

AFTER WE'RE FREE

a novel

VINCE PERRITANO

After We're Free

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All of the characters in *After We're Free* are fictional, and if in any way they resemble real people, it is by coincidence. Some of the places in this novel are real, but the events have been conceived by the author's imagination.

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PROLOGUE

It's a strange path one walks to make himself able to kill a man. Stranger, though, is being there and trying to return.

ONE

Ramadi

“I GUESS I was trying to save the world or something, I don’t know. I can’t really remember where it started, but I do remember getting to Southern Illinois University as a scared seventeen year old freshmen. I ran for dorm president with a friend just to have something to do aside from smoking weed all day. Well, I went around the building, pretty high, asking for votes. When they asked why I was running I didn’t really know how to answer them.

“I actually got elected. It surprised me more than it surprised the people who voted against me. So there I was, going to meetings just as high as I was when I campaigned, and I started to get into it.

“I was walking home from class one day, and saw a middle-aged man digging through our dumpsters collecting cans and bottles. I’d seen him before, and I never put too much thought into it. But this time I decided to stop and talk to him. He told me his name was Lamont Turner, and he couldn’t hold a job because he had chronic kidney problems. And just like my mother, he couldn’t afford healthcare because he was a cancer survivor and he was too high of a risk. He said he was fishing for cans to help pay the rent on a small apartment him and his mother shared.

“That night I passed a dorm law that no one could throw out or recycle cans or bottles. They had to put them in a special trash can for Lamont. Eventually, every Monday Lamont just had to stop by and pick up a few bags instead of digging through trash.

“The organization above our dorm, Thompson Point Executive Counsel, tried to say we couldn’t do that, so I didn’t hesitate to retaliate. I had one of my friends, who was a communications major, write

up an email perfectly stating everything wrong with the president of TPEC. She sent it out to everyone who mattered, and a week later the president of TPEC resigned.

"I thought it was a pretty good victory, but now with the office open I wanted to make it a better victory. I had made a pretty good name for myself by this point, so when everyone heard I was gonna take it no one ran against me.

"The first thing I did as the president of TPEC was lay down the bottles and cans law throughout all eleven dorms TPEC was in charge of. I don't know why I believed Lamont's story, but I guess I just trusted him. When I ran into him next he invited me over for dinner. I realized that I was right to trust him when I got to his apartment. His mother showered me in hugs and told me I saved their home. They were about to lose it and have to live in a halfway house. The place was really small and cramped. There were piles of medical papers everywhere, and they told me more about their situation.

"That's when I realized that it wasn't just a game: I could use the position I got to really help people. High as usual, I was holding a TPEC meeting one day. It was brought to my attention that there was a free daycare center for lower income families in danger of being closed because the city had to make budget cuts.

"I couldn't believe it! I got a hold of the mayor and started negotiating. He told me I would have to come up with \$56,000 in the next year to keep it open. He must have been surprised when I told him I would have it within the month.

"I went all out. I almost completely stopped going to classes—not like I went to many in the first place. I went on campus radio and TV, organized the cans and bottles city wide, and asked for volunteers to pick them up and recycle them for cash. I got small business sponsorship and held a sponsored walk to raise money. The money wasn't there yet, but it was clear I was going to have it.

"I don't know if he just gave me that number because he didn't think I could do it or what. But when he saw I was gonna have it he told me he miscalculated, and that it would take approximately \$215,000 to keep it open. I didn't know if I could get that much, but I told him I would.

"I went to this daycare center and saw how great of an asset it really was for the community. It freed up parents to be able to make more money for their kids while not spending any on daycare. They really had a great curriculum for the kids too. I fell in love with the place. I decided I was going to do whatever I had to do to keep it open. I started to get bigger companies to offer large amounts if they

could advertise on the building. Professors were offering larger donations. It really seemed like we could pull it off.

“I started gettin’ real pissed off with this mayor, though. He just seemed determined to close it. He told me companies wouldn’t be able to advertise on city property, and that the deadline to deliver the cash was gonna be sooner than expected. I tried to act like he wasn’t bothering me, but he was—he just kept giving me the run around when I was trying to do something really important.

“Well, I kept messing around with this guy all the way up ‘til I left school that year. I did horrible in my classes, and should’ve been kicked out. Because of my civic work I was allowed to come back the next year. I never did, though. I left. But that’s not why I’m here. There was a girl involved, but that’s something entirely different.

“Sorry for rambling, though. Did that answer your question?” I looked over to see if it did, but Evans was asleep. We had been up for quite some time posting security in this house. I guess there’s a general coming through to take a look at the city in the morning.

“Evans... Evans, wake up dude. You fell asleep.”

“What—what do you think about Creation?” Evans asked out of nowhere. Was he still dreaming?

“Are you serious? You want me to answer that? I don’t know. I believe God created us so we can evolve, you know? To keep getting closer to Him,” I supplied the first answer that came to mind. I knew he was asking about evolution; he was raised not to believe in it. I think he was trying to learn more about my beliefs because they were significantly different than his. I was one of the first people he was ever exposed to with beliefs other than what his strict parents allowed him to see growing up.

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know if I can believe that. The Bible says God created us in seven days, how could we have evolved in seven days?”

“How do you know that a day to God is the same as a day to us? Maybe he did, but it turned out to look like fourteen billion years to us, I don’t know.”

“But—” he tried to interrupt.

“I know that’s not what it literally says in the Bible, and I’m not sayin’ the Bible’s wrong. I just don’t think it’s wise to take *anything* literally. That’s when bombs start to go off.”

Evans paused before replying, “Good point. Maybe I’ll take some time one day to rethink some of my beliefs.”

“Never hurts to rethink things. You should always be thinking. Just make sure you’re listening to what feels right.”

"Yeah," he paused for thought, "I'll do that." I wasn't sure if he really would.

"You wanna take turns sleeping for a couple hours a piece; if anyone comes just wake each other up?" I asked.

"Alright, you wanna go first?" he offered.

"You were falling asleep why don't you go?" I suggested.

"Nah, you take the first couple. I'm awake now. There's a few things I wanna think about."

"Alright, wake me up at 0430?"

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Hey, you think when you wake up you could answer a couple a more questions I'll have for you by then?"

"Yeah man, just don't fall asleep yourself. If you feel like you're getting tired just wake me up," I said. I was preparing my makeshift bed on the second story floor of the Iraqi house we were staying in that night. Tile floors were never comfortable to sleep on, but when we had to, we were always too tired to care.

* * * * *

DURING THOSE COUPLE of hours of sleep I dreamed they came back strong. This was my second tour in Ramadi. Last time I was here it was expected that we'd get into contact with the enemy every day. The longest we went without any violence in the city was thirty-six hours. This time we'd been here for almost a month and the violence was all around our city, but not in it. I've heard the higher-ups' explanations for why the fighting was over, but we never really knew everything that goes on out here.

At the beginning of the war the people of Ramadi invited al Qaeda in to fight Americans and get us to leave. They came and they fought well, but al Qaeda eventually got out of control and began killing good people for breaking their new strict Islamic law. The citizens of Ramadi got fed up with them and wanted them gone, but they wouldn't leave.

A rich sheik named Sheik Sattar—who formerly smuggled arms through Syria—got sick of the foreign fighters enforcing their own brand of Islam. Those who ventured outside of al Qaeda's limits paid dearly for it, usually with their lives. Sheik Sattar organized most of the prominent tribes in Al Anbar to ally with the Americans and drive the unwelcomed guests out. He might have done it out of revenge—his father and three brothers were killed by al Qaeda—but he was the man who organized The Awakening of Al Anbar.

With the blessing of Sheik Sattar, an Iraqi Army colonel named Salaam rose to a prominent position in Ramadi. He got a ragtag crew

of about a dozen lieutenants and nearly a hundred regular enlisted men to join him in his campaign to purge Ramadi of al Qaeda.

Colonel Salaam and his men, who were all Ramadi locals, began finding everyone in the city who didn't belong. They went around at night, walking into the homes al Qaeda occupied, and began killing them just as they woke. They didn't do this with the sanction of the American military, or even their own government. They found that the only way to get their city back was by resorting to the means of their former dictator.

The foreign fighters approached Salaam on a regular basis pleading with him to stop his campaign, but he always refused. They had no choice but to kill him and they did just that. They hit him with an enormous bomb that would have killed more than fifty people if they were around, but only Colonel Salaam, the martyr, was there that day.

This caused an outrage in the community. Salaam's lieutenants branched out and started police stations all over the city. They continued his campaign with great success. Any foreign fighters that were left alive either fled the city or blended in very well and decided to lay low. In the following weeks Americans were finding foreign fighters tied to trees with their own bombs wedged between their legs. Hundreds of weapons caches were being found all over the city. The people unanimously embraced the new police.

After the campaign was complete and the violence was over, the victorious Iraqi police set up road blocks on almost every street in and out of the city. At all the other intersections they set up check points to monitor everyone coming in and out. The city was truly a police state, but the people liked it that way—it kept the violence from flaring up again.

That's the reason I was told why the city, in which I lost my best friend last year, was suddenly the prototype for a new Iraq. I can't be so sure, though. I remember hearing that al Qaeda claimed Ramadi as the capital of The Islamic State. How could they let it go that easy? They have to be out here somewhere; waiting, planning, recovering.

* * * * *

"HEY BRAD," EVANS whispered while nudging my shoulder with his palm. "Hey, it's 0430. Wake up, Multriener."

"Anything happen?"

"Nah, just a bunch of dogs barking, oh and a horse walked by about a half hour ago." Evans' voice wasn't usually so solemn, but his boredom and exhaustion were obvious.

"Alright, rack out dude," I told him, and he did just that. He

immediately set his head on his tightly rolled blouse—the top half of our uniform.

“How long we known each other now? You still haven’t given me a straight answer, why you joined the Marine Corps,” he said almost completely asleep as though his dreaming thoughts were surfacing from his unconscious.

“Just go to sleep. I’ll wake you up at 0630,” I wasn’t sure that he heard me before falling asleep completely.

Evans has been getting advice on life from a lot of people lately. He got married a little over a year ago and is trying to figure out his next move.

I’m trying to fight off a drove of exhaustion; I can’t fall asleep now that Evans is out. I’m supposed to be observing to the east, down the long axis of this road we’re facing. I don’t really care about that right now, though. I’m mainly watching because there’s nothing else to look at. Through my night vision goggles the world is many shades of black and green. Looking down the road—if you can even call it that anymore—it’s crowded with concrete barriers and concertina wire. The obstacles are to tell traffic exactly where to drive. The serpentine patterns they’re in, near American fixed sites, are to slow down any speeding car bombs so they can be shot at from a safe distance.

Whenever I drove these roads last year it was like running a gauntlet. Last deployment I used to drive a gun truck, now I command one. At anytime the road could erupt underneath the truck. If a bomb detonated under a truck, everyone inside would either get wounded, or, too often, killed. That’s called an improvised explosive device. IEDs are what everyone here calls any type of explosive used against Americans.

As a new guy I came to Iraq scared, but when I hadn’t been hit yet after a couple months I gradually lost the fear. The complacency set in, and as soon as I began to wonder if I could go the whole time here without getting hit, I got smacked hard. It was a big one from what everyone told me, but I can’t remember. I got knocked out. It was six feet to the left of my driver’s door, hidden under fresh concrete.

When I came to, the cab was filled with smoke, my door was hanging open, and my rifle was in the middle of the street. My first instinct was to get out and grab it, but a typical tactic that was used then was secondary IEDs to hit anyone responding to the scene.

I don’t know what I would have done because I didn’t have to decide. My vehicle commander screamed for me to drive, and to drive fast. The humvee had just enough life left in it to drive a hundred meters out of the kill zone before it died for good. After that, we took a good look at the intersection for any more IEDs. My friend in the

truck behind mine grabbed my rifle as they drove by the still smoking shot hole.

In training we're told to avoid crumbling roads, trash piles, and stationary vehicles. It's too bad that anywhere we go in this city that's all we see. Following that advice I would be forced to spend the deployment in my rack at Hurricane Point, but even that's not safe.

Once, the platoon who lived next door to us, MAP White, was out on patrol, and when they came back they found a one hundred and twenty millimeter mortar round had fallen through their roof. Luckily they weren't home, and it was only a dud. It ended up destroying a television, but it would have destroyed the whole platoon if things played out a little differently.

Ramadi has been without a garbage removal service since the war began. Four years' worth of people's discarded lives was left decaying in the streets. The hellish heat baked the trash to ensure everyone could smell the people's embarrassment. Trash was everywhere in Ramadi, like green grass in American suburbs. In the open lots between buildings the trash was piled to form surface laid garbage dumps. The dumps doubled as feeding grounds for the numerous packs and herds of wandering animals.

"AlIIIIIIlshhhhhhhh hu akbaaaaaaaaaa," the mosque's loud speakers proclaimed. "AlIIIIIIlshhhhhhhh hu aaaaakbaaaaaaaaaa," I looked at my watch, it was five o'clock, the time for the predawn prayer. "La ilah illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah," the imam sang.

Although no one's outside to publicly pray, it didn't matter, I had never seen a Muslim kneel towards Mecca and pray in public. They all went in the mosques to pray. I always wished I had a better understanding of Islam. I knew The Five Pillars of Islam, the difference between Sunni and Shi'ite, and a brief history of the religion, but I still wasn't satisfied with my limited knowledge.

I took out a pen and paper and started a to-do list for enrolling in college. I found myself making these types of lists more often as I got closer to getting out of the Marines. After four years of this, being a student was going to be paradise for me.

I looked up from my list and saw, below my window, across the street, a cat jumped out of an abandoned car tattered with bullet holes. The car sat on its bare rims and had no paint or windows, just a rusted over and rotting out body.

The low light and infrared world before me was getting brighter as the sun began its ascent. It's approaching that time when visibility is at its lowest. The light magnifying device on my helmet is rendered useless when there is too much light, but when taken off at this time it's still too dark to see well. *I guess I'll take 'em off anyway, they're not*

doing me any good anymore. As I unclipped them from my helmet my head felt significantly lighter. They're a piece of gear less than a pound. When attached they protrude about six inches from the eye, dragging my helmet down, and digging into my forehead.

The birds are starting to sing their song. They seem oblivious to the war around them and the suffering that takes place daily. There's a lot more birds here than in America. All the animals have a larger population here; the packs of wild dogs, sheep, cows, and horses, all roaming freely. It was as though they could tell that the human population is diminishing, and they've come to reclaim their land.

As the birds competed with the mosque for my attention, I watched Ramadi take another form as the sun now lit the city as it should. The numerous palm trees and riverside plant life that grew everywhere spoke contrary to the misconception that Iraq was nothing but a vast desert. I've heard some say that this place was once the Garden of Eden.

If that place really existed I could see how this might be it. If it was, we must have fallen hard, hitting our head on the crumbling concrete ground. I still feel the dull pain just above my forehead when I imagine what it must be like for a child to grow up in this environment; knowing nothing else, thinking this is what the world is supposed to be like. For Iraq, this is reality. Anything else is an out of reach fantasy. Electricity is for the privileged who can afford a generator. Water must be carried home in whatever container can be found.

It's common to see a hopelessly tangled birds nest of wires strung over an intersection. This might give the impression of power but these veins aren't being supplied by their arteries.

Down the road I could see a gray haired woman with a deeply weathered face open the gate of her courtyard to dump a pot of dirty water. She immediately closed the gate when she finished. Because her hair wasn't covered, she never left the safety of her courtyard. Every home here is surrounded by a brick or concrete wall with a gate usually just big enough for a small car to fit through.

Outside of these walls exists the world they're ashamed of. A world of four years of neglect and violence. Where martyr flags hung too common. Where one political slogan was spray-painted over another in a few days time. Where the dirt and trash overflowed from the medians and shoulders of the roads to become one with the streets. Where, because of a sewer system shattered by thousands of bombs, the stench of open standing human waste would never leave the nostrils of those who had to travel the streets.

Outside of these walls the city was beginning to come to life.

A few children ventured out to take their handed down, oversized bikes for a morning ride. School's not in session today. It's Friday morning; the Muslim holy day. By midmorning the streets will be packed with traffic of all types; pedestrians, bicycles, scooters, motorized rickshaws, cars, buses, and farm vehicles. It was a population of over four hundred thousand finding whatever work they could to support their families.

A good paying job used to be with the insurgency. A hundred dollars was standard for planting a bomb alongside the road, and anywhere from five hundred to a thousand dollars for killing an American. But, for the time being, that job had a massive layoff. Now we give the same people rifles and any type of a military uniform to work with us. It doesn't pay as well, but it's better than nothing. A man will do almost anything to make sure his children eat.

The streets will clear back out by the afternoon. The people will find whatever shelter they can from the hundred and thirty degree heat. With air conditioning almost nonexistent, refuge from the heat is hard to come by. When the sun leaves it zenith the locals will come back out to welcome the night and its cooler temperatures.

The summer weather did not stop many of the men from wearing their traditional clothing; a dishdasha, a full length robe with long sleeves, and their red and white head wraps. The women, too, wore full body garb. Their heads were always covered by their sometimes colorful hijabs. Some fully covered their faces allowing only their eyes to show. With the eyes being the window to the soul, some women here were more exposed than they thought. I've seen nothing but the eyes of a woman so many times and afterwards had the distinct impression that she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen.

In Baghdad there are some westernized women who walk with the confidence of a Hollywood actress, wearing tight jeans and low cut shirts with make up on their uncovered faces. But with the rise of the militias and the sectarian violence, that's quickly coming to an end. Here in Ramadi that's always been unheard of. The population of Ramadi is almost one hundred percent Sunni Muslim, which accounts for the possibility of peace because there's no sectarian imbalance.

Cars began their morning commutes through the few open streets. Shops already started to open. Store owners opened their garages of merchandise to offer a selection of soda, snack foods, cigarettes, and miscellaneous hygiene products.

My watch said 0630 but I guess I'll let Evans get some extra sleep. The prospect of leaving this observation post in a few hours is

too exciting to be tired anymore. First, I was going to see if that damn letter ever came—I've been waiting weeks for this letter. Then I'll probably take a shower, get some hot chow and maybe make a phone call before I go to sleep for the day.

Suddenly the idea of letting Evans sleep was no longer an option, he needed to see this. "Evans," I whispered. "Evans, wake up," I said louder, extending my left leg out to prod him.

"What's up?" he inquired without opening his eyes.

"Dude, you gotta see this," I told him without looking away.

Staying in the shadows, not too close to the window, he peered out with me. "Holy shit," his eyes opened wider now, and life came back to his voice, "what's she doing?"

It was quite obvious what she was doing but my reply was, "I don't know," out of pure confusion.

She parked the car behind the rotting one; a woman driver in Iraq is unheard of. I've seen ten year old boys drive large trucks expertly through city traffic, old half-blind men manipulate even older farm tractors through narrow alley ways, but in Ramadi a woman operating any type of vehicle is paranormal.

"She just pulled up," I told him. "She's dressed pretty nice too." She was probably in her late twenties but she wore an expression that suggested she had the wisdom of a woman three times her age. She got out of the driver's door and closed it, almost simultaneously opening the rear driver's side door. What's even more surprising is in the passenger seat was a man around her age. He didn't look very happy to have a woman as his chauffeur.

From the back seat she pulled out a pair of crutches and walked around to his side, opened the door, and handed them to him.

The passenger used the crutches to struggle out of his seat and once out she shut the door behind him. She put her arm over his shoulder in a way not even a sister or a wife does in this city.

As he crutched his way into view we could see his legs were completely limp. He forced both legs to drag forward to prop them underneath his upper body. He quickly swung the crutches forward and repeated the process. He did this all the way to the same gate which the older woman had tossed the water from of earlier.

The gate swung open for the travelers and the gray haired woman, whose hair was now covered, greeted her guests with the traditional hugs and kisses. The gate closed quickly behind them. We were left to interpret what we had just witnessed.

"Where do you think he got that from?" I asked Evans, referring to his disability.

"I don't know, probably got shot by someone," he stated the most logical answer as if I had asked a stupid question.

"That's probably one of the civilians you shot last year," I said to sarcastically remind him of his trigger happiness as a new guy in Iraq and what it led to.

"Shut up dude," he was obviously annoyed. "They were low crawling towards us in the middle of a fire fight."

"No, I was talking about the other ones you shot; not the one whose nuts you shot off, the dude who's calves you blew open," I corrected, obviously antagonizing him now. Probably not the best idea since Evans was an amateur body builder and I wasn't nearly as big as him.

I didn't like to bug Evans about it, but I didn't want to let him forget it either. None of the people he had shot were out of cold blood. They were just in the wrong place in the middle of fire fights. I recalled him talking about it one day, "*I wonder if any of them died, I hope so,*" he stated even though every one of us knew his victims had done nothing wrong.

The way so many people were able to treat Iraqis as sub-human really disturbed me. I don't know where they got it from, and trying to change them always seemed to be in vain. To avoid serious disputes I usually avoided talking to anyone on a deeper than surface level. That's not how it's supposed to be with your brothers in arms, and that's not how it always was. But now my best friend's dead and all of our minds seem to be further casualties of war.

"I'm just fuckin' around, who knows how he got it?" I said, letting the subject drop itself.

"He probably deserves it though," Evans assumed, quick to judge the handicapped Iraqi.

"Who knows?" I repeated, trying to avoid a futile attempt at explaining ethics and morality to Evans right now. "You know when Bravo's comin' to get us?"

"Should be zero nine at Al Hawz," he said apprehensively, "but who knows, it is Bravo." He spoke lowly of the other half of our platoon. We're Alpha section of MAP Red, about eighteen guys. Eight of us are on our second tour. The rest are new guys; *Boots*, as we referred to them.

"We gotta foot patrol there, right?"

"Yeah, Bravo's already there with a seven-ton," he said.

"You think we're all gonna have to ride in the seven-ton, or you think they'll have some open seats in the trucks?"

"Probably both. I ain't ridin' in the seven-ton, though. The Boots can ride in there. I'm gettin' a truck, gettin' some of that AC."

“Yeah, AC would be nice right about now. What are you gonna do when we get back?” I asked, thinking of how nice it’s going to be to get in those gun trucks, thinking how I don’t have to ride in the large, open air cargo truck anymore. I’ve done my time as a Boot.

“Hmm, probably take a shower, go to sleep, wake up, go to the gym, make a call. I don’t know.”

TWO

Kunabul Amriki

WHEN IT WAS time to leave we quickly packed up anything we had out. Vehicle commanders got accountability of their Marines' gear to make sure we wouldn't leave anything behind.

After thanking the family for letting us use their home for the past three days, I asked if there was anything we could do for them.

"Na'am, electriss, no electriss," the father, an old skinny man with leather hands, replied in the broken English/Arabic we had in common. I told him we were doing everything we could do to get them their electricity, thanked them again, and said goodbye.

I took the position of the platoon's translator only when we didn't have a real interpreter with us. I was the only Marine able to carry on a little conversational Arabic, but it was poor at best. What I did pick up came from talking to Iraqis; just trying to satisfy some of the curiosities I had. It was something that not many of us bothered to do.

It would be a short walk to Al Hawz. As soon as we left the house the children swarmed us, "Mistah! Mistah! Give me! Give me!" They grew to expect a variety of handouts from soccer balls and candy to pens and backpacks. It was always fun for everyone when we could, but this wasn't that type of mission.

We decided to split up into four man teams and take different routes to cover more ground. I went off with Larson, Martinez, and Keys through a rare rich neighborhood. This was where Saddam housed his favorite military officers.

We peeked over the gates we walked past because we were on the lookout for a white pickup truck that was supposed to be a car bomb. I propped myself up on one of the gates to look in, and in doing so I

made quite the racket. A young man in a white dishdasha gave me a puzzled look from within the courtyard. I simply smiled, waved, and said, "Salam." He didn't wince so I said goodbye, "Ma'a salama," and dismounted the gate.

We continued our patrol, but before we made much more progress the gate opened. An older man with wide, searching eyes stood there greeting us humbly, "Marhaba." We exchanged customary greetings, put our right hands over our hearts, and smiled before he invited us into his courtyard. The yard was filled with green grass and a variety of tropical plants. The house was two stories of intricately designed sandy brick and wrought iron patios surrounding the second story. We made our way in and Larson went to inspect for the truck with Martinez. Keyes and I just walked around admiring this unfallen piece of Eden.

We made our way to an outdoor kitchen where there were burn marks and shrapnel gouges in the building's façade. The older Iraqi pointed to it and spoke, "Kunabul, kunabul Amriki." He continued by gesturing to the sky and tracing the trajectory of the bomb's path into his yard. Then he said, "Airplane."

I tried telling him that if it was one of our bombs there wouldn't be a building left, but he didn't understand. He continued by gesturing to the door of his home and saying, "You come, you come."

Keyes offered to come in with me and we told Larson where we were going. His home was vast, there was a glorious entrance with a ceiling towering at least two stories high. Polished marble floors were the theme through the home. On the way to where he was taking me I noticed a room with three young ladies in it. At the sight of me two immediately turned their heads away and began speaking to each other in scared, frantic Arabic.

It was no surprise to see that these women were deathly afraid of me. I didn't like it, but that's just how it always was. Continuing through this man's more than humble abode I began to wonder if Keyes and I would be able to find our way out if something bad happened. Before we took any more twists and turns he lead us to his bathroom.

I really didn't know why he invited us this far to show us his bathroom, but then I saw what he wanted me to see. Placed on a foot stool, between two sinks, was the mutilated remains of a missile, not a bomb. He showed me the difference by pointing to the motor that was smashed by impact. Many of the metallic pieces were not cut, but torn by the force of an explosion.

As I examined the remnants he said, "Kunabul Amriki." But I still wasn't sure if his claim was right. He continued talking, the words he

knew seemed as if he had looked all of them up specifically to give this small speech to Americans. "My madam—dead," I looked up at him, saddened by his statement, and he made the universal finger across the throat gesture, closed his eyes, and stuck his tongue out to reinforce his words about his wife. "My son—blind," he waved his hands across his eyes to illustrate, then pointed back down at the missile calmly.

A wave of horror ran through my body. At first I wasn't sure if I understood him correctly. Did he really just calmly invite me into his home to show me the missile that killed his wife and blinded his son?

"Mitessif," I said, hoping I was correct in thinking that it meant *I'm sorry*.

He nodded his head and began speaking in faster Arabic. He probably thought that my Arabic was as good as his English, but it wasn't. I shook my head and he stopped, then said, "Come see my son." I nodded and followed.

On the way I was thinking how this must have happened a while ago because he was amazingly composed. The way to his son was the reverse way we took in. Keyes remained silent while he followed behind me. The man walked right into the room with the three ladies and beckoned for me to follow. All three of the girls began crying and covering their faces. I really didn't want to do this to them. I wished he would just take me to his son.

He spoke in quick Arabic, just loud enough for all of them to hear. They stopped crying so loudly. He said something else, not commanding them, just a father talking to his daughters. The one still sitting on the bed uncovered her face. Where tears should have streaked her face it was dry. I quickly saw the cause for this: her eyes were glass.

He pointed at her and said, "My son—blind," and waved his hand in front of her eyes. She looked horrified, she trembled violently at the sound of my voice.

"Daughter," I said, but then I mentally kicked myself for trying to correct his English now.

"Shinoo?" he asked.

"Nothing, la. Mitessif," I was still at a loss for words beyond the simple apology. Even if I could have found the words he might not have understood. She was still quivering with a horrified look on her face. Her father spoke softly to her and she immediately re-covered her face with her pink hijab. She gave a loud whimper as she gasped for air through her crying mouth.

To my relief, her father led me out of the room. Why was he showing me all of this? He wasn't asking for anything. He wasn't mad. He was just showing me. He wanted me to see.

"Hey, let's go! We gotta get goin'!" It was Larson calling inside. I wanted to stay until I could figure out what to say and how to say it, but that was never going to happen.

Again, I repeated, "Mitessif." Then I said goodbye, "Ma'a Salama."

This was when he stopped being so calm. He wasn't mad at us, he just didn't want us to leave. "You sit, you sit. Pepsi, Pepsi," he pointed to his living room and repeatedly asked us to sit.

"La, shookran. Ma'a Salama," I said as we made our way out. I wanted nothing more than to stay and try to decipher what it was this man wanted, but it was time to go.

"No, you sit. Pepsi." I looked back to see he had lost his composure and seemed to be mirroring his trembling daughter.

I couldn't hide my expression, which began to look similar to his. But my eyes were made of glass too—the tears that should've fallen wouldn't. His eyes were alive, though. The last thing I saw as I left his house was his tear-streaked face.

* * * * *

BACK ON THE street the children resumed their begging. I gave them what little candy I had. One asked for a *qalam* and I had an extra one. Instead of just handing it to her, I tried to explain about it first. Holding it up I said, "Qalam zien, sliha moo zien." I tried my best to translate the old proverb; *the pen is mightier than the sword*. Directly translated I told her, "*pen good, weapon not good.*"

She tried grabbing the pen, but I moved it before she could grasp. "La," I pointed to her, "Qalam zien, sliha moo zien." I guess she got the idea because she repeated the words before making another grab for the qalam. This time I let her have it. Once she had it held tight to her chest, she broke out running avoiding the other children who tried taking it from her.

"What's your problem, Multriener?" Larson saw the uneasy look I still wore from being in the house. When I told him he started laughing in a high pitch that didn't seem to fit him, but only he could make that type of sound. I hated it. After he got done laughing he asked, "Wanna go back and put her out of her misery?" and started laughing again.

I knew he was trying to be funny, that he wouldn't really do that, but it still made me sick. I turned around and walked backwards to keep an eye out for our rear security, but I really turned around because I couldn't stand looking at anyone like that.

Bravo was at Al Hawz waiting for us. Mine and Larson's team was

the last to arrive so we got to sit in the gun trucks. Evans was in the seven-ton cargo truck with everyone else who showed up first.

* * * * *

ON OUR WAY back to Hurricane Point my mind wandered to the last deployment. I remembered talking with a group of Iraqis at a place called Entry Control Point One. At ECP One we monitored and checked traffic coming into Ramadi from across the Euphrates.

I had a translator with me named Gene, so there was no broken Arabic or English. Gene was my first Iraqi friend. In fire fights he would run out and fire a full magazine out of his pistol then run back behind cover. I asked him if he hit anything and he said, *"I had fourteen bullets, I hit fifteen of them."*

Weeks after I left Iraq, Gene was killed by a suicide car bomb at ECP One.

"Have you ever been to America, sir?" I began by asking a short, fat Iraqi man.

"No, I want to, but I cannot get visa. I waited more than one week and got turned down," Gene translated for the man.

"You don't need a visa to get in America. All you gotta do is get to Mexico and cross the border," I explained.

"You can do that?" I could hear his curiosity through his Arabic.

"Sure you can, thousands of people do it every day. There's groups who do it together. Just find a group, they'll help you."

"Maybe I will do this, but the women in America are too beautiful for me. I will be alone," he said, timidly.

"Nah, you got any money?" he nodded. "As long as you got yourself some money you'll find an American woman."

"But I also have no hair. No beautiful woman will want to marry me."

"Like I said man, money can fix that. You got nothin' to worry about." I was trying to be an accurate representative of the American culture he wanted a part of. Since he was curious I entertained him. If he asked what I thought, I would have told him to stay in Iraq. He'd be happier.

"You want to see what American women wear every day?" I asked the crowd and they all nodded their heads. I showed them a picture of a girl I was writing to at the time. She was wearing a very high skirt and a low-cut shirt.

Their eyes widened and grins started to appear. I decided to elaborate a little more. "In America the women are free to do whatever they want. You cannot hit them either," I explained. "Even when you're married, they

can do what they want and you still can't hit them. That's part of freedom." They appeared confused at first but began to understand. "When women are free to be themselves a relationship with them is much more meaningful because it means she really wants to be with you. She can have whoever in the world she wants but she picks you."

"But sir, what if I don't have enough money for hair when I get to America?" the short fat man interrupted.

"Then you shoot a small animal and wear it on your head," I explained while imitating doing so with my rifle.

The language barrier was torn down when we all broke into uncontrollable laughter at the look of confusion on the man's face. No longer was it American/Iraqi interaction, it was now simply human interaction. The fat man's confusion transformed into laughter when he finally understood the joke.

Still catching our breath, I looked into the eyes of a boy my age, not more than twenty. Judging from the looks he was giving me before our conversation, and the way he was dressed, wearing track shoes while every other man in Ramadi wore sandals, I knew he had fought Americans before. Whether it was a sixth sense type of thing or just a hunch, I knew it.

Right now it didn't matter, though. Now we are all just people laughing at the same joke. Any hatred we might have had for each other under any other circumstances was mutually forgotten. From the smile on his face and the glint in his eye, I knew he, too, felt nothing against me at the time. He might go out and plant a bomb again tonight, but at that moment we weren't at war.

I shook his hand when it was his turn to leave, and bid farewell in Arabic, "Allah wee-yak," meaning God be with you.

His reply was the same. With another smile we both placed our hands over our hearts; an Arab custom to show that we meant what we said.

My daydream was over as we pulled up to the gate of Hurricane Point. The front gate was an armored seven-ton. Its sole purpose in Iraq was to drive forward and back all day and night letting those who were allowed in and out.

Once we got to the clearing barrels we got out and unloaded our weapons. I headed immediately for the hooch. Our hooch was nothing but a one room building that housed enough bunks for each of us to sleep on. Inside I would drop my gear and take a shower. After that, the rack was the only foreseeable thing in my future.

THREE

Insanity Walled In

“ALRIGHT, WAKE UP fuckers!” Larson shouted to the Boots. “Let’s go, get outside,” he ordered. This was Larson’s third time to Iraq and he was having fun with it. Now, he’s far from Boot status. Being best friends with Alpha’s section leader, Grant, Larson could do pretty much whatever he wanted, and he’s taking advantage of that power. “Harold, did you not hear me? Get the fuck outside,” he barked to the straggler.

I was still in my bed under the covers hearing this, thinking how glad I am not to be a Boot anymore. There’s no equality in the Marine Corps. There’s no democracy, it’s a dictatorship. The shit jobs always go to the new guys, while the senior Marines do none of the shit jobs that someone lower on the food chain is qualified to do. Our status is separated by how many deployments a Marine has completed more than it is by rank. One’s first deployment is guaranteed to be the worst seven months of his life.

In Iraq, when a new guy messes up or fails to carry out an order, his punishment is usually sandbags. As a Boot I hated filling sandbags, every sandbag I filled was another step closer to me going insane. If I ever got there or not, I’m not really sure. At all costs, I avoided the Sisyphean punishment.

In the back of the hooch, where Larson had just ordered every Boot to go, they’re constructing a wall of sandbags around our backyard larger than any wall I had ever seen. It was going to be four sandbags thick and towering fifteen feet high. Over five hundred sandbags went onto each layer, and it was going to be twenty-five layers tall. It dwarfed any wall that tried to compete.

Inside of our walled-off backyard, they were digging a square fighting pit. It was currently ten feet deep with the sides fifteen feet long. This is where most of the sand came from to fill the bags. The hours the Boots put into building the wall was ridiculous. They got little sleep, missed out on breakfast and lunch almost every day, and not to mention that over half of the work on the wall was done in the sweltering heat.

Wherever Larson gets the ideas for some of his projects is a mystery to me, but I do know he always has at least three projects running at all times. His creative genius was unparalleled, but his conniving motives usually ended up getting him in trouble. He told me his plan was to turn the fighting pit into a clean, fully functioning swimming pool. I had no doubt that he'd do it, either. I also don't doubt that Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt, our platoon commander, is going to make him drain it when he finds out.

We've been back from the observation post, OP, for only four hours now. I checked for the letter right away, but it still hadn't come yet. After running around the base, doing some unexpected tasks, I just barely got to sleep when Larson inadvertently woke me up. With the quiet restored, my dreams resumed.

We were in front of the hooch, Larson and I, when I began to hear screams coming from what sounded like right outside the front gate. An omnipresent droning hum became louder along with the screams. As the shrieks reached a certain volume I was able to see exactly what building they were coming from. It was a three story building. The top story was visible to us from over the wall of our base. The only occupants I could see were women and children, and were obviously in agony. But the reason why, I still couldn't figure out.

Suddenly, a ray of green light burst down upon the building causing the shrieks and cries to spike in volume. One woman grabbed her child and jumped out of the third story window.

We had seen a lot in Iraq, but neither Larson nor I had ever seen anything like this. We could only watch with a horribly painful curiosity.

The source of the energy bolt appeared out of the clouds. It was a slowly floating, space shuttle shaped aircraft whose many rapidly spinning parts seemed quickly put together like a prototype. It had a main gun on its underside, but it wasn't shooting any bullets, only quick green bursts of light.

Another burst of the energy came from its belly down to the building, this time causing the screams to become less loud but more agonizing, as if they were getting closer to their slow, painful death.

The aircraft seemed alive. Its laughs and jokes about the pain it was causing were clearly heard as if it had a loud speaker broadcasting its sick sense of humor. One more bolt of energy and the screams stopped completely.

"That's the top secret shit the government's working on they don't want you to know about," I told Larson.

He didn't acknowledge my comment at all, he just watched the horrible craft with a slightly detectable wince of fear in his eyes.

As if the craft heard me, it stopped completely still in mid-air, not so much as vibrating. It began to move in on us. Suddenly, a lot closer to Larson and I, it turned its weapon to point directly at us. Larson ran inside the hooch, and I got down and cowered behind a small wall of sandbags.

"What did you say?" it demanded in an extremely loud voice, the voice of an angry man with ultimate power.

"Nothing," I replied, fearing for my life.

Its weapon began to charge itself, gathering the energy that would be used to put me through the same agony of the women and children.

"Don't lie to me. I heard you say it," it boomed.

"I didn't say anything," I stuck to my story. Its weapon was fully charged now, waiting to be released.

"Ha ha! Just kidding, we're on the same team kid," It explained. "Go inside and forget you saw anything."

I could only stand there, though. I tried desperately to understand what I had just witnessed. The aircraft flew away in the direction it came with a much greater speed.

Upon waking early that night, I was very disturbed. Judging by the quietness of the hooch, the Boots were still outside filling sandbags. They must have been at it for at least four hours. The hooch had to either be completely empty or occupied by other sleepers.

My uneasiness was bothering me now. *What the hell did that dream mean?* I had to do something put my mind at ease. If I was in America I might have a beer or smoke a joint, but I never did any of that in Iraq. I wouldn't feel right doing that in a combat zone and risking other people's lives. Besides, my mind's already altered enough. I'll do the next best thing; I'll call Ty Williams.

On the way to the phone center I stopped to take a piss in a port-o-john. After a couple of hours of these mini-green houses sitting in the sun, it's unbearable to use them. Propping the door open with my foot, I tried to piss as fast as possible. I couldn't hold my breath anymore and was forced to inhale the smell of pure ammonia. I got out of there as soon as possible to catch a quick breath of the open air.

Even the fresh air of Iraq was never fresh. There was always something burning. It burnt with a different smell than anything that burns in America; a sweeter scent I didn't even really notice anymore. To me it was the smell of home.

A short walk across the base and I arrived at Uday's palace. After it was taken over, it was turned into the Battalion Combat Operations Center, post office, and our phone and Internet center. After waiting ten minutes for a phone, I sat down in the warm metal chair and picked up the receiver. I could feel the previous user's sweat on the earpiece as I dialed the numbers. Ty's phone rang just to the point of reaching his voice mail. I was about to hang up and call my mom or dad to say hi when...

