

FIVE DAYS IN BABYLON

P.L. REITER

FIVE DAYS IN BABYLON is a work of fiction. The characters, organizations, and situations depicted in this story are based solely on the author's imagination. Any similarity between the characters in this novel and any real persons, places, things, or ideas is purely coincidental. The story contained in this novel is for amusement and entertainment only.

For Brenda

PROLOGUE

The moon bathed the partially finished apartments with a ghostly luminescence as it rose over Coronado Bay. Miles Thompson, a muscular man in his late twenties, cursed at himself for the lunar mistiming of their mission. With luck, though, anyone watching the place would be unable to detect his movements, as he planned to stay low and move slow, as they'd taught him in Iraq. He wore his usual oddball Salvation Army castoffs under a Gulf War field jacket along with an ancient pair of high-top Doc Martin's.

Although a few years older, his partner, Maria Elena Castillo, stood at least a head taller and sported a patent leather jumpsuit designed by Giorgio Armani. She'd purchased the glossy black outfit using a stolen credit card in an exclusive Rodeo Drive boutique, and had accessorized her look by adding exotic hoop earrings and a delicate 24-carat gold bracelet. Had anyone cared to compare Miles's disdain for style with that of his accomplice, he or she might also have wondered what common goal had drawn these two together on this particular August night.

The pair crept around the partially completed rooms in the complex, pausing every few minutes to allow Miles an opportunity to train the beam of his aluminum flashlight onto assorted piles of building materials. He clomped ahead of her, carefully inspecting the markings on several steel drums, but concluded the contents weren't what they wanted and so they moved on to the next building.

Searching several more piles in rapid succession, they eventually discovered a cluster of three white barrels, each marked with a bright crimson sticker. From his previous forays into the complex, he knew that he'd find something to use to start the fire, and he had one particular solvent in mind. The flashlight's reflected beam bounced along the apartments' skeletal walls as Miles slowly read each of the lines written on their labels.

Bingo! This was the stuff! He knew, from the many hours he'd spent Googling the internet, that the solvent these drums contained--something called Acetone--was an extremely hazardous chemical that required special handling. It was volatile if it vaporized and would explode on contact with the tiniest ignition source. He'd have to go slow. Take it easy. Just as if he was back in Iraq trying to survive.

Satisfied, he signaled to his partner that he was ready to begin the operation, and then snapped the flashlight off.

Maria Elena helped him wrestle one of the drums onto its side and then held it steady while he unscrewed its plug with a pair of pliers. As the cap came loose, the pungent liquid gushed out onto the newly fabricated wood flooring and then settled into a constant stream. The two vandals stood, removed their green REI backpacks, and set them down at their feet.

With only the light of the full moon for illumination, Miles sat on the heels of his

boots and removed the contents from inside both backpacks. The first yielded a U.S.C.G. flare pistol, six packs of four high-vis phosphorous cartridges, a large container of wooden Safe-T matches, and two .38-caliber pistols, complete with four boxes of ammunition. From the other pack, he extracted a one-liter glass liquor bottle, several Kotex Maxi-pads and a brushed chrome Zippo lighter, still greasy with the fluid he'd squirted into it earlier in the day.

While reminding himself to leave nothing obvious behind, he yanked the cork stopper from the bottle and thrust it into the side pocket of his tattered field jacket. He twisted the Maxi-pad into a long cigar shape and worked one end firmly into the opening until two inches remained exposed. Inside the bottle, the pad floated lazily in amber liquid that quickly saturated its absorbent fibers. He held the bottle in his hand and waited until the liquid had migrated to the end, forming a flammable wick. With a grunt, he scooped one of the pistols from the bag and flung it in the direction of his female partner.

"Yours!" he said, keeping his voice just above a whisper.

His sudden move hadn't caught her off-guard, for she deftly palmed the weapon in mid-air, rotated it once in her hand, and pointed it directly at him.

