

# Into the Unknown by Graham Balch

## Chapter One - Reality

April 27<sup>th</sup> 11:38 a.m.

King and Queen's seat, Maryland

Clay rose slowly. He grimaced from the pain radiating from his wounds. He glanced down and saw blood staining his shirt near his left shoulder and on the right pant leg just below the knee. The adrenaline that had enabled him to somehow run up the path carrying the duffel bags had dissipated. His body's flight or fight response no longer muffled the pain.

As he turned around, he saw that the entire landscape looked different. Gone were the well-trodden areas from heavy use by tourists. Instead, the forest came right up to the rocks of the King and Queen's seat. Clay stood in awe marveling at both the change and the simple beauty of the place in its natural, untouched state. He turned to face the FBI agent holding her pistol with both hands in a modified weaver stance.

Heather backed up slowly to avoid making a false step on the uneven terrain. She kept her eyes and her handgun on him.

"Mr. Nelson, move slowly towards me and do not make any sudden moves." Over her shoulder, she said, "Agent Cavazos, handcuff his arms in front of him in order to accommodate his injured shoulder."

After a few seconds of silence, Heather raised her voice, "Agent Cavazos, respond!" But the only response was the soft whisper of the wind in the early spring leaves.

Heather kept the gun pointed at Clay with one hand and reached down for her walkie-talkie with the other. She clicked the button and said, "Team, report your position, over."

Silence.

"Team, confirm receipt of this communication and report your position, over."

Silence.

Clay eyed the FBI agent in front of him, his keen eyes evaluating her. "Lady, you are not going to believe me, but I think we just went back in time."

Heather rolled her eyes and sharpened her tone. "That is the first time I ever heard someone say that when arresting them, but with lying criminals, there is always a first." She flashed a fleeting smile before furrowing her brows. "Now, walk towards me slowly with your right arm raised."

"Lady, look around you. Where are the agents who were with you?"

Heather's face showed no reaction.

Clay rolled his eyes and then pointed to the ground, "Did you notice all the carvings of initials in hearts and people's names on the rocks as you walked out here? Look down. They're gone. How is that possible unless we have gone back to before they were created?"

"I had my eyes trained on you and not the rocks, Mr. Nelson. Whether there are names and

hearts on the rocks is of no concern to me,” said Heather with a calm coolness in her voice. “What is important is that you are a suspected terrorist who has been caught. We will get you down this hill, your wounds treated in a hospital and then you are going to spend a long time telling us everything about your terrorist plot and an even longer time locked up in a maximum security federal facility.”

“Fine,” said Clay sardonically. “Let’s just go down the path to your vehicles, drive down the road, visit a hospital and then you take me to wherever you want. Where is the path you came up that we should go down to reach your vehicle?”

Heather backed up a few paces to put a bit more distance between her and Nelson. From her new vantage point, she looked over the edge down at where she had just walked up. Trees grew all the way to the rock cliff where the trail had been.

Heather looked blankly back at Clay. “What did you do to the path, Mr. Nelson? It is not there.”

Clay looked innocently back at the FBI agent. “How could I have done anything to the path?”

Heather squinched her face staring at Clay. She glanced back and forth between Clay and the non-existent path.

“Lady, if what I think has happened, every second counts in getting my wounds treated. Without modern medicine, I could die from these injuries.”

Heather snorted. “You’re delusional Mr. Nelson. The FBI will make sure your injuries are treated properly.”

“Agent, look around you. Your team is gone. Everything is gone. I’m shot and I need help. I am going to walk off this rock ledge.”

He pointed with his head forward and to the right. “The bags over there should have medical supplies. There was a river across from where the road was down there. We need to get down there, clean these wounds and hopefully bandage them. Can you help?”

Heather gripped her gun tightly. “I said freeze! You are a domestic terrorist and you are under arrest! If you take one more step towards me, I will shoot you!”

*Oh God*, thought Clay as he looked at the person in front of him clinging to the last fleeting shred of the reality that existed for her just moments ago.