"Hello?" Ty answered with his usual amount of paranoia in his voice.

"Hey Ty, it's me," I knew he would recognize my voice. Ty has always been family to me. We grew up together since infancy, his mother used to babysit me while my dad was at work.

"Hey Bradley, how are you? I mean, how's everything going? Have you been well?" He released a month's worth of inquiry on me all at once. Last time I spoke with Ty was in Chicago at the going away party he threw for me.

"Eh, I've been alright, you know? It's been really chill out here lately."

"That's what I hear. I read about Ram-dee online, the example for Baghdad? Is it true?"

"Yeah, I guess, *Ra-mah-dee*," correcting him subtly, "has been extremely peaceful the past couple months."

"That's crazy, I mean that's good and all, but why's it peaceful all the sudden? Do you know?" he asked.

"Uh, I don't really know, but I'm just happy it's all quiet, you know? Givin' me some time to chill, get ready for college next year. That's all I'm lookin' forward to anymore," I lied about my ignorance of the situation. I could never tell anyone back home about what goes on out here. I guess most people just wouldn't understand. How could I make them understand when I don't even really understand?

"Ell yeah Brad, movin' up in the world. You decide what college you're gonna go to yet?"

"No, not yet. I told you about my plan right?"

"No, you got a plan?" Ty asked.

"I didn't? I coulda sworn I did," I was surprised I hadn't told him yet.

"Nope."

"That whole month of post deployment leave I'm takin', I ain't

doin' nothin' but touring different campuses in Illinois, partyin', gettin' fucked up, and applying to all the schools. When I get back to Cali I'm gonna make my decision on which one I'm gonna go to," I declared with pride and anxiousness to be a civilian again.

"Yeah Brad, 'ell yeah. You gonna blaze at all when you get back?" He wanted to know if we'd get to bond again like we had so many times before. Instead he triggered something inside of me with his question.

"Nah, I don't think so. I got too much to lose this time, you know? I'm so close to gettin' out. If I popped on a piss test I'd lose all my benefits: no college," I thought about everything I risked each time I got high at home while on leave. "I mean, I smoked way too much this past year. Think about all the times we smoked together and multiply that by about ten," I gave an honest estimate.

"I know, but you always knew you weren't gonna pop. You woulda lost everything but you never worried about it," he said. The truth was I did worry about it. It was just too hard to stop myself.

"Ty, when you live in fear of man, you aren't living at all. You're just existing the way someone else wants you to. I'm done with that, this job's been destroying me inside. I was just trying to be more human again," the switch completely flipped now. "You're not supposed to be your own person in here, and if you are you gotta keep it a secret." Just like I couldn't stop myself from getting high at home, I couldn't stop from telling this to Ty. "Brainwashing, I mean I've never been strapped down to a chair and wires plugged into my head, but we are punished for thinking certain thoughts, and acting in ways you're not supposed to. Then, at the same time, others are rewarded for becoming the type of individual you're *supposed* to be." My voice was getting shaky with anger. "Weed's been the only thing that's helped me reground myself in normalcy."

"Some people are just too special to allow themselves to be taken over like that," Ty picked up where I left off. "Too important, too... too... I don't know... you're stronger than what they can handle," he struggled for words.

"I don't know, bro. I'm surrounded by it, everyone around me, they're all exactly the type of people that I'd do everything to avoid in the real world. It's like their ignorance infects everything they come in contact with, myself included." I tried to express the contempt I had for my *brothers in arms* at the time. Was this normal? All brothers fight, right?

"All you can do right now is stay strong and try to teach them. Teach them Bradley."

"I don't know, Ty. That's impossible with these guys. It's like

they're trying to take control over my mind or something. This shit's been haunting me for the past three years, man. I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"They see something in you that's threatening their way of life. You have them living in fear. See what's happening to them when they let fear guide their actions? They've lost control of their minds. They're fighting what they fear, which is truth, with truth's worst enemy; ignorance." Ty's worldly wisdom always ended up manifesting itself in his words, he was good at that.

"What the hell am I supposed to do then?" I begged for the answer, "I mean I don't know if I can live like this much longer. It's like my mind just shuts off when I'm around them. And I live with them!"

"That sucks Brad, but all you can really do is just stick it through and do your best to learn from them," he offered.

I felt like an asshole for dropping this on him. "I'm sorry Ty, I didn't mean to call you and lay this all down on you like that," I said remorsefully. "This is why I don't talk about the military or Iraq when I'm home."

"Don't worry about it dude," he consoled.

"I'm sorry man." I hated releasing these thoughts on my friends. Now he's going to go on thinking I'm going through hell until I call him again and lie to him. "It's not that bad, though," I tried to change the way he would think about me until I call again. "I have been just chillin'. It's kinda like a free vacation." (One for which the price was paid by my family's fear for my life, and my own mental torment.)

My embarrassment was peaking now. I had to get out of this conversation before I do anymore damage. "Alright man, I think my phone card's about to run out of minutes; I'm gonna let you go before we get cut off," I told the first lie that came to mind.

"You sure man? If you ever need to talk just give me a call," he offered all he could from the other side of the world. It was the best gift I could have asked for; a gift I probably won't ever use.

"I'm sure, dude," I tried to keep my feelings of hopelessness from surfacing into my voice again. "Take it easy, man."

"Stay strong, brother, and keep fighting the good fight." As I hung up the phone I knew he wasn't talking about the war.

I couldn't believe I just did that. I've worked so hard to keep my lies about the war straight. No one could understand what goes on out here unless they experienced it firsthand. Any attempt at explaining it would just result in further confusion and misconception. Not to mention that I'd cause fear and panic in anyone I spoke to. What the hell was I thinking?

On the way back to the hooch I noticed the moon was full tonight. All I could see was the man on the moon. I remembered my best friend Nathan's last night on Earth, when I tried to show him the man on the moon and his inability to see it. That's all I can think of every time I've seen a full moon since. It's been about a year and a half since he died on his daughter's first birthday. I'm sure when I look at the full moon when I'm in my old age I'll still remember Nate's attempts to see what "*this crazy white boy*" was talking about.

I remember thinking he was lucky to be able to get out of the Marine Corps early. But my happiness for his early retirement was overshadowed by my foresight of what his daughter's life would be like when she's old enough to understand. I couldn't stop thinking about how she would celebrate her birthdays, which would also be her father's death days.

The walk back to the hooch wasn't long. Hurricane Point was a small base, far different from the luxurious Army bases scattered around this country. I walked past four signs that read, "*Complacency Kills*," but there were so many of those signs that we had all stopped paying attention to them. Nothing on Hurricane Point was more than a five minute walk from anything else. I like it that way. Hurricane Point is more home to me than any of the other places I've called home over the past five years; Southern Illinois University, Chicago, Twentynine Palms, or Ontario—the city in California not the Canadian province. When I left Hurricane Point last year I thought I'd never see this place again. When I got here at the beginning of this month, I felt like I was reliving a distant memory.

I always knew that whether I liked it or not, Hurricane Point was home, and those ignorant bastards I share the hooch with are my brothers.

As much of a home this place is for me, I still can't find a place to escape my disposition. No matter where I go, my discontent follows me. It follows me from Uday's palace, just across the river from his father's, down the centrally-running road of the base. It hovers over my body like a ghost waiting to possess me. It invites itself into the hooch; I hold the door open for it. It accompanies me as I lay my rifle on my rack and shed my blouse. When I walk out the back door to see what the Boots are up to it gets trapped in the hooch, the door closed before it could follow. Noticing the absence, I double back to get the door for my companion.

Wild laughter of a dozen voices was not what I expected to hear when I walked out to see the Boots' progress. Complimenting the laughter was red and white lights dancing through the sky made visible by the dust stirred up. "Ohhhh!" the voices cried as I came around the corner to see the commotion. The Boots brought out a portable stereo, and a fast paced drum beat provided the music for the escape taking place in the fighting pit.

They hadn't noticed me watching as they continued their lark. None of them wore shirts, only their small Marine issued exercise shorts. Dog tags bounced about their chests as most of them were dancing around the center of the madness. Each Boots' head had a head lamp strapped to it illuminating the festival. No senior Marines beside myself were here to see this. They were tribesmen being observed in their native environment by an onlooker in the tree line. In the center of the dancing circle was not a fire or the hunter's prey ready to be eaten; it was Peterson, a weird skinny-looking kid with a chin that seemed to be sucked into his neck and a lower lip that indented in the middle. He was completely naked, standing perfectly still, hands raised to the sky, palms up, face towards the heavens as if waiting for his god to come down and endow him with powers not natural.

Aaron and Derrick were the only other two not dancing in the frenzy. Instead they were carrying two sandbags each towards Peterson. They were their offerings to their god incarnate. Rather than placing them before him, they each had a knife and cut the tops off of the symbols of their oppression. Simultaneously, Aaron and Derrick raised the decapitated bags over their heads, careful not to spill the contents. The dancing spectators cried aloud with excitement.

As Peterson closed his eyes his prayers were answered. Aaron slowly poured the contents of his bag out directly over Peterson's face showering him in the substance of their enslavement. Their cries multiplied in volume as the main event of their mania took place. When Aaron's bag ran empty Derrick poured his just as slowly. Peterson was now capturing handfuls of the sand and rubbing it all over his body as if he was taking a shower. As Derrick's bag hollowed, Aaron resumed the shower and the other Boots stopped dancing only to watch and cheer on the insanity. Aaron's second bag became hungry again as its contents were regurgitated, but the cleansing wasn't over yet; Derrick still had one left.

As soon as the contents of Derrick's last bag began to spill, Peterson was pushed across the pit by Harold. His skinny body collided against the wall of the hole. Harold, along with all the other tribesmen, rushed forward to receive the baptism. This time the bag

spilled quickly and randomly all about. Each Boot tried frantically to capture a bit of the flying sand. When the shower was over, the cheers and the dancing resumed.

Each piece of the wall of insanity had accomplished its goal. The Boots embraced their punishment. I could no longer simply observe. I kind of wanted to take part, but the ritual was over now.

“What the hell just happened?” I asked, emerging from the shadows.

“Oorah Corporal!” most of them replied. They recognized me as the only senior Marine who wouldn’t assign them more sandbags for the ritual dance that just took place. “We were just kinda takin’ a break, Corporal,” Thomas answered on everyone’s behalf.

“Peterson, you know they’re not going to let you take a shower right now, right?” I asked.

“Yes, Corporal, I’ll be good,” he claimed.

“You guys are fucking nuts,” I informed the crowd with a smile on my face.

Their laughs admitted the truth of my statement. “I don’t think it’s our fault, Corporal,” Thomas spoke up for the group again.

“Eh, it’s probably not, but that don’t change the fact that you all lost your minds.” I was thinking of the transformation many of us had gone through in one way or another. The rites of passage that forever separated us from the rest of the world. Peterson, in the back of the crowd, was brushing himself off and putting his shorts back on to match his peers.

“Hey Corporal, did you go nuts when you where a Boot?” Rhilinger asked.

I laughed because Rhilinger was figuring out the cycle that the Marine Corps perpetuates, “Um, I guess you could say that, but you never saw my ass takin’ a sandbag shower.”

“How did you go nuts, Corporal?” asked Sherman. The absence of his mind was apparent in his voice.

“Well, it wasn’t as much of my seniors driving me nuts as it is for you guys,” I tried to accomplish a task Freud was famous for. “I wouldn’t let them, I was a belligerent little fucker.”

The Boots laughed together in a low rumble.

“I guess it was my peers...and the combat. Losing my best friend helped.” None laughed this time. They just paused to give silence its chance to speak.

“How did he die, Corporal?” Gibbons asked, breaking the pause.

“He got shot by a sniper right in his forehead, just underneath his helmet.”

"Did your seniors treat you different after he died?" Lee asked.

"I guess, only for a little bit. I was back to gettin' hazed a couple weeks later," I recalled him dying December eighteenth, 2005, and how I spent New Year's for 2006; marching back and forth, wearing all eighty pounds of gear, reciting my general orders over and over again, for ten hours. All through the night, and into the New Year. It was quite the contrast of how I spent the next New Year's, in downtown Chicago, stoned off weed and coke, at one of the best parties I had ever been to.

"See Gibbons, why don't you take one for the team?" Aaron asked Gibbons, punching him in the arm, smiling.

"Shut up, Aaron," Gibbons replied, smiling, admitting the humor of the idea of him sacrificing himself so the rest of the Boots would stop getting messed with. The gang again erupted into laughter.

All of the sudden a bright flash of light illuminated my face for all the Boots standing in the hole to see. I looked up and saw an orchestra of flame reach its crescendo. The Boots scrambled to climb out of the over-sized grave and see the spectacle.

"Ah, he's back," Rhilinger exclaimed, talking about the Marine who had just lit the fire in the burn pit. "I'm getting my helmet," he stated to anyone who was listening as he ran off.

"I want that job," Gibbons said, speaking to no one in particular, "That's all he does is ride that four-wheeler out there, and start huge fires every night."

"How do you know that's all he does, Gibbons?" Derrick asked.

The subject of all our attention was the Marine sitting on the back of his all-terrain-vehicle watching his creation consume all of our trash. The burn yard behind our hooch was huge and full of half burnt trash of all shapes and sizes. It's also a common hang out for the seagulls and the ravens. It stretches three hundred yards wide and twice that long.

Rhilinger was suddenly back, wearing only his shorts, and a helmet with his NVGs mounted over his left eye. He crouched on the edge of the berm that separated the burn yard from our back yard.

"What the hell are you gonna do, Rhilinger?" I asked with a more curious tone than an authoritative one.

"I'm gonna go sneak up on him, Corporal," he explained as if asking for permission.

"I didn't hear that, and if that guy turns out to be a staff sergeant or something I was never here," I explained.

"Roger, Corporal," they each said, out of unison this time, with

the excitement of a senior Marine approving their continuation of tonight's ritual.

"I thought you were gonna do it naked, Rhilinger," Aaron expressed his disappointment at Rhilinger's decency. It was one less thing to laugh at.

"I'm going to once I get farther out there," Rhilinger whispered.

Rhilinger slowly crept, using his hands and feet to propel himself over the years of junked goods. "Get the lights off me," he shouted back to us to turn the headlamps off. He continued his trek, unseen now, towards the unsuspecting Marine doing his job. The Boots were keeping their laughter muffled so they wouldn't give Rhilinger away. We could see his outline crawling forward set against the bright flames that were reaching desperately for the night sky.

"AAAHHHHOOOOWWWW! FUCK! AHHH!" There was a number of incomprehensible shouts and cries as an automatic weapon let out a long, controlled burst at us. Not a machine gun, nor even a lethal weapon of any type: it was Larson's automatic BB gun he confiscated out in town. We quickly dispersed. I had never been shot by an automatic BB gun, and I didn't want to either. I ran to the side picturing miniature projectiles following just behind me. I hit the ground to make myself less of a target.

"You wanna keep fuckin' around!?" Larson shouted, letting out another short burst at some movement he must have seen. "I don't give a fuck, I'm talkin' about everybody. Guess what? They're fuckin around, they fuck you," he harshly explained to one of the Boots I hadn't even noticed. One who'd actually been filling sandbags like he was supposed to this whole time.

Larson walked away and the Boots regrouped. They went back to their pit to resume filling sandbags for what had to be the fifth or sixth hour now. Along the way Aaron stopped by Martinez, one of the guys who'd been filling this whole time, "Come on, cheer up, baby."

"You're about to get hit," Martinez replied simply and quietly.

"Come on, we're gonna help you now," Aaron retorted.

"Motherfucker, I'm serious. Get the fuck away from me," Martinez stood up with his collapsible shovel in hand. Aaron kept walking.

"You guys know what's happening over here, right?" I asked Martinez, Keyes, and Gomez, the three who'd been filling sandbags the whole time.

"No, I don't, Corporal," Martinez replied without looking up, continuing to fill.

"What's goin' on, Corporal?" Gomez asked.

"You guys are losing, while everyone else is winning," I explained. "You know what I'm talkin' about?"

"Not really, Corporal," Martinez answered in the same demoralized tone.

"Why do you think they give you sandbags?" I asked.

"I really don't know. I just think there's nothin' else to give someone out here," Martinez answered, referring to punishments.

"No, it's to piss you off," I said. Keyes laughed. "The reason they give you sandbags is so they piss-you-off," I reiterated slowly. "Now you can be this bunch right here who's actually pissed off about it," referring to my current audience, "or you can be like that bunch over there who's fuckin' makin' the best out of it. Who's winnin', huh? Who's winnin'?"

"I don't know, Corporal. I just wanna get it done," Martinez explained.

"He's got a point, or else you're just gonna hate life and wanna shoot yourself," Keyes commented to Martinez.

"Hey, you gotta cut your losses at some point or another," I said. "It's pretty much certain you all are stayin' out here all night fillin' sandbags. You can either sit around and cry about it, or you can have fun with it."

"Yeah, Corporal, but there's gotta be a balance about it," Martinez said.

One of the Boots in the pit was singing a song of high pitch. Keyes told a joke, causing Martinez and Gomez to laugh for the first time. I walked away feeling I had come as close to making my point as I was going to. Larson's voice cut my content sharply.

"Get over here, motherfucker," he directed me.

"What's up?" I asked. Then I followed him around the other side of the wall and out of sight.

"What the fuck are you tellin' them over there?" he demanded.

"I'm just tryin' to change the way they look at all this shit."

"Well stop tellin' 'em that. They don't need to hear that shit," he ordered. He was senior to me by one deployment, but the same rank. I was able to talk back to some degree, but I stretched it.

"What the fuck do you mean? You're gonna tell me what I can and can't say to *my Marines!*!" Martinez was *my* gunner, and Keyes was *my* driver.

Larson shoved me hard against the wall. He used the gym every day like most of the seniors. The mass he put on showed when my back hit the wall. It didn't even budge, a testament to its size and strength, not unlike him. "You better watch how you talk to

me motherfucker!” he shouted with his face uncomfortably close to mine. His eyes looked fierce as I returned his glare.

“Man, shut the fuck up, Larson. Get the fuck outta my face!” I let him know I wasn’t afraid of him, but maybe I should have been. Saying that was the last thing I remember saying. I got thrown back against the wall. I tried to avoid his fist heading straight for my mouth, but I wasn’t quick enough, then...

FOUR

What More Could You Ask For?

“WE CAN’T TELL anyone about this,” we agreed.

“Not even Sean,” I said.

“Not even Sean?” he asked.

“Not even Sean,” I confirmed, “especially not Sean.”

“Alright, not even Sean,” Eric conceded. On our way out of the forest preserve the sun was beginning to set. We were walking with an intensity, trying not to get caught in the woods without any light to find our way out.

“Can you believe this? Right here in our own neighborhood?” Eric asked, doubtful of what we had just seen with our own eyes.

“No dude, but we gotta remember how to get back. I don’t want to go home yet either.” I feared the prospect of going home would end the adventure.

“I know, me neither,” Eric felt the same way I did about home. “Where do you wanna go?”

“I don’t know... Sean’s?” My mind settled on the only feasible place we could go.

“I guess, but we can’t tell him. We’ll just blaze a little bit and watch some TV,” he said finally. There was no dispute about it.

We got in my pickup and drove through the neighborhood of homes that all seemed identical. Like all the other sixteen year olds here, we could no longer stand the monotony of our hometown. If only they knew, but we weren’t going to tell anyone. A short drive, not even an entire song played, and we were at Sean’s.

He answered the door not at all surprised to see us, even though he had no idea we were coming. Swinging the door all the way open

he simply nodded his head, "What's up?" and turned around to his room where we followed. He resumed his video game where he left off, already half stoned.

Eric pulled out a small bag of weed he'd been smoking very sparingly throughout the day. I passed him my little pipe that he unhesitatingly packed with the rest of his bag. As he lit it he took a long hit, paused to inhale, then again hit it equally as long without exhaling any smoke. He passed it to his left, to me, letting a thick cloud of smoke out which he hadn't yet inhaled. Before it could escape his reach he pulled it all back in, inhaled very deeply, and held it.

Putting the pipe to my mouth, ready to light it, I noticed it was already roasting. I began my hit the same as Eric started his, but after my pause to inhale I let out my thick cloud to inhale it through my nostrils. I felt it go straight to the brain that way. I also held the smoke deep in my lungs to allow it to take its full effect. I wasn't sure if that worked, but I always did it anyway.

As I passed it to Sean he paused his game to grab the warm pipe. He put it to his mouth with certainty that he wouldn't need to light it. He proceeded to take a long series of small, quick hits, six total, inhaling deeply but not pausing to exhale. Resuming his game, he passed it back to Eric.

Eric looked at the bowl to see if it was worth hitting again or if he'd just get a mouth full of ash. Deciding it was cashed, he cleared the ash into a plant Sean had growing in his room. He inspected it to make sure it was empty, then he gave it back to me. I pulled a sparse bag out of my left pant pocket and emptied the contents into the bowl. This time I took the first hit myself and passed it back around the rotation.

The silence was normal at first, but to last this long suggested something awkward. How long could we go without giving it away? "You want to tell him?" I silently lippled to Eric.

He shook his head immediately, giving me the *shut up about it* look with his eyes.

I replied by glaring *we can't keep this from him forever*.

His facial expressions replied with consent.

"Hey Sean, we got something to tell you," I started, "but you can't tell anyone..."

We grabbed three flashlights and were on our way back to the forest for the second time in a day. It was the forest I grew up exploring; the forest I knew so well, yet it could still turn me around if it wished. We went under the bridge and down the path that would split in many directions along the way; across a small creek with a bridge made of a tree a beaver had chewed down; through the high

soggy grass. We crossed the next creek—or small river I should say—that I personally helped to bridge during a summer of construction with a childhood friend years ago. Through the thicket, we covered our heads along the way to block any ticks that might decide to drop down for a ride.

If I hadn't known this forest so well, there would be no way we could have made this progress at night. We crossed the final river, fifteen feet across, with only a simple beaver's tree. Balancing our way across, we were getting closer now, real close. But this is the confusing part; open areas surrounded by shrubs all around. We would go through the shrubs only to find ourselves in an almost identical open area again. We repeated this process until we were thoroughly lost, but I wouldn't admit it. "It should be just over here," I said, directing them to follow me with my arm. But it wasn't just over here, nor was it just over there.

Eric's flashlight died, and mine was growing weak. If we didn't find it soon, we would have to go back before we wouldn't be able to. Ready to give up, I decided to start heading us back in the direction I thought would lead to the river. From the river I wouldn't need a flashlight.

Almost there, we relied on my feeling for our primary navigation now. As we came to yet another identical opening in the organic maze, I stopped suddenly realizing what we had just stumbled into.

"Holy shit, this is it! Holy shit, this is fuckin' crazy. How did you guys find this?" Sean's excitement was scattered but genuine.

Eric and I only looked at each other thinking the same thing. *This isn't it*, "No, no, Sean, this ain't it."

"What? How could this not be it?"

Eric and I looked at each other again, the solemnity of our faces spoke volumes. *If this isn't it, this is the second one. There could be a third, a fourth, or even a fifth.*

This realization now occurred to Sean as well. "We gotta get outta here," his fear had the best of him. "Who knows who else is out here right now."

* * * * *

IN THE CAFETERIA I didn't run into her so much as she ran into me. "Heyyyyy Brad," She prolonged her greeting as if trying to show me her sincerity and surprise to see me here.

"Hey Jamie," I wasn't at all surprised to see her. "Whatcha up to today?" I was already suspicious of the front she was putting on. After all, we lived next door. Only a cinder block wall separated our beds. We had even devised a knocking system: different pounds on the wall

told each other if either of us had any bud, and another yes or no knock to see if the other wanted to come over and smoke.

She was the first girl I ever met with a genuine southern accent. "Oh my God, I have a history test right after this. Then after that I've got to go to anthropology and do a project with my lab partner. He's such a weirdo, you know what I mean?" But I wasn't hearing her accent anymore. I was only aware she was trying to get something out of me. I didn't want to let her have it, whatever *it* was. But she's so beautiful she could have whatever she wants from me.

"Uh yeah," I said, not really sure what I was agreeing with.

"What are *you* doin' tonight?" she asked, unconcerned about the tests I had during the day. Could she know? No, how could she?

"I got a lot goin' on, you wanna sit with me? I'll tell you all about it," I offered, even though I knew I shouldn't.

"Sure, where are you gonna sit?" She seemed to be happy with herself, like she achieved her goal.

"Just over there, by the window in the corner. You know, I always sit there." Finishing up at the salad bar, I followed her to the table next to what she had to know was my usual seat.

"So I'm guessing you've already heard." I knew she had. "I got a hold of some mushrooms from Tim today."

She groped the top of my right hand with both of hers, "Noooo, you did? I heard about those mushrooms. They're supposed to be pretty good, right?"

"Yeah they're supposed to be. I'll be finding out for sure tonight," I accidentally let my plan slip.

"How much do you got?" Her curiosity was genuine, but her apparent motives were obvious and fake.

"Just an eighth. Why do you ask?" I knew exactly why.

"All for you?" her eyes widened.

"Um, yeah, I was tryin' to get a quad, but I didn't have the cash," her plan was obvious now.

"Damn, I was gonna see if you wanted to split it with me, I could pay you back when I get the money." If I complied she would never make any such effort. But now could be my chance. In that mind state I could make her fall in love with my intellect. Already in love with half of me, my other half, the half not involving drugs, should soon follow.

"Yeah I guess we could do that. I was thinkin' I was gonna trip on the lake, you down?" I invited her to witness the mental transformation that I was desperately needing. Perhaps tonight will be a night of great transformation in every aspect of my life.

"Where are you gonna get a boat from?" she asked, confused.

"No, not on the lake," I explained grinning, "on the *lakeside*, right behind the dorm."

"Oh, okay. I'll stop by your room at around seven?" She tried to make my plans for me.

"I'll just pound on the wall when I got 'em all split up." I decided to make them for myself.

"Okay, I should be back from the lab around five. Then I'm gonna get some food; I can't trip on an empty stomach." She got up to give me a hug where I still sat, then walked away towards the door, "See you tonight!" I would have to have an empty stomach to feel anything now that she's got half of my bounty.

Around five o'clock I pulled out my bag of mushrooms and began splitting it in half as unequally as possible. I gave myself most of the caps and her most of the stems. I read somewhere that the majority of psilocybin, the major hallucinogen in mushrooms, is in the caps. I ate one of her biggest stems, she wouldn't know the difference. Then I ate one of my larger caps to make it even again. From inside of my small fridge I pulled out the carton of orange juice I bought just for this occasion. Vitamin C is said to enhance the psychedelic effects of mushrooms. The acidic juice also washed away the unique taste of the fungus, kind of like old tree bark.

At seven thirty, waiting for Jamie to show up, my slight body-buzz from the single mushroom I consumed was fading. I went over and pounded on the wall but the one pound reply I got told me she wasn't home, only her roommate. Then a knock on my door told me Jamie came straight to my room after her study assignment.

"Hey," she said briefly, very different from our meeting at lunch, "sorry I'm late." Beginning to explain, she gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and then walked in to set her bag and books on my bed. "The lab was a lot *longer* than I thought it was going to be."

"It's alright, I was hoping to catch the sunset, but maybe we'll watch it rise instead," I suggested, hoping to spend the whole night with her in psychedelic euphoria.

"Yeahhhh," she said, looking away from the sink mirror to give me a stunning smile. There was an excitement in her eyes that I couldn't quite decipher.

Sitting down at my table, she broke out a bag from her purse. This was one of the very few times she ever had anything to compensate for the countless times I got her high. She packed a small one-hitter disguised as a cigarette, letting me hit it first. I tried hard not to smoke the whole thing in one hit, leaving some for her. She hit the half cashed metal tube and repacked it, this time lighting it first and

passing to me. I cleared it out and passed it back to her to pack again. She packed it, alright, right back into her purse.

Fuck, she did that on purpose. She knew that would only get me started, forcing me to break out my supply to finish. The weed I took out of the cabinet, broken into individual bags for sale, was about five times better than her shwag. The water bong I chose to smoke with packed about five times more. After getting thoroughly blazed, we ate the mushrooms together, passing the rest of my orange juice between us. Lighting cigarettes, we made our way downstairs and outside to Thompson Lake.

I laid out the blanket I brought for us to sit or lay on, and we quickly took our seats for the show that was about to begin. The black water before us reflected the full moon's light as gentle waves rolled across it. The wind blew the trees lightly, just enough to let us know it still existed. The setting was perfect for a night of vivid mental experience.

"Thanks for letting me come with you tonight," she said as she pulled out her one-hitter to pack it again.

"It's not a problem. Thanks for keeping me company," I lied—it was a problem. I had some of my most powerful mental breakthroughs when the only company I had was my mind.

"Have you ever thought about what you're going to do when we get out of college?" Was this it? Was she trying to make a place for herself in my life? Maybe she didn't know the place had already been made. "I mean you're a philosophy major. What are you gonna do with that?" Her curiosity suddenly felt like pessimism and disapproval for my lack of a concern about the future.

"Yeah, I'm gonna do whatever I want that makes me happy." I wasn't really sure—I was only sure about the fact that I'll never get a job working solely for a check, doing something I hate.

"But what if you don't make any money at it?" Was she trying to see if I'm a good gold digging prospect?

This early in the trip, I wasn't going to let her rain on it. "If you go on living life only to make money, you're never gonna live life at all." To me it seemed like a simple revelation, but to so many freshmen here it was a concept far beyond their grasp.

She put the one-hitter to her lips. With the lighter illuminating her face, I could see a concentration in her eyes, a focus I very seldom saw in her. She was determined to light her dirt weed perfectly. She made no attempt at concealing her illegal act as she inhaled. Her eyes told me a thought had just occurred in her mind. She gave me a look, then a smile, and leaned in towards me.

Our lips made contact as she exhaled the smoke into my mouth.

I inhaled deeply, deeper than I've ever inhaled before. Consuming everything she had to offer me, and more. I exhaled the smoke through my nose as to not break contact with her thin, soft lips.

She dropped the lighter and the hitter as we embraced each other. Continuing to consume everything she had, I penetrated her mind to view my selection. She wanted love; I consumed her desire. She wanted knowledge; I consumed her mind with the flame of truth. She wanted a man to hold her every night; I consumed the wall between us. She had comfort to give; I consumed her embrace. She had knowledge to offer; I consumed it with my mind. She had love; I consumed her soul with mine.

My mind was moving rapidly now, the psilocybin expanded my perceptions. I was one with her in every way as we showed our growing love for each other. Mine for her has been growing for a year now, since the moment I saw her.

My awareness expanded all the way through her in to the ground, into the lake, filling the trees, touching the stars. I was her, she was me, and we were everything. Everything except the car that honked a long warning to the car that was about to hit it.

It broke us out of our deep concentration, but not out of our connection. I looked into her eyes from above her. As our eyes locked, the connection was as strong as it ever could be. I could see straight into the deepest depths of her soul, as she could see into mine. To affirm what we both already knew we kissed again, and then sat up.

The world around us was now participating in our celebration of life. The water glided casually to meet the banks, the formula of existence visible now, encoded in its waves. The trees spoke to us. Using their branches as vocal cords and the wind as their breath they told us the stories of the way things will be. The lone bird in the trees watched over us, making sure we didn't slip too far into our new world in which everything participated harmoniously. It was us who are now harmonizing with their old world the tree revealed. "Be careful to your left," the dove warned.

As I heeded his warning, I saw a man peeking around the corner of the building to our left, about a hundred and fifty yards away. He noticed my glance right away and disappeared. Who was he, a pervert watching the show? Was he a narc watching us smoke only ten minutes ago? Or was he just a passerby? "Be careful of him," the water stated frankly. Could he have been a hallucination?

"What are you lookin' at?" she asked, noticing my stare. But when she looked in that direction she became quickly distracted. "Oh, what are those?" she inquired about a group of red floating orbs. "Can you see those?" she asked, truly excited about her find.

“Yeah, I see ‘em,” I was still weary of the observer. “You’re not hallucinating those, whatever they are.” I noticed the spheres suspended in animation. Perhaps she and I were hallucinating together now. I have connected with her in every other way conceivable and inconceivable.

“Let’s smoke some more,” I said. Watching the show, hearing the moon now speak to me from heaven—it gave warning, but was unclear as to what.

“Sure,” she agreed, looking around her for her metallic cigarette. When she found it, it still had a good hit left to be taken. She gave it to me, but I had no lighter. I must have left mine wherever I was before this place.

“You got a light?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s around here somewhere,” she said, searching for it. “I know it’s around here somewhere.” I noticed all of the snake holes around our sanctuary as I helped her look for it. We found nothing. “I give up,” she said. “What do you think those balls are over there?”

My trip must have been wearing off. All I could see anymore were those red balls, slightly bouncing up and down as if to taunt us. Everything else was returning to normality—never again to appear normal through my eyes, just having been told a few more of the world’s secrets.

“Could we go see?” she asked for my permission.

“I guess. Are you still tripping?” I was curious if the half an eighth still had any effect on her.

“Oh my God, yes. These ‘shrooms are awesome.” she said, eyes wide.

They were good mushrooms, but for me the half eighth produced a short lived effect. I was now simply intrigued by the red solar system, still visible, that we were getting up to go investigate.

* * * * *

THE HANDCUFFS WERE on tight, cutting off the circulation to my left hand. The rookie restraining me seemed to like it that way. “All I want to do is talk to your sergeant,” I restated the only thing I had said the entire confrontation.

“Yeah, whatever buddy. Why the fuck’s he gonna deal with you?” he denied my request once again. Though, it wasn’t the rookie I had a problem with: it was his sergeant. “Look, you even know why I got you in cuffs?”

“Yeah, it’s ‘cause I was looking at you like you’re a dumb rookie,” I said frankly. He twisted the chain of the cuffs ninety degrees. The already tight restraints forced my wrists in an unnatural direction.

"Listen motherfucker," his voice was raised and more direct now. His head craned over my right shoulder as if to lean in and whisper. Only he was doing a bad job at the whispering part, "You know I could take you in right now? What's stoppin' me?"

"Your sergeant," I informed him, not letting the pain in my wrists show through my voice.

"The fuck he is! All I gotta do is say the word, SAY THE FUCKIN' WORD, and you're finished!" he was furious now at my questioning of his authority.

"Alright dude, after you *say the word* and your sergeant denies it, can I talk to him?" I asked, consciously trying to demean his power I knew he valued so much.

He pushed me to the curb in front of the bar I was just in. "Sit down," he ordered, walking off towards his sergeant. Maybe he was going to *say the word* now. After an array of passionate explanation and intense hand gestures on the rookie's part, the sergeant looked over at me to see the cause of the new officer's wild craze.

Walking toward me with the calmness only obtained from years of dealing with these types of situations, he asked, "What's your problem kid?"

"I wanna know why you choke slammed that girl to the wall back there," using a backwards nod of my head to indicate where *back there* was. "I saw the whole thing. It was completely uncalled for," I nearly imitated the voice of a highly paid lawyer.

"Look, you wanna spend the night in jail? Is that what you're trying to do?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"If that's the price you wanna pay for the complaint I'm gonna file against you and your rookie to your department."

Trying to appear as though the threat was unheard, he retorted, "Who the fuck you think you are, son?"

"I'm a non-commissioned officer in the United States *Marine Corps* with more combat experience than your entire department's seen in the past fifty years," I drunkenly laid all my cards out on the table.

"Well I was an engineer in the Army Reserve. That don't make me special," he stated, as if it did.

"Damn right it doesn't. You wouldn't last a minute in the grunts." I referred to the infantry to ruin his pride. The infantry had a way of ruining everyone's pride.

"Hey motherfucker, I served my country." He tried reclaiming what I took from him. "This ain't your fight. Your fight's in Iraq. Why don't you get the fuck outta here?" he asked, revealing his handcuff key.

Three-one-seven, three-one-seven, I repeated in my head, committing his badge number to memory. "I'm goin' back in ten days, and I can't fuckin' wait." *Three-one-seven*. "I'd rather be shot at with my brothers than dealing with this bullshit any day." *Three-one-seven*.

I stood up to turn my back on him so he could free my hands. *Three-one-seven*. "You better have a little more respect for authority, or else you're gonna wind up in and outta jail when you get back." he said, predicting my future.

"Yeah, you should have a little more respect for women or else you're gonna wind up an ex-cop without a pension," I said, predicting his more accurately—*three-one-seven*—knowing I would help to facilitate that.

"Get the fuck outta here, kid," he ordered. Defeat was slightly audible in his voice.

Turning to walk away, I asked one of the students of the University of Illinois how to get back to my friend's apartment. "Hey, how do you get to First and Armory from here?"

"Well First is west of here, and Armory's south," thinking aloud, obviously as drunk as I was. "Go that way 'til you hit First, then take a left," he said, pointing in the right direction.

"Thanks man," I said, turning in that direction. *Three-one-seven*. When I hit First I turned left towards Armory. The streets of Champaign all looked the same, like Ramadi did the first time I saw it. After the episode with the cops, I'd much rather be in my beloved city. When I arrived at the corner of First and Armory, heading up to Owen Huntington's apartment, I couldn't help but think of how envious I was of him. Not in a spiteful way, but more of a *why-did-I-leave-college* way. Owen was one of the smartest people I'd ever known, but not as a result of staying in school, although that helped a lot. Ever since I'd known Owen he'd been brilliant. When I met him in summer school, the summer before my freshmen year of high school, we sat next to each other in the back of the classroom, and we'd been friends ever since.

Owen was one of the reasons why I wanted to go back to college so bad. After seeing what a university did for his already intelligent mind, I couldn't wait to catch up with him. I guess the jealousy spawned from us starting college at the same time. Now he's about to graduate in two weeks, and in ten days I'll be back in Iraq.

Not even knocking, I let myself in the apartment to see Lauren, Ryan, and Owen, along with some other people I had never met, look up from their drinking game to greet me with surprise.

"Where the hell did you go?" Ryan asked, not with concern, but curiosity. Lauren and Owen waited for my reply, too.

“Eh, I went to a bar. I was about to leave but I saw some cop grab a chick by the throat. She was just walking by him, and he slammed her against the wall.” I explained my missing hours. “So I stuck around, waitin’ for a chance to give him shit about it, and his asshole partner snatches me up ‘cause I’m lookin’ at him like he’s a piece a shit.”

Lauren gasped and asked, “Then what happened?” She and Ryan were two close friends from high school as well.

“Well they put me in cuffs and...” I told the story, but not with much detail. I was exhausted from my journey here and my lack of alcoholic fuel for the past hour. All I wanted to do was go to sleep on Owen’s couch—so I did just that. Curling up on one side of it, I forgot about the empty room with a bed he told me about before I was drunk. I at least took my shoes off before passing out...

“Don’t touch me,” a tired woman’s voice said, waking me up. I could already tell she was beautiful from the sound of her voice. I barely opened one eye to see who she was talking to. She was on the other side of the couch mirroring my sleeping position. It looked like some guy tried to sit down and put her unconscious head on his lap.

“What?” he asked, guiltily.

“Don’t fuckin’ touch me,” she quietly barked, reinforcing her adamance.

“Just let me sit down,” he pleaded.

I stumbled off the couch to stand, still half asleep, “Get the fuck outta here, dude.”

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, surprised, turning his attention on me. A big guy, he could probably show me a thing or two about fighting.