"Right," she said, matter-of-factly. "Got bullets?" She released the cylinder.

"Catch."

She snatched the box as she had the weapon, flipped it open and emptied it into her hand. One by one, she inserted the brass cartridges into the cylinder.

**

The pistol, a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver, was not her favorite, although unlike most women, she possessed enough hand strength to pull the trigger without cocking it first. She preferred pistols that were lighter, yet retained their balance. She owned a Glock. She found she could hide her Glock easily under the chic yet functional clothes she wore when she went out on missions.

On this particular night, though, she'd decided to leave the Glock behind in her night stand, where it couldn't be entered as evidence in the unlikely event that they were detained or arrested. After all, it was registered and she only kept it for personal security, not business. This was business, these guns were stolen, and therefore, expendable.

She finished loading the .38's bulky cylinder, snapped it shut, and hefted the piece as if making a mental note of its weight.

"Let's make this quick, Miles," she snapped. "For some reason, I'm nervous as a

cat tonight.” She wiggled her head, throwing the curls off her neck as a shiver crawled up her spine.

**

“Works for me,” Miles replied, without emotion, as he snapped his flashlight on once more to verify that the drum had finished emptying its load onto the floor.

The initial outflow of Acetone had fallen to a trickle, but it had already formed a circular pool an inch or two deep, twenty feet in diameter. On the far side, a tiny rivulet was fast disappearing through a crack in the floor, and soon, the pool would be gone and its effectiveness as a point of combustion diminished.

Ten feet beyond the edge of the pool, Miles saw that the wooden framework connected to the next apartment cluster, and that unit connected with the next unit and it with the next, forming a circle that encompassed nearly forty acres of developed land; in total, he figured there were five-hundred partially-built apartment units, devoid of any firebreaks. It brought a sneer to his upper lip.

As he again picked up the liquor bottle and the greasy Zippo, he noticed the moon’s warped reflection, still fat and egg-shaped, shimmering on the surface of the chemical pool. Then Maria’s image came into view, and he watched her wavy silhouette as she inserted one of the thick cartridges into the chamber of the flare gun, took a few steps toward one of the apartments, and pointed it into the air at a forty-five degree angle.

His eyes traced her intended trajectory to a pile of scrap lumber and paint cans that workmen had carelessly discarded against the wall of an adjacent building.

He realized with a start that he was lagging behind schedule. He flipped open the lighter and struck the wheel with his thumb several times in rapid succession, but the ocean breeze continually snuffed out the flame. Placing the bottle between his knees, he turned the Zippo upside down and thumped it against his thigh, snapped the wheel again, and hurried to cup his hands around it. The flint sparked nicely; this time, the wick caught. With the wind blowing it from behind, the blue and yellow flame quickly became a miniature blowtorch.

He heard the distinctive POP of the flare gun in the distance, and looked up in time to see a ball of burning phosphorous arch gracefully and land in the center of one of the woodpiles. Within a few seconds, the flare had transformed the surrounding paint and lumber into a raging blaze.

He watched her while she reloaded repeatedly, shooting round after round in all directions. New fires sprang to life as the flares reached their targets and sent embers skittering throughout the site. She stopped firing long enough to check her escape route, confused about which path to take.

Miles knew she was resourceful and would figure it out, and there was no more time to waste worrying about her. He had to hurry and get his end of the job done quickly, before the fires were detected and brought the authorities on the run. He turned away from the wind and touched the lighted Zippo to the bottle's wick, which instantly burst into flame.

But he'd been careless. The hot solvent dripped copiously from the wick, searing the tender skin between his thumb and forefinger and raising dime-sized blisters as it ran down his arm. He panicked and lobbed the flaming Molotov cocktail in a high, wide arc, although at nothing in particular. For several seconds, the projectile turned end over end, the wick's flame tracing a spiral orbit around the bottle's forward motion. It crashed in the middle of an apartment and shattered, spewing hot starter fuel across the Acetone-soaked wood. With a blinding flash, roiling balls of fire shot out laterally in all directions and the substructure ignited with a sharp crack.

