

OUT OF THE BOX

The Mostly True Story of a Mysterious Man

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CHAPTER ONE

The Sahara

“Can you believe that, kiddo? I counted one hundred and twelve of them! One hundred and twelve goddamn camels!”

I couldn’t believe it, actually. Not that I thought the camels were a mirage or anything. They were clearly real, as anyone with eyes and an olfactory organ could attest. No, the truly unbelievable part was that my sixteen-year-old preppy self was sitting cross-legged on a Bedouin rug in a huge open-sided tent in the universe-sized vastness of the Sahara Desert with my Uncle Bob, a drunken New York priest, a retired Texas oil rig worker, and a remarkably pretty kindergarten teacher from Cleveland named Candy.

I actually think it was Candy who inspired my septuagenarian uncle to count out loud with such schoolboy enthusiasm, as one hundred and twelve camels passed by our little odd-duck camp. Driven by Bedouins clothed head-to-toe in bedsheet fashions, the camels were laden with salt slabs from Timbuktu and going to market. (And yes, there really is a place called Timbuktu.)

An awe-inspiring, hot as hell, seventeen-day camping trip to the center of the Sahara was Uncle Bob’s sixteenth birthday present to me—complete with two guides who carried automatic weapons, just for the fun of it. I personally believe the trip also provided Uncle Bob with some good cover—but for

what I'm still not sure to this day. According to him, it was all about boxes. In any case, it was an incredible coming-of-age gift, revelations included.

Looking back now, I sometimes marvel that my mother even let me go. Given my health issues—not to mention jihadists in Niger and random kidnappings in Algiers—she could have been a protective party-pooper, and no one would have blamed her for it, maybe not even me. But she wasn't, thank God ... and honestly, I think her belief in an almighty power actually did have a lot to do with it. She'd been a big proponent of "letting go, letting God" ever since I was born—two months prematurely and somewhat miraculously. You see, I decided to make my surprising entrance into this world on the same day that my dad and Uncle Bob made it up much of Mt. Everest.

"Two climactic life moments, shared by satellite radio!" as Mom loves to tell it.

I also have to believe that my father's and Uncle Bob's long-shared spirit for adventure played an honorary role in Mom allowing me this rite of passage—especially since my father's half of that spirit flew off this earth in a plane crash outside Minneapolis when I was two. For the record, though, my mother says she let me go simply because she preferred me to brave the Sahara Desert with Uncle Bob than spend spring break in Ft. Lauderdale with my boarding school friends. And from what I heard tell about Florida that year, the Sahara probably was the safer option—just barely.

Uncle Bob and I first met up in Paris and then flew on to Algiers to rendezvous with the group. It was the only part of the trip I remember Uncle Bob being on high alert. He told me Algiers was on the State Department's travel warning list, with kidnappings becoming more and more prevalent among tourists.

"You're too blonde and pretty. You're a target, kiddo," he warned. "Just stick close to me until we get out of here."

At first I thought he was exaggerating, but I soon had to admit the city was not the place of postcard-perfect experiences. Danger did seem to lurk in the shadowed doorways and littered alleyways. I found myself clutching tightly on to Uncle Bob's hand as we walked the streets—just like when I was a little girl in downtown Chicago. (I could only hope those warped-minded passport guys weren't tailing us.) He did let me out of his sight for about two hours that afternoon but only after he'd hired our guides-with-guns to sit outside my hotel room. He said he had to see a guy about starting up a box plant. Two hours later, he was back with a smile, and I didn't even think to ask him how things went. Mindless teenager.

The next day our anxious little group of travelers piled into a well-dented, white four-wheel-drive van and happily left Algiers in our dust. Once out of that forsaken city, the desert took us in fast—and there was an odd comfort in its vast nothingness. Most of the real threats were in cities at the time, and we were far more likely to run into an ancestral band of nomadic Bedouins than modern-day terrorists in the

desert—or so our soldier guides said anyway. Uncle Bob must have concurred, because he soon reverted back to his relaxed, charming self as sandscapes enveloped us.