“I’m a half-drunk, extremely tired motherfucker, and I ain’t goin’ to sleep ‘til you get the fuck outta here.” I gave him more detail than he probably wanted.

She was the most beautiful girl I’d seen since I could remember. She had short black hair with piercing brown, almond shaped eyes that dominated her brown face. She sat up, not to intervene, but to watch as her agitator hopefully got what she thought he deserved.

“Oh, did I mention I love to fight?” I asked casually. The alcohol in my blood was still enough to have its usual effect on me.

FIVE

Autonomy and Arbitrary Authority

IT TASTED LIKE I hadn't brushed my teeth in a month, the old blood in my mouth that didn't dry. Beside the pain in my stomach and my bloody teeth—two lower ones loose—I felt well rested. Laying there in the sand, I noticed the stars bright overhead. There was a lack of electric light to compete. Instead of getting up, I made myself comfortable in the soft intruding sand, spitting blood intermittently.

I'd been passed out for about an hour and a half I discovered after looking at my watch. I guess I needed the rest, and had no reason to wake up after Larson knocked me out. He must have finally let the Boots sleep. The quietness of the night was only disturbed by the constant in-and-out drone of the industrial sized generators powering our small base.

Finally some solitude, a commodity so rare on Hurricane Point. My only company: the man on the moon. The deep sharp pain in my stomach must mean Larson either kicked or punched me while I was down. I just hoped that I wouldn't lose any teeth.

"Did you see that shit, Nate?" I asked the man on the moon. "Pretty fucked up, huh?"

Nate's reply by facial expression translated to voice in my head, "Yeah man, that was pretty fucked up," he said in his thick Mexican accent. "I'm glad we weren't with him when we were Boots."

"Yeah, no shit. We woulda hated life," I said with a bloody smile.

"Hey, remember when we were gonna reenlist to be drill instructors together?" he asked.

"Yeah," I chuckled, "we woulda fucked some bitches up." We

reminisced at the unrealized memory of us running up and down a squad bay, screaming our heads off at all the scared recruits.

"Fuck yeah, dog," he agreed. "I like how you're, like, the only one of us who actually became the senior Marine you said you were gonna be."

"Yeah, I guess, maybe. That was hard, though," I explained. "It was easy to say I was gonna be cool with all my Boots. But when they came they were fuckin' stupid, man. You know, everyone got so sick of them messin' up all the time; we just started fuckin' 'em up." I was filling him in on the first year he missed. "By the time they started acting right, most people were just so used to fuckin' 'em up all the time, they just kept doin' it, which is how we got seniors like Paulson." Judging from the look on Nate's face, I could see he was listening intently.

"Well, I started treatin' 'em more humanely when they acted like it, ya know? Tryin' not to pick favorites."

"Uh huh," he agreed. A quick acknowledgment signaled his mind was only occupied by my story.

"They started listening to me more, carrying out tasks I gave them better. And, when they fucked up, I let them know. I mean, I really let them know. The rest of the guys, still goin' off their first impressions, just kept fuckin' 'em up all the time—the only motivation they had to excel was to not get fucked up even worse."

"Yeah, that shit sucked," he remembered.

"Yeah, I mean who would you rather follow, Corporal Roth or Corporal Page?" Roth embodied the authoritarian aspect of leadership; Page personified the more democratic side of it.

"Page, any day," he quickly answered, reinforcing my point.

"Yeah, me too, no doubt. But I'm not exactly like I said I was gonna be. I think I'm a bad leader sometimes. I mean it looks like a lot of these guys don't even respect me as a senior Marine anymore. I gotta talk them into listening to me. I act like their buddy, so why should they have to listen to me when I tell them to do something?" I asked.

"They're testing their limits, man. This small shit don't matter now. When you guys get into it, they're gonna do everything you say, no hesitation," he consoled.

"I hope so. You think we're gonna get into it again out here?" I was curious to hear his prediction.

"Well, I don't know for sure. It is Ramadi, man."

"Yeah, I hope you're right. About the leadership thing, not the combat."

“Yeah, I know,” he said, revealing our brains were on the same wave, just like they always used to be. “I wanna thank you, man.”

“For what?”

“For lookin’ out for Natalie and my wife.” Natalie was his daughter.

“Dude, I told you I would right after you died.” His family was my main source of grief after he died.

“I just want to thank you, man. I mean, you kept your promise, and I know you will.” The promise I made to him, his family, and me. The thought of his daughter not having what she deserved destroyed me. I never took over his position in their family or anything. I just kind of keep up on them, and make sure everything’s going right every now and then. If not, that’s when I’d have to get on a plane to Texas and make things right.

“It’s no problem, dude. Don’t worry about it.” I was trying to turn the attention away from myself—he was the guest of honor. “Hey, you talked to Lieutenant Scott or anybody else?” I asked of one of the other Marines we knew who passed on.

“No man, I haven’t seen him. I talked to my wife the other day. Natalie’s getting’ big.”

“Yeah she is. She talks a lot now, too, mainly Spanish. She’s a handful, though.” Nate’s wish was that she would learn Spanish first.

“I know, she talks to me all the time, she doesn’t know I’m dead, though,” he said with disappointment in his voice. It was tough to think of his daughter having to learn that fact sooner or later.

“How is it being dead?” I asked, trying to avoid intruding on the conversations he had with his daughter.

“You know, it ain’t that bad. I know everything’s gonna be alright now, for me and everyone. Just tryin’ to watch my daughter grow up, you know?” he asked. Maybe that’s why he keeps sticking around here.

“Yeah dude, I’ve been helping to raise this other kid in a dump for a house. I can tell he’s gonna grow up to be something great. I’ve watched him grow up from two weeks to thirteen months man, it’s been one of the most worthwhile things I’ve ever done.” I explained about the mismatched family I became a part of in Ontario.

“Yeah, I’ve seen you with those people. Where the hell’d you meet them?”

“Well, me and this dude I used to know met up with these girls who live in Ontario. They hung out with us every weekend. They had these friends Sarah and Jim; Jim’s a Marine in a different battalion. When we all decided to help rent Sarah’s house together and live

under the same roof, we became a family. Each of us did our part to help raise Sarah and Jim's baby, Vincent. It's amazing how Vincent's brought us all together. We all love him so much. We all love each other too, man. It really is a big family." I thought longingly of the happiness I found in one of the ghettos of California. I decided not to tell him about all of the bad influences that were also present.

"I know, dude. I got to experience that, too. It is the most beautiful thing in the world." His disappointment for being dead was obvious in his voice. A single tear escaped my eye and rolled down my face. I tried to imagine exactly what it was that Nate had and lost; how he'll never get to hold his baby again, or take her to the bus stop on her first day of school.

"It's alright. You really don't understand what it's like here," he said. "It's not bad at all. I know everything's gonna be okay. It's just time for me to sit back and watch, ya know? Maybe throw a little divine intervention in there every once in a while," he joked, but sincerely.

"That's good, dude. You know Jim, Vincent's dad? Throw a little of that divine intervention his way. He's in Al Qa'im right now, near Husaybah." I couldn't help but think of how painful it would be for the family to lose Jim like we all lost Nate. Vincent needs Jim.

"I will. He's a good guy, huh?" Nate asked.

"Yeah dude, he's like a brother to me," I said guiltily, not wanting Nate to feel replaced.

As a cloud blocked my view of Nate, I realized I would need to get going in soon. I had to make sure my guys were ready for the mission tomorrow. We've known it was coming since before the OP, and from what I've heard, it's supposed to be high profile.

I got up to dust myself off and wipe the blood off that had crusted on the corner of my mouth. "You got to go?" Nate asked, his image suddenly staring down on me again.

"Yeah," I said with a sigh, "we're supposed to be doing something pretty important tomorrow, who knows."

"Don't forget about what happened last time I went on an important mission," he warned, referring to his *last* mission. "Be careful out there man."

"I won't forget. See ya later, Nate." I longed for the time I'd truly get to see him again. I was only careful when it came to somebody else's life these days. My life didn't seem to mean that much anymore.

"Peace," he said.

INSIDE, EVERYONE WAS asleep except Larson. Larson was up with his laptop, probably going over maps for tomorrow's mission. After checking my truck for its combat readiness and telling the fire watch when to sound reveille, I laid down to sleep.

Sleep refused to come easy tonight; there's way too much on my mind. Not thoughts about my comrades. It's hard to not think about everything that goes on out here. But whenever I had the chance, I'd dwell on what I left back home; like my mother. She was constantly on the move, never staying in one town for more than a year. Her claim was that she was slowly working her way to Montana. Montana was her utopia to which she had never been. It was her escape; her escape from poverty, her escape from corrupt society, her escape from sickness. She survived melanoma as a teen, and now no health care companies will insure her for less than a fortune. Montana was her hope, her hope for justice, her hope for harmony with nature, her hope for a place she could live.

I don't know why she's so set on Montana. Maybe she saw a picture when she was a kid and couldn't forget it. Maybe when she grew up and faced the reality of life—which she still hasn't really done—she couldn't stand it. She couldn't handle not being able to do what she always wanted. One might ask of her situation, "Why doesn't she just get out of there and get a good job, and do whatever she wants?" Well, those are the type of people whom I argue with often, and they're passionate arguments which, if the situation permits, usually turn physical.

She would probably tell that person how that's what she's been trying to do for the past twenty years, but if she got a *good* job she wouldn't be doing whatever she wants. She would tell him of the invisible force holding her down in the situation she's trying so desperately to escape. She would probably just give that person the middle finger and let her husband, Paul, take her away on his Harley-Davidson.

She would then call and tell me about it. She'd tell me how free she felt with the wind in her hair and her arms wrapped around the waist of the man she loves. I would probably tell her how happy I was for her. Even after all of my anxieties for her wellbeing and security, I would still be happy for her. I would feel comfortable knowing that when the wind's in her hair with the man she loves, she is happy. I would feel comfortable when I figure out that the wind has blown her hair wild for the past twenty years while she's been on her escape.

My mind also ran rampant with the thoughts of her husband's son; my stepbrother, technically. Though with Nick, he wasn't my stepbrother. We had grown up together since we were two and three. Nick is my brother. He always has been and always will be. My moth-

er truly loved both of us equally, and so does Paul. When asked what their kids are up to these days she says, "One's fighting the war on terror, and the other is fighting the war on drugs." She just doesn't tell them on which sides we're fighting. I wasn't even sure on which side I'm fighting. I felt at times that, as a Marine in Iraq, I might be the real terrorist.

Her patriotism made her so proud of me, though. And I don't mind it, either. She needs to feel proud. She deserves it. But I don't hide my revolutionary dreams from her. I tell her about the day when I'll give her her utopia. I'll give it to her and all the other mothers out there who deserve it. I remind her about how, soon, she won't have to worry about whether or not she'll make her escape. I tell her how Nick and I will help her escape the society in which she's incarcerated.

But before Nick and I can help her, we have to wait. We have to wait until the day we are liberated from our incarcerations; his being the most literal. He's been doing a seven-year sentence in an Illinois state prison for drug related charges. What exactly the charges were, I'm still not completely sure. I heard of him getting in so much trouble for pretty much everything imaginable.

The reason I only heard of this and didn't see it was because I was in California going through boot camp. When I came home he had left. No one knew where he was, but I tracked him down. I was able to find the phone number of a girl he was staying with. When I called he sounded messed up. He didn't believe it was me. I had to tell him how we used to hunt squirrels in our backyard with BB guns as kids.

We made a time and place to meet, but he never showed up. I had to go back to California for infantry training. I called him at that number again and told him something I never told him before: I told him I loved him.

I was in Iraq for the first time when my mother told me he was not in jail anymore, but in prison, and he was going to be staying for a while. I was in California and Iraq hearing about my little brother, when I should have been there being his big brother. I would have talked some sense into him and helped him out. But mostly, I wish I was there so bad because I know I was the only person he would have listened to.

All I know now is that he's in prison for drug charges and something having to do with a gun. He was doing a seven year sentence, but with the prison so overcrowded, he's able to take a day off the end of his sentence for every day he's on good behavior. With the time he served in jails, he would be out of prison the same month I get out of the Marine Corps.

I've visited him twice and continue to write about once a month with a money order enclosed. I don't want him worrying about making money in there; I want him focusing on school. He already graduated valedictorian of his GED class, and now he's taking college courses.

I tell my mother about how after we escape we'll help her to do the same. After she's free, Nick and I will finish college and do something meaningful with our lives. I just hope I'm not lying when I tell her we'll do all of this.

* * * * *

THESE THOUGHTS WEIGHED heavily on my mind all night. I wrote Nick a letter and went to sleep. The gash on my inner lip prevented me from enjoying my sleep. Many things were preventing me from enjoying my sleep. But it was the gash preventing it the most. That gash was a painful reminder of the situation society's in. My dreams must have been important that night because I woke up unable to remember. I woke up unable to remember anything: the OP, the sandbags, or the one-sided fight. I woke up thinking I was in my bed in Illinois, unable to decipher which direction I was facing, whether my head faced the window or the door. Regardless, I was home.

I was home until I decided to open my eyes. A rude awakening—I remembered where I was: in the Garden of Eden, but far from it. Evans was across the way from me. He, too, struggled to once again accept reality as he woke. A platoon full of guys struggled, a world full of people. The day would probably happen, maybe not. Maybe I'd wake from it and be back home, but probably not. We will probably go on to face reality only to get punched in the mouth, then struggle once more to deny reality as we recede back into our dreams.

* * * * *

THE BRIEF WENT as planned at 0800. All of Mobile Assault Platoon Red was there at the front of the hooch. A computer was hooked up to a projector ready to show us the plan. The platoon sat on the floor, on beds, in foldable chairs, watching porn, waiting for Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt to come with the plan.

A laugh thick with a Boston accent alerted anyone too focused on the projector's screen that Staff Sergeant was in. He stood aside and watched the screen for half a minute until he thought it was time to focus on our mission.

"Alright, you can turn it back on after the order," Staff Sergeant

said. He signaled Harold to close the window and boot up the brief's slide show. "Everybody awake? Well rested?"

"Errrrr," the platoon replied with our universal answer to almost every question.

"Good, 'cause you're gonna need it. We got a recon patrol today, and it's gonna be a long one," he was happy to inform. "Hey, and on a side note, before the brief starts, it's gonna be an important one, so let's do our best out there," he explained. "Not that I expect anything less of you. We're MAP Red, right? MAP Red sets the bar," he reminded us with his favorite saying.

"Errrrr," we acknowledged.

"Alright, at approximately 1000 we're going to be patrolling these zones," he pointed to the entire map posted on the wall. "I'll go over the route later, but for now you need to know we're going in places coalition forces haven't been since we were here in '05."

"Does that mean we'll get a welcome back party when we get there, Staff Sergeant?" Benson joked.

"Yes, Benson, there's gonna be plenty of women and beer when we get there," Staff Sergeant met Benson's sarcasm with more of the same. "No, but seriously, we gotta be looking for passable routes, large generators, fueling points, anything out of the ordinary. Battalion's tasked us out with this because Division's been wonderin' why the hell we don't know our whole AO yet. I know. We can thank the units who took over from us when we left last year for never traveling these roads. They were just too dangerous back then."

"Didn't stop us from goin' up and down 'em all day, every day last year," Sycamore stated, reminding us of the insanity we had. Insanity was a requirement for most of our missions back then. It was something that we were regularly checked for, and diligently maintained.

"I know, I know, the deal is the IPs pretty much blocked off every route in and out of every neighborhood in Ramadi," Staff Sergeant explained the Iraqi Police's tactics. "Good for them, not good for us. Cas-evacs are pretty much impossible in most of these areas, and if shit hits the fan again, we'd be fucked." He put our disposition of evacuating casualties in laymen's terms.

"So what are we gonna do if we get a casualty out there, Staff Sergeant?" I asked.

"We'd be fucked. Sound good?" he replied, supplying the only true answer. "So let's not get any casualties, shall we?"

"No, Staff Sergeant," everyone in Red replied out of unison.

"Alright, good to go. Like I said, division-level people are gonna be watching from unmanned aerial vehicles. So let's get out there and

do what we do best,” the platoon commander said, doing his best to motivate us.

“Errrrr,” the platoon replied, highly unmotivated.

“Alright, whatever, let’s kick this brief now. Harold hit the slide.”

Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt went into a long, complex explanation of exactly everything we were going to do. His slides showed us our exact routes. The maps were of such fine detail, it was as if the pictures were taken from a hundred feet above the city. The presentation showed us exactly where everyone was going to be during the patrol at all times, every place where we were going to get out and take intelligence pictures, the people we would talk to, what questions I would ask, and how we were going to keep in touch with our higher-ups. There were plans for what we would do in almost every situation imaginable. He explained this all to us in a language only a Marine could understand. It was a language so chock full of acronyms and military lingo, that one becomes fluent only after being exposed to it for at least a year.

By the time the brief was over, it was nearly time to go. Everyone seemed comfortable with their understanding of what we were doing for the day. At the end of the brief we were told to go outside and conduct pre-combat checks and pre-combat inspections, but with our complacency high, we didn’t feel it was necessary. Instead, we chose to go back to our racks and relax for a few minutes before the patrol.

“You know what I’d like to do?” I said, not really asking, but just getting the attention of the Marines whose racks are close to mine.

“What’s that?” Benson asked.

“I’d like to get, like, ten full-fledged insurgents in here, and just have a conversation with them,” I said plainly, “just a regular conversation.”

“So, you guys planning on killing any of us any time soon?” Evans asked, as though they were sitting on our racks with us.

“No, like, ‘so, how’s things?’” I attempted to clarify.

“So, how’s the family? Your kids doin’ good?” Benson asked the imaginary insurgents.

“They’re good, just started school last week,” Evans imitated the voice he thought an insurgent would have.

“Like they’re all locked and loaded, and so are we,” Benson offered more detail to our combined imaginations.

“Yeah, and they’re all wearing their face masks and there’s the dude in the back with an RPG resting on his shoulder.” I supplied my contribution to our primary form of entertainment.

“Does anyone need more chai?” Evans offered more of the sweet Arabic tea to our imaginary guests.

This was one of our favorite pastimes; using our imaginations to help remove us from reality. We'd imitate our friends, invite insurgents over for chai, imitate Staff Sergeant's Boston accent that would show every time he laughed. We'd do whatever we could to divert our minds from where we were. Some watched movies all day; Coronel was always reading or exercising; others would play video games, or combine any of these methods for escape.

I would spend my time trying to plan a real escape. I tried never to waste this valuable time. I read books on politics, society, even mental illnesses. I would try to find whomever I could to have engaging conversations with. I planned out my next step in life: college. I couldn't wait to go, not because that was the expected thing to do, but because I wanted to learn. I was hungry for it. I didn't care if I got a degree. I just wanted to learn.

After we got carried away with the imagined scenario, we put on our flak jackets as the time for the mission grew closer. We gathered our helmets, sunglasses, and cameras; everything we'd need for the mission. Our imaginations slowly shifted back to the task at hand as we walked out of the hooch for the trucks.

* * * * *

GIBBONS, MARTINEZ, AND Keyes beat me to our truck, Alpha Four, and were ready to go. I like to think I taught them to be punctual with everything they do, but they deserve most of the credit because I haven't always provided the best example.

Martinez was up in his turret double checking his medium machine gun, making sure it's ready to fire. My Marines' level of complacency was high, but they'd do everything possible to not let me see. They knew it was the easiest way to provoke my authoritarian side.

Keyes was in the driver's seat to my left, messing with the radio. That's his job in the Marine Corps; radio operator; he's a communications guru. Being a new guy, he wasn't expected to do everything he does. In MAP Red it's very rare that we have a problem with our radios. His partner is a senior Marine, but he's incompetent to the point that if he works on a good radio, it usually goes bad. Keyes' driving skills aren't bad either.

All in all, I got pretty lucky getting these guys in my truck. I was glad to have them working with me. The only problem was that it was hard for me to let them know that.

As 1000 hit, Grant asked each truck, over the radio, if we were ready to go. After he got the responses he was looking for, we were

on the move. The seven-ton pulled forward to let us out of the front gate, and reversed back after my truck passed. We were the fourth vehicle in a four vehicle patrol.

The city of Ramadi has many streets and alleys but the most prominent is the six lane road called Michigan. Michigan is the first road we get on as soon as we leave the gate. "Everybody all good?" I asked.

"Yes, Corporal," they all replied as if tired from the brief they just sat through. They knew exactly what my vague question meant; if they were all geared up and easily able to do their job with no problems.

"Good, you guys'll finally get to see parts of this city that aren't all shot up," I told them, excited to bring them with as I revisited my past. "Alpha Three this is Alpha Four, radio check."

"Lima Charlie," Larson replied, letting me know I came in loud and clear.

"Hey Corporal, are we gonna be passing out a lot of candy to the kids?" Gibbons yelled from the back seat to make himself heard over the roaring diesel engine.

"Yeah, just make sure there's not too many around when we do or else they'll attack you all at once, and reach in your pockets for everything you got." I spoke from experience.

Gibbons was about to reply when Keyes slowed down. We all watched ahead with fear and anticipation, except Martinez who faced backwards, guarding the patrol's rear.

Alpha Two, Evans' truck, was swerving out of control. It was obvious that his driver tried to overcompensate after fish-tailing for some reason. The truck's rear end swerved all the way up to the front of the truck, making the truck go forward but with its left side leading the way. Thomas then cranked the wheel hard to try to regain control, only causing the truck to swerve the opposite way and the rear end swung around to the other side.

We could only watch, hoping Thomas would regain control, but he never did. In what seemed like slow motion, the top-heavy truck's left wheels lifted off of the ground and its right side laid down. Still moving at a fast speed, it slid on its side then turned again and flipped upside down, facing us. Supported by the gunner's turret and the front end of the truck, its rear end towered high.

"Get up there!" I shouted to Keyes. "And don't flip ours on the way," I warned as he slammed on the gas pedal.

As Keyes reached top speed I forced my door open, fighting hard against the wind to keep the heavily armored door open. I was poised to jump out as soon as I could like a helicopter passenger in Vietnam.

The thought of anyone in that truck hurt was something I didn't want to face. I had to get up there and make sure everyone was okay. If someone's hurt, I'll help them out of the truck and start working on them. After all, Doc's in there, our only medical professional.

As we came close, Keyes slowed so I could get out. As soon as my boot touched the pavement he took off again. "What the fuck!?! STOP!" I yelled, and he did. Rushing to the scene with Gibbons behind me, I noticed Larson was already there. I went to the other side of the truck to get a door open. Fighting gravity hard to open it, I found no one inside.

"They're all out," Larson told me through the overturned truck as I kept looking. I couldn't believe Larson got them out so quickly. I turned off the engine, and we began the clean up. Security was relaxed, we didn't have the slightest inclination the enemy might suddenly return to hit us while we're down.

Bravo, still in the gate, came to our aid quickly with a wrecker truck that turned Evans' vehicle upright again and towed it off. Before we left, we completed the messy clean up job of collecting all sorts of random bullets from here and there, rockets, grenades, and water bottles. Fluids from the vehicle formed puddles all around as though it was a man who'd just been shot dead.

The crowd that quickly formed didn't seem happy to see us in such a vulnerable situation. I had to tell them, as respectfully as possible, to leave. I tried not to set back the years of work that we'd mutually put in towards making our relations peaceful.

From the moment of the crash, we were out of there and back on base in less than half an hour. The only sign of the crash were the puddles and the large chunk of missing pavement that Evans' truck gouged.

Everyone seemed fine except Doc Wood; he broke his left arm. We took him to Charlie Med right away. Staff Sergeant, as we speculated on the way back to the hooch, was probably going to have our heads. The debrief that was sure to follow would either prove or deny our theory.

Setting the Bar

WE SAT IN the same places we were for the brief. I was reliving in my mind some of the worst combat I had been through. As I vividly remembered those nerve-racking days, I just hoped I'd never have to go through anything like it ever again. It was never that bad actually going through it, but thinking about it later and anticipating it in the future was the tormenting part.

This time there was no porn, only silence as we awaited our reprimand. This is what each of us feared more than combat itself. Not the verbal aspect of our ass chewing, but the new rules that always followed an incident like this. The demoralizing aspect of the situation was the most effective part of our ensuing punishments.

Maybe our living areas will become less personalized and completely uniform, bringing us back to boot camp. Messing with our sleep will be sure to keep us in line for a few days. Maybe some more sandbags might persuade the Boots to learn how to drive. Possibly some physical hazing is what's in store. Micromanagement is always a sure motivator to get us to square ourselves away, before someone higher has to. Staff Sergeant could schedule everything for us; when to wake up, when to eat, how long to clean our weapons. Then, fill this many sandbags in this time period, eat lunch in ten minutes, and so on. Completely revoking our independence, and offering the opportunity to earn it back, is probably the most effective way to make us act like perfect Marines.

Whatever our punishment's going to be, the psychologically excruciating wait is the worst part. At least after we're given our punishments we can receive them like men, and look forward to completing

them. Right now, the fear of our unknown future was the reason for our silence.

Staff Sergeant's sudden entrance in the hooch was not announced by a Bostonian laugh. This time it was by a silence that seemed to become more silent as we each became aware of his presence.

"MAP Red... MAP Red... MAP motherfucking Red," he began. "Congratulations Red, you just became famous throughout all of First Marine Division," he informed, not sounding so happy with our new celebrity status.

"I told you they'd be watching, dissecting our entire patrol. Well they watched, they watched with their UAVs as we showed them how to successfully roll a humvee. Now some PFC out there's probably gonna take that video and put it on the Internet for the whole world to see," he said, running out of breath to do so. "Thomas, what were you thinking?" He demanded an explanation for the inexplicable.

Thomas stood up from his seat. His face seemed different, not temporarily, but as though his self-inflicted mental torment altered his outlook forever. "There was a dog," he said, obviously fighting back tears. "There was a dog, Staff Sergeant."

"Okay, a dog. Did you swerve to miss it?" he asked, trying to piece together the whole story.

"No, Staff Sergeant. I swerved to hit it and missed," he surprisingly admitted.

"What? What the hell? You tried to hit a motherfucking dog?!"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant," he mumbled, completely honest. Hearing his reason I knew right away that Evans did nothing to stop it. He might have even provoked it.

"Alright, listen: there was no dog. You swerved because you thought you saw an IED." Staff Sergeant said, informing all of us what now *really* happened. "There's gonna be a full investigation when a fifty thousand dollar vehicle flips, and that's what happened." He now spoke to all of us: "Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant," we replied loudly, not tempting his good graces with our less appropriate *errrrr*.

"Good. Now I'm not mad. I understand accidents happen. Let's just try to stay low for a while 'til all this dies down," he said.

"Errrrr," we replied, already more comfortable with our father figure again.

"Good. Let's get Evans' truck switched out and get ready for Path Finder tonight," he said, ending the debrief that we thought was going to be our *dehumanization* brief. Path Finder was a mission conducted every other night, in conjunction with an Army unit, to clear the main roads of any IEDs.

Staff Sergeant left us considerably happier than we were when he found us. He's been in the Marines for ten years now and is getting ready to be promoted to Gunnery Sergeant. For some people, the military is the life for them. Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt is definitely one of those people.

Not me, I already know I'm getting out as soon as I can. Others like Evans still aren't sure. Just recently married, he's struggling to find another way to support a family. Sycamore just got married before we left and already has his new wife pregnant. Reenlistment is his plan. He doesn't have any desire to change it, either.

"Boots get outside," Larson reminded them of what they already knew. The Boots' relieved faces turned discouraged once again. As the Boots shuffled out, the seniors moved back to our area.

"No need to thank me for getting us out of that mission," Evans said in a happy-go-lucky way, adding a giggle in at the end. "I'm not doin' it again, though. Next time it's gonna have to be someone else."

"Yeah, thanks Evans," I said.

"We really appreciate it," Sycamore offered.

"No problem, just doin' my job," Evans stated.

"Yeah, that's cool. Just next time try to make sure your driver doesn't kill you in the process," I told him. There was no real need to express my gratitude for his truck crew's second chance at life. He had no need to thank me or Larson for rushing to their aid. These kind of things were understood.

"Anyone wanna go to chow?" Benson asked. Syc, Coronel, Evans, and I offered to go with. Most of us skipped breakfast to sleep an extra hour before the brief.

It was getting to be the middle of summer and it already felt like I was standing too close to a large fire every time I stepped outside. It was a two minute walk to the chow hall, but it felt much longer battling the heat.

Once inside the chow hall we went through the line helping ourselves to either ham, bologna, or roast beef, with condiments, and two slices of bread. This was our lunch at Hurricane Point every day. The chow hall was just that, a large hall with tables lining two long walls. As we sat down to eat, I had to pull an extra chair to the side of the table meant to seat four.

"I guess it kinda sucks; my whole truck almost died today," Evans said after completing a short prayer in front of his meal. "How many times now? How many times has God saved my ass?" he asked, addressing all of us. I couldn't help but think it wasn't that God saved his ass, but it was God making them have the accident to tell him

something. Exactly what the lesson was, only Evans and God knew that.

"Quite a few now," I replied, thinking of all the situations we'd been in together where we probably should have died but were given second, third, and fourth chances.

"Um yeah, you need to stop almost dying all the time. It's gettin' kinda old," Benson brought his comment to the table with his sandwich.

"I guess. It is pretty fun, though." Evans' philosophy on life came out again. I once heard an old Gunny quote Winston Churchill on this matter: "*Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.*"

My exhaustion caught up with me as my roast beef sandwich neared its end. The couple hours of sleep I got after writing Nick's letter weren't enough to reenergize me. A wave of weariness overcame my body causing my eyes to close and actually fall asleep for a split second before snapping back.

"You alright?" Syc asked through a full mouth.

"Yeah, I'll be good. I thought I got enough sleep last night, but I guess not." I thought back to when I was knocked out for a couple of hours and my afternoon and evening of uncomfortable dreams before that.

"Well, you got all day to sleep, bud. We ain't got Path Finder 'til 2330. Even then, I hear we're just gonna be sittin' back here at HP as back up for Bravo if they need it." Sycamore was always known to spread rumors and pass bad word, but every once in a while he was right. Now I just hear what he has to say and consider it without planning on it.

"Sweet, maybe you guys won't have to forward stage out in town. You can just chill in the hooch." Benson's optimism carried him away.

"No, you know we'll stage right out here, ready to go in thirty seconds if they need us. Staff Sergeant's going to want to *set the bar* to that."

"We'll that's what happens when you got a Staff Sergeant tryin' to pick up Gunny," Coronel finally decided to participate the conversation. Evans was unusually quiet while eating. He was probably still contemplating God's lesson.

"Yeah, I can't wait for him to pick up already, then he can stop pimpin' us out for every mission that comes down," I said to Coronel.

"Oorah, Staff Sergeant," Syc directed over my shoulder at what

could only be Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt. Did he hear me? My body froze, then I slowly turned to look over my shoulder to see.

“HA HA HA!” Sycamore’s loud laugh filled the chow hall. He had just fooled me; no Staff Sergeant in sight.

“Ah, you motherfucker,” I said with a smile on my face. “Thanks for that, Syc.”

“No problem, buddy, no problem.” He called me buddy because he was five years older than me. But in the Marines age doesn’t matter. It’s not even rank so much as it is experience.

“You guys ready to go yet? I’m about to pass out here,” I asked.

“Yeah, I could go for a nap, too.” Evans seemed to have lost his happy-go-luckiness.

Once back at the hooch, I quickly stripped out of my uniform. As I laid down on top of my covers, sleep immediately rested its hand on my shoulder.

She got to the source of our curiosity before me. She stood before the glowing red orbs, reached into them, and grabbed one out of the sky it was floating in. When she held it in her hand she seemed happier than I had seen her all day.

As I got closer to her, now, I could finally see the source of her joy.

“Get up. Sherman lost his NVGs,” Evans said, shaking me awake.

“Fuck,” was all I could say. I knew what this meant to the platoon, but I was too deep into my sleep to care enough to get out of bed.

What was she so happy about? Why was she so infatuated with a simple apple?

“Hey, wake up—” Larson paused for me to open my eyes before he explained any further. “Sherman lost his NVGs. Staff Sergeant doesn’t know yet, so we gotta find ‘em right now.” I wasn’t surprised that my hopes for a good bit of sleep were ruined again. Grudges rarely existed for long in our platoon, but if they did, they never interfered with business.

“When?” I asked while stretching to wake up.

“We just found out now. He didn’t want to tell us. I guess he’d been missin’ ‘em since right after the mission.”

“Sonofabitch, alright, I’ll be up in a minute,” I told him as he walked away to let me continue my stretching. With a yawn and one

more full body contraction, I worked up the will to finally get out of the bed.

"Sherman, where's your rack?" I heard Larson ask Sherman from across the hooch as I looked for a pair of socks.

"Right here, Corporal," Sherman said, pointing it out.

"Alright, these two, and the two on each side, pull all your shit out and set it on display outside," Larson instructed the six Marines who lived on the three sets of bunk beds. I hated times like this as a Boot; times when things would get real stupid, and it happened quite often, too. The six Marines didn't rush to lay all of their belongings in the sand for inspection.

Missing NVGs is always a big deal because they're serialized gear. I once heard that when serialized gear goes missing, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the highest ranking man in the Corps, gets a list of what got lost and who lost it. MAP Red was acting like up-and-coming movie stars as our fame continued to climb.

"Alpha Four!" I shouted for Gibbons, Martinez, and Keyes.

Each of them sounded off and rushed to come see me as I put my boots on. They only moved this fast when they knew I had a good chance of getting pissed off. I didn't want it that way, though, I'd rather them move fast all the time, or even move slow all the time. Either way I didn't want them to fear me.

"Yes, Corporal," they reported out of sync.

"Go get all of your serialized gear and come show me," I told them as calmly as possible. Each ran off to carry out my order.

They came back quick with arms full of bayonets, NVGs, and high powered flashlights. Keyes had a piece of communications gear that encrypted our radio frequencies. In their other hands they held their rifles. Twisting them around, they showed me their infrared lasers attached so they could aim with NVGs. Gibbons didn't have a rifle. He carried a light machine gun called a SAW, squad automatic weapon. With my grenade launcher fixed to the bottom of my rifle, I was happy with the fire power my truck team could produce.

"Alright, good shit. Go check your areas for Sherman's NVGs, then meet me out on the truck."

As I left the hooch, the sun immediately turned the little hair on my head hot to the point that it burnt my scalp. My shoulders and face took the blunt of the sun's powerful rays. My rifle weighed light slung across my back, but heavy wrapped around my mind. I knew the missing goggles weren't in our truck, but we were going to have to check anyway. My team must have known they weren't in their areas, either, because they met me on the truck shortly after I got there.

"Anything?" I asked.

“No, Corporal, they’re turnin’ the hooch upside down lookin’ for ‘em, though,” Gibbons said, happy to not be participating in the mess. Fondling his slung weapon with his right hand, Gibbons acted as though his SAW was more of a burden than an asset. It was heavy on his back, but still light on his conscience.

“Alright, this isn’t gonna take too long to search the truck, so let’s clean it while we’re out here. Gibbons, get everything out of the back and set it all out nice and neat,” I began. “Martinez, Keyes, start gettin’ everything out from inside, I mean everything. Martinez, get everything out of your turret, too, and dismount the gun,” I dictated as the ideas came to mind.

“Roger, Corporal,” they all said, dispersing to carry out their tasks.

I went around back to help out Gibbons. We pulled out everything: a small rocket launcher, a big rocket launcher (both disposable), a poleless stretcher, two fire extinguishers, a box of readymade meals, a case of water, two jacks, two body bags, a shovel, an ax, and the spare parts bag for Martinez’s machine gun. “Alright Gibbons, sweep out the back and put all this shit back in nice and organized.”

I went to the side of the truck to check out how Martinez and Keyes were doing. They already had all 1,600 rounds of ammunition for our machine gun out, along with a can full of hand grenades, ten smaller grenades for my launcher, an ammo can full of extra rifle magazines, road flares to warn Iraqi vehicles from coming too close, and chemical lights to do the same at night. We were still working on getting out all our miscellaneous sunglasses, half-full water bottles, and weapons maintenance gear. “Okay, let’s get the cab cleaned out. Don’t forget to pull out all the Kevlar blankets.” I reminded them of our improvised floor armor of old cut up flak jackets packed down like floor mats in a car. We loved those dirty pieces of camouflage material so much because the deadliest IED is the one that blows up underneath a vehicle.

As I walked around front to look at all our ammo and gear, Martinez’s spare machine gun barrel caught my eye. “Martinez, what the fuck is this?” I asked, picking the barrel up for him to see. He gave me his usual guilty look of confusion, even though he knew exactly what I was talking about.

“What’s that, Corporal?” he asked.

“It’s your motherfuckin’ a-barrel, that’s what, and it’s dirty as fuck!” My calmness escaped me. He took his look of confusion and distorted it to utter cluelessness in an attempt to hide his guilt. As he walked over to see what I was talking about, I thrust the filthy machine gun barrel into his chest. “You see that, motherfucker?” I was

sick of pleading with them to listen to me. "What the fuck did I tell you? Your only responsibility: keep the gun clean. What the fuck did I tell you?" I didn't pause to give him a chance to answer, "You only expect to fire that gun for a few minutes? You don't think you're gonna ever have to change the barrel?" It was a vital act necessary to keep the gun firing after the first barrel gets too hot to fire properly.

"Yes, Corporal," he said quietly, head down, pretending to look over the barrel, but really just avoiding eye contact with me.

"Well, I got news for you motherfucker: you change the barrel and put this one on and your gun's down." I never yelled except when a Marine's life was put at risk. "Down 'til the first barrel cools back down 'cause this ain't gonna fire shit!" I pointed at his a-barrel. "Why the fuck are you actin' like such a Boot with this shit? I don't treat you like a Boot. Why the fuck are you actin' like it?" I pled with him. It might have seemed to him like a rhetorical question but I really wanted to know.

He gave a quick laugh as he continued to examine his a-barrel.

"What the fuck's so funny, Martinez? Something funny?"

"Yes, Corporal, you said you don't treat us like Boots, but we're constantly out here messin' with the truck, and we never get it right. It's never good enough for you, no matter how good we get it. I mean our truck's damn near perfect all the time. Everyone else's is all fucked up all the time. Hell, Thomas just flipped his and your getting mad over an a-barrel." His guts for speaking his mind impressed me—this is what I wanted. I've been waiting for them to stop thinking only what we tell them, and start thinking for themselves. "And even when we get it right you don't say anything, nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Martinez. I'm sorry this ain't the motherfuckin' Girl Scouts!" I retaliated. "Yeah, I'm a perfectionist. You know why?" I paused only for breath. "Because you can never be good enough! Not out here! As soon as you think you're good enough, that's when you're gonna get killed. I'm never gonna be satisfied if I can still make you better!" I was speaking from the heart, "You want me to give you a little pat on the back every time you do something right? Well, I got news for you: this is the motherfucking Marine Corps, not the fuckin' Girls Scouts, alright? You want me to put up a little posterboard with all your names on it and put up a gold star every time you do something right? Is that it?"

"No, Corporal," his voice got quiet again.

"Cause I will, motherfucker. You know I will. I'll make it nice and pretty for you, too." Explaining this to Martinez I felt I suddenly knew what it's like to be a parent. "Look, my seniors didn't raise me right, but I made myself right the hard way. I ain't gonna do you guys

the same injustice.” I stopped for a second to think, but then continued, “I got news for you,” speaking to all three of them now, “you guys are the most squared away Boots in Alpha. No, fuck that, you guys are the most squared away boots in Red, but I ain’t gonna stop there.”