The scene was almost surreal. He didn't hear a thing after the bottle shattered--nothing at all--but felt the air gasp around him, as if at that very second the fire had sucked out the last pint of oxygen in an attempt to suffocate him.

In the next second, a backlash of heat knocked him off the concrete foundation. He fell headlong into a pyramid of paint cans that emptied on top of him, and he lay there, dazed, looking as though he'd just tossed his breakfast.

When he pulled himself to his elbows, he realized that the flames, fanned by the dry Santa Ana wind, were spreading out of control. In the distance, it had engulfed the first set of apartments and flashed over to both the upper and lower levels, forming a wide ring that reached nearly all the way around the complex. He shook his head to try to gather his wits; then he tried to get up, but his boots couldn't find any traction in the sticky paint. Just as he was about to panic, Maria appeared through the smoky maelstrom to jerk hard on his arm and help him to his feet.

He stood in front of her, a half-zombie, sheepishly looking down at his pants. He brushed at the painted-on puke with the back of his burned hand.

"Miles, you goddamn moron!" she screamed, her mouth inches from his face. "Why didn't you wait for me to get back before you threw that thing? That fire nearly stranded me over there with no way out." He didn't immediately answer her and continued to brush at his pants.

"Miles? What the hell's the matter with you?" she said, taking a step backward to inspect him.

Miles didn't like her bitching. "Forget it. I fucked up," he said. "Fell off." He picked up his revolver and shoved it into his pocket. He noticed that she still carried hers in her hand.

"Let's get out of here," she said. "I told you, I'm nervous enough tonight without

having to take care of you. I feel like something bad's going to happen to us. Try to be more careful." After a minute, she added, "This isn't rocket science, you know. For Chrissakes."

He didn't bother to argue with her. He knew it was a waste of time.

They slung the backpacks over their shoulders and scrambled up the slope leading toward the knoll where they'd parked. When they crested the top of the hill, they stopped to look back.

The entire forty-acre complex was engulfed in flames that stretched as far as he could see, even to the edge of the lagoon. Besides the crackling of the framing as it split and the whistle of the wind through the nearby trees, he heard no other sound: no sirens, no alarms, no excited babble of voices rushing to the scene. In a dreamy voice, he said, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She shot a sharp glance at him and then abruptly turned and stomped away. Miles dogged closely behind, at her boot heels, not daring to step in front of her or even to walk beside her.

"I think we pulled it off, Maria," he said, as they returned to the spot where they'd hidden his car. "You have to admit, we showed 'em. They can't get away with this shit, not while we're around."

She didn't answer.

"What's the matter with you now?" he asked, annoyed.

She gave him a dirty look. "You left me out there," she said, "and I don't appreciate it."

"Jesus, like you were in some kind of danger--not!" He stuck the injured part of his hand into his mouth like a pacifier and pouted. After a minute, he pulled it out. "Look, I'm sorry, OK?"

"You always are," she said, opening the car door with a sigh. "Real sorry."

Chapter 1

Jack Stone wasn't a lowly pawn in the Game of Life; he was the board. Yielding to pressure from the L.A.P.D., he'd caved in and left town, choosing instead to rot away in an obscure outpost out in the Borrego desert. He didn't dwell on it much, realizing that at the ripe old age of fifty-five, his life was pretty much over. No matter. He was too burned out to give a damn.

The previous night, like most nights in recent memory, he'd mixed his drinks on the heavy side--copious amounts of Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey kicked up with a dash of Diet Sprite--and had settled onto a fast track to a drunken tirade, enjoyed alone, to some extent, save the terrors that erupted from memories formed some decades past.

He'd finally lost consciousness and slept in a sodden heap on the sagging, threadbare couch, and now that the dawn had irritated him awake, he found that he had the aching back to prove it. Even his scuffed Tony Llama boots were still attached to his feet, although his shirt had been flung haphazardly into a corner across the room, joining a dozen others that he'd treated the same way.