“Look lady, there is no more FBI. There may not even be a United States depending on how far back in time we travelled.” Clay stared at her looking for any hint of understanding. Seeing none, he continued with caustic urgency, “I need medical help. Go down to where your cars and the road were. Go see if they are there. If they are, great you can bring an army of FBI agents up to arrest me. But if not, you are going to have to deal with the fact that our world just changed beyond belief and we need to deal with my injuries quickly.”

Heather backed up until she was off the rocky ledge and could feel the soft texture of the forest floor under her feet. She walked over to a tree that was thin enough to put a handcuff on yet sufficiently tall and strong to not slip the handcuff off of. She stood to the side of it and called out, “Mr. Nelson, come over here slowly and sit down by this tree.”

Clay grudgingly obliged and limped over to the tree. He sat down, wincing with pain as the movement made his wounds throb. Once seated, he looked back at Heather expectantly.

Heather watched him with unblinking eyes as she walked cautiously over to him, keeping her gun pointed at him.

When she was a few steps away, she took out a pair of handcuffs and threw them at Clay and took a quick step back. Clay growled with indignation that she refused to get near him in his current injured state.

“Put one of the cuffs on the tree trunk and the second one on your right wrist.”

Clay did as Heather commanded and put one side of the handcuffs around the tree. He then struggled to get the handcuff on his good wrist without the use of his other arm. Finally, Heather inched closer and while keeping one hand on her gun trained at him, she used her other hand to close the handcuff on his wrist and checked the cuff that was attached to the tree.

Once he was secure, Heather made her way down the steep hillside to find her vehicle and the rest of her team.

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After making her way down the hill, Heather kept walking until she reached the river’s edge. “Wait, where is the road? It was definitely between the hill and the river. I remember seeing the river on the right as we drove up here,” she said out loud almost willing it to be true. She turned around in a full circle, but saw nothing but the river and trees.

Clay’s words about going back in time echoed in her head. *That’s impossible.* But, as crazy as that sounded, there was nothing else that could explain a road simply disappearing. Maybe Nelson could have had help. *My team could have been captured somehow and the vehicles driven away quietly, but the road? Where is it?*

Heather took a deep breath and exhaled it as she fought back panic. She looked around at the forest in disbelief. “What is going on?” she exclaimed out loud to the stillness of the forest.

“Oh God,” Heather felt herself getting woozy. She leaned over and vomited. As she did, she held on to a tree for support – there were many all around her to choose from. She felt her body shake all over while still heaving out what little was left in her stomach. She clenched the tree with both hands as her mind searched desperately for answers.

Slowly, her body calmed down though her pulse was still racing. *What if Mr. Nelson was right about going back in time?* She shook her head as if the negating motion would help convince her that what Clay said was wrong. However, she couldn’t extinguish the thought that what he had said might be true. *Heather, check yourself, don’t let him fool you. Yesterday this guy evaded two FBI agents in Florida and a half dozen in Philadelphia today. He also escaped the blockade at the intersection and kept fleeing after being shot. Heather, you have gotten to where you are by not foolishly trusting others. Even injured, this suspect is not to be underestimated.*

A second later she uttered, “I left Nelson alone,” and began climbing back up to where she had left him.

Despite being in good shape, she was out of breath when she got back up the hill. Clay looked up at her from where he was sitting right where she had left him.

“So, Agent, did you find your team?” Clay said softly with raised cheeks and all the facial

features of a smile, but without any upward curvature to his lips. Heather felt he was challenging her control of the situation, but she couldn't deny what she had observed...and not observed.

Heather stared back, her chest heaving from sprinting up the hill. After a long pause, she replied, "No. Not only that, but the cars are gone. What is even stranger is the road is not there either," Heather said flatly without the surety she had exhibited before going down the hill.

Clay interrupted her thoughts by saying, "We have to start acting on what we know. We are in the woods. No one is around. I have been shot, by you no less, and I need medical help. Can you start by uncuffing me?"