“You wanna be a driver next deployment Keyes?”

“No, Corporal.”

“You wanna be a gunner next deployment Martinez?”

“No, Corporal.”

“You wanna be a back seater again Gibbons?”

“No, Corporal.”

“Good ‘cause none of you are gonna be. You see the seniors who are still holdin’ Boot billets? That ain’t gonna be any of you. Martinez you’ll be a VC next year, if not a section leader. Gibbons you’ll most definitely be a VC. And Keyes, I talked to Hogan the other day, you’re most likely gonna be takin’ over his spot as Company Senior Line Radio Operator.” I was happy to inform them.

I had to pause. My heart was completely spilt now. No one spoke. I couldn’t help but look at the map laying on the ground in front of me. I don’t know why, but that was the only thing I could look at. I couldn’t think of anything more to say.

I picked up the map to point out a small road in the souk, the Iraqi market place. “Gibbons, what’s the name of this road?” He struggled to find it in his memory from the extensive map study I had them do. “No, just read it,” he came close and squinted his eyes.

“Ram... Ramirez, Corporal”

“Yeah, Ramirez, sound familiar?”

“No, Corporal.”

“Here pass it around, everybody get a look,” I pushed it on Keyes. “It doesn’t sound familiar?” I asked as I lifted my shirt to my chest revealing a tattoo on the left side of my stomach. “Read the map Keyes.”

“Ramirez, Corporal,” he read.

“Read Gibbons,” I told him. He saw the tattoo: a rifle driven into the ground, helmet on top, and boots on the ground sloppily unlaced in front.

“Nathan Ramirez, Corporal,” he read.

“Keep goin’,” I said, still holding my shirt.

“Nathan Ramirez, 4 September 1985 to 18 December 2005, Father, Husband, Friend, Marine... Hero,” he finished. I lowered my shirt.

“You see now?” My voice shook. “Every day I pray to God that I don’t ever see one of your names on this map,” I didn’t think I was ever going to be this honest with them.

I noticed that, now, everyone else was out on the trucks searching for the NVGs, too. "Clean all this shit up," I said barely louder than a whisper.

Letting them get back to work, I walked up to Alpha One to see if Grant or Larson had any new word to pass.

"I gotta tell Staff Sergeant," Grant said as soon as I walked up. "We turned everything over. They're not here. Staff Sergeant's gotta find out soon, before this shit's missin' for a week."

"Tell 'em." I said, simply. I didn't feel like trying to hide the truth from anyone anymore.

"I'm going to," Grant said. "First the truck this morning, now this, all in one day," he said in disbelief.

* * * * *

WHEN STAFF SERGEANT found out, we got word to be in the hooch at 1530 for a platoon meeting. This time there was no hope for Staff Sergeant's benevolence. We knew very well to expect anything other than his forgiveness.

We sat scattered around the front of the hooch waiting for Staff Sergeant to arrive with our fates.

"How we doin', Red?" Staff Sergeant asked as he walked in. "Let me tell you how were doin', Red. Right now we got generals talking about our driving skills, and now I just had to tell our company commander that we can't find a pair of NVGs. How do you think that feels?" he asked. "Hey Sir, sorry to bother you. I know you're busy working out our crash this morning with Division, but we can't find a pair of NVGs right now," he dramatized his conversation with the CO.

"We went from the best the battalion had, to this, and the day's not even over yet!" He shouted now, rare for a platoon commander: that's the platoon sergeant's job. "Wanna go for three today? We still got a mission tonight. Can we do it without fuckin' that up, too?"

"It's alright, though. This is my fault. I should have made sure we could keep good gear accountability." He feigned turning on himself. "We can do that. We ain't gonna lose anything else. Each and every one of you is gonna dummy-cord everything you got," he said. *So far it's not so bad.*

"Then after that's done, be in formation in front of the hooch with all your gear on for PCCs and PCIs." He got up to leave.

"Staff Sergeant, is Alpha stayin' in the wire for this one?" Larson asked.

"Yeah, but you're gonna be staged by the chow hall, standing by to get out if Bravo needs you," he said as he left.

“Isn’t that what QRF’s for?” Evans asked, not talking to any one in particular. Complaining about rules and orders he didn’t agree with was one of his favorite pastimes. True, quick reaction force is designated to leave the gate in less than three minutes, but Staff Sergeant hated relying on anyone other than MAP Red. Evans’ pastime usually got on my nerves. I never liked it when someone constantly complained but never did anything about it.

* * * * *

BACK ON THE trucks again, we took short pieces of string and slip-knotted our NVGs to our flaks. We also tied a slip-knot to our helmets. That way no matter where the goggles were, they’d always be dummy-corded. We continued by zip tying our IR lasers and our high powered flashlights to our rifles. When a Boot leaves his rifle unaccounted for and a senior Marine finds it, he usually gets the rifle tied to his wrist for three or four days. Each of us has an invisible dummy-cord, now. When we’re about to walk away from our rifle there’s a pulling feeling in our guts that tells us we’re missing something. All of us except Sherman, I guess. I still don’t even know how he lost them. All I know for sure is that they’re not anywhere around here.

“Alright, get your gear on, and go get in the formation,” I told my team.

“Roger, Corporal,” they replied in a seemingly different manner. They hurried to put on their gear and walked quickly to the gathering formation. They were moving fast, but I could tell it wasn’t out of fear anymore. Whatever it was that motivated them, I wasn’t quite sure.

I was one of the last to show up to the formation. I could see Staff Sergeant walking towards us from the direction of his hooch. He, too, was wearing his gear. It was sloppy but ready for combat. On his flak he had everything he could possibly need. It wasn’t on there to aesthetically please, but it was on there. The chin strap for his helmet was unevenly rising to the left side of his face. His orange sun glasses distorted the color of his eyes. Wearing sunglasses was not a choice; we had to wear them for eye protection.

While Staff Sergeant closed in, the truck full of mail drove down the center running road to the Battalion COC. I hoped it was in there. She said she was going to write right away. If she did, it would’ve been here at least three weeks ago.

Staff Sergeant walked to the front to address us while Evans and Sycamore straggled to the group. “It’s pretty nice today, huh?” He was commenting on the uncomfortably hot weather which felt greatly magnified by the eighty pounds of gear we each wore. Sweat poured down his face from under his helmet like everyone else.

"Yes, Staff Sergeant." We gave the only answer he wanted to hear. My exhaustion was shoved aside. My anger for the stupidity of the situation took its place. We can't stay in the wire for too long without getting in trouble. When our company first got back from Iraq last year, we set the base's record for most DUIs in a month: it was fourteen. If we would have just completed that mission this morning, none of this would be happening. I couldn't wait to get back into the city. We work so much better out there.

"Do we know why PCCs and PCIs are so important?"

"Yes, Staff Sergeant," we all replied.

"Why, Sherman?" he asked the one who probably knew the least.

"Uh... because... we need to have our shit, Staff Sergeant," he said, sounding more like he asked.

"Yes, Sherman, good job. Exactly right, *we-need-to-have-our-shit*. No Marine in MAP Red will ever leave that wire without every piece of gear he needs to accomplish the mission." He elaborated on Sherman's theory. "Pre-combat checks and pre-combat inspections. Pre-combat checks and pre-combat inspections. Sherman, can you tell me the key word there?"

Sherman had to think for a bit before answering, "Combat, Staff Sergeant?"

"Two for two Sherman, not bad," Staff Sergeant said, trying to appear happy. "Combat. I know we haven't seen much of it since we've been here. We haven't seen any of it, yet. You think that means we don't have to worry about it anymore?" he asked, now addressing us all.

"No, Staff Sergeant," we replied in perfect unison.

"What happens when we stop worrying about combat, Evans?"

"People die, Staff Sergeant," Evans replied.

"Yep, people die. People *fucking* die," Staff Sergeant reinforced. "So until I decide we've successfully pulled our heads out of our asses, we're going to come out here as a platoon before every patrol and conduct PCCs and PCIs," he informed.

I really hope we pull our heads out of our asses soon because my back is already starting to hurt from supporting the sixty pound flak jacket. We haven't even started the inspection yet. The heat will probably cause quite a few people to pass out if we continue this. My uniform under my flak was already soaking wet and the sweat was starting to roll down my back. Judging from Syc in front of me, we were all getting just as wet. Sweat already soaked down his uniform to his knees.

"So, let's begin, shall we?" he asked as he stepped in front of Grant

to inspect him first. It was more of him joking around with Grant than it was an inspection. Staff Sergeant spent nearly five minutes talking with Grant before moving on. Only thirty-four more people to go. Staff Sergeant was checking for everything: dog tags, proper dummy-cording, the cleanliness of our weapons, the serviceability of our flaks and helmets. He even checked to see if our boots were tied tight enough. This was not something any of us wanted to do before every mission, not even Staff Sergeant.

As he got to the second row of Marines, he inspected each individual a little faster. It'd been forty-five minutes so far, and I could feel the cartilage in my spine compressing between each vertebra underneath the weight of my armor. My neck and face grew immune to the fire of the sun. Sweat seeped through my socks, making my boots wet.

By the time Staff Sergeant finally got to me, it was hard to stand tall for him. My neck felt like going limp as my helmet seemed to grow heavier the entire inspection. I was aware of what felt like my vertebrae grinding against each other. The flak seemed to have meshed my uniform to become one with my skin. The one sandwich I had eaten earlier was no longer providing any nourishment, and my exhaustion made me feel like collapsing on the spot. But I stood tall for Staff Sergeant Ahlstedt—not out of fear—but for respect.

“Good evening, Staff Sergeant.” I gave him the proper greeting as he took his place in front of me.

“Good evening. You doin’ alright, Multrienner?” he asked. “You look kinda pale.”

“No, I’m good, Staff Sergeant,” I replied, without even considering telling him how I really felt.

“Alright, good to go. You got your kill card?” he asked, beginning my inspection.

“Yes, right here,” I produced my list of serialized gear for my truck and its crew.

“Good, how’s your weapon lookin’?” he asked as he grabbed my rifle which I passed off to him.

“It’s pretty clean, Staff Sergeant, except the dust that’s been blowin’ on it since the inspection started.” I wasn’t worried. He knows it’s not what the outside looks like—it’s how the inside’s working that counts. As he racked the bolt a few times, inspecting the chamber, he seemed happy with what he saw.

“You know you didn’t have to have such a heavy weapon?” he asked. I really didn’t feel like getting in a conversation right now. *Just hurry up and move on* I told him in my head.

“Yes, Staff Sergeant, I wanted the grenade launcher, though. It

might come in handy if the situation ever calls for it again," I hurried to end his inquiry.

"You think the situation will call for it again, soon?" He asked the same question that was on all of our minds.

How the hell am I supposed to know? Just move on to Evans. "It might, but I'm pretty sure the IPs'll keep 'em out. The city's pretty much locked down." I would love peace for the rest of the deployment. As the thought went through my head a thunderous explosion went off shaking the ground we stood on. The new guys scattered until the senior Marines—unwavering through the blast—told them to get back into formation.

"What do you think about that?" Staff Sergeant again called on my opinion.

"Sounds like it was about five or six clicks south. Probably the Tamim district," I guessed. The explosion wasn't the first of its type since we've been on this deployment.

"Probably right, sounded like a VBIED," he added, guessing it was a vehicle born improvised explosive device: a car bomb.

"It had to be, unless air just dropped some ordnance over there," I agreed, but brought up the possibility of a jet dropping a bomb.

"Could've been. Good job on the inspection, Multriener," he said, finally ending the inquisition.

"Good evening, Staff Sergeant," I said, giving the expected greeting before and after an inspection like this.

"Evening," he said as he moved on to Evans.

* * * * *

IN THE CHOW hall we determined the inspection took two hours, fourteen minutes, and twelve seconds. Syc timed it on his wrist watch. Staff Sergeant decided to chew our ass a little more after the inspection. He let us know that we're acting incompetently and like junior varsity. He was basically telling us that we weren't acting like MAP Red should, and he wouldn't treat us like Marines until we started acting more like it.

Dinner was the usual leftovers from Camp Ramadi, the Army base from across the Habbaniyah Canal. Finally, a chance to get some decent sleep. I could hear my bed calling me, now, promising not to kick me out this time. I was too tired to eat all my food. I kept falling asleep at the table in between long bites. We finally got up to leave. As I walked out of the chow hall with my half eaten tray of food, I lost my recollection of the day. My near future is all I could think about as I fought to stumble onto my bed. I unlaced my boots, more than half asleep, and after kicking them off...

"You wanna blaze this morning?" I asked Sean over the phone.

"Uh... I guess, when you gonna pick me up?" I could tell he'd just woken up by his voice.

"Probably around six, I gotta get Eric first," I told him. "Just look out for me around six, and bring the bong."

"Alright, later," he said.

I picked up Eric at his house and as we drove to Sean's I decided to tell him of my most recent idea. "So this summer's probably gonna get pretty crazy, huh?"

"Um, yeah it is dude. It's gonna be sick."

"Well, you know how the Buddhist monks meditate to find enlightenment? I decided to meditate," I proudly said.

"What? But we got work to do."

"I know, I decided I'm going to try Living Meditation. I'm just going to meditate on life as I live it."

"Sounds dope, dude. Let me know how that turns out," he said, genuinely interested.

"Oh, you'll know." I knew I was going to see some sort of results. Whatever they would be was what I wanted to find out.

We didn't really have to go to school this early, but being juniors, this was the only way to get a parking spot without a senior pass. One of the twenty first-come, first-served spots is where we parked every morning.

When we got to Sean's house he immediately walked out of his front door, obviously half asleep. He had a light sweatshirt on for the morning chill, and held a large object in his right hand hidden under his sweatshirt. Eric opened the door for him and Sean hopped in. He set his foot-and-a-half water bong on the floor and kept a hand on it to keep it still.

We rode to school listening to underground hip-hop turned low. It was too early for loud music. It was too early to do anything except start the day off right. We were still early enough to have at least ten of the free spots open. We'd be there in a minute.

"Fuuuuuuck," Sean said to himself, but we all knew why. The seniors had all arrived a lot earlier than us. All the spots were full of cars with parking passes. They were barbecuing and had signs that read, "SCREW THE JUNIORS."

"Motherfuckers," I said to myself as I realized that they were pulling one of their senior pranks.

"Let's just park here anyway," Eric suggested, pointing to a spot that we'd get a ticket for occupying.

"I guess," I said, pulling into a spot right by the seniors. Eric reached behind my seat and pulled out four black cardboard cut-outs that fit in the windows snugly. We put them up to make the truck look like it was empty from the outside. Sean picked up his bong and packed it full. The bubbling

of the bong was music to our ears, and the smoke was our coffee that would let us start the day right.

Sean exhaled a large cloud of thick smoke that quickly filled the cab. With the windows up, the smoke inside would stay inside all morning while we passed the bong between us. We each packed it three times. The small cab clouded densely, and fast.

"You guys notice the planes?" I asked between coughs.

"What planes?" Sean asked, taking his mouth off the bong to do so.

"I got these planes following me everywhere, ever since the forest," I told him.

"Whatever man, there ain't no planes followin' you." Sean seemed convinced I was just paranoid.

"I'm serious, dude. No matter where I go, everywhere I go, there's always a plane flying over me. I think they're following me." I told him honestly. The inside of my small cab had completely filled with smoke. Just outside all the seniors thought they were screwing the juniors.

"Look Brad, I really don't think anyone's following you. Let's just smoke one more bong and go inside," Eric said.

"Alright, but I still think someone's following me, and I wouldn't be surprised if all our phones are tapped, either," I said, shaking my head as I hit the bong for the last time. After the hour long session we took the cardboard down and replaced the cut-outs behind the seat.

The cool air hit our skin letting us know exactly how high we really were. The smoke escaping from the truck let all the seniors know, too. We didn't care. What were they going to do to us? We were about to make the deal of a lifetime, as long as these damn planes stay out of our business.

Before English class I stopped by John's locker; he gave me a couple prescription pills which I took before walking away. In class we were reading a book together. I was really interested in what the author had to say. When the teacher called on me to read a passage, I could only answer with silence. I would have read the excerpt if the words would just stop moving all over the page.

"Is there a problem, Bradley?" she asked.

"Um, no problem, I'm just having a hard time finding the part you're talking about."

"Well maybe you should..." was all I heard her say as I got up and walked out of the class. I'd leave school altogether, but it was probably the safest place to do business without having to worry about planes, phone taps, or cops.

SEVEN

Path Finder

HAPPY TO HAVE gotten a few hours of sleep, I woke up sore from the inspection. I really didn't see the difference between sitting on the trucks by the gate, as opposed to staying in the hooch while Bravo goes out. I guess I'll just get some sleep in the truck.

"Let's go Red! Get out there," Larson shouted as he was walking out with his flak on. Putting my flak on was the last thing I wanted to do. At least we don't have to go out tonight, I don't know if I'd be able to stay awake on the patrol.

The trucks got staged right on time. The lead truck, Alpha One, was about fifty yards from the gate, ready to roll at a moment's notice. With the trucks spaced out, and a wrecker truck between Three and Four; Alpha Four was about three hundred yards from Alpha One. Doc Wood stayed sleeping in the hooch with his broken arm. Once we got settled down, Doc Wilson showed up to my truck with his gear on.

"What's up, Doc? You know the Corpsman rolls in Alpha Two?" I asked.

"Yeah, your Corpsman does. I ain't your Corpsman. I'm just with ya' 'til Wood can go out again."

"Sounds good, welcome back to MAP Red." Doc Wilson used to be our Corpsman until he got promoted to Senior Line Corpsman of Weapons Company. "Have a nice nap," I said as he sat down in my back seat and closed his eyes.

"You too, wake me up when we can go back," he said.

"Hey, listen up, guys," I yelled to get my team's attention.

"Yes, Corporal?" Gibbons, Martinez, and Keyes responded from their positions within the truck.

"Each and every one of us is supposed to check everything on this truck, right?"

"Yes, Corporal."

"And no one caught that dirty a-barrel?" I asked.

"No, Corporal," Keyes said.

"You hear me over there Gibbons?" I asked, raising my voice so he could hear over the engine.

"Yes, Corporal," he shouted back.

"Alright, so something needs to happen to fix this problem, huh?" I asked, bringing up my premeditated punishment.

"I guess, Corporal, but it was my barrel," Martinez pointed out, trying to take all the blame.

"Yeah it is. Did you get it cleaned by the way?"

"Yes I did, Corporal," he said.

"Good, but something needs to happen, right? We can't just let this go anymore," I said, allowing my Marines to follow along with my reasoning.

"Yes, Corporal," they recited.

"No, if you disagree, stop me and say so. I just think we need to fix this problem before it keeps getting worse, know what I mean?"

"Yes, Corporal," they droned. I got the feeling they were just saying that—not really paying attention to what I was saying. Just wanting me to shut up so they could sleep.

"Alright, but I've been thinkin'. I don't like you guys doin' sandbags for a punishment," I revealed. "I just don't see the value of it, I mean what do you learn, how to fill a sandbag? I'm pretty sure you guys are experts on that by now."

"Yes we are, Corporal," Keyes said. Suddenly they were paying attention.

"Well, you guys are done with sandbags for now, unless you really piss me off. Now we're gonna experiment with something a little different."

"What's that, Corporal?" Gibbons asked, craning his head to see past Martinez sitting down in the middle of the truck, probably tired of standing in the turret.

"How did you guys do in school?" I asked.

"I did a lot of drugs, Corporal," Keyes blurted out.

"I know you did, Keyes. I know you did. But did you do okay in school while you were doin' all those drugs?"

"Not really, Corporal," Keyes admitted, discouraged at where I was going.

"It's okay. You wanna go to college when you get out?" I asked.

"I'd like to, Corporal," he said.

"Good, 'cause none of you are allowed to reenlist. That's a direct order from me." I knew each of them could amount to so much more outside of this institution. "Did you guys like doing homework?"

"No, not at all," Martinez answered on behalf of his peers.

"Well you have a group project to do now. I want a full and comprehensive essay written on the history of Iraq. All the way from early Mesopotamia until 2107."

"Isn't 2107 not part of history, yet?" Keyes wondered.

"Doing the history from Mesopotamia 'til now, you might notice a trend or something that'll lead you to be able to give a decent prediction of the future of this place," I elaborated. "Now I want the whole essay written out on how the history of Iraq has lead to its current situation. Then, how its current situation will affect the future situation of the world. You might wanna write this down."

"Roger, Corporal," Martinez said, each of them got out their pens.

"Alright, so we got the essay, right? Well, I think this might be a valuable lesson you're going to learn, so, why don't you give a presentation on the essay as well. I want a full slideshow. Each of you are gonna give a speech on one third of it," I assigned. Maybe I was getting carried away.

"Where are we gonna get this information, Corporal?" Gibbons asked.

"We got an Internet center, don't we?"

"Yes, Corporal," he said, then looked down to write something.

"Okay, this is kind of a big project, right? Well I ain't gonna tell you when it's due yet; that's gonna depend on how I see it coming together. Don't gaff it off, though. We got a whole half a school year out here, still. I'll get you real educated if we keep fuckin' up."

"Roger, Corporal," they replied while writing.

"Got any questions?"

"Yes, Corporal, could I just do sandbags instead?" Keyes asked.

"Nope, I'm done making you dumber for being dumb in the first place," I said, as I thought back to my brother in prison.

"I have a question, professor," Keyes snuck in.

"What did you say?"

"I mean I have a question, Corporal," he said.

"What's that, Keyes?"

"Are you gonna be a teacher when you get out?" he asked.

"I don't know what I'm doin' when I get out, yet. I just know I'm going back to college."

"I can't wait to go back to school," Martinez commented, dreamily.

"Don't worry about it right now. You still got too much time left to get hung up on that."

"Roger, Corporal," they said, going over their notes.

I was looking forward to taking care of my affairs for the night before I could follow Wilson's lead. I got out of my truck and walked around the wrecker truck to find Larson and let him know my guys weren't filling sandbags anymore. When I got to his truck I opened his door expecting to see him sleeping in his seat, but he wasn't there.

"Where's your VC?" I asked Gerards, Larson's gunner.

"Uh, I think he's up by Alpha One Corporal," he said, lazily.

"Alright, thanks," I said shutting the door. I looked up there and I could make out Larson, Staff Sergeant, Grant, Syc, and Evans gathered around the hood of Alpha One. Not exactly being in the most social of moods, I decided to let them continue joking around by themselves. I went back to my truck. I decided to just tell him when we got back to the hooch.

Opening the door to my truck and getting in, I decided my Marines could get some sleep, too. "Hey, just one of you needs to stay awake and monitor the radio. The rest of you can be like Doc, here, and pass the fuck out," I projected my voice so Gibbons could hear. "Shut the doors and turn on the AC," I told Keyes, the only one who had control over the air.

I decided to do like Doc and the rest of my truck, and put my flak on so it wouldn't take up all the room in the seat. Keyes, with the mic to his ear, was the only one awake after I fell asleep. He'd probably wake up Gibbons in half an hour to listen to the radio, then go to sleep himself. Boring missions like this are all we've been doing this entire deployment, and it's probably all we will do. The deployment will go on far less significant than last year, with no violence to speak of. That's fine with me, I'm extremely happy here at Hurricane Point. This is my home. I don't belong anywhere else, and I won't have to worry about getting killed this year, either.

She stood holding the half-ripe apple with a smile on her face, and an all knowing glare in her eye that I had never seen before. We weren't hallucinating the glowing spheres; we just couldn't see the dark tree in the night that held them up. When I joined her in front of the tree, I knew the mushrooms no longer had any effect on me. All I could think about was how beautiful Jamie was.

"They were apples," she giggled.

"I know," was all I could say. Her beauty continued to consume me.

"You wanna eat it?" she asked, holding it out towards me.

"Are you serious? No," I said laughing at her absurdity. Why would I eat this apple? It's not even ripe yet.

"Yeah, it looks good. I'm gonna take a bite," she said, looking unsure of her decision to do so. As she put the fruit to her mouth and took a bite, her eyes squinted with a look of disgust. She held the look as she chewed and swallowed. "It is good, you should try it," she said, calling her face a liar.

"I don't think so. I just wanna smoke some more. Wanna go get my lighter with me?" I asked.

"Alright, I'll just stay here with the blanket, though. You go get it," she said, still holding the apple out for me.

She's so beautiful, if she wants me to take a bite, I will, I thought as I grabbed her hand and brought it to my mouth. A good feeling went through my stomach as I put my mouth over her fresh bite, biting the apple deeper.

Chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk! The unmistakable bark of a fifty caliber machine gun from the front gate post woke me up with a start. "Put you're helmets on!" I yelled, not having to wake anyone up. "Anything comin' over the net?"

"No, Corp—" Keyes' answer was cut off by the loudest explosion I'd ever heard. A large flash came from the gate and the fifty cal was silenced. The shockwave knocked our heads back in our seats. I could hear the debris fall down on top of the truck, like rain and hail hitting a tin roof. My ears were ringing hard and my stomach felt like I should throw up.

"Stay down, Martinez!" I shouted, knowing it had to be a VBIED on the front gate. As the smoke and dust cleared, I could see the seven-ton laying on its side and thirty feet of the large cement wall of Hurricane Point was missing. Only a truck full of explosives could have done that.

"Drive Keyes! Fuckin' drive!" I yelled, forgetting to tell him where to go. "Get up to Alpha One!" I screamed. Staff Sergeant and everyone were up there. We had to get to them, everyone in the trucks should be alright. Keyes slammed on the gas pedal, and Martinez jumped up to man his gun. Keyes, knowing exactly what I would have told him to do, parked the truck sideways in front of Alpha One, shielding the casualties from the exposed city. "Let's go, Doc!"

Doc, Gibbons, and I jumped out of the truck to get to our helpless brothers. As we ran around to them, Doc went to work immediately. The city opened up on us with small arms fire from almost every building facing the wounded base. Without hesitation, Martinez let

his gun scream with a nonstop burst of at least seventy-five rounds. "Watch what you're shootin' at, Martinez! Don't waste those rounds!" I shouted, suddenly aware of my adrenaline overdose. This is what I lived for. This is what I'm good at. "Gibbons, get that SAW up!"

Gibbons set the bipods of the SAW on the hood of the truck, and he, too, opened up with Martinez firing again. "Get those guns talkin' to each other!" I shouted. As Martinez finished a burst, Gibbons started one to carry on the conversation. *Why is my truck the only one firing?* Only the posts on the bridges were joining in. I ran to Alpha Two. Every stride felt like it took five seconds to complete.

No one was behind the gun. I opened the driver's door to see what was wrong. Thomas and Lewis were both unconscious like the explosion never woke them up, but I knew it did the opposite. "Wake up! Wake up!" I shouted, shaking Thomas awake. "Get your truck up there with mine. Lewis, get your fifty up!" I slammed the door shut again, running back to Alpha Three to repeat the process.

After waking up Larson's truck, I jump inside to get a ride back up to the casualties. From Larson's seat I could see muzzle flashes from the top floors of all the buildings in sight. One of the attackers—only visible as a muzzle flash—zeroed in on the truck, spider webbing the windshield of Alpha Three. I swung the door open to run back to my truck screaming "Talking guns!" along the way.

"How're they doin', Doc?" I asked without looking as I started firing on the muzzle flashes.

"They're gonna be alright. They're just knocked out. I can't get them up, though. Evans has got some serious shrapnel in his legs. I got him, though!" he shouted over the continuous machine gun fire.

"Good, keep workin' on 'em. We got ya!" I loaded a grenade in my launcher and took aim on the most continuous muzzle flash. *Thump* the grenade silenced its target. I loaded another one but got down as I heard rounds cracking past me.

"Gibbons, cover me for a second!" I yelled as I ran to the back of our truck opening the hatch. Inside, I grabbed the two rocket launchers and took them back to my original position. "Gibbons, keep firing, you too, Keyes, Martinez!" After preparing the rocket for flight I ran a few steps away from the truck, under the cover of all three of my Marines.

I took a quick knee, aimed in, and pressed the button. The loud explosion next to my already hurting ear signaled the flight of my rocket. It flew for less than two seconds but seemed like it took a half an hour to greet its target. Its impact was my cue to run back to the cover of my armored truck.

As the cover fire for me slowed down, the fire from outside of

the gate sped up without skipping a beat. There was a faint explosion from one of the buildings then a deafening one right on Alpha Two. They returned my rocket with one of their own, showing they were just as good at hitting their targets. "Let's go, Gibbons!" I shouted, "Stay with the truck, Keyes." Gibbons and I ran the thirty foot gauntlet to Alpha Two. The AK-47 and medium machinegun fire was frighteningly audible over our heads and around us. Someone extremely strong punched me in my left arm.

I pulled open the door to see if Thomas and Lewis were still alive, and once again, the two of them were unconscious. "Get the fuck up!" I screamed, pounding on Lewis' helmet. I noticed his face was bloody, but not wounded too bad. He had caught light shrapnel, giving him a bloody beard. Both of his sleeves were drenched. I pulled him out of his truck by his flak. His limp body fell lifelessly to the ground. Shielded by the truck's mass I went to work on him. "Get behind that fifty, and wake up Thomas!" I ordered Gibbons.

Opening Lewis' first aid kit on his flak, I prepared a pressure dressing for his wounds. I wrapped it around the bloody eruption on his right arm. The flowing blood was a sign of life. Ripping my own first aid kit open, I got another pressure dressing for his other arm. "Wake up, Lewis!" I screamed. "Wake up!"

Looking up at the chaos around me, I saw a dump truck speeding into the base through the gaping hole. I prepared myself for death by attempting to clear my mind of any negative thoughts. I was sure it was about to explode. Firing on it from here would only cause it to detonate. I could only embrace Lewis' unconscious body. The protection I offered would do nothing to stop the VBIED from killing both of us—it was just instinct.

It did not detonate, though. It drove right past us, and rounds bounced off it. It must be armored. It drove right into the base taking the first left towards the Battalion COC. The driver must have had directions. As soon as it crashed through the sandbags guarding the front door, it detonated, crumbling the façade.

The shockwave, like a sledge hammer hitting my helmet, caused me to throw up on the ground next to Lewis' head.

The shockwave also seemed to bring Lewis back to life; his eyes opened, searching for something. Maybe he was looking for the surroundings of his room back home. Whatever he was looking for he didn't find it. "Just stay here behind the truck! I'll be back for you!" I shouted, getting up to run back to my truck.

The booming machine gun, louder than all the others, told me that Gibbons got the fifty firing again. That's a big plus, because without that, all we'd have going for us would be two medium machine

guns and a handful of individual rifles. Getting back to my truck, I checked to make sure my grenade launcher was still loaded, and then positioned myself over the hood to fire.

This time, with less targets to choose from, I picked a muzzle flash farther away than the first. *Thump* as it flew through the air I knew it was going to be a miss, then the distant explosion told me I was right. I didn't pause. Loading another, I noticed the fire from outside of the gate was dying down. Firing on the same target again, I hit this time. After loading another grenade and firing it at the last target I could see, I hit again.

It wasn't quiet, though; the Boot gunners continued to fire into the city. "Cease fire! Cease fire!" I screamed to the gunners, and they did. "Conserve you're ammo, now! Have your drivers check how many rounds you got left! Gunners keep an eye out for anyone else!"

"How ya doin' up there, Martinez?"

"Good, Corporal, is everyone alright?" he shouted back down.

"Yeah, they are. You do a barrel change?" I asked.

"Yeah, two of them," he yelled down, not taking his eyes off the city.

The stars did not run and hide from the battle. Instead, they chose to stay and watch. And now, MAP White and MAP Blue started to show up from the hooches still left untouched. Half of them ran to the Battalion COC and the other half ran to our aid.

"Get these Marines to Charlie Med!" I yelled to the oncoming help, pointing to the group of casualties and remembering Lewis. I ran back over to him, still laying there, still conscious. "Can you get up?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I'm gonna need your help, though." I grabbed him by the front of his flak to help him up, not wanting to hurt his arms. In doing so, I noticed my own arm was bloody like his, but our arms never touched. I must have gotten hit when I ran to him the first time. *Fuck*. Helping him limp to Doc, we noticed what had to be Bravo slowly driving in from the other side of the city, turrets spinning, looking for targets.

Limping with Lewis to Doc, looking forward to getting my arm looked at; I heard a distant explosion, then consecutively a louder one. Lewis and I dove to the ground and I saw an explosion leap from the lead vehicle. Then another rocket from a rooftop hit the second vehicle.

"Let's go, Keyes!" I shouted. "Get in the truck!" I jumped into my seat and loaded my grenade launcher again. "Get over there," I yelled to Keyes over the reincarnated machine gun fire. He sped off

to the victims with new driving expertise. "Stop up here, I'm getting out!" I screamed, just yelling now out of habit.

Forcing my door open again after the short ride, I fired a grenade at the building I saw the rocket come from. Martinez provided cover fire for me again as I ran to the downed vehicle.

When I got to the truck everyone inside was alright except the gunner, who I helped out of the truck with the truck's vehicle commander. This was not Bravo. I didn't recognize any of these Marines. "Over here," I said calmly to my help, pointing out the nearest door. He ran there while I dragged the wounded Marine.

The VC kicked the door open and cleared the first room with his rifle and flashlight. "Clear!" he shouted, signaling me to drag the gunner in. It was an auto shop. The garage door was halfway open. The smells of motor fluids and gun powder filled my nostrils.

"I got this one, go get your Corpsman and any other wounded in here," I ordered to my unknown brother.

"Roger," he said, quick to follow my advice, and he ran back out into the night.

"You okay, buddy?" I asked the unconscious Marine. "What's wrong with you anyway?" I asked as I moved him into the light from the nearly full moon. I noticed a hole in his forehead from which blood spilled down his face. *The same place they got Nate*, I realized as I noticed I was staring into the dead face of Nate.

EIGHT

The Death Bed of Civilization

"I'M A HALF-DRUNK, extremely tired motherfucker, and I ain't goin' to sleep 'til you get the fuck outta here." I gave him more detail than he probably wanted.

She was the most beautiful girl I'd seen since I could remember. She had short black hair with piercing brown, almond shaped eyes that dominated her brown face. She sat up, not to intervene, but to watch as her agitator hopefully got what she thought he deserved.

"Oh, did I mention I love to fight?" I asked casually. The alcohol in my blood was still enough to have its usual effect on me.

"What the fuck ever. She ain't worth it in the first place," he said as he got up to leave.

"Okay, now you can apologize." I probably mistook him for a Marine. I expected him to follow my order without any argument.

"Motherfucker, I'm about to kick you the fuck outta here," he whined. "What's your problem anyway?"

I leaned in close, "Listen, now you owe me and her an apology. I'll be happy if you just give her one. But you ain't stayin' here, and I'm not lettin' you leave without a broken jaw unless you apologize," I quietly told him. I wasn't really too sure what the outcome of a fight with this guy would be.

"Whatever, man," he said refusing to apologize to me. "Sorry," he said plainly to the girl before he turned to leave.

For the first time tonight, I wisely chose not to provoke anyone further. I went to my spot on the couch to go back to sleep.

"Are you comfortable like that?" the girl asked.

"Not really, but I've slept in worse places. I'll be good," I told her, shutting my eyes to pass out again.

"You can get up here with me, and we can both stretch out," she offered.

The thought went through my mind after the guy left but I opted not to intrude like he did. "I guess I can do that. Yeah, that'd be nice," I agreed, getting up to lay down behind her, putting an arm around her waist; there was no place else to put it. I could already tell she was taller than me, but I didn't mind. In fact, I kind of liked it that way.

"What's your name?" she asked. Her voice fit her perfectly, beautiful just like every other part of her.

"Brad, what's yours?"

"Jasmine," she said softly. "Thanks Brad."

"Not a problem, Jasmine. I'd fight for a beautiful girl like you any day," I said, letting the alcohol continue to choose my words for me.

She giggled quietly, and grasped my arm around her waist with her hand. It'd been a long time since I had a woman in my arms like this, and this was the first time that she was a black woman. There was definitely something very different about her, something—perfect. We fell asleep this way. I could only savor every minute of it. I knew it would be long time before I held a woman so close again, maybe even never.

What the fuck? What's goin' on? Where's my gear? Where's my weapon? Who's trunk am I in? Fuck, fuck, fuck! I was starting to remember what happened, the pain in my throat and arm reminded me. I remembered a struggle with someone who crept up behind me in the garage, choking me as I swung my rifle behind me failing to hit my attacker. I struggled hard but uselessly until I passed out. I thought I heard more loud explosions, too, but it was hard to be sure of anything.

Now I'm in a damn trunk, not going fast, but going. Fuck, they got me. How the fuck did they get me? I asked myself silently, not wanting to alert anyone of my consciousness. Sonofabitch, they're gonna make a video outta me. Fuck. I ain't goin' out silently, I'm gonna fight 'til I die. Fear gripped every aspect of my being. I knew I wasn't supposed to live with fear, or die with it for that matter, but that's really hard to do when I knew I was on the way to my decapitation.

Tears fell from my eyes, one each, as I could only think about my mother. I hope she can survive when she finds out. The only thing that went through my mind as I was forced to my death were thoughts of my mother, my father, and what it's going to feel like to get my head cut off with a dull knife.

I could feel nothing but the worst mental torment as the vehicle slowed to a stop. How long was I out back here? Are we still in Ramadi? I could hear the doors open and shut as the vehicle lifted from being relieved of much of its weight. Expecting them to open the truck and

drag me out, I was relieved when they didn't. They must have gone inside wherever we were.

The fear gripped my body again forcing me to shake quietly and violently in what could only be my last place on Earth. I said a lot to God in that trunk, and I spoke to my mother telling her I would be with her long after they kill me. I told my father how he gave me the best upbringing a child could've ask for, and was the best father I could've had.

How the hell did I end up here, in a trunk, about to be escorted to my bloody death? I guess this is where most people start pleading with God to give them one more chance, but I knew God had already given me a million chances. It's just my time, now. I just asked Him to forgive me for everything I did wrong in my life. I reminded the Universe how all I ever wanted to do was good, even when I was doing the opposite.

My thoughts raced violently in that trunk, not stopping on one for long enough to fully comprehend it. I spoke to whoever would listen about everything I learned during my short time on Earth and how I hoped it would carry over with me when I die.

My silent thoughts became quiet whispers when I decided no one was there to hear. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Get a hold of yourself, Multriener." I gave myself the advice I thought Staff Sergeant might say. "You're a fucking Marine. Figure something out." But I had already searched for any interior trunk release and found nothing. "You're more than a Marine, you're Bradley Multriener. You've figured you're way outta worse than this."

Nothing to do now but try to calm myself and plan, plan how to survive. Calming myself was futile, though. Every time I was able to accomplish the task, I was suddenly reminded of my situation.

It went on like this through the night, and what I could tell was the morning as the sun peeked into the trunk through gaps in the hatch. My nerves settled slightly as my predicament became less of a surprise. I tried to fulfill what I always imagined my last day would be like. I tried to bring my mind to that point of clarity I always wanted to die with. I spent the rest of the time we were stopped trying to attain that clarity.

I didn't reach what I was looking for, but I eventually calmed myself and started to feel more comfortable with the situation. There was just something inside of me telling me it's not my time to die yet.

The door to the house opened and I could hear two men arguing in Arabic. What they were saying I could not translate directly, but I got the gist of what they meant. *Get him out of here! He does not need to be here!* someone said.