The goal of the trip was to go to the center of the Sahara and back, a trip of about thirteen hundred miles through an endless expanse of desert, day after day. If that sounds horrible to you, I have to admit I, too, had my doubts the first few hours in the van. No one knew each other, with the exception of Uncle Bob and me, so it was a relatively silent and worrisome outing at first, kind of like my first bus ride to overnight camp in Michigan. By the time we got to that night's campsite—a sand dune amid sand dunes from what I could see—I had started thinking I'd made a big mistake in swapping the sands of Ft. Lauderdale for those of the Sahara.

My fears didn't last long, thanks to Uncle Bob. That first night around the campfire I watched him work his unusual magic, breaking the ice with stupid jokes but more importantly, smart questions. Before long, he had everyone sharing their life stories, and in the process, I noticed he made his own life sound as boring as all get-out. Lesson learned.

Uncle Bob's not a loud man by any means; in fact, just the opposite. He's got a quiet yet strong way about him and a good sense of humor, and to be totally honest, he knows how to use his good looks and winning smile to best advantage. I'm a sucker for the guy, obviously, but that night was the first time I realized he has that effect on most everyone, men included. By the time we went to bed, spirits were high, there was adventure ahead, and camp-like friendships were forming. I also remember thinking Uncle Bob's smuggled-in wine was a whole lot better than bug juice. Another lesson learned.

Our fellow travelers were as memorable as you'd expect people to be who signed up for a spring fling in the Sahara. Uncle Bob talked for hours on end with Hans, a Czech-born, Canadian-raised adventurer who had successfully gambled with his life atop a Texas oil rig for many years. Now retired, he was hell-bent on spending his winnings in most every country in the world, and like Uncle Bob, he'd already traveled more than a hundred countries. Hans regaled all of us with his far-flung stories, and I might add, he included some pretty hot details about women in every port.

My uncle, on the other hand, told a few G-rated tales that portrayed him as a far more gallant adventurer—as much for schoolteacher Candy's benefit as mine, I thought. She was, as I've said, a beautiful woman, and Uncle Bob liked to flirt with her—as he did, and does, with most women. How she ended up on a trip to the Sahara, she couldn't really say. It just called to her, she told us. She'd seen a magazine ad at the dentist's office, went home, and booked the trip, and there she was playing hooky from her kindergarteners. Go figure.

Hands down, though, the wildest guy at the party was Father Moses. That was not his real name, but it is what we called him. Remember the one hundred and twelve camels? Well, they would later inspire the good father to go into a hellish drunken tirade about how the camels were clearly tied to the Second

Coming of Christ, or something like that. I was never quite sure what he was talking about, to tell you the truth. The man was nice, don't get me wrong. But he worshipped wine right alongside God, and that made for some pretty interesting nights for us all.

On one particular night, he climbed a sand dune and started preaching down to us, both literally and figuratively, half-serious, half-crazy. It probably would have gotten really uncomfortable for everyone if Uncle Bob hadn't done what he did.

He yelled up to him, "Hey, Moses, time to come down from the mountain and go to bed."

We all saw what he meant immediately. The guy really did look like a maniacal Moses with his long gray hair and flowing beard, clad in one of the ragged local robes we all wore as required desert apparel.

For one excruciatingly long second, I thought Moses was going to go for the guard's automatic. But then he roared with laughter, barreled down the dune, and tackled Uncle Bob in a bear-hug. It was a Bible-based moment I'm sure none of us will ever forget. Like I said, my uncle has a knack with people. Thank God.

Each day of that trip was a different adventure, partly because of the place—and ultimately, for me, because of Uncle Bob.

The place was, well ... difficult to describe at best. Our group of five often found ourselves competing at night to find the right words to describe the place to people when we got back home. It's that hard, because it's that bizarrely unique. The place is flat for miles upon miles of hard-packed sand, and the views are mainly of endless—truly endless—horizons of nothingness. There are no roads, only sand, and how the Bedouins find their way to Timbuktu and back without maps or trails—much less GPS—is mind-boggling to me. You miss a turn off to an oasis here, you're dead. It's that simple.

Occasionally you're shocked by huge, alien-looking rock formations, jutting as high as three hundred feet in the air. They come out of nowhere, as does an oasis now and then. After nights of camping on endless sands, it is nothing short of miraculous to see a lush, green oasis pop up out of nowhere, just like in a cartoon. You really do rub your eyes to check your senses.

Climate-wise, the best way to describe the heat of the day is that it makes you fearful. Without water, you'd die pretty damn quickly, and you know it the whole time you're there. Thankfully, the nights were cool when we were there, frosty even.