Heather took a long look at Clay and wondered if she was in some huge training simulation. As soon as she fell for his story, it would be over and agents would come out of everywhere to end the simulation and review the breakdowns that led to failure. She told herself that if this was a simulation, it was one million times more elaborate than anything she could ever imagine. It was more plausible that everything around her, and everything that wasn't around anymore like the team, the cars and the road – this was all real.

She moved towards Clay and used a key from her belt to unlock the handcuffs. He moved his now freed arm to support his other arm and injured shoulder.

Clay said, "Can you go get those three bags out on the ledge and bring them here? When I looked in the bags at the bank, I saw a first aid kit."

Heather walked out on to the King and Queen's seat to retrieve the duffel bags and backpack without saying a word. When she returned to where Clay sat, she opened them and searched around until she found a first aid kit.

Clay asked, "Do you know how to treat these wounds?"

Heather's first thought was that the first aid training she had done did not include caring for gunshot wounds. However, she didn't have much of a choice.

She gave an answer that was uncharacteristic of her.

"Maybe," she said.

Clay looked at her with a raised eyebrow, "Maybe? My life kind of depends on it."

"Then," said Heather jutting her jaw out in determination, "you will have to hope I can. First, we need to get you down to the river and clean these wounds out thoroughly. If you put your right arm over my shoulder, can you make it down with my help?"

"I guess I'll have to," responded Clay.

"You ran up this hill carrying the duffel bags and backpacks Mr. Nelson, I am sure you can get down."

Clay tried to stand up and winced. "The pain in my leg and shoulder is a lot more intense now. Can you help me get down?"

Heather put the first aid kit back in the duffel bag and picked up that bag leaving the other two there as she could not carry all the bags and an injured person down the hill at the same time. She reached her free arm out to Clay and helped him up. He put his good arm over her shoulder to support himself.

"Ready Mr. Nelson?"

Clay nodded, but his squinched up face against the pain told Heather otherwise.

Slowly they worked their way down the hill with Clay involuntarily wincing every now and then. Heather carried the duffel bag in her other hand, which wasn't easy because she, Clay and the bag were pretty wide to be passing through the woods with no trail.

Once they reached the river, they both took off their shoes. Clay awkwardly half pushed and half rolled up the right leg of his pants with his one good arm so he could put his leg in the river.

The river was numbingly cold. Heather shivered as she waded in. She washed Clay's leg carefully. The bullet had passed to the side of his shin and looked to have gone clean through without hitting any bones.

"Let's step out and get this one wrapped up and then I will take a look at your shoulder."

In a small clearing next to the river, Clay laid down. Heather found antibiotic cream, a hook-shaped needle for sewing stitches, thread, gauze and medical tape in the first aid kit. First, she put antibiotic cream gently on the inside and outside of the wound. Though she had never sewn a wound before, or much of anything for that matter, she figured she would hook the skin on each side of the wound and pull the two sides together enough using the thread. Hopefully it would be close enough for a scab to form over the wound.

She inserted the thread in the eye of the hook shaped needle and knotted it. She then managed to stitch up the wound on the back of his leg where the bullet had entered and repeated the process for the exit hole on the front of his leg. She then wrapped gauze around his leg and secured it with tape. Heather stepped back and admired her work. "That's not too bad."

She remembered there was another wound to treat and her momentary satisfaction passed as she looked up at Clay's shirt. "There's no blood on the front of your shirt, Mr. Nelson. That means trouble because no blood means no exit wound and the bullet is probably somewhere in your shoulder."

"Wonderful," Clay said as he sighed and frowned.

"Let's get your shirt off so I can look at it."

With Heather's help, he took off his shirt slowly. Heather took his shirt to the river, washed it out, and brought it back to clean off Clay's shoulder. Clay had an even tan across his upper torso. He didn't have big muscles gained from regular visits to the gym. Instead, he looked toned and wiry.

As Heather was cleaning his shoulder, Clay said "My last name is Nelson, my first name is Clay. What's your name?"

"Agen...", but as she began saying it, it felt out of place without her team, the road, or anything besides them around. After a short pause, she continued, "It's Heather"

"Heather, thanks for your help."