Fine! We will go! my captor replied, angry with his denial of a safe haven. *The Marines have to know I'm missing now. They'll send the entire battalion after me.*

Shuffling footsteps made their way to the vehicle and got in. They tried to start the car but it would barely turn over. The driver put it in neutral and rolled backwards out onto the street and stopped. I could hear men throw their hands on the trunk to push the vehicle. As it got momentum, the driver was able to start the engine. The men got into the vehicle and we drove away once again.

Hopefully they will let me out when we get there, I thought. I must have started to get delirious. I would like to get some fresh air and stretch my back. Earlier, my bloody arm was the least of my concern, as my soon-to-be *bloody stump of a neck* occupied my whole mind. But now I was able to think clearly once again, just like in the battle.

I put my right index finger in the hole in my sleeve made by the bullet that had my name on it. I used the hole as a foot hold to rip a long strip out of my sleeve as the engine roared, muffling the noise. The strip was ripped completely off, exposing my gunshot wound. I wrapped it around the hole that wasn't bleeding so bad, the hot bullet must have missed all arteries and major veins. It looked like it might have even cauterized it a bit. Using my teeth and my right hand, I tied the strip off tightly over the wound stopping the slow trickle of blood. It was painful and uncomfortable, but Doc Wilson wasn't there to give me any morphine.

Once again, we slowed as we went up what I could tell was a ramp into a home's gated yard, then stopped. This time, again, I was left in the trunk while they went in to greet their new hosts. I noticed, now, the hunger was gripping my stomach. I looked forward to getting out and meeting my captors face to face. I wanted to look them in the eye to see them for real.

After a while in the trunk, I went back to worrying about my family. Not how they'd cope without me, but how they would get along in this vicious world. I thought about the challenges Vincent was sure to face growing up. I hoped he would never have to come to the Middle East on violent terms. I wondered if my brother will be able to stay out of trouble when he gets out of prison. I worried for my mother, wondering if her on-the-run lifestyle would ever catch up with her.

I thought about my father, I had no idea how he'd take this. There's still way too much I need to learn about that man. I'd like to get out of this mess soon, and go out to get some breakfast with him somewhere.

Then I wondered why she never wrote me that letter like she

said she would. Maybe she lost my address, or maybe she changed her mind. Either way, something was wrong. She said she was going to write right away, but she never did. I didn't have her address or phone number or anything. I was just waiting to get a letter from her because it would have made my whole week better, and I could write back with a thousand letters. I had so much to tell her. *How come she never wrote?*

Maybe she could get my new address of wherever we're going, and she can write to me there. We had to still be in Ramadi. They would've locked down traffic into and out of the city after that fight. It was a good one. I'd never been in one like that before. It did kind of feel good to knock the dust off.

I wonder how the rest of the fight went. I hope everyone came out alright. Too bad for that poor bastard who got hit in the face. Does his family know yet, or are they going on with their day, waiting for their son to make his usual call home?

My exhaustion has been trying to get a hold of me for the past couple of days, but I hadn't been able to give in. I could probably get some much needed sleep. *I am tired as hell. I just can't get to sleep in this trunk.* It's just something about being held captive by people who are known to behead their prisoners.

In fact, I couldn't even tell if I was awake anymore. My gunshot was making me vertiginous, along with my desperate need for sleep. My hunger wasn't doing much to quell my delirium, either. And some water would be nice. Could I have some water please?

"Water," was all she said in a raspy voice.

"Alright, hold on," I said, getting up to grant this beautiful angel her wish. The sun beating in through the large window woke us both up around the same time. For a while we could only lay there while the sun perpetually heated the room.

Going to the sink, I only wanted to use the best glass I could find, a large Chicago Bears glass that would hold plenty. I filled it from the sink then stopped halfway. Ice. I would make her the best glass possible. Going to the freezer to get the ice I decided to drink the water in the glass myself, fill the glass with ice, and get some filtered water from Owen's fridge. This has to be so much healthier, I thought

She held it with both hands, drank half the glass in one gulp, and passed it to me for my share of the precious liquid.

"Thank you, Brad. You're such a gentlemen," she said softly, laying her head back on the pillow.

"Do you want to sleep in a bed?" I asked, suddenly remembering what Owen had told me before I got drunk.

"There's an open one here?"

"Yeah there's a whole open room here, somewhere. Wanna go?"

"Hell yeah," she said, excited at the prospect of getting out of the sun and into a real bed. I was excited to see how close she would lay to me with a whole bed to sprawl out on. She followed me down the hall where we found the room Owen had told me about.

"Are you hot?" she asked.

"Yeah, kinda, it's cooler in here, though."

"Me too," she said while striping down to her dark blue bra and panties. I joined her in shedding most of our clothes. Throwing off a blanket from the bed, leaving only a sheet, I got in and held it up for her.

"Do you go to school here?" she asked.

"No, not here," I replied.

"I didn't think so. You aren't like anyone I've ever met here," she said, getting under the sheet with me. "Where did you learn to be such a gentleman? I thought your kind didn't exist anymore." She got real close as she climbed in, resting her head on my chest and putting her arm around my waist. I couldn't ask for anything more right now. I didn't want to ever have to get up from this spot. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life here, with this stranger holding me, me holding her. I don't need anything else, just let me stay here, with Jasmine, I thought.

"Not in college," was the only answer I could think of without giving too much away.

"Where do you go to school?" she continued.

"USMC," I said without lying.

"University of Santa Monica in California?" she asked, surprised to meet someone from out of the state. "You're from Cali?"

"Nah, I'm from Chicago. I've been living in Cali for the past couple of years, though," I answered, trying to maintain honesty and anonymity.

"What're you studying?" She seemed quietly amused at the out-of-towner.

"Ha, I'm not studying. I'm a Marine," I replied, becoming as honest as possible.

"No way, are you serious?" she asked, gripping my arm tight, obviously more excited all of the sudden.

I couldn't help but laugh. In California this is the time when she would have gotten up to leave. "Yeah, it's not a big deal, though. Let's just go to sleep for a little bit and talk about it when we wake up."

"Okay, I've never slept with a Marine before, and you saved me last night too!" she said quietly, paused then said, "I didn't mean sleep with you like that," hurrying to fix her misuse of the right words at the wrong time.

"I know what you meant. All I want to do is lay here with you. I

haven't had a woman in my arms in so long," I said, trying to comfort her, wondering if that was the wrong thing to say on my part. I should just go to sleep before I do anymore damage.

"That's good, all I want to do is be in your arms right now." She completely abolished any anxiety I had for being so honest with her.

With Jasmine in my arms, I couldn't think about anything bad in my life. Right then I didn't have a life, all I had was Jasmine, all I needed was Jasmine, all I wanted was Jasmine.

Trying to go to sleep was hopeless for me. With one of her legs between mine and her head rising and falling with my breath, she looked up at me, I guess to see if I was still awake.

I answered her look by rolling over on top of her so fast she couldn't do anything but giggle. Pinning her to the bed on her back, I gazed into her warm eyes. The rest wasn't me thinking, just instinct, as I leaned in to kiss her.

The trunk opened loud and fast. I could briefly see three men standing over me before one forced a bag over my half asleep, half delirious head. Grabbing me by both arms, I could feel one hand grab my wound tightly. They all grabbed me and lifted me out of the trunk. I was just starting to get comfortable, too.

"Salam," I greeted my escorts, knowing I had probably just killed at least one of their brothers last night.

"What's up?" One of the men replied in a younger, accented voice. Then I got slapped hard on the side of my head as they guided me where to walk. I heard one reprimanding the young one, then another slap, probably the young one getting it, too.

So these are the people who are going to kill me, I thought, trying to rack my memory for the proper Arabic phrases to use at the right times. I didn't want to be the impolite, unwanted guest that they'd be eager to get rid of.

They guided me through the heat of the day, up a step, and in through what seemed like a door. In the even hotter house, I was guided into a room where they released me by throwing me to the hard floor.

One of the men took the black bag from my head, and the older man began speaking to me loud and furiously in Arabic. He kept pointing my rifle at my face as he spoke. A younger man, probably my age, translated for him.

"Prepare to go to hell, American. You have stepped your dirty boot on holy land too many times. This your last time, American," the young man said in a tone that didn't at all match that of his elder. He had a young, hardened face with high cheekbones and pursed

lips. He had skeptical eyes that appeared to see the world much more clearly than his two cohorts. His hair was cut short and he wore a grey dishdasha with sandals. All three of their faces were exposed. I would rather them be covered. With their faces exposed, it meant they didn't plan on letting me go, because now I could give their description. *Fuck, what the hell was I thinking in that trunk, these people are gonna kill me right here with my own rifle. Fuck.*

After the leader's brief *You're going to die* speech, he and the younger fellow left, leaving me with the middle-aged one. He had a weathered face that seemed incapable of a smile. He was very skinny and had a mustache like his leader's. He wore a generic shirt for a popular American sport company, track pants, and running shoes. His outfit was not popular for Ramadi, well, at least for the past few months. His clothing style was the uniform of a fighter. Other than to carry out an attack, no one ever wore running shoes here; only sandals.

His face reminded me of some of the hardened LA gangsters I'd run into. Years of nonstop combat probably did that to him. I bet he'd been fighting since the war started. Being lucky or skilled enough not to have been killed, he'd probably seen a lot of his friends die. I bet he would like to do nothing more than to kill me right now. He's probably waiting. He hasn't been ordered to, yet. He's been ordered to guard me in this small, dank, sauna of a room.

Still sitting on the floor, I asked, "Schlonek?" to see how he would reply.

He didn't reply by telling me how he was doing like I hoped. Instead he yelled some quick unknown word as he rushed forward and kicked me in the face. My head was sent backwards to the ground. A warm coppery taste filled my mouth and I knew Larson's gash had been reopened. This time I didn't get knocked out. I could probably get back up and overpower his AK-47 from him, but I would like to survive this ordeal. I know if I'm going to survive, I'm going to have to think my way out of here, or at least think of a plan to overpower my way out. I can't just act with brute force. I have no idea where I am or where I could go.

I decided to just stay down, stay down and swallow my own blood. Maybe now I can finally get my rest that'd been continuously stolen from me since the OP. I'll go to sleep lightly. I'll allow myself to be woken up by the slightest touch. If they decide to shoot me in my sleep, that'd probably be the best way.

If I wasn't already completely exhausted, there'd be no way I could've fallen asleep there. The cement floor was the coldest thing in the room and it was hot to the touch. There's nothing to lay or lean on except the wall. In any other mental condition, I might have stayed

awake to study my guard more or tend to my wounds, but I couldn't resist this chance to recharge.

The apple was sour. How could she have thought it tasted good? The fruit dried all the moisture from my mouth. I regretted trying it immediately. Forcing myself to chew, then swallow, I was happy to have finished the bite.

"It is good," I agreed with her, not sure why.

"I told you, come on," she said smiling and beckoning me to the blanket. The smile never left her face, as if she was endowed with all a person could ever ask for. We walked back to our place on the lake holding hands. In all places I could be with any person, I would not want to be anywhere else but here, with Jamie, the love of my life.

Looking into the sky, the stars were dancing for our love again. We didn't need to speak anymore. We just knew as we held each other in our arms. We just knew and watched the world around us in silence.

Red and blue lights pierced our view of the world. Then the siren really caught our attention. We looked back toward Warren Hall and saw a police car on the road. It brought its spotlight up across the ground and fixed on Jamie and me. We immediately froze, but that didn't last for long. Our hands still clasped, we got up and ran. We ran fast towards Warren Hall, the only place we could go.

Our hands only held on to each other for our first few strides, then they broke. As we made it to the back door we saw two cops scrambling to get out of their car and chase after us. We rushed up the steps to the third floor, down the hall and to Thejo's room.

"Thejo, open up dude, we gotta get in!" Knock, knock, knock. "Thejo, it's me and Jamie, hurry up, man!"

Finally, Thejo opened his door and stood in there half asleep. We rushed in around him and I shut the door quietly. We could hear the police rushing through the third floor door from the stairwell.

I was awoken violently by the middle-aged one wrapping thick tape around my head and over my mouth. My fist connected square with the side of his face. I heard the cracking noise of his jaw bone either breaking or dislocating, along with a muffled cry of real pain.

He didn't waste any time to return my blow with a stiff punch to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. I could have fought back but he caught me right as I recoiled from my loss of breath. He grabbed my arms and put them behind my back, taping them quickly. The older one rushed in to his aid. They picked my exhausted body up from the ground, the old one at my feet, the other at my head. *I'm not*

goin' out like this. I brought my knees to my stomach and shot them back out again, drop kicking the old man in his chest.

On the ground again, scrambling to my feet without the aid of my hands, I got up before the middle-aged one could get a hold of me. I faced off with him, backing him into a corner. Just as I was about to throw a crippling kick to his knees, I heard running steps coming from behind me. Looking to see who it was, I saw the young one charging at me with his AK-47. The butt stock of his weapon made painful contact with the right side of my forehead.

* * * * *

I WOKE UP in a pitch black coffin, unable to move more than a few inches. I was bound tightly with the tape. *Fuck, not again.* I did the only thing I could do; I squirmed, testing my limits. My legs knocking into something and I heard the distinctive sound of my rifle clattering on the ground.

“HALLWAY FRONT! ROOM TO THE RIGHT! ROOM TO THE LEFT!” The familiar voice of an unfamiliar American shouted as he was clearing the house! “ROOM CLEAR, SUPPORT UP!”

“ENROUTE! I’M WITH YA! PUSH!” another voice cried as loud as possible.

I screamed through my tape but my cries were muffled. I kept screaming, trying to get the attention of my search party. I heard them pounding right over the top of my coffin. It must not be a coffin. I must be in the floor. “Nothing in here, sir,” an American called.

“*Abhhhhhhhh!*” I cried at the top of my lungs through the tape.

“Alright, move out to the next house!” the officer ordered.

“*Abhhhhhhhh!*” My muffled screams were heard by no American. I could hear at least six pairs of boots pounding over me and out of the house. The speed at which a group of Marines can clear a house can be really fast if they choose.

I didn’t want to leave my coffin. I was sure they’d get their payback when they knew it would be safe to take me out again. Maybe they won’t take me out. Maybe they’ll just let me rot down here. That would be nice. My captors above me were running frantically around the house, shouting to each other in Arabic.

One of them probably heard me screaming because the middle-aged one opened the floor I was under. He waited until we made eye contact and then butt stroked me with his rifle.

NINE

Humanity

WHEN I WOKE up I was back in the trunk, except this time I wasn't surprised, just beat. I had an unnaturally bad headache and blood was crusted all over my face. I was unbearably tired, hungry, and thirsty. There would be no screaming or yelling in here; my feet, hands, and mouth were all taped tightly. I'll just try to sleep to escape the pain. If these guys are planning on killing me, they better give me some medical attention soon or I'm going to die on my own. They probably wouldn't care so much, but to capture a live American is such a rare accomplishment for them in this war. I'm not sure if I fell asleep or if I passed out from the pain, but either way I needed the rest.

Bound with tape, bleeding from my wounds, painfully hungry, and desperately thirsty, I slept well. I don't know how long I was out, but it must have been long because when I woke I was actually well rested. They must have known the fight was out of me because they didn't hit me when they opened the trunk. The two younger ones lifted me out of the trunk and into the evening sun. They didn't bother to blindfold me because there was nothing around except open desert and a house.

It was a large, yellow brick building that wasn't finished being built, or if it had been finished, it was looted back down to its skeleton. There's so many like it in Ramadi, all the construction projects from before the war stopped after the invasion. So many homes were left half-built as if time stopped in 2003 and quickly digressed ever since.

The old man lead the way into the new hideout with my rifle slung across his back. The middle-aged one cut the tape from my legs

allowing me to walk. “Do as you’re told, and you will be left alone,” the translator said on his own accord.

“Can I get some food or some water?”

“Do not try to fight and you will be fed,” he said.

“I won’t, I just need food, and to wash this blood off,” I told him, seeing how much he’d be willing to give.

“You will be taken care of. Just go inside,” he instructed.

“Are you guys still planning on killing me?” I asked.

“You will stop asking questions now,” he commanded, beckoning me to keep moving with a stiff push to my left shoulder. With the cloth tied tight around my wound, my arm was numb. At least it stopped bleeding.

The upstairs room he showed me into was nothing but concrete; the walls, the floor, and the high ceiling. It did have somewhat of a mattress, though. It was a small slab of foam, the most inviting foam I had ever seen. The only thing recently built in the house was the solid wood door of the room they escorted me into. They must have been expecting me. Sturdier than most doors I’ve seen in Iraq, this room seemed to be designed for the purpose it was to serve. “Stay here,” he said as he walked out. With almost no space between the bottom of the door and the floor, it ground hard on the rough concrete. When he finally shut it, I could hear him locking it from the outside.

Only when I laid down on my foam slab did I finally realize the pain I was in. Maybe it was a full night and day’s worth of adrenaline, or maybe it was the fact that my mind was preoccupied with survival. I didn’t know if my headache would ever go away after this, or if there would be an *after this*. My left arm was now immobilized with a shooting pain running up and down its length and into my chest. My throat burned from dehydration. I wasn’t even sure if I’d be able to drink water if I was ever given any.

I tried to lay still on my slab, but I couldn’t control my shaking. Sleep was no longer an option. Besides, for once I felt well rested. The bucket in the corner of the room could only be for one thing, so I used it painfully and went back to my mattress.

I had been laying on my mattress quivering with pain and fear for what seemed like forever when the English speaker came back. He carried a two liter bottle of water with the top cut off, and a blue grocery bag with pita bread in it. “Drink this, eat too,” he said. Something wasn’t right. I figured they would just bring out the video camera and tape me getting my head cut off already. “What’s your name?” he asked in an uninterested way.

“Brad, what’s yours?” I asked sipping the water. My stomach hurt too much to try to keep down the bread.

"My name is not important. You eat and drink and sleep. We will talk later," he said, leaving me with my pain again.

Eventually I was able to try the bread, and I found it to actually be very good. They must have given me some out of their own freshly baked share. I could only eat one of the four pieces he gave me and decided to save more than half of the water for later.

Soon I was alone again, like much of my life—not that there weren't many people in it—I was just rarely able to find anyone with whom I could connect. I could have connected with her though, if only she would have written. Good for her, she won't have to deal with losing someone who would have loved her so completely.

How could I have avoided this? I put myself here. I should have just stayed in school and never quit smoking pot. At least when I was smoking pot I wasn't shooting at anyone. I'd never know if I killed anyone last night, I could only guess. What if I did, did the poor guy have a daughter? Was it her first birthday yesterday? Did he have a wife who won't stop crying until their daughter's old enough to take over?

I might as well have killed myself. Maybe I would if I still had my rifle, but I don't. He has it, which is just as well, because he'll probably kill me with it, anyway. I guess I lived a long enough life. If time is relative, then I should be older than most men on their deathbeds. Maybe that's why I'm here on my foam deathbed. Maybe the Universe asked: *You've had enough. Did you figure it out? Did you figure out why you were put on this Earth?*

To which I would have to reply: *No, I don't think I have. If I did, I must've forgotten. Was I supposed to pick a religion and follow it without question? Or should I have just refused to participate in humanity's madness? Was I wrong for getting involved and trying to make some sense out of it all? I really thought I should try to figure You out for myself. I mean what if I agreed with a lot of what they had to say, but I disagreed with one part, should I concede and choose to accept it as truth? Or should I have started my own sect and condemn my dissidents? Should I have picked a life of celibacy and contemplated You all day, every day from within a monastery?*

I would have chose to raise a family and teach my children everything I could about being a good person, but I didn't feel right about bringing a child into this world, yet, while it's still doomed for self destruction. I guess I'm sorry for never really picking and just going on what seemed right at the time. Maybe I should have just picked a life and followed it. I mean, at least then I could've rested and had some time to contemplate Your genius.

There're so many problems in the world; was I wrong to have tried

to take them on? I really wish I could have just exiled from the world into my cave and lived the way I wanted, but You wouldn't let me do that. What was I supposed to do?

I asked You so desperately to give me a woman in my life—a real woman—one I could love, God. There has to be a reason You never put her in my life. Was it my fault? Did the stars not line up? I guess You're right, I mean, what was I asking for? I was asking You to put a woman in my life almost every day, but what did that mean? Why did I want one? I guess I was never ready for one. I hadn't settled down yet. I was too busy trying to adventure, trying to see Your genius creation.

Did I even have a choice on the life I lived, or was it all part of Your plan? I mean, how is that supposed to work? I've never really been afraid of You. I always hear everyone say I should be a God-fearing man, but why? Why should I be afraid of the most benevolent being in the Universe? Why should I be afraid of the Universe? Why should I be afraid, God?

I am afraid, though. I'm afraid You're gonna take me out of this world before I get to complete my plan. Is that selfish? I have plans, God. I'm afraid of what the world's going to become if You don't let me fulfill my plans. Can You let me fulfill my plans please? I swear You'll be happy if I do. I have to get out of here, God. I can't die here. Not now, at least. I still have work to do.

If God was still paying attention, I might be asked: How do you plan on accomplishing your plans?

And after being completely lost for an answer, I might say: Well, I'm not really sure. I never thought that would be a problem. It's never been a problem before. I've just always done what I had to do. And if I can't figure it out, I usually just listen to what the Universe has to say and You point me in the right direction.

I mean, I'm not really sure what my plans are. I just know I have to change the world. Is that common, God? Does everyone want to change the world? I would guess it has to be. I don't think I've ever met a person completely satisfied with the world—most people I've met aren't satisfied with anything about the world at all. Doesn't everyone want to change it?

Am I the only one? Why can't I find any help? Why does everyone I meet seem determined to stop me? Like they know my plans, and they won't stop 'til I fail. Everyone in the platoon wouldn't let me breathe if it meant I had my way. I guess ignorance is bliss. I've never seen any of them worrying about the world. Can't they tell there's something wrong? I would ask You if I could just be like them, if I could just forget everything I knew about the future, or lack of it, but I wouldn't be able to be blissfully ignorant like them. Ignorance might be bliss, but bliss is not ignorance.

Why do You do this? I know I'm not the only one who's completely lost. Why do You put us in a world full of so much violence and hatred? I know You'd say it's to teach us, show us the way, but the only way people find to fight violence is with more violence. It's gonna end us, we're only human, damn it. We can't find the lesson You're trying to teach us, we're only gonna end up killing each other and end Your great experiment miserably.

Every time I think I find the way, I seem to forget. I get lost every time someone close gets killed, or every time I see I little girl die because of someone's stupidity. Every time I see the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, every time I see there's no justice in the world. Why the hell did You put us through all this?

I argued with the Universe all night, back to the point of exhaustion. I slept a little, but reality kept waking me up. My mind, left free to wander while my body was still incarcerated, traveled far. It's always wandered far with my body always incarcerated. It wandered to a future where humanity was not always focused on killing each other. It wandered to a place where I was free to raise my children the way I wanted. It wandered to a place where I did not have to live in fear, and to a place where I could be friends with the people right outside of this room. My mind wandered far while my body was pinned down far from home, wherever that was. Once again I accepted death only to reject it again, soon.

I just hoped that they would kill me when I happen to be accepting it. I hope I go out without fear, without hatred, and without a grudge against humanity. After all, humanity does have just as many redeeming qualities. Even if I can maintain that understanding from now until then, I bet it'll change when I'm staring down the barrel of a rifle, or when I'm looking into the eyes of the man who will cut my throat.

I looked at my arms, my legs, and my body and thought how the bugs will make it one with the desert soon. I imagined my dust traveling around the world in a drop of rain. I saw it fall into soil and get soaked up by a tree. I saw Vincent pick an apple from that tree. I saw all the great things my body used to be before it was loaned to me. I really wasn't too sure of everything I was thinking that night. Like usual, my thoughts and opinions changed so rapidly I was unable to grasp one long enough to even begin to try to comprehend it.

I stopped trying to fight the oversized mosquitoes. I stopped trying to fight at all. I stopped trying to fight my meeting with death. I tried to take a leaf out of my platoon's book; I tried to turn an ignorant side to my horrible fate. I tried to pretend like nothing was

wrong, but that never worked for me. Reality was always there to punch me in the face, shoot me in the arm, or butt stroke me over the head.

Suddenly my sense of urgency came back and told me I was wasting my time. Sitting up, I quickly tore another strip from my bloody uniform and rebandaged my arm, this time being much more careful about it. I would have cleaned the wound with the water, but from the taste, I knew it came from a well outside. It would only infect the hole going through the top of my bicep. The bandage I put on this time was much more carefully constructed and tied. As per usual, it hurt to replace the old with the new.

I was hungry, but I didn't feel like eating. I was thirsty, but I didn't feel like drinking. I was tired, but I didn't feel like sleeping. I only felt like laying back down on my slab. So I did, once again, alone with my thoughts, just wanting to die. My mind haunted me all night. Sleep was still fleeting. Every time I would fall away, my dreams would kick me out of their world. No comfort to be had, no peace to enjoy.

* * * * *

“WAKE UP!” HE called, opening the door, unaware that I was more awake than ever. He had to force the door open as it grinded on the floor, fighting to stay closed. I thought how that ruined my chances of opening it quietly and sneaking out in the night.

All three of my captors entered the room, each carrying a weapon. The two younger men held AK-47s, while the older man still held my rifle as if he owned it the whole war. “You will be asked questions now. You will answer them,” the youngest one demanded.

“You're gonna torture me?” I asked, not at all surprised.

“You will tell us what we ask,” he continued.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, hoping to avoid the painful persuasion.

“Not now, first eat this.” He brandished a crumbling pill. As he handed it to me, both of his friends leveled their weapons to my face.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Eat it or die,” he said, pushing the pill closer to me.

I picked it up and carefully reached for the water to my left. I placed it under my tongue and swallowed it with a gulp. I could feel it go down my throat, wondering what it would do to me. I noticed an oversized beetle make its way into the room through the open door that they each walked out. They fought it back closed, and I was no longer alone.

"How'd you end up here?" I asked the beetle whose long skinny legs worked tirelessly to propel its large black body.

It stopped to look at me. I waited for a response but got none. "You hungry?" I asked, tearing off a small piece of pita bread. Still no reply. I tossed it to him anyway, but he passed it up on his way to the corner of the room.

"If you're tryin' to get outta here, your best bet's to go back by the door and wait for it to open again." He didn't want to listen. "Whatever buddy, you stick around here long enough, you might get eaten yourself," I told him, thinking of survival stories I had heard in training for exactly this type of situation.

Maybe that's how I can get out of here, I realized as I picked him up by his fat, delicious body. His legs fought uselessly against my index finger and thumb.

"Don't eat me," he said calmly.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll only be eating yourself," he said simply.

"Who are you?"

"You've been talking to me all night."

"Ohhhhhhh," I said, suddenly enlightened.

"You see now?"

"Yeah." I was at a loss for words.

"Can you put me down now?"

"Oh yeah, sorry about that."

"No worries," he said walking away, waving goodbye.

The door being forced open again notified me of company. *Is everything alright? I hope they like the place.*

"There is not much to ask you that we do not already know," the English speaker said as he walked in with his armed companions. "So I will ask the basic."

"What's your name?" I asked, beginning with the basics.

"Do not ask questions, answer them."

"You haven't asked me anything yet," I told him.

"Enough, who is your leader?"

"I am," I said, giving him the only answer I could think of.

"Your military leader!" he barked.

"Ohhhh, that guy, I can't remember his name right now. What was that pill you gave me? I wanna get more when I get back to the States."

"Shut up!" His accent indicated that he did not normally use that phrase in English. "Your leader, who is he?"

"I told you already, you are."

"Do not make me hit you," he warned. Saying something to the

older gentleman in Arabic, he continued, "We already know. Everything is on the Internet. Now just tell me; who is your leader?"

"Some old dude, I forgot his name." The image of my battalion commander came to me.

"Ridiculous!" he shouted, forcing the muzzle of his rifle into my mouth, the metal made painful contact with my teeth that Larson had loosened. "Tell me his name!" he screamed, not removing the rifle from my mouth so I could talk.

I mumbled incomprehensibly, annoying him worse, but he could only take the barrel out of my mouth. "Seriously dude, I really can't remember, but if you kill me you'd be making a big mistake."

"It would be no mistake to kill you right now," he said, now pressing his barrel into my forehead.

"You don't even know me, yet. How do you know?" I asked.

"I know you, you were the funny one last year at the bridge check point," he brought back my memory. I guess I was right, he was a fighter. His image came back to me and confirmed he was the boy my age smiling in the back of the line, listening to my jokes with the fat man.

"Wow, how's it goin', man? What have you been up to since then?" I asked as if reuniting with a long lost friend.

"Shut up!" he shouted again, speaking to his leader in Arabic once more.

"Hey man, killing me right now really isn't your best option. By killing me you'd be helping America." My thoughts were becoming clearer.

"Get up!" he shouted. "Get up! On your feet!" I wasn't really sure, but I didn't see a reason not to comply. The middle-aged man shoved me out the door, and must have been feeling generous because instead of pushing me down the stairs, he just pointed. When I made it to the bottom he was right behind me to push me out the front door. Now I understood why they brought me out here: it would be easier for them to get rid of the mess.

I stood with my back to the house trying to find peace in the stars. I found it, too, but then my knees were kicked in from behind and I buckled. "Say again what you said inside," the young one said, slightly more calm.

It took me a moment to remember, then it came back to me, "If you kill me, you will be helping America."

"Liar, you fight against us. You are American!" His anger drove his words, along with his rifle, hard into my head.

"I guess I'm American, but I happen to be the leader of a revolutionary group in America that will topple that government from

within." I told him of the group I had just invented and appointed myself the leader of.

"By lying to us you only make your death more painful," he said, holding two conversations now; one with me and one with the elder Iraqi.

"I'm not lying, dude. It's not gonna be that hard. I mean the current state of American society alone could be responsible for its inevitable end," I told him, unsure if he would understand my words. "I mean, there's only so much you can do from over here. You have friends over there. You can't fight this fight alone—it's too big."

I could tell he was listening to my words, but he was only speaking to the old man now. I tried to enjoy the smell of fresh desert air because I had the distinct feeling that it might be my last opportunity to do so. Then I understood: *all I really need to do is love the Universe*. The middle-aged comrade was listening in on the revelation told by the young one, and they all occasionally glanced back at me. "Then why do you fight on the side of the Americans in this war?" he asked, probably translating the old man's inquiry.

"I don't. I only fight for my life when I have to," I told his distorting face. He turned back to his mentor to translate.

"What is the name of your revolutionary group?"

Now tasked with naming my new organization, the title came easily to me: "*Humanity*."

"What?" he asked before translating.

"Humanity. I am the leader of the revolutionary group Humanity. You know, the Palestinian Liberation Organization fights for the liberation of Palestine; we fight for Humanity."

He quickly translated my response and received more questions from the old man. It became apparent that I caught them off guard. I just hoped this would prolong my life another day. "How far does Humanity reach in America?"

"Probably just as far as your gang reaches into Iraq, but we have allies. We've spent years networking and finding connections all over." He continued looking at me before he began translating. Something was changing in his eyes. He was starting to see me like I could see him.

The old man's eyes also grew wider but his were dull compared to the translator's. "How do you plan on ending the American tyranny?"

"Look, I can't tell you that. I'd be happy to speak with your leaders about it, but we have our operational security we need to main-

tain.” I had to end it there. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep this up.

After translating my last piece, a brief discussion between the youngest and oldest followed. They were both looking at me as they spoke to each other. Then the young one said to me, “We will find out if you are lying.”

“Well, if your leaders find out you tortured me to get information about Humanity, they’ll most definitely torture you three for doing it. Arrange a meeting with me and your leaders to talk. You will be held high in their eyes if you do. I’ve been looking for the opportunity to make this alliance.” I wasn’t sure where I was getting the inspiration for this, but I didn’t think that pill was holding me back, either.

He frantically translated the best he could. The confusion in his eyes declared that he lacked a full comprehension of everything I just said. Another brief conversation between the two ensued. The middle-aged one either didn’t have anything to say, or I broke his jaw.

“Get back on your feet. Go upstairs,” he said, and they all lowered their weapons. His words caused a chill to run through my body. I felt the Universe course through my veins. My legs were shaking violently as I followed his order and made my way back into my room.

He came in the room and asked, “Who should we tell our leader you are?”

“Bradley Multriener, the leader of Humanity,” I said as I watched the beetle follow my advice and leave through the open door.

The Target Is More Than a Silhouette

MY THREE CAPTORS left shortly after I told them who I was. I was able to sleep soundly, being so content with my actions during the interrogation. After all, that wasn't the first time I was interrogated while completely drugged out of my mind. Drugs had been my primary escape plan for so long. When drugs were unavailable, so was sanity. Since then I've been trying to find that same escape without drugs, but I haven't been too successful.

When I woke up the next morning I could tell the sun had just risen from the orange hue seeping in through the inconsistent crack between the door and the ground. It wasn't the bright light of mid-day, but the morning sun that wouldn't hurt to look directly at for a few seconds. I didn't lay on my slab struggling to wake up, but instead woke refreshed and energized. My only reminders of the past few days were the various wounds I had accumulated. The pain came back to me along with the realization that my dreams from the night had not actually occurred. Although I was used to dealing with pain, the pain of a superficial gunshot wound was a new sensation to me. Two bloody gouges that had opened on my head by the butt strokes, the loose teeth, and gash in my mouth contributed, as well.

The pain didn't stop me from rising as soon as I woke, and upon rising I found more in my room than I had left it with. There was a neatly folded garment in the opposite corner of my bucket. Next to the garment was a dish overlaid in plastic, and in the dish was more pita bread, along with strips of chicken meat, and a grated type of cheese, probably goat. My two liter bottle of water had been replaced with two plastic pitchers filled and covered. Along with all of this was

a basin I recognized as one in which a Muslim washes his feet before he prays, as well, three wash rags.

My blood-ridden uniform smelled like it had absorbed a month's worth of my sweat and filth, maybe it had. Quickly stripping out of it, and double checking that they hadn't left me with anything in my pockets, I threw it aside and picked up the clean garment. It was a grey dishdasha, heavily drenched in what would be considered cheap cologne in America, but was quite common in Iraq. Before I put it on, I tasted the water to make sure it had not come from the well. It had not, but where it came from I didn't know. I used it to wash myself the best I could, leaving small amounts of blood around my wounds, not wanting to get too close to them. I figured the clotting of the blood would be my best bet for a functional bandage right now. The bleeding seemed to have ceased, at least temporarily.

After turning my three clean washcloths into dirty, bloody rags, I was as clean as I was going to get in that basin. I put my dishdasha on. It felt like I should have been wearing one all my life, the most comfortable piece of clothing I could ask for.

After relieving myself in the bucket, I emptied the dirty basin into it. It was now halfway full. I hoped they'd let me out to empty it, because I didn't think they would do it for me.

Done with my morning activities, I began pacing in my room. Being immobilized for more than a day now—but what but like weeks—it felt good to use my legs. I paced in lines and circles while stroking my stubbly beard that was beginning to sprout. I paced for over an hour before I decided to unwrap my dish and begin eating.

When the wholesome food filled my stomach it told me I was going to heal. It became apparent to me that I may not die here.

This not being the first time I woke sober and wounded after a night of wild intoxication, I felt very content with myself, very much human again. I spent the remainder of my first happy morning in a long time laying on my large piece of foam. This time I was not arguing with God, but we were now reminiscing of old times, times when we were closer. I laid there with a smile on my face thinking deeply, going in and out of short naps, and occasionally eating a little bit more.

Finally as the morning wore on, the door began to grind open across the rough cement floor. It was the English speaker, and he had a black grocery bag with him. The unknown contents scared me at first until he began to speak. "You need bandages," he said as he squeezed through the door, not bothering to force it completely open.

"Yeah I do. Is that what you got there?"

"Na'am."

"I remember you from the bridge. What's your name?" I asked.

"Call me Azooz. Do not ask any more of it, just Azooz." He sat down on my mattress, emptying the contents of the bag, one by one, neatly on the floor. While he was sorting all of this out, I noticed he was wearing my watch.

"Where did you get all this?" I asked him.

"You think we go to hospital right after you shoot us? We would be taken in right there, never seen again. We've become experts in medicine. We have our own doctors. Reveal your arm," he ordered.

"What're you gonna do?"

"Just show me your arm," he repeated. After I did, he inspected it then poured what must have been hydrogen peroxide all over the wound. "It will heal on its own," he said as if he had seen this many times before. Sopping up the excess liquid with a rag, he put gauze over the entrance and exit wounds and taped it tight. The bleeding resumed lightly but it was clean.

"Motherfucker," I growled through gritted teeth.

"What did you call me?" he asked, swiftly pushing my arm away.

"No, it's a kind of expression, nothing against you," I quickly supplied, hoping he would resume with his healing expertise.

He did just that, pouring more hydrogen peroxide onto another clean rag, he painfully scrubbed the two splits on my forehead. He used butterfly bandages to close them and one large piece of gauze to cover them both. He didn't seem to mind wrapping the medical tape completely around my head to hold the gauze, not caring about the hair that would be pulled out to remove the bandages.

"Azooz, where did you learn to speak English?"

"Where do you think?" he asked.

"School?"

"No, action movies: *Jean Claude Van Damme*," he said, imitating a karate fighting stance with his arms.

"Seriously?" I asked, chuckling.

"No, school. I do watch many American movies, though," he said guiltily.

"Yeah? You done with school now?" I asked.

"No, I'm still in college. I will graduate next year, electronic engineer. Then I will marry my girlfriend," he puffed up as he told me this.

"You got a girlfriend? How long have you been with her?"

"I have grown up next door to Naida since we were babies," he said, looking blankly at the wall, probably picturing her as he spoke.

"That's good, Azooz. I wish you the best of luck with that." I

wondered if the Iraqi divorce rate was even close to that of America's.

"Electronic engineer, you said? So you're the one who's making the bombs out there so high tech," I joked.

"Yes, I am. I lay bombs under the road. I have a right to fight for freedom of my country," he lashed. I guess he didn't get the joke. "Not only do I fight for my country but I fight for my family. I am the man of my home. I support my mother and baby brother."

"Where's your father?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"He was killed when the war began, him and my baby sister. He looked forward to the liberation from Saddam. He told me Americans would bring us a better life. Then he was shot in his car with my sister in it."

I could have asked why but I knew—it was probably a Boot gunner, scared because the car got too close. I didn't know how to respond to that, or if I should even say anything at all.

"I'm sorry, Mitessif."

"I have fought ever since. I have fought against the invaders and made money for my family," he said with a scary indifference.

"That's good, Azooz. You take the fate of your nation into your own hands," I told him, not sure how to feel. The people he's been fighting could have been my fallen friends.

"You do not have to tell me *it's good*. I know why I fight and nothing will stop me," he said, repacking his medical supplies and getting up to leave in a rush.

"Wait Azooz."

"No, I leave now," he said shutting the door behind him, tears were audible in his voice.

I felt bad for opening his wounds after he had closed mine, and I definitely didn't want him to leave. "Sadik, wait, sadik," I called behind him.

He stopped in the door. Without turning around he spoke calmly, "I am not your friend."

"Yes you are, Azooz, and I am yours. You don't understand," I told him. "No one understands. This is more complicated than you or me."

"You don't think I know that? Who do you think I am? A dumb Haji?" he shouted. He knew Americans use Haji, a pilgrim to Mecca, as a derogatory term. "I have had no breaks of this war since it has started. You think you know more than me?"

