quickly called out a drink order. Lulay accepted his offer of a cigarette and lit it with his. Once it caught, she swiveled around and blew smoke directly at Cooper—fiercely, in Lucy’s angry way.

Cooper stood to leave, pulling moldy bills from a pocket in his cutoffs and stacking them on the bar. “You leave too much money,” the barman said while making no effort to hand it back.

“Buy Lulay some bubblegum, will you?”

He’d stepped away when Sam Brown said behind him, “Aren’t you going to say good-bye ... *Sergeant?*”

Cooper stopped, swallowed hard, and turned around slowly. He remembered the first time he’d seen Sam Brown, when he’d caught him staring at him in the long mirror. He had glanced up and Sam Brown hadn’t looked away. That’s why Cooper had always suspected that he’d come looking for him, and there certainly were enough reasons why someone might. “You got a reason for calling me that?”