"Well, it's not like either one of us has a choice. Besides, I'm the one who shot you."

Heather focused on cleaning the wound and avoided further eye contact with Clay. She didn't feel comfortable touching someone else even if it was for medical purposes, and eye contact would have made the moment too personal. Heather didn't need to make physical contact with people in her line of work. FBI agents didn't shake hands, they showed their credentials. She didn't have time for friends, much less relationships, so she didn't have physical contact with others in her

personal life -- and she preferred it that way.

Once Clay's shoulder was clean, she examined the small hole in Clay's upper shoulder that looked like a dark red circle with a trickle of blood still slowly coming out of it. As she pushed gently down on Clay's collarbone, he cried out in pain.

"It looks like the bullet hit your collarbone and broke it. It's probably sitting in your collarbone or right next to it."

She looked more closely at the wound. "I have to figure out how to get the bullet out the entry hole in your back. But the collarbone is towards the front of one's shoulder and that would require me going deep into your shoulder to fish the bullet out."

Clay's eyes widened. "That doesn't sound very promising."

Heather looked through the first aid kit. "Here's a small pair of tweezers. They're not long enough to reach deep enough into your shoulder and grab the bullet."

She rummaged through the rest of the duffel bag and found a survival kit with a knife in it and pulled it out to look at it. "Even if I could reach the bullet with this knife, how would I pull it out?"

Clay raised his eyebrows. "This conversation isn't giving me a lot of confidence."

"Don't worry, I have an idea. "Instead, maybe I should cut through the skin on the front of your shoulder and try to pull the bullet out that way."

"Through the bone??"

Heather ignored him as she continued thinking it through. "But I'm not sure exactly where the bullet is and do not like the idea of using a knife to cut someone's flesh away, and then poke around for the bullet."

"Poking around for the bullet doesn't sound any better."

Heather stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm not an EMT and I don't know what to do. I hate situations like this where there is no clear answer. I feel more comfortable when there are protocols to follow that created a path of action that had proven reliable in the past."

Clay stared blankly at her.

Heather continued, "I have relatively little medical training and I need to do shoulder surgery. I am not looking forward to whatever it is I'm going to do."

Clay swallowed and his face softened. Heather knelt back down and reexamined the wound.

"Clay, where does it hurt most?"

Clay immediately pointed with one finger to a spot on his collarbone. "Here."

"I remember from my first aid training that when people sprained something they motion to a general area, but when it's a broken bone, people pointed to a specific point. My instructor even told us a story of taping a paperclip in the shape of an arrow to a patient's arm where he said it was broken. They left the paper clip there while the x-rays were taken and, sure enough, the arrow pointed right to where the break had taken place."

"Since I pointed to a specific spot that means that's where my collarbone is broken?"

Heather twisted her lips and cocked her head. "I'm guessing so. And, I am going to have to cut through from the front to get the bullet."

She leaned back to look at Clay's face. "This is going to hurt a lot. Can you handle it?"

Clay nodded while pursing his lips and opening his eyes wide. Heather laid him down on the leaves with the wet shirt behind his wounded shoulder keeping it free of dirt. She wiped the knife with an alcohol pad from the first aid kit. "Take this stick and put it in your mouth. I've seen that in movies, and maybe it will help."

"Great, now we've gone from first aid to Hollywood medical advice."

Heather furrowed her eyebrows. "I'm doing my best here, Clay. This isn't easy for me."

Clay exhaled. "I realize. It's just my shoulder we are talking about and it's a bit scary."

Timidly, Heather probed Clay's shoulder just below the point on Clay's collarbone that he had pointed to. He gasped in pain, but she had to find the bullet. She felt something that felt different than soft tissue. *Is that it?* As much as she hated not being sure what to do, she had to try.

Heather made an incision where she thought she had felt the bullet. Blood flowed out as she cut. Clay bit down on the stick, his whole body tensing up.

"Relax Clay. I can't do this if your body is tightened up."