"No Azooz, I'm just sayin'... I'm just sayin' we can't pretend like we know everything. We got a lot to learn from each other. We could both really help each other."

"What do you have to teach me about placing a bomb under your truck to kill you?" he asked, his accent was hidden by a growl.

"You can kill Americans all day long, and we might leave eventually, but as soon as you get your country the way you want it, America'll be back. Our grandchildren will fight each other," I told him. "Do you want that? Or do you want America gone for good?"

"You know the answer to that," he quietly said.

"Then you've got to change America. Don't lie to yourself. Do you know how to do that?"

He inhaled quickly as if about to reply but no words came out. Again, he poised himself to speak but only an empty gasp escaped.

"That is what I will do. My group will be the one to change America. But I need your help, Azooz. This is bigger than me or you, but that's what it is, me *and* you."

I got the feeling he didn't want to admit that he didn't feel he could make that much of a difference in this war. He stood in the threshold seemingly unsure if he should walk away or not.

"They don't even know, Azooz. They have no clue what's going on over here. No joke, when I got back to America last year, I met a girl who didn't believe I was in Iraq. She thought the war was over." It was true; I couldn't believe she was serious when she said it.

"It is all over your news. Everyone hears it every day," he said.

"They see it every day, but they stopped paying attention years ago. You and I both know this is the most complicated war ever. The American people don't even care anymore. They pretend they do with bumper stickers and shit, but they don't."

This seemed to come as a shock to him. One of the bigger reasons Iraqis continued to fight Americans during their civil war was to scare America via media.

"And what they do know of the war is all lies. A lot of Americans believe whatever we're told," I said, feeling no shame for speaking badly of my countrymen. "You know that. That's how we got talked into coming here in the first place."

"Then how will you change America? The only way to change it is to get rid of it." "Maybe. I told you, I will lead the Revolution in America, and you can help, Azooz. We can do it, I know how, we can change the world."

"You will grow tired of trying to change the world. You will never succeed," he muttered, walking back in from the door.

"I have plans, Azooz. I know how to do it." I lied, I had no clue.

"You need money. You cannot do it without money. Are you a rich man?"

"No, I'm not rich at all. I have plans to do it without money. Azooz, what you are fighting for you believe to be the truth, right?"

"Yes, I know it is," he said.

"How many are there like you? Not many right?" I asked.

"No, not many," he said looking at the ground, discouraged. His eyes could cut like lasers when he made eye contact, but he rarely did. He moved to share a seat on my foam slab with me.

"There's not that many like me in America, either, but there's only one truth. We're both fighting for the truth. No matter what uniform we wear, we're fighting on the same side." I continued, "Azooz, this war's going on in Iraq, but it's gonna affect the rest of the world for years to come. You know that... hundreds of years."

"I already know this," he said.

"I know, but who's winning right now? I'm not winning, neither are you. They got us fighting against each other. They want us *both* to lose. And the longer we fight each other the more we are winning the war for them." I felt like I knew this all along and just never voiced it before.

"Who is *they*? Who is it that makes us fight?" he asked, as if preparing to find a flaw to call me out on.

"They're the ones who gain from it. No one started this war to bring your country freedom or democracy. It's taken America over two hundred years to try to work out our own democracy but it still doesn't work."

"I know this. With Saddam he was one man, but he controlled Iraq, everything, there was nothing he could not handle. Now there are many in the government: they can do nothing. Baghdad, our heart, now does not have power, some with no water or food. The worst thing, they have no security. Before the war you could walk at anytime, anywhere and no one grab you and ask who you are. Everything was good; just don't speak against government, and you be okay."

"And college was free with Saddam, too, right?" I asked.

"Yes, everything was good."

"So this is what's happening, Azooz: you and I are fighting the worst part of the war, bleeding everyday and losing our friends and family. We're the victims of this war. While we bleed, there's rich people making even more money off the war. And it's not just in America, there're people in Iran and all over gettin' rich off this thing."

"You think I do not know this? This is why I fight, to get your people out of here," he said firmly. "You held the door open for Iran. Do you know millions cross the border to vote in all of our elections?"

"They ain't my people. I'm done with them. I'm going back and I'm gonna get rid of all the greedy power hungry fucks who are in the government. Just like your government is corrupt, mine is too, and I ain't sittin' around lettin' them run shit like that." I didn't know if he was able to follow as my English got faster and less proper, but he must have seen a lot of movies because he knew exactly what I was saying.

"You would like to do that, but you have to leave here first. You seem certain that you will, but we have no plans of letting you go. If you are telling the truth then you have nothing to worry about, but if you are lying about your Revolution, you will die at my hand." He seemed to look forward to dealing me my fate.

He got up to leave the room again and paused in the doorway once more. "I hope you are telling the truth. I would like to help you to overthrow your government." He forced the door shut behind him.

The wooden door bounced hard up and down the rough concrete fighting to stay open. It didn't close all the way until Azooz gave it one final jerk from the other side forcing it to slam. As it finally closed, the bottom of the door made a snapping noise. When I looked to see what it was, I noticed a large splinter beginning to break off the bottom. I sat there looking at it for a while before I got up to investigate.

It was a thick piece of wood in the shape of a spear head; thick at the bottom and thinner towards the top. I grabbed the bottom of the piece and helped it to make its final severance. It split all the way up, and its tip came to a point.

I stayed there by the door holding my new possession and just admiring it for a while. I sat there examining my new tool like a *Homo habilis*. I immediately memorized everything about it. I learned its size and dimensions. I became familiar with it so when I needed to use it, I wouldn't be using a foreign object. Instead, I would be using a part of myself.

It was about nine or ten inches long, but the tip of the spearhead was too thin. I went back over to my slab trying to figure out where to hide it. I could keep it under the slab for now but I needed a place to keep it on my person. Just like I used to be with my rifle, I wouldn't be caught without it. But I couldn't be caught with it, either.

I began sharpening it on the concrete floor, trying to maintain the sharp tip but bring it closer to the thicker middle. I sat there sharpening it throughout the day. Every swipe across the floor was with precision, making sure not to shave off any necessary parts. All I could think about while sharpening my new prison shank was what

our old platoon commander told us the day Nate was killed: *"We are the tip of the spear. We need to stay sharp. When we get sharpened pieces get filed off."*

I was never sure what to think about that. I preferred not to liken my best friend to a small piece of metal who got shaved off to make us sharper. But we were sharper after that, a lot sharper. That's what I was doing; I was making my splinter as sharp as I was. I was not only sharpening the stick; I was sharpening myself. I wouldn't stop until I got it exactly the way I wanted.

The first thing I used my new tool for was to help tear two strips from my bloody uniform. I tied the two strips around my right calf and slipped the knife in. My dishdasha fell over it as I stood up and walked in clockwise circles to make it comfortable. I memorized what it felt like on my leg and got used to it there. I kept walking until it felt natural. From now on it was invisibly dummy-corded to me. If it wasn't there, my leg wouldn't feel right.

I continued walking around my room, getting my exercise, and practiced pulling the knife quickly, poisoning myself to strike with it. I spent the day training with my weapon. I became an expert with it. I made its simplicity so complex it was simple again. I practiced everything I could think of, pressing the tip to my clothed skin to understand exactly how much pressure was necessary to penetrate.

I tried to practice with my left hand but it was immobilized with shooting pain. If I couldn't use my right arm, my weapon wouldn't be used.

I spent the rest of the day training with my weapon and figuring out my next move with Azooz. I decided then and there that I would not die in this place. I wouldn't allow it to happen. I adopted the escaping spirit of Kunta Kinte. I wouldn't only escape from this house; I would liberate myself from everyone trying to shape my fate. I would escape everything. I was going to live. I was going to do something not many people can do these days: I was going to live free.

I was now as comfortable with my new weapon as I could be. It was now a part of me. My hunger informed me that I was done training. I wiped the sweat from my brow with my sleeve. My whole torso was covered in sweat and blood was coming through my sleeve. I uncovered what I had left over from the morning and finished the old chicken and warm cheese. The food was starting to disagree with me, and I was persuaded to spend some time using the bucket in the corner.

My stomach gradually became my worst enemy. I drank water to cleanse my system, but I began to suspect the water wasn't as clean as it tasted.

As I knelt before the bucket expelling my guts, my mind would only let me wonder how I got here. How did I manage to put myself here, right now spilling vomit from my mouth and nose? I've been here before, almost on a regular basis, puking, tears streaming down my face, wondering how I let myself come to this.

I didn't blame my captors; I blamed myself. But the only time I could manage to put these thoughts out of my mind was when I blamed someone else. I blamed my environment, my country, friends, family, but most commonly, I blamed God.

ELEVEN

Rescue

“WHAT ARE YOU doing?” It was Azooz waking me up. I was soaking in sweat in the fetal position on the floor next to the bucket.

“What? What’s goin’ on?” I mumbled.

“What is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been shot, butt stroked twice, taped up thrown in and outta trunks, and I almost swallowed your rifle last night!” I unleashed. “But the worst thing is that damn food fuckin’ with my stomach!”

“Have you forgotten where you are? You are lucky to be alive!”

“I’m lucky to be alive? Fuck you, if you wanna kill me, then fuckin’ kill me already. Stop fuckin’ around and do it! What the fuck are you waiting for?” Climbing to my feet, I felt déjà vu. Had I been here before, too?

“I’ve come to tell you that your meeting with our leader has been granted. You will discuss your plans with him when we take you to see him. If your meeting is bad, I will be the one who kills you.”

“It ain’t gonna go bad. But if you wanna kill me you better do it while I’m sleeping, or else I’m gonna take you with me.”

“You will not kill me. When I kill you I will look in your eyes.”

“Really? Look me in my eyes right now!” I said, closing in on him.

I punched him in the stomach hard, knocking the wind out of him. He bent forward claspin’ his gut, and I grabbed his small throat with my right hand. Sweeping his legs out from underneath him with my right leg, he fell to the ground. His head made an audible thud as it hit the concrete. I released his neck with my right hand and took

hold with my left, the adrenalin acted as a numbing agent. Driving my knee into his stomach, I cocked my right fist to strike him repeatedly in the face. I could easily kill him right now. I could beat his face in with my fist until he's dead, and I wanted to.

"Look me in the eyes. Look me in the eyes!" I quietly shouted at him, but he did not. He only struggled, jerking his head from side to side. He was trying to make some sort of noise but only gurgles of spit came out because I was still choking him.

I stayed there struggling to decide whether it was his time to die or not. I came close to breaking his jaw with one hit, but I re-cocked my fist, staying ready to strike.

His face quickly turned from bright red to dark purple. His lack of air and blood to his head was blatantly obvious. My rage began to spike. As soon as I decided I was going to kill him I broke into tears.

"Is this what you want, Azooz? Is this it? You wanna die right here?" I asked over suppressed cries. "'Cause I will, Azooz. I'll kill you right now. I said I'll kill you right now, you hear me?" But he didn't answer, his guttural noise silenced, too, and he stopped struggling.

I released my grip and plead with his incoherent body. "You hear me, Azooz? You don't want me to kill you and I don't wanna kill you. This is what *they* want Azooz, this is what they want. They want us to kill each other."

"You hear me, Azooz? I'm talkin' to you, here. You hear me?" I cried hard now. My right fist was still clenched tight. I couldn't let it go. "I'm sorry, Azooz, I'm sorry." My tears were streaming, they fell on his face. "I'M SORRY!"

"God?" I asked, but it felt like I was alone. "God, help me. Please God, help me," I cried.

But God must have been with me in that horrible room because Azooz began coughing his way back to life. "You hear me, Azooz? This is what they want. They want you dead, and they don't give a fuck if I die either. This is what they want. I don't want this anymore. This is what they want." He still did not reply. He only continued to cough, looking up at me with wild fear in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Azooz, I'm sorry," I said, crying hard over his body. Suddenly I remembered my knee was still driven into his stomach. When I moved it he struggled up right away, scrambling to the door and pulling it shut behind him.

I stayed there for a minute, sure this was where I was going to die. Azooz would probably get his two companions and tell them what happened. They'd kill me right here. I stayed kneeling where I had almost killed Azooz until I decided that dying right now wouldn't be that bad. I went over to my sleeping mat and laid down. I pulled

my knees to my stomach to try to quell it, but it was now giving me sharp inconsistent pains.

I laid there once again trying to pass out, expecting to die sometime soon, but not really caring. Sleep came, but it didn't come easily. I could only replay what had just happened over and over in my head.

"You ready for this Eric?" I asked.

"Hell yeah, dude. I can't believe we're actually gonna pull this off."

"I know, I'm really nervous about it, but I've been working on this plan for the past month. Nothing can go wrong."

"I don't think I'm gonna be part of this," Sean said.

"Why?" I asked flatly. "We need you for this, Sean. You're a huge part of the plan."

"I know, but you know how long we could go to jail for this?" he responded.

"We're not goin' to jail," I said. Eric agreed by nodding his head.

"Whatever dude, just count me out for now. I'll think about it," he said, seeming unconcerned, just continuing to play his videogame like usual.

"Alright man. Eric, you ready?" I conceded.

"Yeah, let's go," he said. We left Sean's house to the meeting I scheduled for tonight. We were the last to show up. The forty guys I invited had all made it there early. The meeting took place at a public skate park that was usually empty at this time. They were all sitting around waiting for us to arrive. When we got there I wasted no time going into my planned speech.

"Alright, you've heard the rumors right? Well I'm here to tell you exactly what's going on and what we're gonna do. The forest has been hiding something from you all, and you've probably been out there looking for it, but only Eric and I know where they are.

"Yes they're out there—about 4,000 of them, three fields—the plants are anywhere between ten to fourteen feet tall right now, and thick as my wrist," I confirmed their wildest dreams. They responded with muffled cries of joy and whispers among themselves.

"Alright, there's more. 4,000 plants ain't gonna be easy to sneak out of a forest, and you can either think I'm crazy or not, but I've had airplanes following me everywhere I go for the past three months.

"Somebody's onto this, I don't know if they're local, feds, or even high end dealers, but somebody's onto this. Now it's gonna be kinda risky, but I've got a damn good plan that's gonna work. You'll have tonight and tomorrow to think about it. The payment's either gonna be two pounds, one pound and a thousand dollars, or two thousand dollars; your choice.

Don't call me, either. Tell either me or Eric in person. Once I know who's all in, I'll get you all together and lay down the plan," I told them confidently, continuously looking over my shoulders for any squad cars that might pull up. "I know you got a lot of questions. Let's hear 'em."

"Where we gonna keep the weed once we get it out?" one of the shadowy faces asked.

"I've got safe houses worked out, where is not important right now," I said.

"What if we say we're in, then we hear the plan and we don't like it?" another voice asked.

"Once you're in, I'm counting on you to stay in. The plan's a solid plan. As long as everyone knows what they gotta do, and they do it, nothing'll go wrong," I ensured. "Alright, I can sit here all night answering questions, but that wouldn't be very smart for all of us to stay here waiting for a cop to roll up. So get with me by Thursday, and whoever's in, I'll be going over the plan in detail on Friday," I said, turning to Eric, signaling for us to leave.

"It's that Living Meditation, dude." Eric said.

"What? Oh yeah. You still remember that?"

"Yeah man, I'm just tryin' to get the hang of it myself. I've been noticing changes in you. I can't really describe it, though."

"Yeah, well, you start to see changes in yourself when you start to see changes in the way you look at everything else. I don't know, man. There's a whole lot goin' on out there, and I'm just trying to keep an open mind to it." I wasn't really sure if I could explain to him what was really going on with me lately.

"Crazy, dude. You think we're gonna get away with this?" he asked as we got into my truck.

"I know we will. The plan's perfect," I said, going over the details in my head.

"Are we gonna go after the six plants we transplanted?" Eric asked, probably already knowing the answer.

"Hell no, those were a just-in-case thing. We got 4,000 to worry about. We ain't wastin' our time with six plants," I said bluntly.

"Yeah man, I know we're gonna get away with this," he decided.

"Yeah, I know we can. We're looking at one and a half million a piece. I don't know about you, but when I get the money I'm movin' to the Caribbean," I said, dreaming of my near future.

"Hell yeah, dude. I'll go with you, live in some little shacks on the beach, and grow our own. Fuck yeah," he said, enthused.

"Yep dude, we'll be livin' the American dream."

Waking up with a horrible taste in my mouth, I drank more of

the water knowing I'd be dead soon anyway. My stomach was still in no shape to eat. I hadn't been disturbed in my sleep. With the slight temperature decrease in the room, I could tell the sun was going down. I was still covered in sweat from my restless sleep. Continuing to lay there in the fetal position, contemplating my situation, I was clueless as to what my next move could be.

The next week or so went on like this, alone in my cell. The only time the door opened was in the middle of the night to give me more bread or water only after I had ran out. Sometimes I went without eating or drinking for more than a day at a time. Instead of letting me empty my bucket, I found a new one in the room one morning after the first one came dangerously close to overflowing. The first one stayed in the room, still, attracting more flies than a carcass.

My body seemed to grow immune to bug bites after waking up one morning with my legs feeling paralyzed from the pests. The constant in-and-out buzzing all around me quickly became white noise. I only laid on my mat and walked around the room occasionally for exercise. My beard was filling itself in. As much as I wanted to grow a beard while I was with the Marines, I wanted to shave it now. My gunshot wound wasn't doing any better as the days went by. I changed the bandages occasionally with what was left of my uniform. But my arm was growing weaker, and beginning to smell worse than the rest of me.

I spent a lot of time wondering how my mother was taking this, no doubt she had heard the news by now. Did my brother know? I could imagine how my father and the rest of the family were taking the news, but my mother had to be taking it the worst. I cried when my imagination allowed me to feel what she felt.

I spent time talking to the Universe, trying to find some helpful wisdom in the sounds of the hot wind sneaking through the room. I asked many questions to the All Knowing, but received few answers. Eventually, I hid from talking to God, fearing the answers I might hear. I tried to convince myself that this was my problem, and I alone would get myself out of it.

I don't know exactly how long I spent in complete solitude there in that room. Time seemed to lose its meaning as my mind lost its ability to reason. I found myself talking a lot, whether to myself or to someone else, I wasn't sure, but I carried on many detailed conversations with someone. I wrote in the light coat of dust on the floor, occasionally doing math or writing lyrics I remembered.

Every time I woke up from sleep I felt dirtier and dirtier until I reached the peak of dirtiness and stopped caring. I probably would have been more active, but my body was too weak. The bread and

water was only filling a void in my stomach that refused to be full. Eventually I stopped moving altogether except to use my bucket. I lost track of whether I was sleeping or awake, as well. When I was awake my delusions felt like dreams, and my dreams allowed me to feel momentarily normal.

As my mind continued to lose control, I no longer had to think in order to find answers. The answers came to me before I asked the questions. I understood that I was going to die soon, not by the bullet or blade, but by my own accord. I would lay here in this daze and allow my mind to slip beyond the point of no return. I would die shortly after and be reunited with The Essence.

As our lips made contact so did our souls. I had crazy thoughts running through my mind. I felt like asking her to stay with me forever. I felt like marrying this stranger I'd just met. I didn't know what I was doing, but she did.

"You're going to Iraq soon, aren't you?" she asked.

"What? Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Cause it seems like you're just trying to get laid before you go," she said like she had gotten to the root of the situation.

But she hadn't. I was sure that was impossible. "No, just a kiss. Is that alright?"

She giggled, "Yeah," before we began again.

I began feeling her body, and wondered if she was testing her theory. No, I won't. I decided not to allow myself to go any further. I ended the kiss as politely as I could.

Resting again on my back, her on hers, I was once again right where I wanted to be: with her. "You're graduating soon, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, in two weeks."

"You gotta be lookin' forward to that."

"Not so much. I'm looking forward to leaving this place, though," she said, cheering up.

"What's so bad about Champaign?" I asked.

"No, not Champaign—I'm leaving America."

"For good?"

"Yeah, for good."

"That's the coolest thing I've ever heard. You're gonna be an expatriate?" I asked, now even more excited.

"Ha, yeah I guess." She smiled.

"That's awesome. Why are you leaving?"

"I'm sick of America. I'm gonna leave before it gets worse," she said.

"Where ya gonna go?" I asked, wanting to go with her, wherever it was she was going.

"Spain. I'm gonna teach English there."

"I really can't believe this. This is amazing. You have the guts to get up and go. I wish I could do that," I said. I grew less enthused as I remembered that I was leaving the country too, but not to Spain.

"Why can't you?" she asked, as if inviting me.

"I'm kinda tied up for the time being. I'd like to, though."

"You should."

"Maybe I will," I said, trying hard to comprehend my release from the Marines. Every time I tried to imagine what it would be like when I was out, I just felt as though it was an unobtainable dream. It didn't seem like a reality.

"When do you leave for Iraq?" she asked, changing the subject, but not really.

"Ten days—wait—nine days," I said, counting on my fingers.

She gasped, "Oh my God, are you scared?"

"As scared as you are to go to Spain," I lied. *"Well kinda, it's hard to explain,"* I said. I wasn't sure if she could understand my fear of losing another friend, not my own life.

"What do you do? Like, what's your job?"

"Eh, I do a lot of stuff. That's also hard to explain. It's not really that important. But you're gonna be an expatriate, when are you gonna leave?"

"Next year, I gotta save up for the trip," she said, looking up at the ceiling as if that's where her plans were written.

I looked at the ceiling, too. They were written there. I wanted to tell her what I saw. I saw how when I got back from Iraq, I'd have enough money saved for both of us to leave and live there until we got jobs. I wanted to ask her to take me with her. I wanted to escape America, too. "I think you're my new hero," I said. *We both laughed, but it was true.*

My skull was making a loud grinding noise while it was collapsing on my brain. I let out one last yell before I was going to go for good. The grinding noise continued as Azooz walked in through the door he was forcing open. "You ever listen to hip-hop, Azooz?"

"What?"

"Hip-hop, you ever listen to it?"

He was not acting defensive. He held another two liter bottle that he was bringing in for me. He had to know of my weakened state. "Heep-hap? What is this?"

"Hip-hop, it's music, the best," I said, laying there, staring at the ceiling.

"American, I don't think I would like it," he said, setting the water down next to the half-empty jug.

"No, you'd like it. It's not like most American music. It's informative, you can learn a lot from it."

"Learn about what? How Islam is evil?" He started walking away.

"No, some of the best hip-hop artists are Muslim," I said as he grinded the door shut behind him. I felt bad for being American. I was sick of being portrayed to the rest of the world by corrupt politicians in office. I thought America's way of demonizing Islam was responsible for Iraq's lack of a willingness to accept America's *help*.

"You said *artist*?" Azooz asked, wrestling the door back open.

"Yeah, artist, hip-hop artist. It's an art."

"How?" he asked, finally squeezing through the small crack in the door.

"The poetry; I mean the things they talk about are so important. Now, I'm not talkin' about what you might hear on the radio or TV. They talk about whatever they have to so they can make more money. It's called *underground hip-hop*. That's what you gotta check out." I listed off many underground artists I was most fond of. "They're the ones who will tell you what America doesn't want you to hear. I mean, a lot of places in America aren't much better than Iraq."

"Anywhere is better than Ramadi," he said with shame.

"I don't know, I've felt safer in Ramadi than some of the neighborhoods I've been in LA. But yeah, Ramadi's pretty bad," I said while thinking of the places Vincent's destined to grow up. "But hip-hop talks about that; it tells you about issues that need to be brought to light. It talks about everything. It's just poetry. You gotta hear it. Remember those names I told you."

"I will. Have you heard *rai*?" he asked, standing near the door, probably still scared of my previous volatility.

"No, is it good?"

"Yes, you might like it."

"If you hear hip-hop, make sure you listen to it with bass."

"Bass?" he asked.

"Yeah, bass, the stuff that makes it go *boooooom*."

"Oh bass, I know bass," he said, giving away that he didn't.

"You'd like hip-hop beats, too. The people who compose them are brilliant. They're artists," I said, giving up on trying to support my head. I let it fall to the foam. "Hey, I don't think I'll be able to talk to your leader like this; I can barely stand."

"What is wrong with you?" he asked.

"I need more than just bread and water. And getting rid of that bucket might help, too."

"I will ask what to do about this," he said.

“Azooz... Hey, I’m sorry for almost killing you the other day.”

“The leaders will be here soon. You need to be more ready. They will have you killed if they do not believe you,” he warned.

“Do you believe me, Azooz?” I was genuinely curious.

“I think you are different from the bridge.”

“Huh?”

“When I saw you at the bridge, more than one year ago, I knew you were not like the rest of them,” he said looking at my watch blankly, as if replaying the day in his head.

“Will you tell your leader that for me?”

“I have never met them. They will not listen to me.”

“It’s alright. Hey, *sorry*. Sorry for almost killing you the other day.” I tried to slip it in unnoticed.

“What?” he asked like he didn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“I almost killed you the other day. I’m sorry. It’s just a little, uh... It’s not easy for me to be locked up here, thinking you might kill me. I don’t know, man. I guess I just snapped. It won’t happen again,” I said sincerely.

“From these years in war, I learn many things. As personal as war can get, it’s not wise to take it personally.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I recognized its profundity immediately. I just hoped to gain as deep of an understanding of it as Azooz had. “Wow, Azooz.”

“What will you tell the leaders?” he asked, avoiding the apology.

“The truth, it shall set you free, right?”

“Eh?”

“It’s an expression, never mind,” I said. “What group do you guys fight for? I need to know so I don’t say the wrong thing to your leaders,” I wondered, knowing there were hundreds of factions in this war.

“I fight for the people, with Ahmed and Abas,” he said, quickly.

“Ahmed? Abas? Are they the other two?”

“Yes, do not tell them I said their names,” he begged, sitting on the floor with his head close to the open door. My bucket probably persuaded him to keep the door open.

“I won’t, are they family?” I asked.

“Ahmed is like my brother and Abas like our father, but no.”

“How’d you meet ‘em?”

“When my father and sister were killed, me, my mother, and little brother were in grief. We had food from everyone in our tribe, but soon everyone had no food. We lost it all. We lived like more than four hundred years ago but in the skeleton of a modern city,” he

began to explain. "We lived in building with no heat or water." He reminded me of the freezing Iraqi winters. "We have only rice. We looked like you. We had nothing. Then, Abas came and offered me and Ahmed money to kill the Americans who killed my father."

"So you took the job. I would've, too," I said, shifting my position to my side so I faced Azooz.

"Yes, it was good, and my mother and brother ate. So I went to school and made bombs. Each one I blew up I got very much dinar."

I tried not to think about my friends who died from IEDs. This was not what I wanted to hear, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Yes, Abas leaves for many weeks, but when he come home he has much dinar for me. I buy my brother new clothes and pens for school, and food for my family. I buy Naida new clothes and jewelry, anything she wants. It is very good."

"You gotta look out for the family," I supplied.

"Yes, it is Abas who looks out for us," he said.

"How old's your brother, now?"

"He is five."

"I have a brother, too," I told him.

"In Amrika?"

"Yeah, he'll be there for the next year at least..." I went on to tell him about my brother's incarceration. We spoke of many things that afternoon. We spoke of our mothers and how much we loved them. When I tried to explain to Azooz how I thought all the world religions could get along one day, he told me what his mother taught him: "*All religions are the same, just different cultures.*" He had the same hopes for peace as me.

I told him more about hip-hop and Azooz explained rai music to me. I found out its social relevance almost makes it the Arab version of hip-hop.

I told him how America does demonize Islam but there's many who are starting to understand that it's truly a beautiful culture. He told me how the civil war in Baghdad was going and why it was Iran who was causing most of it. How they're trying to bring the Iranian political party to power in Iraq by fighting the other parties and sects. He told me how Iranians were sneaking across the border on election days to vote for the Iranian party.

When I asked him how we could end this war, he told me the only way to do so was to completely redo the government with only Iraqis. He said the whole government that America set up is Iranian and against the people of Iraq. That is why he fights, he said, because

the people of Iraq feel violated by the Iranians who were brought to power in Iraq by the Americans.

I told Azooz about some of the political problems America has, and of the president of America. We laughed hard telling jokes about him and his lack of intelligence. We joked about him but we both understood how much we hated him and blamed him. We blamed him from Iraq while he was across the world probably on vacation in his home state trying not to think about the war.

Azooz told me how, in Iraq, everyone lost someone, but most lost everyone to the war. He told me how, before the war, Ramadi had almost half a million people, now it's a ghost town in comparison. He told me how Ramadi used to be the jewel of Iraq, how before the war Sunni and Shiite were like brothers, but the new government makes them hate each other.

We talked for hours while he got us real food: ka-bobs of lamb with rice and vegetables. We kept talking while he changed my bandage on my arm and cleaned the infected wound. What really caused Azooz to stop and think was when I told him about how the people of America are good people. We just have bad ones in charge for some reason. His answer was simple, "Why don't you change them?" but I told him how our government got out of control to the point that we can't. How we could only vote for one of two parties and both had bad people in them. But that wasn't what Azooz meant; he couldn't understand why the whole country wasn't having a revolution. Neither could I.

Azooz and I continued our conversations every afternoon. He always brought me the same food he ate. He changed my bandage every other day, and allowed me to sneak out one night while Ahmed and Abas were asleep to dump my buckets and rinse them out. As I regained my strength, I grew impatient to meet their leaders and negotiate my way to freedom. Whenever I asked when they would arrive, Azooz told me soon but would never be specific. He would only tell me that it was a dangerous trip that they were willing to take in order to meet me.

Azooz and I got to know almost everything about each other during our daily meetings. I told Azooz more about myself than I had ever told anyone. And as my beard grew to be full, so was my understanding of Azooz and his people.

We talked about problems that plagued Iraq and America and tried to devise solutions. We thought we were two world diplomats sitting in that hot room, figuring out how to bring people the freedom and standard of living every human deserves. The answers that we came up with for most of our identifiable problems were usually

way too complex or unreasonable. Every time we thought we had that universal answer that we were elusively looking for, we found that we usually overlooked one key factor or another.

Sitting there trying to find these solutions by myself at night made me feel small. When I discussed them with Azooz we felt big, and the problems seemed solvable. I don't know if we were just passing time or really trying to find a way people could coexist. Either way, we were bettering ourselves. We were acculturating ourselves. We were making our own individual cultures even more unique and refined. I was now part Iraqi, and Azooz was part American. Not by choice, we just rubbed off on each other like that.

The day I began to think of Azooz as my new best friend was the day he didn't show up for our normal meeting. In fact he didn't show up for the next one, or the one after that, either. Suddenly I was alone with my thoughts, again. My thoughts and the pita bread.

TWELVE

In Complete Sanity

WHEN THE POLICE pounded on Thejo's door, Jamie and I were laying in his roommate's bed who wasn't home at the time. The room was completely dark when he opened the door. We could only hope that they wouldn't see us laying perfectly still under the covers.

The door creaked open and Thejo imitated the way he had just woken up when we pounded on his door. "Hello?" he answered.

"Yeah, who do you got in the room?" a young voice asked. He probably just graduated college himself.

"No one. Is there a reason you're asking?" Thejo replied.

"Yeah, we saw two individuals run up here to this floor, we thought we saw 'em run in here. You mind if we step inside and take a look around?" The cop asked. I could hear Jamie's heart beat faster as if in a race with mine. I really didn't feel like going to jail tonight, and I don't think she did, either.

"Yeah, um... I got a test in the morning and I need my sleep, so no thanks," Thejo said, closing the door in the cop's face. "You guys owe me your lives," he whispered as he walked back to his bed and got under his covers.

"Hey, we're gonna stay here for a little 'til the cops leave," I whispered back.

"That's cool man, just get outta here before Chris comes home."

Jamie and I stayed there under the covers occasionally kissing silently with the cop's voice still filling the hall. I wanted to have her there, right in Thejo's room. Our hands couldn't be controlled. The only thing we were careful about was not to make any noise. After the cops had made their way down the hall—waking up every student there—we waited

a few minutes to make sure we didn't hear any more loud rasps on any doors.

"Thanks, Thejo," Jamie whispered to the sleeping figure in the room as we opened the door silently to peek out. We looked up and down the hall twice before we took off running for my room. I didn't need to fumble with the key, it went right in and we were safe in my room.

She didn't need to ask, we both knew; she wasn't leaving my room tonight. We quickly made our way to my bed shedding our clothes before we got in. The air conditioner did its best to keep the room cool, but its attempts were futile. The weed smoke and heat of our bodies kept us warm throughout the night. All night long we took each other. We both had class in the morning but neither of us even thought about sleeping. In the morning we showered together before class. We missed the first one but didn't care.

We considered missing the rest of our classes to stay together but reluctantly left my room at 9:45. It was impossible for me to pay attention to anything the professor said. All I could do was look forward to going back to my room to meet Jamie.

Jamie basically moved in with me after that night. She kept most of her stuff next door but spent every night and day with me. We finally fell in love. We talked about how we were going to get an apartment together next year and the year after that. Everything I hoped for that night happened. Jamie and I couldn't be separated. We were best friends.

I occupied my time now not by allowing myself to lose control, but by maintaining control of the situation as best as I could. I spent most of every day doing exercises, eating and drinking as much as possible, and working on the rhetoric I would use to appeal to the resistance leaders.

All I could do was plan and wonder. I wondered and worried about Azooz. Every once in a while I thought maybe they got rid of him because he got too close to me. I continued my exercises, physical and mental. Any time I was consumed by fear, I allowed it: fear was a valuable indicator for me. It told me when I was not ready to meet with the leaders. I allowed fear to enter my body and my mind, but I did not act on it. Never again would I allow fear to guide my actions. I listened to my fears, and I adjusted myself so I wouldn't have anything to fear. When I feared the leaders would not believe me, I practiced my charisma. When I feared my execution, I exercised to not allow myself to be taken over. What I feared most of all was going back to America. I feared living by the will of another. Being so far removed, I didn't think I'd ever be able to fit into that society again.

When that fear tried to take me over I planned, schemed, and plotted, but I wasn't sure if I'd ever overcome that fear.

I wasn't going to have any friends over there after this. I had a friend here, though. Azooz wouldn't let me be condemned by his leaders. He'd tell them of the Bradley Multrienner he knew.

I would tell them of the discussion Azooz and I had where we learned that a corrupt government could not walk into a country and impose a just government. I would tell them how America can help Iraq, but first America needs to be helped. I would be the only real diplomat in Iraq. I was going to bring peace to the nation. However I was going to do that, I was sure I would have to bring the war to America.

I was going to wake America from its coma. I was going to show the politicians first hand of the wars they started but pretended didn't exist. I felt no guilt for the prospect of the violence that was going to be brought to America. America created this monster—it's time America deals with it. I'll never be ashamed to call myself an American again.

I lost track of how many days I had been in captivity. I tried to judge by the length of my beard, almost an inch long now. I passed the time by enjoying the endorphins released by my exercise. I was in better shape than I was in the Marine Corps, the only problem was I didn't have enough bread to sustain the amount of activity I would have liked. I felt a little sorry for whoever it was who took care of my bucket—probably Ahmed. I set it next to the door to get switched out every so often.

My enthusiasm for the future was fleeting, though. Without Azooz I began to feel small again. *I'm only one person. How can I really attack these problems with any success?* I doubted the leaders were even going to show. When they do, they will understand that it was worth it to meet me. They won't have regretted making the trip.

I took to sleeping more than exercising again, and my mind took to fearing more than planning once more. I felt I had everything worked out. I knew exactly what I would say when I meet those who will decide my fate. I had it memorized word for word. The main problem was my waning confidence. *Will they believe me? Why should they?*

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm doing what feels right."

"Why? Can't you just be happy with what you have?"

"Maybe I could if I didn't know what I know."

"What is it that you know?"

"I know I don't have anything if I don't have total peace and freedom to enjoy it."

"You have freedom. You live in America."

"They keep telling me I have freedom so I won't question the fact that I don't."

"Who's they?"

"Those who have more to lose than I do, and want to keep it that way."

"You have a lot to lose."

"I told you, I don't have anything but my hopes to have something."

"You're fighting a losing fight."

"At least I'm fighting. I didn't lose, yet."

"You know you're just going to end up dying young?"

"Have you seen the dead kids? They died young."

"That's war, what are you going to do about it?"

"End war, I'm gonna fucking end it!"

"Why do you keep lying to yourself? You're only one man."

"Maybe, but I'm not really a man unless I do something about it."

"You can live a happy life in America. Why are you going to risk that?"

"I can't live a happy life in America, not when I know what it takes to tell me that lie."

"It's all relative. How can you say all those in America aren't really happy?"

"Maybe they are, but I can never be, not until some things change."

"How old do you think you're going to be when you give up?"

"I'm not giving up, damn it. However old I am when it's over."

"You're delusional. You can never change this. It's too big for you. You're nobody."

"How can I be delusional? I thought you said it's all relative."

"Bradley... Bradley, it's time. They're here," Azooz said crouching next to me as I lay on my mat.

"What? How many of them?" I asked quickly, sitting up. Fear rushed over my body in a cold chill.

"There is three. The youngest one is the leader of our whole group," he said enthusiastically.

"Wait, where the hell have you been?" I asked, remembering I hadn't seen him in what must have been two or three weeks.

"I went with Abas to get them. They were far. We could only travel small distance at once," he quickly explained. "Get up, wash your face, have some water. You will be meeting with them very soon. This is a great honor for you, Bradley."

“Alright, alright. I’ll be good,” I said more to myself than to Azooz. I got up and began pacing, and tried to remember my plan. “Azooz, I’m nervous,” I said, hoping he would say something to calm my nerves.

“You should be. I am too. These are very important men,” he said, pacing too. “I must go. I will get you when it’s time.” He left the room swiftly, pulling the door shut behind him with new expertise on how to manipulate it.

Alone again, I was left to feel smaller than ever. My doubts all attacked me at once. I tried practicing my speech but I was only able to say one or two points before I forgot the next part. I would get a good flow going then my mind would suddenly hit a road block and just shut off.

I stopped thinking about my emancipation from this place. I began to think that tonight might be my last night after I go out there and make a fool of myself. Over the past few weeks I stopped talking with the Universe out of fear. I was afraid of how it would answer my questions. Now I could only think one thing: *God help me.*

THIRTEEN

Rhetoric, Charisma, and Bullshit

AZOOZ MUST HAVE put his shoulder into the door, he opened it so fast. “Let’s go. It is time,” he said, not even entering the room, just swinging his head to follow.

“Azooz, wait,” I called, trying to follow, but found myself rooted to the spot.

“What? We cannot make them wait,” he said impatiently.

“I don’t know what to say anymore.”

“What? You are the leader of Humanity. Talk to them with respect. You will be fine.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go.” I suddenly found myself uprooted and on the way out the door for the first time in day light. Walking down the stairs felt as foreign as walking on the moon. Once we reached the bottom floor I saw Abas and Ahmed sitting at a table with three others. They had just finished eating, judging by the empty plates and bowls at the table. Abas and Ahmed were laughing hard while the two older leaders laughed more controllably. The younger one, like he had just told the joke, only had a grin on his well groomed face.

The two older leaders wore traditional Iraqi garb. The younger one wore an outfit that might have been fashionable in America during the 1970s; a maroon shirt with an oversized collar that was unbuttoned down to the middle of his chest exposing his black chest hair and a gold necklace. He tucked his shirt into his grey slacks with a brown belt, and wore highly polished brown leather shoes.