The first few nights of our trip, Uncle Bob behaved himself—and by that I mean, he stayed in the tent. But then, one night he packed up his sleeping bag and said he'd be sleeping outside.

"Where?" I asked incredulously.

"Don't worry, I'm just going a few sand dunes away ... I want to practice being a speck in the universe," he said. "I'll be back before you wake up."

Of course, I thought he was crazy and was scared shitless for him—and for me too, by the way. What would I do if he didn't come back? I tried to discourage him, sounding a bit like my mother in the process, actually. I said there were scorpions—but he countered that at this time of year they were harmless, buried deep in the sand for warmth. I said I was worried about the natives—but he assured me the Tuaregs were basically peaceable nomads and joked that he was pretty sure goat herders weren't prone to kidnapping.

Of course, I still thought he was crazy, but it was quickly obvious that arguing would be futile. Uncle Bob's never been one to follow the rules; I knew that much about him even then. So on that and other nights, he'd leave me to bitch and moan as I liked, but he always came back in the dawn, rested and smiling. I did wonder why our soldier guides didn't protest his departures ... but I pretty much figured that Uncle Bob charmed them, tipped them, or both. Perhaps the heat dulled my senses, but it wasn't until we were treated like royalty a few days later at the oasis encampment of a Bedouin sheik that I really seriously started to wonder if my dear Uncle Bob was much more of a mystery man than a traveling box man.

That particular oasis was huge and lush, with vegetation and pools of sparkling blue water. The sheik was obviously prosperous, with a good-sized entourage that had many tents and herds of goats, sheep, and camels. He seemed like a well-educated man and spoke fairly good English, and to Uncle Bob, he was extremely attentive.

The night we arrived there was a wedding feast, to which we were invited. Uncle Bob and I were seated nearer to the sheik than the rest of our group, which at the time I assumed was just the luck of the draw.

The wedding was a simple ceremony followed by a simple meal, and the food was interesting and at least edible—including my first, and presumably last, taste of goat. The sheik explained to us that this would be the young couple's last night with them at the oasis encampment. As it had been for thousands of years, the young couple would set out on their own with a few goats and a tent as wedding gifts. From that humble start, they would have to find a way to support themselves, most likely by trading for millet, rice, and other grains or making cheese from their goats' milk. If the goats prospered and their trading from oasis to oasis was good, the sheik told us they could look forward to getting sheep, and in time, perhaps their own camels. The cycle would repeat with their children and on down their line.

"If Allah is willing," concluded the sheik.

I remember thinking to myself that I sincerely hoped Allah would be willing. Circling the Sahara for a lifetime seemed an awfully tough way to go, from my perspective. It still does.

When the dinner was over, my uncle was invited to meet with the sheik privately while the rest of us were shown to our tents. That raised a few eyebrows, I can assure you, mine among them.

When Uncle Bob came back to the tent, I grilled him. He told me the sheik was related to the man he'd met with in Algiers who would be providing packaging for his date crop. The sheik was an investor, and he wanted to know more about the business so he could safeguard his investment.

"You mean to tell me that we are in the middle of the Sahara and this nomadic sheik wants you to educate him about boxes for dates? You expect me to believe that, Uncle Bob?"

"Well, why not?" he said, matter-of-factly. "It's the truth."

I didn't say another word. I just got into my sleeping bag, and he got into his. This was one night it seemed that Uncle Bob would not be sleeping outside the tent. Sheik's rules, I guess.

I went to blow out the lantern, thought twice, and then stopped myself.

I looked him straight in the eyes and outright asked him. "Okay, just tell me what the hell you do, Uncle Bob. Really. I need to know."

He looked surprised, and then chuckled quietly to himself. He stared up at the ceiling of the tent for what seemed a decade to me.

Still staring, he said, "You do remind me of your father ..."

A long pause ensued. He turned his head toward me, and two slightly glistening eyes met mine before he spoke.

"Okay, Julianna. Starting tomorrow, I'll tell you my story, for what it's worth," he offered. "It's about time someone heard it, I guess. I just hope you like what you hear."

With that, he exhaled out the lantern, rolled over and away from me, and nestled deep within the protective cocoon of his sleeping bag. It was my turn to stare.