The raspy sound and strong, pungent smell of coffee brewing eventually worked their way into his barely-lit consciousness. He'd have to remember to thank God--later, of course--that he'd had the foresight to set the timer on the shitty excuse for a coffee pot before he'd taken his first drink. He raised his arm and checked his watch. It was nearly six o'clock. Another day in Paradise.

He rolled off the couch and stumbled, in a more drunken-than-not stupor into the tiny bathroom. There, he clutched both sides of the stained porcelain sink, hanging his head while the blood struggled to catch up with him and climb through his jugular to light his brain. Raising his eyes level with the mirror, his reflection gazed back at him.

Normally, he'd have been confident in his ability to pull his act together after one of these bouts. Lately, however, it was becoming harder to accomplish. He shrugged and wrote it off to the inevitable aging process, but even as he glanced repeatedly at his own image in the half-silvered mirror, the tousled JFK look that he'd been blessed with--a healthy head of sandy blonde hair intertwined with a darker pepper thread--had stayed with him. His steel-gray eyes were lined these days with bags and crow's feet that a few, short years ago hadn't existed anywhere on his face. His ideal body weight of one hundred fifty pounds had certainly bitten the desert dust sometime after he'd started drinking heavily ten years earlier; now he pushed two hundred and was thankful for that.

He turned on the cold water and splashed two hands full against his face before donning a denim shirt and once more checking his sad image as he flipped off the lights.

He slouched into the kitchen, where he salvaged an unwashed mug from the two week's worth of clutter living in the sink, set it down, and poured coffee to within a hair's breadth of the rim. As he picked it up, his shaking hand caused a splash of the hot liquid onto the counter and the stream ran along the raised edge of broken tiles until it formed a brown pool around the butt of a chrome pistol. Cursing, he picked up the Colt .357 with his free hand.

"What're you doing here, Palsy?" he slurred at it. "Oh, I remember now." Reverberating ad nauseum in his ears, his voice sounded as if he was mentally ill, even demented.

He shoved the gun's muzzle into the soft area below his jawbone, between his earlobe and his skull. He felt the coolness of the beveled metal snout and the bite of the forward sight as it dented his flesh. With his thumb, he pulled the hammer back all the way and cocked the pistol. He waited there, coffee in one hand, his own death in the other. The urge to pull the trigger struck him as if the hand of the Grim Reaper had silently encircled his own.

A voice in his head commanded him: This is the end. Count to ten and pull the trigger.

"Why?" he cried, sounding even more pitiful than before. He licked his lips; they were cracked and dry. He needed another drink; needed to think about this for another minute.

The silky voice whispered to him again: Ten dead men. Satisfy those men's' souls. End it. For all our sakes'.

Jack Stone stood there in the dusty kitchen, hunched over the counter like an old wino and watched the cockroaches cascade out of the walls looking for something to eat. He knew they were after his remains.

Look around. See for yourself. Is there any reason not to?

Jack did look around, more like a trapped animal than not. "One. I have to live, if for no other reason than to make amends to those poor bastards who died," he recited. "I let them down."

Pull the trigger!

But as he'd done every time in the past, his thumb eased the hammer back in. Real slow. It was over. Past.

Do it!

"Not today."

Doitdoitdoit!

“No. The show’s over.”

Goddamn coward!

This time, he set the piece back down on the counter. The sweat that had beaded on his forehead ran down the stubble on his jaw and formed large drops on his chin. They hung there for a moment and then fell away to the counter top, like tears.

Nauseated and still shaking, he took a few tentative sips from the mug and went outside, shoving the door open with his boot.

“Get a grip, Jerk-off,” he said, shutting the Voice out of his mind.

The coffee soothed his vocal cords and the breeze off the desert evaporated the sweat from his skin. The scent of sagebrush and rosemary wafted in the desert air as he walked toward the barn, a short distance from the main house. When he reached it, he jerked open the sagging door.