With a napkin, he wiped the food off his face along with his grin. Azooz spoke quickly in Arabic. Abas and Ahmed shifted in their seats

to face me while Azooz stood to the side of them poised to translate. I stood about ten feet from the table ready for the inquisition.

“What is your name?” Azooz asked, translating for the young leader.

“Ani ismi Bradley Multriener, tsharafna.” I told him directly, putting my right palm over my heart.

“Tsharafna, Bradley, techey Arabi?” he asked.

“Shway shway,” I said, using my thumb and index finger to show him *a little bit*.

“Zien...” he spoke a long Arabic sentence I did not understand.

I looked to Azooz and he translated, “I apologize for the conditions you have lived. I hope you can understand. I understand we could have many business to do with each other.”

“My conditions were not that bad, thank you. And yes, I hope to be able to work with you,” I said, putting my hands behind my back in an obedient posture. Azooz’s voice translated in the background.

“Very good, I must understand, why did you fight in the military against the people of Iraq?” He rested his elbows on the table, folding his hands.

“I joined the military to get trained by the United States and learn about its military. I was sent to Iraq shortly after I joined. I only fought for my life when I had to.”

“You say you are the leader of the Revolution in America?” he asked. Azooz translated the sentence almost before he finished asking it.

“No, I’m not the leader of the whole Revolution, just one group. It is a large group though. There’s Humanity all over America,” I said, struggling with my nerves and trying to remember my speech. This was not how I pictured it happening.

“We too have groups in America. I contacted some of my friends there, they’ve never heard of you or your group. You are not lying?” he asked. His eyebrows bent with scrutiny.

“Never, sir. We remain underground until the time is right for action. We are still building our numbers and planning our moves,” I struggled to explain. An oversized fly buzzed close to my ear. I tried and failed to swat it away.

“Very good, and when will your group be acting?” He asked the question I was not at all prepared to answer.

I took a breath to answer, but no words came out. Hesitation is not what I wanted him to see. “Within one year, that’s when we’ll have the number of people we need, and the resources,” I made up. “The plans are already formed and drawn. We will continue to revise them until the date of action.” Sweat began to slip down my brow.

The hot breeze didn't help my nervous body, and the fly continued to swarm.

"And what will your actions be?" he asked, pushing himself away from the table slightly.

I had this part of the speech memorized, but not only could I not remember the part, what I could remember of it seemed irrelevant now. "I'm happy that you ask that. This is what I've been looking forward to discussing with you," I said bidding for time. Words escaped me as I struggled to remember my lines.

Spontaneously, I realized I didn't need to remember any part of any speech, nor did I have to put on an act for this man. I really felt that there should be a change in America. All I needed to do was speak from the heart and all would flow.

"We will first begin with public demonstrations and bring light to many of the issues the U.S. government wants to keep in the dark. This will be the education process. In order for the Revolution to be successful, the people have to know what they're fighting for. The education process will continue until there are sufficient numbers of people who will be willing to facilitate this change by any means possible.

"We will demand the release of political prisoners, and for them to right various other wrongs they are responsible for. These demands will not be met, naturally, and we will continue to have our ideals shot down by the corrupt government.

"We will demand a government that is free of corruption and legal bribes, and of course our demands will continue to be overlooked by those in power. But the truth and righteousness of our goals will become clearer in the minds of the people.

"After the government's continued refusal to work with its own people is obvious, that's when we will begin to retaliate. What myself and many others have learned from our time in the military and in Iraq, we will use to begin the war against the corrupt government on American soil. Hundreds of thousands will go underground and begin learning and operating against the oppressive institutions in America." I was going roughly off of my lines, but this was better than I pictured.

"As you know we will not be able to compete toe-to-toe with the U.S. government in combat, but we will have a heavy effect on them through guerilla tactics. Every time we are refused justice, we will retaliate. We will be seen as the real heroes of the American people.

"Eventually the war will be won, not by overwhelming force but by continued resistance to the oppressors. The U.S. democracy will be put to the test when the people are all ready for a drastic reform

of the government. And when that government continues to deny the people's wants, it will only undermine itself by reinforcing its hypocrisy.

"When the change of government is ready, tools like the Internet and worldwide communications will be used. We will install a pure and true democracy with no corrupt representation that will be used to decide the future of America and its influence on the rest of the world." My passionate words caused sweat to pour down my face but I didn't care. All I could see was the young leader who seemed unmoved by my improvised plans.

"Very interesting, it sounds your plans are in line with the plans of my people in your country," he said before I interrupted him.

"Yes, that's part of the loose ends I have to tie up before we can begin. There are many revolutionary groups currently operating in America but few are allied. They're all operating separately without larger organization or structure. When America falls under her own weight, if these factions are not united, they will fight for control amongst each other after the fall.

"Part of my plans, before the action phase, is to organize. We need to come together under common leadership and act together, coordinating the blows like the left fist coordinates with the right." What I did not tell him was that the coordination mustn't stop there. Plans will have to be drawn to fill the vacuum of power before just another corrupt government replaces the old one. I didn't tell him this because I was sure he had his own plans for that, I didn't want to undermine him right now.

He seemed untouched by my passion. He held his position with his elbows on the table, and hands still folded in front of his mouth. He continued to silently study me with his eyes, allowing me to finally notice the electric heat of the wind.

My mind raced rapidly for more conviction, if not to convince him, at least to convince me. I had to consciously tell myself to keep my eyes from opening wide, exposing the fear I had for the man who controlled my destiny.

After his eyes were done studying every part of my composure, he turned to his two associates to discuss my fate. Abas and Ahmed listened but seemed unable to understand. Then he turned back to me and asked what I hadn't planned for: "Will you be able to kill Americans?" I gave Azooz a glance, but he disregarded my attempt to communicate.

The question really threw me off guard. I always avoided contemplating that while drawing my plans. That was one of those questions I hoped I'd never have to answer. "I..."

"Na'am," Azooz answered for me.

"Very well, thank you," he went back to his private discussion. I now owed Azooz my life because he'd just saved it.

I stood there in front of the table with my hands recently replaced behind my back which had escaped during my passionate impromptu. I began focusing on my breathing, trying to appear confident as I awaited my sentence: *guilty* or *not guilty*. The jury was in session for longer than I liked. Thirst began to remind me I was still alive.

They finished their discussion when the young leader raised his voice slightly and placed his palm on the table. He looked up at me and began speaking in Arabic, "We have had a discussion, not a disagreement. We spoke about what you had to say and we are happy to have found you. You will be contacted by our agents when you reach America." His words rushed over me like cool water: *when you reach America*. "You will do great things for the people of the world, God willing. Your group will receive the necessary funds from my people. I know I can trust you to keep our identities secret when you are released. When you get to America you must waste no time to take action."

"I will not," I said.

"Very good, you will spend one, maybe two more days here before you will be blindfolded and released near American soldiers. It is an honor to meet you Bradley. God be with you."

"Allah weeyak," I returned his wish.

I shook hands with all six of them, and was shown back to my room by Azooz where I fell to my familiar foam mat. All the adrenaline flowing through my veins was suddenly rendered useless but still present. I was shaking uncontrollably.

"You did it, Bradley!" Azooz exclaimed with a huge smile on his face.

"I know, I can't believe it! Can you believe it? I can't believe it," I stuttered, wanting to get up to hug Azooz, but I could only curl up on my mat, rolling with excitement.

"You did it! Wait, I have something for you!" he said, rushing out and leaving the door open.

I began laughing silently to myself—I was going to be free! All the possibilities began rushing to me. I made plans for the entire next month in two minutes. I couldn't remember rejoicing this much in my whole life. I was now guaranteed my whole life. I did it!

Azooz came back carrying a cheap stereo the size of a shoebox, shutting the door behind him. "Hip-hop!"

I laughed loud and hard, "Where'd you get that?"

"Baghdad. I was there for more than three days to get the lead-

ers," he said, dropping to all fours, face close to the boom box, and pressing buttons expertly. The beat came out of the speakers and right into my soul.

"This is it! You got it!" He somehow found my favorite artist I told him about so long ago. "This is it!" I stood up and put my hands in the air, moving my body, and waving my arms to the beat. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to help it. I was dancing!

Azooz imitated my movements poorly but he started dancing, too. "Ha ha!" We were dancing! "No like this," I showed him, "you hear the beat? Move with it." I couldn't help laughing anymore. "There ya go!"

I couldn't believe myself, I had never been happier to be alive. The song came to an end but I kept dancing. Azooz dropped back to his knees to press more buttons on the stereo. This time hip-hop did not come on, but a fast-paced wailing instrument. Someone was singing in Arabic but I understood none of it.

"This is rai!" he shouted over the tunes and began dancing a very different way. He held his arms out to his sides snapping his fingers to half the pace of the music, and shook his body rhythmically. His body shook slightly but his head shook twice as fast as the pace of the song. A huge smile on his face shook side to side almost too fast to discern.

I tried miserably to imitate it. "No, your body move different than your head," he said, providing the example.

"Like this?" I asked, getting better at the dance.

"That's it, that's it! Ha ha!" I didn't know what the guys downstairs thought of the sounds coming from upstairs, nor did I care. I just kept dancing.

The Iraqi song came to an end and another hip-hop song started. "This is it right here. Listen to the words!" I said, still dancing but not as enthusiastically. I exhausted myself quickly, and went back to sitting on my mat. But I wasn't exhausted beyond listening.

"I'm gonna miss you, Azooz," I said in between songs.

"I will see you again. Don't forget you are still my prisoner for another day or so." We both broke into wild laughter. We stayed there on that mat listening to the underground hip-hop and rai music that he pirated off of the Internet all into the night. "Listen to these words," he translated, "Father, father tomorrow, tomorrow the sun will rise on Iraq, father." It was a beautiful slow paced song. I hoped its words were true. We kept listening until the batteries ran out on his stereo, and kept talking about music and the bright future the world now had.

"It is true Bradley, the leaders are great men. They drive up in

a brand new Mercedes. Everywhere the young man walks, everyone respects him. He gave me one half million dinar the first day we met." Azooz whispered the last part like he wasn't supposed to see that much money. It probably equaled out to four hundred dollars. "I bought Naida a beautiful necklace from the market, and more books for her and my brother."

I smiled and said, "That's great Azooz. I'm sure she'll love it."

"She did Bradley. I was allowed to go to Ramadi for two days to see my family. They missed me so much, and asked many times where I have been. I have to tell them in Syria, studying for college in peace. I don't think Naida believe me, though."

"Well, it's probably better they think that, then know what we're really up to," I offered.

"You are right. But it is beautiful, Bradley. Ramadi is at peace now, no fighting anymore. I did not believe Naida when she tells me, but then she show me. Everyone out in the streets, cleaning up, painting, rebuilding, it is beautiful now. Wait until you see, Bradley."

What Azooz said stirred my heart. I couldn't wait to see Ramadi. I was beginning to realize that Ramadi was more of a home to me now than I could ever expect America to be. "I can't wait, maybe in five or ten years I can bring my family to come visit yours."

Azooz's face lit up. "Yes Bradley! Our children can be friends and our wives can shop together in the souk!"

"Inshallah, Azooz. Inshallah." The idea warmed me inside as much as it did Azooz, but when he mentioned *our wives* my mind flashed back to her. Maybe she did write and her letter just got lost in the mail.

We kept talking until exhaustion took over. After falling asleep in mid conversation twice, we decided to continue in the morning.

FOURTEEN

Treachery

THIRTY-SIX PEOPLE OUT of the forty gave me their word that they would help carry out my plan. We were beginning to assemble in one of the dirty, decrepit safe houses where the weed would eventually be stored to dry. The final ones began to show up slightly late for the plan.

After everyone was in, I drew attention to a large map of the area we had laid out, and began, "Alright, everyone knows where this is. It's the forest. It's pretty big and the trips in and out are gonna take about an hour and a half a piece.

"The bridge is right here and that will be the main assembly point for the whole night. So the forest is roughly a huge square with four main intersections on each corner. These intersections are the only way to get to the forest with a vehicle. Karnell, you're going to be in charge of that. You're gonna take three guys and sit at the intersections with two way radios, and you're gonna let us know every time any car goes in or out of the area.

"Now, we got a van. Will, you're gonna be driving it to the safe house and back. Pat, you're gonna be there unloading the van and storing it. Myself, Eric and Chad are gonna each have nine or ten guys making runs back and forth from the bridge to the fields," I explained. I didn't say aloud that this was the safe house. I would tell Pat and Will that separately.

"Yeah, but how're we gonna—" Pat began.

"Hold your questions 'til the end. I'll go over the details later. Alright, Chad, I'm gonna take you to the fields tomorrow to show you how to get there. Alright, there's three separate fields and three groups, so we're

each gonna take one and clear it. Eric, Chad and I are gonna have radios listening to the guys at the intersections.

"When we're in the fields we're not wasting any time. We're hackin' the plants down, and getting rid of all the excess branches. Alright, we're gonna each have a tarp and when we got a good amount, roll 'em up and strap them to your backs.

"Quietly, and with as little light as possible, make your way back to the bridge, and wait under it until the van shows up. Okay, when a group is ready for a pick up, we're gonna get confirmation from every intersection that there's no traffic, and that's when the van's gonna come out to pick up the weed.

"Whatever group's ready is gonna come out from under the bridge as soon as the van is on top of it, load the cargo, and get back under the bridge as fast as possible. Once you do that, then you're going on another run. This is gonna start at 1:00 am and go no later than 5:00 am. We don't have much time to waste, so don't be messin' around out there. Get in, get out, and get back in again.

"Alright, this is all going on Wednesday night. Everyone get outta here now except Chad, Will, Eric, Karnell, and Pat. We're gonna go over all the details. Now one of these guys is gonna be directly in charge of you so listen to them, and if you don't, your pay's gettin' cut in half."

The next few days went by fast. All the details were addressed and everything fell into place. Tuesday came fast, and it was time for Eric and I to show Chad how to get to his field. My nerves grew tense every time I went near the forest anymore, but this was the last time before we carried out the plan. A haze was cast over the town as we drove from Chad's house to where we would park and walk to the field. We didn't play any music on the way there. We just went over the plan over and over again.

"Make sure all your guys are wearing black on Wednesday, and don't let any of them give you shit. If they don't want to listen to you, cut their pay. And if they're still not listening, knock 'em the fuck out in the middle of the forest," I told him.

"Nah, I'm good. They're all gonna be fine. I just can't wait to see these beautiful plants," he said.

As we got closer to the spot the haze grew thicker. We looked closer to the haze's source to discern it and noticed three helicopters circling over the forest.

"Oh fuck—" I said as my stomach rose to my throat. We didn't park as we planned—we just kept driving. There were at least twenty squad cars from three departments parked on top of the bridge. At least fifty cops were walking around the area, writing reports, and taking pictures. The source of the haze was now obvious: the fields were in flames.

"Brad, wake up," Azooz whispered, shaking me awake.

"What's up?" I asked, wondering why he was waking me in the middle of the night.

"Shhh, just wake up," he demanded, quietly urgent.

"What's goin' on, Azooz?" I sat up.

"He's Iranian. I knew it."

"What?"

"The leader, he's Iranian. He doesn't plan on letting you go, either," he whispered.

"What are you talking about? He's an Iranian?"

"Yes, I've been fighting against my people the whole time," he said, quietly crying. "I thought before, maybe he was Iranian, but I did not want to think it." He was clearly ashamed. "They left already. He told Abas to kill you one day after he leaves."

"What? But he was happy to have me. He said I was free to go," I plead, but it wasn't Azooz I was trying to convince.

"I don't know what to do," he said quietly as he placed his back into a corner and slid down the wall. He sat on the floor with his head in his hands.

My mind raced, and my stomach hurt. The prospect of freedom was all a lie. They plan to kill me. "Azooz, you gotta help me escape. We could leave right now. You could get me back to a base, and I could help you. Then you'll be rewarded for helping me escape." I quickly said the first thoughts that came to mind. "Azooz you gotta help me."

"I can't," he said over a sob. "They know where my family lives. They will kill them if I help you," he said, letting all his cries out in the corner now.

His predicament hit me hard in the stomach. I was clueless. "You said they're gonna wait one day before they do it?"

"Yes, tomorrow night they're going to kill you. Tomorrow I will beg Abas all day to keep you alive, but you cannot tell them you know or they will kill you sooner."

"Alright," I said. I was searching for options, but found my mind as fruitful as the desert surrounding us. "Alright, will you stay with me tonight, then?"

"What?" he looked up.

"I'm scared, Azooz. Stay in here tonight. I'm scared," I said, now up and pacing.

"Okay, I will stay. As soon as the sun rises I will talk with Abas," he said, getting comfortable in his corner. I sat down on my mat again, and my mind raced faster than ever. I left no option unconsidered. I stayed up long after Azooz fell asleep. It was impossible for

me to fall asleep. I must have burnt out, because all I could do after a while was stare blankly at the dark wall in front of me. No thoughts went through my mind anymore, just silence.

Azooz was snoring lightly in the corner for an hour when I got up. The door was still open; he couldn't lock it from the inside. I stood in the doorway looking over the dark house. It was perfectly silent except the wind. There were no electronic appliances providing background noise. No television left on after someone fell asleep. There was no air conditioner steadily humming. Only the wind.

I looked back toward Azooz sitting up, sleeping in the corner, and I quietly crept out. My eyes were adjusted to the dark, but I could barely make out the steps that I spent five minutes negotiating. When I made it to the bottom of the stairs, I took each step with careful precision. I no longer felt afraid. I now understood how I was in control of my destiny, no one else. I had traveled deep into my mind where *I was no longer I*. I traveled deep enough to unite with the Universe. I was one with everything, void of an ego. I understood that, in this state, I was one with God. I was God. I had free will as I took control of my destiny, yet I was following *God's plan*, it was *My plan*. My awareness filled the whole house. I didn't know the floor plan but I knew where to go. I quietly stepped through a hallway to the end.

In the room at the end of the hall I heard loud snores filling the walls. I stood in the doorway of the room where Abas slept. He laid on his side using his clasped hands as a pillow. An AK-47 was set against the wall behind him, and to the left of it was my rifle, still loaded.

I didn't even bother to walk around him. Instead, I stepped over him, telling him through my mind to stay asleep. He would never again wake up. Instead of choosing my rifle, I grabbed the AK-47. Its weight felt comfortable in my grasp. I knew I would be waking up Ahmed and Azooz with my actions, but I didn't worry about it at that moment. I only focused on my task at hand. Putting the butt of the rifle in my shoulder, I aimed right at Abas' heart.

"*God bless you, Abas,*" I whispered before I let the rifle cry. A four round burst hit his chest causing him to roll to his back, now asleep permanently. I heard running footsteps and a loud shouting of Arabic.

I took a knee in the doorway, allowing only the muzzle of the rifle and part of my head to be exposed. I aimed in down the hallway, and a running shadow fell into my sights. As soon as I acquired the target I squeezed the trigger hard, not letting it go.

The fifteen rounds or so knocked him off of his feet quick. He laid wailing a horrible cry in an expanding puddle of his own blood. I

got up from my knee and walked over to him slowly. He squirmed in his blood and cried a sound that made me feel his pain, but I didn't care. I stood over Ahmed and watched him squirm until he made brief eye contact with me. "I'm sorry," I said, before I dealt him the same fate as Abas.

I now heard Azooz yelling something in Arabic as he ran to the scene. "Nobody's killin' me, Azooz!" I yelled as he was still yelling frantically in Arabic. "Nobody's killin' me!"

He held his AK-47 ready to fire as he ran up. When he saw me standing over Ahmed he stopped and pointed his rifle at me. "What did you do?" he demanded.

"I said nobody's killing me, Azooz. Nobody's killing your family, either. We're gonna get outta here. All you gotta do is get me to a base, and I'll make a call to my unit to go get your family before they do," I explained, still gripping the AK-47 tightly.

"Bradley, we're in Syria!"

"What? What the fuck? Sonofabitch! How far from the border?"

"A day's drive, maybe more. If Abas doesn't call the Iranian tomorrow night, they will send someone here. If my body is not found with theirs, my family will be killed immediately. They know we are friends, Bradley!"

"Alright, let's get to a phone so you can call them. Tell them to get the fuck outta Ramadi."

"They do not have a phone. We must get you to the Americans!"

FIFTEEN

The Desperate Hajj

I GRABBED THE magazine out of Ahmed's rifle, and we went back to Abas' room. Azooz searched Abas' pockets for the keys to the car. While he was doing that, I stared at my rifle wondering whether I should take it or not.

"I found them," Azooz said, he didn't get up from the side of Abas' body; he continued to kneel there saying goodbye. As he got up I grabbed my rifle and slung it. For some reason, it no longer felt right to carry. We made our way outside to the old, white American car that was covered in a coat of light sand dust.

"You know where we're goin'?" I asked as he got in the driver's seat and put the keys in the ignition.

"I think so," he said, while turning the key, which produced the noise of a dying animal. "There is a safe crossing east of here, near Husaybah." He continued trying to start the car. It merely groaned in resistance.

"How far east?" I asked as the car finally jumped to life.

"I don't know," he said, putting the vehicle in drive and pulling away from the half built, yellow brick castle. Its silhouette was visible against the night sky. "Just east," he said, hitting his palm on the steering wheel out of frustration. Slamming his foot on the gas, he sped away from the fortress to his family's rescue.

I couldn't talk much more as we drove through the dark open desert. I only thought about Abas and Ahmed. I had to lie to myself so I wouldn't worry about killing them. I had to stay in denial like Evans was with his victims. I knew they were bad people, but they

were just people. Deep in my heart I felt bad, but I did not allow that to surface above my icy denial.

We made the first leg of the trip in silence. Azooz must have been following the stars to navigate, or else he was just dead reckoning. He didn't seem lost as he drove with unaltered concentration.

We drove in silence while the sun began to rise in front of us. The sight was remarkable. It had been so long since I'd seen it directly. As its heat became apparent I couldn't hold my tongue much longer. My guilt for putting Azooz's family at risk was pushing me to say something. Whatever it should be, I didn't know.

"Look, I don't know what to say. I'm sorry, alright? I thought I was helpin' both of us out. I didn't know there was gonna be a phone call or anything. I mean they were working for the Iranians the whole time. Your family's gonna be alright. We just gotta get to some Americans and your family'll be fine."

Azooz let silence speak volumes. Seemingly unmoved, he continued to drive, not letting his eyes leave the vast desert in front of us. I could tell his mind was racing faster than the car, but he didn't let it show. We continued our drive in silence. The car tore through the desert leaving a dust trail rising into the air, stretching over two hundred yards long. Luckily this will be a safe ride; there're no IEDs in Syria.

Just when I thought that today would be nothing but a scorching ride in silence, Azooz opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. I didn't say anything. I gave him time to formulate his words before he decided to talk.

"It's good," he said. "Now I can finally get my mother and brother out of the war. After your Marines rescue them, I will move them to Jordan."

"Yeah, you'll get rewarded for helping me escape. You can use that money to leave Iraq," I hurried to respond.

"No, I will stay in Iraq. My family will move to Jordan until the war is over," he said without removing his eyes from the barely visible path ahead. Maybe this was the smuggler's path Sheik Sattar used before becoming the most affluent man in Al Anbar. "I will not fight for anyone but my country anymore. Everyone is corrupt in this war. No one is real," he said monotonously.

"Fuck no they aren't. Everyone's corrupt on both sides. I'm done with this war, too. You can't fight for a cause in this war. You might think you are but we're really just laying down our lives to make somebody else's bank account bigger," I said.

"I will find the corrupt ones who are really responsible for all of this and kill them," he said solemnly.

"I'll be doing the same thing in America. Anyone who's holding back the human race from evolving together, I'm gonna take 'em out."

"Yes," he agreed.

"You see what I'm talking about, Azooz? I mean we got so much potential as a people now, and there's still those motherfuckers who want to steer us in the wrong direction."

"Na'am, I will be the leader of a branch of your army in Iraq. We will find those who hold us back and kill them, all of them."

"Yes we will. But there's one thing you should know." We had been driving for at least four hours now. "I'm not really the leader of any revolutionary group in America."

"What?" he said, slamming on the brakes, the vehicle slowed fast and came to a stop. "You lied to me the whole time?"

"Well yeah, but—" The guilt of the day was adding fast. I felt just as bad as the ones we had just sworn to kill. "You don't understand the American people. All you've ever seen is America's shitty foreign policy; that's not us," I tried to explain. I just wanted him to start driving again. "We lost control of our country a long time ago. That ain't us."

"If there is no Revolution in America, then there is no hope," he said, not so much towards me but as a realization vocalized. "If America doesn't change, your country's ignorance will continue to poison the world," he said, running his fingers through his hair in disbelief.

"There is Revolution in America, Azooz. It's in the heart of every American no matter what they believe. We will take control of our country again, just like Iraqis will take control of theirs," I struggled. "I don't have to be the leader of a group—I can do it myself. Once the people start to understand what's really happened to them, everyone's gonna rise to fight. It's inevitable. I don't have to have a group," I explained.

"Believe me, Azooz, once the American people take back control of our country we can help the people who are really struggling. We can stop destroying our environment and stop destroying any hope of peace in the world."

Azooz began driving again slowly. He picked back up to our previous speed. It seemed his distrust for the revolutionary spirit of the American people caused him to maintain his previous silence.

"I'm tellin' you, once we take control we're gonna use all our advancements to help all the oppressed people in *and* out of America advance along with us. It's gonna be different, Azooz. And we're not gonna rape anybody's culture anymore, either. We're gonna learn

from each other's cultures instead of trying to change them." I was saying all this quietly, more like I was talking to myself. "Like me and you, how we learned from each other." I knew whatever I had to say was falling on deaf ears.

"You're too small, Bradley!" he shouted out of nowhere. "You cannot fight this giant by yourself. You might try but you will just end up dying like the rest!" he exclaimed, pounding his palm of the steering wheel again.

I let the silence consume us again as we kept steadfast on our way back home. Through the heat waves of the desert, I made out a mirage like city far in the distance. As it grew closer, it was all I paid attention to, trying to put the revelations of the day out of my mind. We continued heading straight for the city. It must have been our destination. "Is that Husaybah?"

"No, Syria still. We need petrol," he said, blankly.

The city seemed like a small Iraqi city, most of the roads were dirt. As we pulled onto the streets I noticed one major difference between this and an Iraqi city: there were no bullet holes, bomb creators, or caved buildings. As we pulled into the gas station, the few people there stopped to stare. There were only two pumps and one was broken. "Do you have any money?" Azooz asked.

"Ha ha, no." I laughed at the irony. He took everything I had weeks ago, including my watch he was still wearing.

He pumped the gas anyway until the tank was full. The people were still staring while Azooz calmly walked back to the driver's seat, got in, and took off. An attendant came running out from the gas station yelling and waving his arms, but Azooz just drove, quickly trading the small city for the open desert.

We were quickly back to the uneventful silence of the very unscenic drive. It was impossible for it to be a peaceful drive knowing what was at stake, but there was nothing more that we could do but drive. The sun had passed its height and was begging to sink again. Today was the first time I had looked in a mirror since before the battle. What I saw scared me each time, a bug bitten, fully bearded face that seemed unfamiliar.

But looking in the mirror this time scared me even more: in the distance behind us was a dust cloud moving across the desert on our path. It was caused by a vehicle following us from the city.

I told Azooz, but he seemed unconcerned. He only sped up a little more. The car was already reaching its maximum speed. I kept watching our tail through the mirror, occasionally turning in my seat to see firsthand. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like it was getting closer.

A half an hour or more went by with it still following us, and now I was sure it was getting closer.

I switched out my AK-47 magazine with Ahmed's full one. I checked to make sure the magazine in my rifle was full and that a round was chambered. Once both of my weapons were prepared I placed them to the left of my legs in the foot recess.

"We gotta stop and get rid of these guys," I stated to whoever was listening, whether it was Azooz or not. "They're gettin' too close."

"When they get closer I will stop and talk to them. They will probably let us go," he said checking his rearview mirror. They were less than five hundred yards behind us, offset to the right to stay out of our dust cloud. Azooz began a slow decrease of speed letting the vehicle get closer before we stopped. "Alright, get out of the car right away so they do not see our weapons," Azooz said as he stopped. Then he took his advice, quickly opening his door and stepping out. I followed his lead.

"Let me know if they speak English," I said, before they stopped twenty feet behind us. They got out of their car and were in uniform. Azooz immediately began speaking to them in Arabic.

"I don't think they speak English, they look dumb," he said out of the corner of his lip.

"What are they saying?"

"They know we're Iraqi. They're messing with me," he whispered as the two Syrians conversed between themselves. "They want money or they will arrest us they say."

"They want a bribe? Motherfuckers." I couldn't believe it. Suddenly the Syrians brandished their pistols one pointing at each of us. "What's goin' on?"

"I told them we have no money," Azooz said without fear detectable anywhere in his voice.

"Tell them I got money in the car and I'm going to get it. When I say 'now' jump to the ground."

"What?" he asked quickly.

"Just tell them, and hit the ground," I said, walking over to my seat. One of the Syrians probably sensed what I was up to because he got a lot louder and waved his pistol more frantically at me. I kept nodding my head with my hands slightly up, still walking towards my seat. Azooz's rapid Arabic words were probably the only thing separating me from the bullets in that Syrian's pistol.

I opened the door and leaned into the car, gripping the AK-47 without showing it yet. "NOW!" I yelled and Azooz immediately dropped to the ground. Without pausing I raised the muzzle to the Syrians through the two driver side windows. I heard a pistol fire first

but it didn't hit me. I yanked the trigger fast, spraying the two corrupt officials with .30 caliber bullets. The echo effect from firing the automatic weapon in the car caused my eardrums to feel torn. After both Syrians hit the ground I ran around the car and continued to baptize them with metal until the magazine ran dry.

"Fuck!" I yelled out of anger. These were the third and fourth people I killed today and I didn't like it at all. I just wanted the killing to stop, but I knew it wasn't going to anytime soon. There was everyone in Iraq who was killed today and who's still yet to be killed before the day ends. Then the people who will fall victim to the war tomorrow, and the next day. I just wanted it to stop. "FUUUUUUUCK!"

"Let's go!" Azooz yelled. His ears must have been hurting, too. We got back in our seats. Azooz didn't hesitate to jump on the shattered glass in his seat before we peeled off back to the unbiased desert.

"How far are we from the border?" I asked, sinking into my seat.

"Maybe one more hour, can you see the buildings ahead?" he asked, pointing them out, then checked my watch.

"Yeah, barely. That's Iraq?"

"Yes, Husaybah," he said, triggering a memory in my head that I couldn't quite decipher. I checked the side mirror to see how far we made it from the dead Syrians and I saw another dust cloud behind us. It seemed a little closer than the last one was when I had first noticed it.

"Isn't Husaybah near Al Qa'im?" I asked.

"Yes, it's very close. Why do you want to know?"

"I don't know, but we better get there quick. There's another car following us." Azooz looked back at what I was talking about and looked forward again, stepping harder on the gas.

The sun was getting closer to setting, but the wind from outside still felt like a blow dryer on my face. "Azooz, I want you to know I'm not lying about the Revolution in America," I told him, hoping he was more willing to listen now.

"That is good, Bradley, but right now I am hoping we can make it to Iraq before the Iranian makes the call to have my family killed." I noticed he was gripping the steering wheel nervously tight.

"We will, where do they live?" I asked.

"Saddam Mosque—" he started.

"They live in The Saddam Mosque?" I interrupted, confused.

"No, two blocks south. Al Ma'Laab."

"Alright, I know exactly where that is. I've probably been in your house a couple times." I joked.

"Probably," he said plainly.

"Sorry." I expected silence to resume its role again, but it did not.

"Bradley, this is it for us, I will not see you again."

"No, this might be it for a little bit, but I'll see you again. After the fighting's done in Iraq I'm gonna go back out to Ramadi, or you can come to America once the fighting's over there. Our families, right? They're gonna be friends. You know my name. Look me up." The denial was telling me what to say. I knew Azooz was probably right, but I didn't want to admit it.

"Yes, I will. Next time we see each other the world will maybe be a better place." He was speaking in a low tone.

"It will be, Azooz. You got Iraq, I got America. We'll get everything worked out." I was just trying to make small talk now. I didn't want to think about the car that was closing in behind us. I didn't want to think about never seeing Azooz again, either.

The vehicle behind us was getting harder to ignore, though. It had cut our distance in half in less than a half hour, and was determined to catch up.

"Where are we gonna cross at?" I wondered.

"It is near Husaybah. I do not know exactly. We need to look for it when we get there," he said as if there weren't any Syrian officials following us.

"What do you mean 'look for it'?"

"It is a cut in the wires, there are many wires on the border." He must have been talking about concertina wire.

Dusk began to set on us like a judge delivering a death sentence. The sun was hovering dangerously close to the horizon. In the distance I could see the lights of the city begin to flicker. The vehicle traffic was flipping their headlights on. The border Azooz mentioned was clear, a thick line of concertina wire spanning as far as I could see in both directions. It didn't seem to have any breaks that I could see. The border must have been twenty spools of concertina wire thick and three or four high.

Azooz started driving to the left of the city as to not drive right up on it. The Syrians were uncomfortably close now as we reached the border. With nowhere to cross in sight, Azooz began driving alongside the border faster than ever. "Where's that safe crossing at?" I yelled, looking back at the Syrians who made the left turn at the wire less than a minute after we did.

"Ahead, before the Euphrates. We must make it. We have no time to fight the Syrians!" Azooz was yelling over the wind that grew louder with our speed.

“We might not have a choice.” When I looked back I noticed there wasn’t one car following us; there were four more, except the four were on the other side of the border. That was when I heard the first shot fired at us. It broke our rear window and impacted on the dash board between Azooz and me.

Then a more consistent string of automatic fire was aimed at us. As soon as Azooz heard it he almost spun out of control. That was probably the only thing that prevented either of us from getting hit. I had only my American rifle now and I never fired more than one well aimed shot at a time with it. It was instinct from endless training and experience.

I aimed at the driver and started squeezing off rounds, pausing to aim between each. Even if I wanted to fire fast I wouldn’t have been able to. It was so dirty that I had to apply immediate action every other round to make it fire again.

The Syrians, too, started swerving as I saw two of three of my bullets hit the windshield, but they continued to follow, returning fire with what seemed like a full magazine each time. “Keep swerving!” I yelled, getting as low in my seat as possible, avoiding another long burst.

I got up to return fire with another couple of rounds and I realized who the vehicles were on the other side of the border: they were American military! “Keep driving, Azooz! When we lose these motherfuckers we can get your family saved!”

“I see the safe crossing!” he yelled back, but it didn’t seem so safe anymore. I peaked over the dashboard to see what he was talking about. It was almost half a mile away but we’d be there soon.

“We gotta stop there, we can’t cross over with the Americans on the other side. They’ll blow us away!” I warned. We were going to have to slug it out with the Syrians. “How much ammo you got?”

“One magazine!” he yelled over the screams of the Syrian weapons. We both knew what we were going to have to do next—we didn’t have to talk about it.

When we reached the break in the wire, Azooz slammed on the breaks. I began firing more rapidly, suppressing the Syrians fire while Azooz ran from the car and got cover behind the engine. As soon as he was set, he opened fire with his AK-47 allowing me to get out and join him. When I opened the door and began running I felt the same punch as before in the upper left shoulder, except this punch hurt a lot more. It tore through me while I had my back turned to them, knocking me to the ground like a wrecking ball.

Azooz stopped firing and my first thought was, *what the fuck are you doing!?* He gave up his cover to drag me behind the car. He saved

my life then, because as soon as he stopped firing, three Syrians got out of the pickup truck and started firing at us while they ran behind their vehicle. Their rounds hit the ground I was on just two seconds before.

He dragged me by the collar of my dishdasha behind the car after a brief struggle with my weight. "Why aren't they helping!?" he angrily shouted. The humvees were parked right in the opening of the wire, all of which had their heavy machine guns pointed right at us.

"They don't know who we are! You don't want them to help right now, either. If they open fire, we're all dead!" I quickly explained, listening to get a better understanding of the situation. Their bullets were hitting our car but not with such a heavy volume as before. "It's us or them, Azooz!" It was nothing either of us didn't already know. "You know what we gotta do, right?"

"We need your friends to help us!" he screamed, still pointing out the group of gun trucks that could end this in five seconds.

"No, how much ammo you got left? I got half a mag."

"Me too," he said, checking his weapon.

"They're about twenty meters away. We gotta charge 'em!"

"What!?" he looked at me like I was crazy. I was. I could feel a searing burn where the bullet tore through my shoulder.

"We gotta run fast and keep firing the whole way! But save your ammo. When we pop around their truck we gotta just spray 'em down!" It was the only way I saw out of this.

"It won't work!" he screamed at me.

"What do you want to do?" I asked, hoping he would say something better, but he only stared back at me with a wild look in his eye. That's when I noticed the silence. They stopped firing. They probably thought we were dead.

"This is our chance. Let's go!" I screamed before I struggled up and began an all out sprint. I saw out of the corner of my eye Azooz followed. The first thing I saw was a Syrian walking up to our vehicle with his AK-47 at the ready. My left arm didn't want to work with me but I forced it to as I instinctively fired, hitting the man in the face.

We kept firing at a pace infinitely slower than our sprint, but we kept firing to keep their heads down. Time slowed down again, like usual, but we made it to the truck in no time at all. Two Syrians were crouched behind the engine. As soon as we appeared I looked down the barrel of one's rifle but mine fired first. One bullet fired, but then my bolt locked to the rear: I was out of ammo. The Syrian was not dead, but, voluntarily or not, my shot persuaded him to drop his weapon.

Azooz fired a short burst before he, too, ran out of bullets. Most

of the rounds hit the ground in front of his target, but at least one must have hit because he dropped his weapon, as well. We didn't waste any time pouncing on them. Azooz started beating his enemy with the butt of his empty weapon. I began punching mine in the face with my right fist. My left arm hung limp during the beating.

As Azooz's enemy's skull crushed, I felt brains and blood splatter across my face. I continued giving my beating without an ounce of remorse. I wasn't sure if he was alive anymore when I pushed him away. Azooz dealt him one blow to the forehead. His skull caved on impact.

It was over, but neither I nor Azooz felt it was. Azooz picked up his dead enemy's rifle and checked the truck for anyone inside, but there was no one.

"We have to stay together, Bradley," he said. His adrenaline caused his voice to shake violently. "We work too good together."

"You're right," I said, trying to wipe the blood from my face, but only smearing it. "We're brothers."

I left my rifle where it laid. I didn't want anything to do with it anymore. I knew what we had to do, but I really didn't want to talk to any Americans right now. Regardless, Azooz's family was more than a hundred miles away, unknowingly close to death. We began walking slowly to the gun trucks.

"I'm an American!" I shouted to one of the dismounted troops. He was yelling something back but I couldn't hear what over the ringing in my ears. "We're Americans!" I screamed louder, but he only put his hand out, signaling to stop. I looked over at Azooz, obviously furious. He kept walking towards them shouting something. Whatever he said, I couldn't hear either. I couldn't hear anything, but I knew what was going on.

"Drop your weapon, Azooz!" I thought I yelled but I heard nothing come out of my mouth. All I could hear was silence, not even the ringing anymore. Suddenly my hearing came back: three shots and Azooz fell.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!" I cried as I ran to Azooz's side. The sand around his right side was dark with blood.

"Save them..." he struggled to say in between coughs of blood. "My family... s-s-save them..."