Clay's breathing was heavy, but he relaxed his body as much as he could. Heather cut a hole in Clay's skin big enough for her to pull the bullet out. She then worked the knife deeper into Clay's shoulder trying to get the bullet out. Clay groaned and then his body went limp as he passed out.

She could feel something hard at the tip of her knife. However, each time she tried to push the knife to the side and past the bullet, the knife couldn't get around it and instead pushed the bullet further back not forward. *How am I going to pull the bullet out?* She paused to wipe the nervous perspiration off her brow with her arm, being careful not to get her blood-covered hand near her face.

*This isn't working. I need to try something else, but what?* She studied the hole in the front of Clay's shoulder she had made. *Maybe I can push the bullet back far enough that I could pull it out from the back side.* She took a quick glance at Clay's face. His breathing was shallow and he had a pallid complexion. No wonder as she was learning backcountry first aid using his shoulder.

She rolled Clay's body on to his side with the injured shoulder up. She put the knife back in the hole in the front of his shoulder that she had made eliciting a moan from Clay. As best she could she pushed back on the bullet, which wasn't easy as she had to use the tip of the knife to push the tip of the bullet.

Slowly, she tapped the bullet back bit by bit. When the blade was about three inches deep in Clay's shoulder, she reached around his shoulder with the tweezers and stuck them in the bullet hole in the back of Clay's shoulder searching gingerly for the bullet.

Fortunately, the bullet was just beneath the surface and not too hard to find. Heather pulled it out and looked back at Clay. He laid still, his face turned to the ground slightly and his eyes closed. The stick was still in his mouth, but it did not look like he was biting down on it. She put the back of her hand in front of his nose and felt the faintest of breath. *He hasn't died...yet at least.* She turned back to her work. She put a good dose of antibiotic cream in the front and back holes. Then she attached a new thread to the sewing needle and stitched up the hole she had created in the front of his shoulder. She then stitched up the hole in the back.

"Now what?" Heather said aloud as she looked askance at the woods around her. She shivered

even though it was early afternoon on a pleasant spring day.

First, she went back up to get the other duffel bag and the backpack and brought them down the hill. She looked through them finding survival equipment, a gun and a lot of ammunition, some food and a duct-taped box marked 'valuable' and a very suspicious looking red bag with an orange biohazard symbol on it. *I have to keep that red bag away from Nelson so that he cannot complete his domestic terrorism objectives once he wakes up.*

She realized she was incredibly thirsty and she drank deeply from the full water bottle. Not having ever been into camping, Heather was a bit out of her element. She was in the middle of the woods – where a road had been just hours before. She had an unconscious, injured companion whom she had shot and she had no idea what year it was. She mentally tried grasping onto any known constant without success.

After a few minutes of inconclusive thinking, Heather decided to build a shelter because she didn't think she could handle dealing with any combination of cold, bugs or rain without shelter. It gave her something to do and made her feel not quite so helpless and at a complete loss to explain what had happened to them.

Heather made a small lean-to of branches leaning against a tree which she covered with fallen leaves. Crude as the lean-to might have been, she admired her handiwork. She then carefully and gently dragged Clay and the duffel bags into it. Clay stirred enough to get down a few sips of water from the water bottle with Heather's help. Though it was only mid-day, she curled up next to Clay and sat there exhausted.

As the evening shadows advanced with the falling sun, Heather shivered. She put on a hat that was in the duffel bag. She took the long-sleeved top she found and gently slipped it on Clay's torso and put his good arm in the sleeve, but left his left arm pressed against his chest on the inside of the polypropylene top. She then curled up next to Clay, not so close that she was touching him, but just close enough to know he was there and to feel a bit of warmth from his body. Just hours ago, this guy had been a wanted fugitive and now she was sharing a lean-to with him – what a bizarre day.

With the dark of night came the sounds of katydids and other animals that were far louder than Heather could have imagined. She could sleep through the noises of a city without noticing the sound of passing cars or occasional police sirens, but she wasn't sure how she could fall asleep tonight. After what seemed like an eternity of listening to the deafening cacophony of forest noises, Heather drifted off into a fitful sleep.