The place smelled worse than a fifty-year-old barn should. It was musty inside, yet that stench was intertwined with the delicate bouquet of decaying horseshit that permeated the empty stalls as it had for more than twenty years. Even the wooden structure had decomposed considerably during those years and he hadn’t removed any of the graying, rotted lumber, pulled any of the bent, rusty nails, or shoveled any of that stinking crap in the ten years he’d called the ranch home. But he had all intentions of getting around to it--someday.

As his '79 Harley Ironhead rested on jack stands, the chrome tail pipes gleamed fire red in the morning sun’s magic hour. A ten-dollar Havana cigar he’d nursed on and off for at least a week remained balanced precariously on the edge of the hammered artillery shell that served as an ashtray. He stuck what little was left of the butt into one corner of his mouth and lit it.

From the tool chest, he picked out a Craftsman box wrench, wincing as he slammed the drawer shut too loudly. He knelt down next to the Harley and began to remove a strut that had been damaged the previous week. He’d dumped the bike to keep from colliding with a Chevy pickup that had turned right in front of him as he sped along at 80 miles per hour.

He’d been lucky. Even though he’d dumped it into the pavement, the bike was okay, just the bent strut. He’d walked away without a scratch.

The cops hadn’t asked him if he’d been drinking when they investigated the accident, and they knew how he’d answer the have-you-been-drinking question, anyway.

They didn’t bother asking because they knew him and they knew he’d lie through his rotten teeth. It was a good thing, too, because he’d have blown at least a .20 BAC on

the Breathalyzer and then he would have wound up a guest in the county jail. But nothing had happened. At least, not that time. The whole thing had been the other dude's fault and the cops could see that.

As he twisted the wrench back and forth, he looked through the doorway at the distant interstate. He focused on the lines of traffic as they rushed headlong from some God-forsaken city to converge on L.A., or were escaping from it.

His ranch was rotting away at the end of a road that began at a nondescript exit on Interstate 10 and then meandered across the parched Inland valley, eventually morphing from asphalt to gravel to rutted dirt, only to die altogether in a clump of dust-laden tumbleweeds a short distance past his decrepit barn.

He noticed a cloud hovering over the road, thrown up by an approaching vehicle, and a few minutes later, a silver-colored Mercedes sped into the lot, the door flying open well before the car came to a complete stop. Pulling hard on either side of the doorframe, the driver, a balding man of considerable bulk, swung two spindly legs through the opening and extracted himself from the leather seat. He brushed his suit several times with the back of his hand and ambled toward the barn, his shoulders rolling back and forth like a defensive lineman preparing for a quarterback sneak.

"Jack Stone?" he panted, stopping a few feet away from where Jack was kneeling.

Jack nodded once and the man moved a step closer. The sun, an orange ball at this time of the morning, was positioned directly behind him, plunging his face into shadow.

"Stop right there." Jack squinted to see who he was, all the while gripping the wrench like a club. That goddamn gun's never where it's supposed to be, and always where it isn't.

"No problem. No problem!" The man stopped and held up his single open palm. In the other hand, he held a manila envelope, which he waved around in the air.

"Nothing up my sleeve," he said, and then smiled broadly. "Name's Jacobson."

He stuck out his hand as he was moving forward, but hesitated when Jack raised the wrench even higher.

"I said stop. What do you want?"

"Now, hold on, don't get excited. I ain't a cop or nothing, if that's what you're thinkin'," Jacobson said. "I didn't come here to cause any problems. Thought I might solve a few." A smile returned to his ruddy face for a few seconds, but then quickly faded away.

Jack tried to jam his sodden brain into gear. It didn't matter in the least if this guy was a cop, because he had nothing to hide. He no longer possessed any unregistered

weapons, illegal substances, or stolen explosives. He'd gotten rid of them, months ago. Or did he? He couldn't remember for sure.