

Tick tick boom

MICHAEL
PINKUS



“Bomb.”

They’re shouting in the corridor outside my room.

“Bomb.”

I hear again. My head has just hit the pillow after a long night on watch. I was hoping they didn’t need me.

“Get Wallace.”

I heard. Shit. The door to my room burst open.

“Wallace, CO wants to see you.”

I’m groggy but awake.

“Now.” The voice says.

“Where the fuck’s Wallace?” CO Greene has pushed his way into my room, past the messenger he sent. “Wallace, when I say I need you, I don’t mean at your convenience; I mean right the fuck now.”

I snap to attention and stand straight, still in my boxers, hoping I was not exposing myself.

“Put your pecker away Wallace, this is not that kind of mission. We got a bomb on the perimeter and we need your ... professional expertise.”

A shirt and pair of khakis hits me in the face before I can get my salute down. I catch them with my descending arm; I struggle into both. First my shirt, then the pants. I buckle and run after the CO. He’s already halfway down the hall, barking orders out to me.

“Carl has already loaded your tools onto the Jeep.”

Greene looks like a younger version of Idris Elba, but without the British sophistication, he’s pure Southern through and through.

“Where am I driving to, sir?” I say my first words since waking. They catch in my throat and come out as a croak.

“You? Nowhere. I’m driving you. I gotta fill you in on what’s going on.”

We climb into the Jeep, and I note my disarming bag in the back. Carl knows me well. We’ve been partners for 5 years, since being stationed together. They call us Frick and Frack, because where one is, the other isn’t usually far behind. I look around, no sign of Carl.

“Where’s Carl, sir?”

“Other side of the compound. We got two of these fucking things.”

“What things, sir?”

“Bombs, Wallace. Some chowder-head threw two bombs over the fence early this morning. Security was doing a perimeter sweep, thought someone had dumped garbage. Guards mistook them for pillows, the dogs went nuts, when they opened them ...”

“The alarm sounded,” I said, finishing his sentence.

“Carl’s already dealing with his on the south side. You got the north.”

We drive in silence. I look around the Washington Navy Yard where I’d only been stationed a few weeks.

“Where’d you get that name from?” CO asks.

“Wallace? Family name, sir.”

“Your first name.”

“George ...” I pause. “My dad had a thing for irony. Said a tough name will test your mettle.”

Greene just nodded. “Sounds like a prick.”

“Couldn’t argue more if I wanted to.”

Greene pulls up in front of the site with squealing tires, klieg lights have been rolled out, putting the pillowcase center stage.

“Sure looks like a pillow, sir. “

“It isn’t ... get going.”

“What kind of time?” I ask the security guy holding back the dogs.

“Timer said 30 when I found it. You might have 10 now,” he says, eyeing his watch.

“Wallace,” Greene shouts, pointing to the bomb-suit in the back.

“No time, sir.” I find it encumbers my vision and mobility. Bag in hand, I walk towards the bomb.

I approach, dropping the bag a few feet from the pillowy object. I open one end. Yep, a bomb. I look closer. The device is not attached to the pillowcase. I take my scissors and it to expose the bomb and the cotton fiber encasing it. It had been a pillow at some point.

I survey the unit and notice more wires than usual. There’s red and green, but also blue, black, purple, orange, gray, pink, and tan. I follow the leads. Where do they go within the device?

The walkie-talkie in my bag squawks. It’s Carl.

“Ever seen anything like this, George?”

“Strange config, but ...” I lift the device slightly. “Armed when it hit the ground.” I look at the counter, less than 7 minutes. “You tried picking it up?”

“Nope.”

I do. I can see the switch that was pressed to activate. Maybe if I ... A beep sounds, then a click. I look at the counter. It’s running double time; I’m down to 5 minutes, at twice the speed.

“Shit.”

I grab my snips.

“Talk to me, George.”

“I must have activated a speed-up default when I lifted the son-of-a-bitch. I’ve got maybe a minute or two to decide.”

“Decide what Wallace?”

“Sir, I don’t think you should be here.”

“I’m responsible for these men ...”

“I don’t have time for speeches, sir ...”

Greene looks at me, scowls. I’ve been here long enough to know he doesn’t like to be interrupted.

“Get on with it.”

I eenie-meenie-miney-mo in my head. Tan and pink seem out of place. They’re my best options. I snip them both. The counter jumps 15 seconds. I take a flyer and snip the red. Another 15 second jump. One more chance. Black it is. The counter hits zero. Greene’s hand hits my shoulder with a thud. I jump and close my eyes. The device makes a small popping sound and I open my eyes. A puff of smoke, a single flame, the B.O.O.M. appears in red on the screen.

“You’re dead, Wallace,” Greene says, leaning over and whispering in my ear.

“Happy birthday, hotshot,” Carl’s voice comes through the walkie. “Hope it was memorable.”

I collapse on the ground. Hands covering my face. My breathing returning to normal.

“Next time, don’t be so cocky,” Greene says. “Now, both you and Carl have leave for the day. Go before I change my mind.”

I collect my things and amble back to the Jeep. Everyone is smiling and laughing.

“Fuck all of you,” I say with a grin, giving the universal one-finger salute above my head as I wave.

The laughter increases, along with slaps on the back and well wishes for a good birthday.

Fucking Carl.