"I will, Azooz, I promise," I struggled to say over tears.

"I... believe... in you... Bradley, your... Revolution." His last words came out almost silently but I heard them louder than anything.

I lifted his head from the sand and embraced it with my whole body while I cried uncontrollably for my dead brother.

It was hard, but I regained control of myself and lifted Azooz's body over my right shoulder. Disregarding my pain, I carried him back to his country that he loved so much.

Childhood

“AFTER REVIEWING YOUR situation I think I can make an exception for you, Mr. Multriener.” The Dean of the College of Liberal Arts said.

“I would really appreciate that, ma’am. I know my grades aren’t the best, but I’ve been working hard for the school and the community all year. Next year you’re gonna see a big change in my academic situation.” I was relieved that she was letting me stay.

“That’s good, because you’ll still be on academic probation for the remainder of next year. However, in order for me to let you stay with us, you will have to attend summer school and receive no less than a B average in three classes,” she said, twirling her pen and taking sporadic notes.

“Oh, you won’t regret your decision, ma’am. Summer school will give me a chance to catch up a little bit, too. Thank you so much,” I said and got up to leave.

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Multriener, and good luck with the Erma C. Hayes place. I really hope you’re successful there.”

“I really hope so, too, ma’am. Thanks again.”

On the way back to the dorm it felt like I could fly there if I wanted. I was so happy. I was allowed to stay even with my horrible grades. Jamie and I could stay together. We were going to shop around this weekend for an apartment to share next year. I couldn’t wait to tell her the news. She was going to be busy most of the evening with another anthropology lab project. Her project partner was coming to our dorm this time. I was looking forward to meeting him. She said he always has pretty good weed.

The way back to Warren Hall from Fener Hall was a scenic walk through the budding Thompson Woods. A paved trail provided the way

through, but I usually took the deer trails through the trees inhabited by squirrels and birds of all types. A brief walk along Lincoln Drive and I was back in Thompson Point. It was my rogue nation as it was called by my superiors when commenting on my leadership of the place.

Built in the late fifties, the eleven dorms were all very similar, and now were of fading brick, surrounded by tall trees and green grass. The students were out studying, enjoying the spring weather. That was something that I would have to learn to do for next year.

As I walked up the steps to the third floor, I thought about all the students who had traversed the same steps in the past. I wondered if any of them had ever done so as happily as I was doing now.

Probably not, I decided. I wondered if anyone, anywhere could have matched my contentment. Once I reached the third floor I heard a rhythmic knocking that captivated me to figure out what it was. It was coming from down the hall, near my room. As I got closer it grew louder.

I became aware that it was coming from Jamie's room, it sounded like her roommate had a boy over for the night. It didn't matter to me; Jamie and her study partner were in my room. She practically lived there now.

But my room was still locked and as I was unlocking it, I heard something that made me drop the key. "Abh..." It was Jamie moaning the same exact way she had moaned for me so many times. "Abh..." There it was again, another crippling blow.

As the knocking of her bed against the wall got quicker her moans grew louder and faster. As their rhythm grew faster I grew frantic. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but I knew too well. I considered breaking the window of her room and charging in. I wanted to pull him off of her and beat him violently while she watched, afraid that I would do her next.

I did none of that, though. I only stayed long enough to confirm what I had just heard, then I left. I ran out of Warren Hall so fast that I actually stumbled and fell on the last flight of stairs. I scrambled up, only wanting to leave. I felt blood dampening my hair just above my forehead. I didn't stop to think about the difference of opinion I now had about that flight of stairs. I didn't stop to think about anything. Every time my mind settled, it reverted back to what I had just heard. I would immediately shift my focus elsewhere, only to be quickly drawn back.

I had no idea where to go or what to do. I just started walking away from Thompson Point. I speed walked and occasionally broke out in a run. I walked for half an hour finding myself headed in the direction of The Towers on the other side of campus.

Jared was the only friend I had who lived there, so I decided to go up to his room and see if he was home. The elevator took me up to the tenth

floor where Jared lived. I knocked three different times before he finally opened.

"Brad, what's up, man?" he asked, surprised by my unexpected visit and the obvious uneasy look on my face.

"Not much, man. Hey, I was just in the area and I was wondering if I could get a ride somewhere?"

"Uh, yeah, I don't see why not. Where you gotta go?" he asked, looking around for his keys.

"City Hall, if you wouldn't mind."

"Nah, you'll have to tell me how to get there, though. You gonna talk to the mayor?" he asked after having found his keys and shutting the door behind him.

"Yeah, his office is still gonna be open for another hour. I got some shit to tell him," I said, following him back to the elevator.

On the way to City Hall I avoided any questions he brought up about Jamie. I encouraged small talk about anything else for the duration of the trip. I don't think he would have given me a ride if he hadn't noticed something wrong with me. He didn't quite figure it out, though. "You need me to pick you up when you're done, man?"

"No, I'll see if he'll give me a ride when we're done," I said, knowing the mayor would do no such thing. I just didn't want to bother Jared anymore.

Inside City Hall, on the way up to the mayor's office, I got the usual amount of odd stares for my casual attire. He was inside of his office at his desk, his door was slightly ajar. I could hear him on the phone talking with his wife about their plans for the weekend among other things. When I asked his secretary if I could see him she replied that he was too busy to talk today.

Against her advice I took a seat in one of the chairs outside of his door and waited. I tried not to think about the evening's events much further by listening in on his conversation. "Yeah honey, I will. I will, no Saturday... Yep... How much? I thought I told you to stop using it during the work day... Okay... Uh huh..." This went on for the remainder of his work day. Finally he wrapped up his call and began packing up his things to leave the office.

"What—What the hell are you doing here?" he asked when he noticed me patiently waiting.

"Just tryin' to see if you weren't too busy to talk about Erma C. Hayes," I said, following him down the hall.

"Well, I am, thank you," he said.

"I just wanted to tell you to call off your plans to close it down. We're gonna have the money." He stopped in his tracks and turned to face me.

"What's wrong with your head?"

"What?" I couldn't believe he was calling me crazy.

"Your head's bleeding."

"Oh this? It's nothing. Did you hear me? I'm gonna have your money."

"You're gonna have two hundred and fifteen grand a year?" he asked, sure that I wouldn't.

"Every year?"

"Yep, are you gonna have the money now?" He seemed proud of himself for some reason.

"Who the hell are you working for? 'Cause it sure as hell ain't the community. Are you trying to do this for votes or something? You know I'm gonna rally the whole campus to vote against you?"

"I don't need to listen to your idle threats. Who the fuck do you think you are, anyway?" He started walking again and I followed.

"You know if your cops were more honest, then people might actually respect them and you wouldn't have to beef up their budget." I was letting my anger show now, probably a mistake. "Keep fuckin' over your community, O'Brian. One of these days we're gonna get together and fuck you over, and it ain't gonna be on election day, either."

"What are you suggesting, Multriener?" he said, stopping in the door of the stair well and turning towards me like he was going to strike. Then he began to descend the stairs.

"Just tryin' to teach you a lesson. You're gonna learn it one way or another," I shouted down the stairwell, then decided not to follow him any further. I had lost.

"Stop! Aguff!" the Marine who shot Azooz yelled at me, but I didn't stop walking.

"Does it sound like I have an accent, motherfucker? I'm an American, you fucking idiot!" I kept walking, and he lowered his rifle.

"What the fuck are you doing in Syria? Are you CIA?"

"No, damn it. I'm Corporal Bradley Multriener. I was captured in Ramadi about a month ago," I said, laying Azooz down on his native land.

"Stay right there," he said, running off.

I said a long prayer over Azooz's body, not an Islamic prayer, nor a Christian one. I just spoke to the Universe. I spoke to God telling him how Azooz loved the world and the people more than anything, and fought hard to bring some sanity back to the world.

It was the first time I spoke to God in a while. It felt awkward at first, then for the first time in a long time I felt cared for, guilty but safe. I asked God to take Azooz and give him the freedom he deserved but never had. I asked God to take him to a better place.

I stopped praying suddenly when I realized wherever Azooz was now had to be better than this. There's no place worse.

An older-looking Marine came around from the other side of a gun truck to either tell or ask me something, but I stopped him before he started. "Get on the radio with your battalion and tell them to get in touch with the Marine battalion in Ramadi. It's an emergency. Tell them two blocks south of The Saddam Mosque in the Ma'Laab, there's about to be an execution of a woman and a child. Tell 'em to send everything they got."

"What the hell?" he questioned. He probably couldn't believe a bearded, dishdasha wearing Marine was giving battalion level orders.

"Did you fuckin' hear me? FUCKIN' DO IT! IT'S AN EMERGENCY!" I screamed with all the volume I had. He responded like a Marine usually does when yelled at: he ran to the radio and made the call.

"What did they say?" I asked, still kneeling over Azooz's body, making sure my watch was still fastened around his wrist.

"They said they were gonna look into it and to get you to the base as soon as possible." He spoke like he wasn't sure who he was talking to. "Do you need a Corpsman?"

"Yeah, that's fine. I'll get on the radio and tell 'em myself on the way," I said, getting up to leave.

"We can't let you do that. You're gonna be flexi-cuffed and blindfolded."

"What? Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

"No, we have to do it. He'll be put in a body bag and taken back, too." He pointed to Azooz, and signaled a Marine who came up with zip tie handcuffs and blacked out goggles. A doc also ran to my side with his bulging medical bag and went to work.

"Listen to me. If your battalion doesn't make the call to my battalion, I'm gonna personally see to it every one in your chain of command from you to your battalion commander gets fried," I said, greatly exaggerating my power within the Marine Corps. "Lives are on the line, damn it!"

"And you said you're a Corporal?" he asked, laughing.

"Yeah, motherfucker, who are you?"

"Staff Sergeant Date, and you can stop calling me motherfucker now." The Corpsman started applying a bandage to my shoulder.

"You sonofabitch! Give me the fuckin' radio!" I made a run for it, but his Marine with the detainee equipment tackled me hard. The combined weight of his body and all his gear came down hard on my malnourished body. I wanted to scream at the junior Marine, but there was no breath in me to yell.

They weren't gentle restraining me, and once the Corpsman was done bandaging me, they put me in the back of a truck. I just hoped they wouldn't leave Azooz behind. I had no strength to resist or even yell anymore. I only spoke loud enough to be heard over the diesel engine. "You wanna have a dead family on your conscience for the rest of your life?" I asked whoever could hear, but I got no reply. "I'm Corporal Bradley Multriener. I'm not lying about this."

We were in the truck for what seemed like half an hour before my door opened, and I was led into a room where my restraints were removed. It was a medical facility.

I continued telling anyone who would listen about Azooz's family but no one seemed to care. One of the medical officers ushered me into the surgery room where he immediately shot me with morphine.

After the painkiller started to take effect I almost lost consciousness completely, but I still told him about Azooz's family with slurred words. After he started surgery I was out completely. I had horrible dreams while I was out. I just kept seeing Azooz's dead body in the sand and picturing his family's execution.

* * * * *

I WOKE UP in a delirium several hours later. I was laying on a cot in a brightly lit, dusty tent. My left arm was numb and bandaged perfectly. While I began to stir I noted a Marine with no rank or nametapes sitting there patiently. I was in clean hospital clothes, but I was still very dirty. My dishdasha was folded at the foot of my cot.

"How's it goin'? My names Mike, and you are?" He must have been one of those Human Exploitation Team guys. They go by code names, keeping their identities a secret while interrogating.

I didn't want to be interrupted from telling Mike about Azooz's family so I went right into it. "I'm Corporal Bradley Multriener..." I went on to say my social security number, all the information about my unit. I even stated random statistics about my favorite baseball team to prove I was an American. After he checked it with some printed papers he had, he was convinced I was who I said I was.

"We're incredibly happy to have you back, Corporal," he said, and then turned his head to speak into a small handheld radio. "I have confirmation." With no response from the other end I wondered if his message was heard. "We're notifying your family that you're alive and well. Now, before we begin is there anything you would like to tell me?"

"Yeah, you need to get a hold of the Marines in Ramadi and tell them to send everything they got to the Ma'Laab District. There's

about to be a woman and a child executed there. It's gonna happen sometime tonight, you gotta fuckin' listen to me," I pled. He spoke into his radio again in a low tone so I couldn't hear.

"We've already notified your unit of the situation. Once we get a little more information they'll be pushing out some Marines to take care of it," he said, holding the radio to his ear for what I thought was an imaginary response.

"What else do you need to know? They're about to get executed! The fuckin' Ma'Laab, two blocks south of the Saddam Mosque!" I stood up quick. The cot slid back on the wooden floor.

"Settle down, Corporal," he said, authoritatively. "I actually have a lot to ask you tonight, and no, it can't wait."

He went on with the interrogation just like he was trained. He asked me to tell him everything from the battle at Hurricane Point to the battle on the border. He wanted to know if I had been tortured, and what information I gave up. He was especially interested in how I escaped.

The night dragged miserably on. Food was brought to us by a private first class, but I could only pick at the American cuisine. I was painfully hungry, but I had to force myself to eat the little I did.

I told Mike everything I knew besides a few key points. I left out how Azooz and I formed plans for an American Revolution that would spread throughout the world. I left out how Azooz and I became inseparable and how we decided to stop fighting this war and take on our own. I didn't tell him of the meeting, either. I just said we left after I killed Abas and Ahmed.

I spoke highly of Azooz, and demanded his body be taken to Ramadi and put in a grave there. I told Mike how Azooz saved my life numerous times, but if I told him that Azooz and I really were friends, the interrogations would never end.

Mike took notes on everything I said, so I was careful about every word that came out of my mouth. Then he went into questions about the enemy, taking notes on anything I had to offer that could be useful. I didn't tell him anything if I wasn't sure he already knew it. I didn't know much, but if I did and I told him, I would be participating in the war again.

The sun began to rise, changing the room from being unnaturally lit, to a bright, warm glow. "Alright, Corporal Multriener, I think I have enough here to get started on a report. There's gonna be quite a few people reading this one. Try to get some sleep if you can." He shuffled his papers into an even stack before getting up and leaving. I was given a blanket and a pillow that I wouldn't use, and a Marine was brought in with a loaded rifle to watch me while I slept.

"What's up, man?" I asked my guard but he only stood steady and silent. "You wanna have a staring contest?" He didn't budge. "Okay, you win. Two outta three?" He seemed determined not to speak, but I knew he's a Marine and he wanted to say something. "This your first time here?"

He looked away then back at me again. I took it as a yes. "You think you're makin' a difference?"

He finally broke, "Look, I don't know who the hell you are. They just told me to come down here and guard you."

"You guardin' for me or you guardin' against me?" I asked.

"What? I don't know, man. Who the hell are you?"

"I guess I don't really know," I answered.

"Huh?" I really wasn't trying to confuse him, but it wasn't hard to confuse a new Marine.

"So, you think you're makin' a difference out here or not?"

"I don't know, I guess. I mean we're here now so I guess we gotta fix it up or else they're gonna attack us again," he said, probably rephrasing the words that came straight out of his battalion commander's mouth.

"I guess you could say that, but did you ever think we've just given them a huge training exercise so when they make it to America they'll know exactly how to operate?" I purposely tried to contradict him just to see how he would respond.

His eyebrows scrunched up and his forehead wrinkled. "No, I didn't think about that. Who the fuck are you anyway?"

"Just call me Brad. That's not important, though. What is important is that you *are* making a difference. You're making a difference in these Iraqi's lives. We did start this mess, all we can do now is try to fix it the best we can so we don't completely ruin this country. You know what I mean? Everyone's got their fingers in this dyke; America's the only thing keeping it from blowing up completely." I was stating facts that I didn't like admitting. I wanted to give this kid a better understanding of why he actually was so important to this country, instead of the *you're fighting for our freedom* bullshit I was so sick of hearing. "So you keep that in mind next time you're thinking about killin' an innocent Iraqi for the hell of it. And that bullshit *he had an RPG, so I shot him then his buddy picked it up and ran* excuse is overplayed, so just don't do it." He had no idea what to say. His eyebrows still wouldn't unfold.

"I think I figured out why they said I wasn't supposed to talk to you," he said, resuming his original posture.

"Is there a pisser around here?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Out here," he said, leading the way for me to follow him out

of the large canvas tent. When I slid off my cot I stepped on my dishdasha and felt something important. Without giving it away, I picked it up and brought it with me as though I was going to discard the filthy thing.

I saw the port-o-john he pointed out and also noticed the fact that the whole tent was surrounded by concrete barriers to protect against mortars and rockets that might drop on the base. What really aggravated me was on top of the barriers were three strands of concertina wire and the only way out was a tall door that was padlocked. *I'm a prisoner again*, I realized on my way to the port-o-john. *I've been a prisoner for a while now*. I tried to figure out the last time I truly considered myself free, but I couldn't. I just kept stretching my mind back to my early childhood.

The port-o-john smelled disgusting and was uncomfortably hot. It reminded me of home for the past month. The shank was a lot dirtier than when I first fashioned it, but it was no less effective. Whoever folded it into my dishdasha must have known how much it meant to me. I fixed it to my leg using two strips from the dishdasha.

Upon returning to my cot I found myself unable to sleep. My mind kept reverting back to Azooz. I turned my back on the guard and pretended to sleep, but again I felt small thinking about my task ahead and trying to accomplish it without Azooz.

Just when I caught myself drifting into the dream world, I was woken by a medical officer who wanted to see my wounds. He told me they should be healed in a few weeks' time, and said if I was careful not to soak the bandage, I could have a shower.

Shortly after he left, another Marine showed up who lead me to a shower trailer just across a dirt road from the detainee center. The guard followed me out and posted himself just outside of the door when I went in. There were six showers and six sinks in the trailer, and only me inside. I considered breaking down right there and crying for Azooz again. I did, mentally, but I refrained from shedding a tear because I knew it was useless.

In the trailer they laid out some soap, a towel, scissors and a razor, and a brand new pair of utilities. Also, there were boots that looked far too big and a used pair of socks.

As I removed my hospital clothes and unfastened the shank, I felt strange putting it down on the bench. I thought about bringing it in the shower, but instead I hid it underneath the utilities.

When I stepped under the water, a month's worth of filth immediately blackened the porcelain floor. It was odd because I didn't want it to go. I was going to miss it.

After an hour in the shower trailer I came out almost looking

like a Marine again. I was beardless, now I just needed a haircut. My uniform was baggy but comfortable. It felt good to be back in an outfit designed for combat. I was a warrior, and I was going to remain at war for quite some time now.

My shank felt odd fixed in my beltline, but my blouse concealed my weapon along my right side where my good arm could reach it. The Marine followed me back to the detainee center where I found that, like what happened with Nate, the only way I could put my mind at ease from last night was by sleeping.

"Freedom? Does anybody here want freedom?" I asked. The endless sea of people cheered deafeningly. "But we live in America, right? Aren't we a free country?" The booming cheers turned to a low roar whose vibrations penetrated down to my bones. "It's true, I've been to some pretty bad places. America has a lot to offer, but this is not freedom. This is sedation! This is the agreement that has been reached to keep us quiet. 'We'll give you this in exchange for that.' My friends, this is not freedom! How can you truly consider yourself free so long as it takes the oppression and manipulation of the rest of the world to be as such?" The crowd roared louder than ever.

"How long are you willing to live a sedated life? The lie that you're free is the only thing holding us back from greatness! We have not yet reached greatness. When we do, there will be no question about it! There will be no worries about our environment threatening to collapse because, as a free people, we won't tolerate the raping of Mother Earth. Nor as a free nation would we have to worry about other nations and other people threatening to destroy our way of life. Because instead of exploiting their already weak economies to the point of collapse, we as a free nation would release our grip on their lives. We'd finally use the advances in modern technology and philosophy to raise all people who want it, to a higher standard of living without stripping anyone of their culture. We as a free nation will never exploit a lower class within our country again, nor will we lower a second-world country to third-world status in order to reaffirm our position as number one!" The screams from the audience were so loud I couldn't hear the last few words that come out of my mouth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, something big is coming! You can feel it, I can feel it! We now stand at a crucial fork in the road of human existence. One direction leads us to a future where our technology will help us into a harmonious coexistence with each other and our environment. Where we will come together and truly figure out how to solve the problems of our past and prevent new ones from being thrust upon our children. Yes, this path is one where we will continue to exist!"

The crowd grew slightly quiet waiting to hear where the other path

would lead. "We have to choose to follow that path, or we will continue to follow the one we are already on. Yes, the path we are currently facing is one that leads to more war on every level, with fighting on every front, ecological disaster, and the reversal of all the invaluable knowledge we've acquired throughout our existence. Yes, this path we are currently facing down is a path with a dead end." The crowd continued to grow quieter.

"In which direction are we going to turn? This is not being decided by us! Do you see? Have you awoken from your coma? Are we going to take control of our destinies and break free from the powers that threaten to destroy us? Are you ready to be free?"

The crowd inhaled to reply with a ground-shaking cheer, but no voice was heard but the echo of mine. I looked at the people in the front row as their eyes drifted from me to a short, fat man joining my stage. He held a piece of paper and walked right up to my microphone and began reading.

"To all who shall see this presence, greetings, Commanding General, American forces in Iraq takes pleasure in commending Corporal Bradley Multriener for his actions in Ar Ramadi, Iraq and various other places that resulted in the deaths of three known insurgents..." he continued to read officially.

"Wait!" I shouted into the microphone. "Three? I didn't kill Azooz!"

"That's not what it says here," the man affirmed by showing me the paper. "And now to give you your award we've brought a special guest."

I looked around but saw no one. The crowd silently did the same. Then from backstage a younger man was rolling out a dead body that stood erect on a dolly. It was Azooz, well decayed, holding a medal in his stiff hand.

"I didn't kill you, Azooz!" I plead with his lifeless face.

"Thhhbaaaaaannnnnnkkkkk yoooooooouuuuuuu, Brrrrrrraaaaaaad-dddddlleeeeeeey," he struggled to groan through immovable lips while he pinned the medal to my chest.

"I don't want this. I didn't kill you." I scrambled to rip it off but the medal could not be removed. "Azooz, what are you doing?" But I got no reply. The fat man looked over his award presentation with odd content.

I looked around frantically to see if anyone knew what was going on, but I only saw the crowd rapidly dispersing. No God, there goes our last chance.

I woke soaked in sweat. It was midday with the temperature at its maximum. My guard sat in the corner sleeping. I guess I couldn't put my mind at ease even in my sleep.

I could hear someone's fast paced footsteps growing closer as

they trudged through the gravel outside. At their loudest point they suddenly stopped and someone began to rattle the cage door. "Hey! Hey! Who's in there?"

I didn't say anything, although the voice did sound familiar. My guard shook awake, and when he saw I was sitting up and staring at him he jumped to his feet. "Hey! Who's on guard in there?"

"It's me," the PFC said. He must have recognized the voice, too.

"Open this damn door! Hurry up!" I jumped to my feet when I recognized the voice for sure this time. The guard opened the door. "Stay out here. Don't bother us in there," my friend ordered the guard.

"Jim!"

"Brad!" He rushed forward and gave me an uncomfortably tight hug. He must not of known about my arm. "We thought you were dead, dude!"

"What?"

"Yeah, you've been dead for the past month. I couldn't believe it. Look at you! It's like talking to a ghost." He looked me up and down to see if I was all there.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. How are you, man? How's Vincent?"

"He's doin' great, man. Sarah took it hard when you died, though. I don't know if that rubbed off on him or anything," he hurried to explain, like he had something else to say.

"They really thought I died? How did everybody take it?"

"Bad, dude. I don't know how your family did, but us, your Ontario family, no one got over it. From what I hear the house is worse than ever. They said that the last building you were in was rigged to blow, and after that Marine you were helping ran back in he tripped the wire. The whole place exploded and there wasn't much of anyone's body left."

"Holy shit. Alright, well they can get over it now. They got to, for Vincent's sake."

"I had to see with my own eyes before I could call them and tell them you're alive. They're gonna think it's a sick joke."

"Well, I'd be there with you to tell them, but they won't let me outta here."

"Yeah, I asked about that. Apparently when a Marine who's presumed dead shows up in Syria it raises some eyebrows. Know what I mean? There's gonna be quite a few investigations." He pulled up a box of Meals Ready to Eat and sat on it. I sat back down on my cot.

"Yeah, I guess. So how's Vincent doin' for real? Is he talking yet?"

"He's says a few more words: Mama, Dada, banana, you're welcome," Jim said.

"For what?"

"No, he says, 'You're welcome.' He's so smart, dude."

I could clearly see Jim's pride on his face. "Yeah he is. His mind's a sponge right now. He's taking in everything, good and bad."

"Yeah, I know," Jim said, not so enthused, probably thinking about the fact that Vincent's been given far more bad examples than good in that house.

"That's why you're a good father, dude. Whenever you're around him you give him everything, all the examples he needs how to be a good person," I explained to lift his spirits.

"I try, but I don't know," he said, like he wanted to change the subject.

"You're doin' good, man. When Vincent grows up his generation's gonna save our asses. I hope so at least, as long as there's more kids like Vincent. You know, kids whose parents teach them how to do something positive in the world. I don't know, as long as Vincent's there we'll be alright." I struggled to conclude so Jim could say what he was obviously wanting to say.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He broke eye contact to look at the ground. "Me and Sarah haven't been doin' so good, though."

"Why, what's up?" I thought I might know.

"Eh, I just don't think we're gonna work out. It's kinda on hold right now 'til I get back, but I don't think it's gonna work."

"Well if you guys gotta split up, just make sure Vincent doesn't get the ass end of the deal." Again, Vincent was my main concern, but I felt bad to hear his relationship with his child's mother wasn't going to work.

"Oh, he won't. If anything, his life'll be better because of it. He won't have to see us fight all the time. Maybe I can move him outta that neighborhood and get him in some good schools, ya know?" He sounded a little more encouraged.

"There ya go, maybe it will turn out for the best."

"Why the hell am I burdening you with this right now? You just got reincarnated; we should be celebrating!"

"Okay, where're we gonna celebrate?" I asked, sarcastically.

"I don't know, maybe when you get outta here we'll go to the chow hall and get you a soda or something."

"Ha, if I eat at a chow hall right now I'll puke. Besides, I don't think I'm in the celebrating mood." Jim being one I could trust, I told him everything: the battle, along into the trunk and through the different safe houses to where I met Azooz.

I told him about my rough start with Azooz, and how I almost killed him, and the insane periods of solitude. Then I told Jim how Azooz and I started getting to know each other and found that we weren't that different. Jim understood unexpectedly well how I found a close friend in a man who initially wanted to kill me. I continued to tell Jim about the meeting with the leaders and my promised freedom.

Jim thought that was where the story ended until I told him about the betrayal and the escape. "So he actually helped you get back here?"

"Yeah, he helped me. He saved my life. They were using him the whole war, and we were friends," I explained. It only made sense to me, then and now.

I told Jim everything up until I got here. "He suddenly decided to believe in you?" he asked, scratching his head.

"Those were his last words. I think it had to do with the fire-fight with the Syrians," I explained, turning the situation over in my head.

"So let me get this straight. You're gonna try to overthrow the government and set up a counsel of America's greatest minds to find a way to... to what?" he asked with his eyebrows scrunched so tightly I couldn't tell if they'd ever relax again.

"To find the answer to how humanity can continue to exist, you know? The whole doomed-to-failure thing. Well, it ain't just gonna be America's greatest minds, either. It's gonna be anyone who has an idea, everyone's gonna be heard." I was so happy to be telling my great idea so quickly. "And not just a way to continue to survive, but peacefully... like in harmony or something."

He gave a quick laugh and asked, "But you're gonna do it violently?"

"Well yeah, we gotta do it however we can—it's too important. We gotta get rid of this out of control government."

"I'm with you then." His sudden allegiance came as a surprise.

"You are? But you got Vincent to worry about." I really didn't expect him to carry on with this war any more than he had to.

"Yeah, that's why I'm with you, man. I never felt right about raising Vincent in this world, but we can make it better, right?"

"Yeah..." I was still trying to process my accomplishment of starting the Revolution in another American. "I don't expect you to help, though. If you just said, 'Sorry, but I gotta take care of Vincent,' I would totally understand." I wasn't sure if I wanted Jim to be with me. I didn't want him to have to risk anything. I wasn't sure if I wanted anyone with me.

“That’s what I’m doin’. I’m takin’ care of Vincent. I’m gonna give him a better world to live in,” he said, exposing a wide grin that made me forget any second thoughts.

“Hell yeah!” I jumped up with excitement. He stood, sliding his box of chow from underneath him, and joined me with a clasp of hands.

For the first time since being in Iraq, much less in an American detainee center, I forgot everything. I thought I was back in Ontario with Jim babysitting Vincent who must be in the other room sleeping. I guess I was in Ontario. In the ghettos of Ontario, there wasn’t another place I’d rather be as long as Vincent, Jim, and the rest of the family’s there. And just then, there wasn’t another place I’d rather be but here.

Our brief celebration was interrupted by Mike’s voice questioning the PFC: “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“He’s being watched, sir,” the Boot said.

“By who?” He was getting agitated. I could hear him rushing towards the caged tent through the gravel.

“Alright, I’ll see ya later, man,” Jim said, preparing himself for an ass-chewing.

“Peace brother, keep safe out there,” I said, sitting back down.

Mike swung the cage door open and flew in the tent before Jim could walk out. “Who the fuck are you? What the hell are you doing in here?” he demanded, sizing Jim up.

“Who are you?” Jim challenged the nameless, rankless man in uniform.

“Mike, that’s all you need to know. The rest is classified. Who the hell are you?” Mike was obviously infuriated. He looked like he might strike.

“J, that’s all you need to know, then,” Jim said, walking past Mike to leave.

“The rest is classified,” I added. “Later, J.”

“See ya, man.” Jim’s voice trailed as he left view.

SEVENTEEN

Cooperation

“WHO WAS THAT, Brad?” Mike said, quickly composing himself, sitting down where Jim sat a minute earlier.

“Just a Marine, nothin’ to worry about,” I said, laying down on my cot.

“Look, if you don’t want to cooperate, I don’t have to put a rush on this paperwork.”

“Mike, you must not know how used to being a prisoner I am by now.” I really didn’t feel like negotiating with this classified individual.

“I bet you’d like to finally get some freedom of movement back.”

“I don’t really give a fuck right now. J said I was dead. What the hell’s that all about?”

“Yeah, I got something here about that.” He started flipping pages in the folder he carried, my file I guess. “Here it is.”

He handed me an intelligence summary which I quickly read. Jim had gotten the story right. Everything in here confirmed what he said. I kept reading to learn that, after that explosion, the battle ended and no one else from MAP Red was hurt or killed. It said Staff Sergeant, Larson, Grant, and Dec only had minor injuries. Evans’ were worse, but he’d been treated. I reread key parts a few times just to get the details straight then I looked up.

Mike waited patiently, then said, “Listen, the sooner we get finished with these debriefs, the sooner we can get you back to America.”

“What?” I sat up fast. “I’m not goin’ back to America, yet. I’m

goin' back to Ramadi." But I knew this was a decision that couldn't be argued with. "Why the hell do I gotta go back to America?"

"You don't have a choice, Bradley. There's going to be a lot of follow up on your situation. We can't just turn you back to your unit after you've been a POW."

"Wait—never mind that. Did my unit mobilize and save that family I told you about?" I asked, turning to face him uncomfortably close.

"They mobilized but I haven't heard the outcome of the whole operation yet," he said, scooting back a few feet.

"What the fuck, Mike? I thought you were supposed to be some sort of an intelligence guru." I was extremely aggravated as I laid back down. "Who do you work with anyway? HET, right?"

"Nope, not HET, OGA," he said, proudly.

"Which other governmental agency?" I asked, already knowing the answer. The only one which referred to itself as an *other governmental agency*.

"Well I'm not really allowed to say, but it's three letters and the first one is a C."

"Sonofabitch, you're CIA?" I said, sitting back up again. My arm wasn't enjoying the rapid changes of posture.

"Now, I didn't say that..." He grinned an affirmation of my suspicion as he let his sentence trail.

I couldn't help but laugh. As soon as I take the first fraction of a step towards Revolution, I have a CIA agent assigned to me. "How much longer is this gonna take?"

"There's going to be at least another five days of question and answer sessions, and there's some debriefs we need to give you before we can go to America."

"I'm not goin' to America, Mike. I'm goin' back to Ramadi." I decided to lay down again and really try to relax this time. Talking to Mike was only tolerable because it kept the immediate horror of the past few days off the forefront of my mind. Mike kept telling me I was going back to America in a week, and I continued to argue with the agent.

The arguing persisted for the remainder of the interrogations. I had another shower and began eating a balanced diet again. A Marine was brought in to give me a haircut which felt refreshing with the heat.

Mike's interrogations continued every morning. He said at night he was reporting his findings. He didn't find out much more than what I told him the first time. I never told him about the conclusions Azooz and I came to. The medical officer sent a Corpsman every

morning to change my bandage, and give me painkillers and antibiotics. My arm was almost healed and my shoulder was making good progress.

I continued to ask Mike what happened to Azooz's family, but he always seemed to be avoiding the real answer. It was always the same: "I haven't been briefed on the outcome of the operation." It would have been an unbearable five days in that tent if I hadn't spent the previous month in conditions incredibly worse. I enjoyed the ice cold water and the slightly more tolerable American food. The daily showers were a privilege I was glad to take advantage of as well.

Under any other circumstance I wouldn't have enjoyed the company of the agent and the Boot, but when they were there I was able to divert my mind. When I was left alone I found myself thinking about Azooz and hoping to God that his family was rescued. I noticed that I wasn't able to shed any more tears. I would lay down on my cot and just close my eyes as hard as possible. I shook uncontrollably with frustration, but no matter what, I wasn't able to cry anymore. Maybe I cried all the tears I was allowed for this life. One thing I wasn't sure of was whether I shed more tears or blood in this war.

After five days of daily interrogations and debriefing, we finally had plans to leave Al Qa'im in a helicopter. I had a small backpack full of toiletries and snacks with me, and I nagged Mike for a weapon every day. "I'm gonna need a rifle if I'm goin' back to Ramadi, Mike."

"Yeah, you would, but you're not goin' back to Ramadi. We're takin' you back to the States," he said as we were waiting for our bird to come in the dark of night.

I could hear the *chop chop chop* sound of our flight coming from a distance. I couldn't see it, though, because it flew with infrared light. It got closer and louder, then, I could see it I could see it coming with just enough time to turn my back to the rotor-wash. Once it landed and the dust settled, Mike and I ran through the thrust and into the dimly lit hull. The rear door gunner was there to wave us in. He didn't even look human, more like a robot with his oversized helmet, NVGs, tubes, and wires that connected him to the helicopter.

The bird made an initial leap from the ground, then struggled to gain altitude as the lights of the small city grew distant. With the rotor so loud I didn't have to listen to Mike nag me about how nice it would be when we get back to America. I took the opportunity to take a nap in the helicopter that dripped oil from its roof.

When we landed we were in Al Asad, an Air Force base that's famous for its good food and near-American amenities. We weren't there long enough to take advantage of the base's pleasures, though.

Nor did I feel like it. From Al Asad we caught a ride in a military airplane to Kuwait.

In Kuwait we didn't wait long for a flight out. We got on a bus to Kuwait City International Airport only an hour after landing in the country. They must have wanted me to get to America quickly, because the first leg of our journey that we completed in a day usually takes a week or more.

Finally, we boarded the commercial airliner where I saw the first American woman I had seen in months. She pretended not to notice us; the only two passengers wearing Marine camouflage.

Seeing the flight attendant reminded me of her. Maybe I'll see her soon, and I can ask why she didn't write. It's probably a better idea if I just never talk to her again. I was stupid to think it was possible for me to have something with a woman like that. She was too perfect.

We sat in first class and were served good food that I could only pick at. All I really wanted was pita bread and maybe some cheese. Mike, like one of his coworkers might be listening, leaned in to say in a low tone, "Listen, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but there's gonna be a surprise for you when we land in Maine,"

"What? Is my family gonna be there?" I wasn't sure whether that would be a good or bad thing.

"I'm not saying anything more than that. I was briefed by ten different people to keep this a secret from you. Just make sure you don't look like a bag of ass when you step off the plane."

"Thanks for the advice, Mike," I said, and looked back to my food. I had to force myself to pick at it.

The in flight movie wasn't interesting, but I watched it to keep myself awake for the first leg of the twenty hour flight. After layovers in Hungary, Ireland, and Iceland, we set off over the Atlantic.

After Iceland I finally let myself fall asleep which wasn't hard in the comfortable first class seat.

"Sean, you're not gonna get in any trouble. All you gotta do is drop me off and pick me back up two hours later." I was all ready to go. I just needed Sean to give me a ride. An orange bird and a sparrow were chirping in their cage in his kitchen. They always seemed to have good advice.

"Dude, the planes are gonna see you right away. Just give it up; it's only six plants," he said, cracking an egg into a frying pan.

"No Sean, I figured it out. The only way they know where I'm at is 'cause they planted cameras along the trail. I'm not takin' the trail," I explained, sitting at his kitchen table waiting for breakfast.

"How the hell are you gettin' there then?"

"I got it all figured out. That's not important. All you gotta do is drop me off where I tell you and pick me up in the same spot two hours later."

"If you're not gonna tell me what you're doin', then I'm not gonna do it," he said, turning around from the stove to face me for the first time.

"Fine, I got a map and a compass, right? I figured out where we transplanted those six plants. Let's say it's right here right?" I pointed it out on the imaginary map I drew with my finger on his table. "It's about half a mile in from the bridge, so if we drive half a mile down Ela, all I need to do is follow the compass east 'til I run right into it."

"Okay, that's a good plan, but I doubt they're even there anymore," he said, turning back to his eggs.

"There's only one way to find out, right?" There was a silence, only the sound of sizzling eggs could be heard. He must be thinking hard.

"Fine," he struggled to say. "What time do you wanna do this?" He shoveled the eggs onto a plate.

"Fuck it, right now," I said, standing up.

"Settle down, after we eat."

I never ate so fast. I didn't even taste the food as it went down. I wanted those plants. I already lost four thousand. I didn't want to lose them all.

After breakfast, we went to my house to get the map, compass, and an empty backpack. Then, we went back towards the forest for the first time since the bust.

"Alright, look at the odometer from here. When it says half a mile, stop and let me out," I explained, anxious to get every detail right.

"I know what to do. Just get ready to jump out." He rolled slowly by the spot. "This is it."

"Alright, meet right back here in two hours," I shouted over my shoulder as I hopped out of the slowly moving car. Without hesitation I ran into the thick brush, pushing my way through its heavy growth.

After I was twenty feet in or so, out of sight of any passing vehicles, I checked my compass and found east. Right away, I realized one thing I forgot in my rush to leave: water. From the beginning, the early September heat let me know it was going to be a grueling journey.

I took out a bandana from my pack and tied it around my face like an outlaw just in case there were any cameras I didn't know about. Once I got my bearings right, I decided to make it a short trip. With only about two miles to the six plants, I started running.

Once I got in the general area I would be able to find them from my own knowledge of the place instead of the compass. But until I got there I continued a swift jog, stopping every few hundred yard to recheck the compass. Taking this unexplored route proved to be treacherous. Huge

patches of thorn bushes hindered my path like barbed wire. At any rate, I just ran around them and rechecked my compass again.

While I was stopped momentarily, I could hear a droning engine in the sky above. I jumped in the nearest bush for cover. I doubted they would use their thermal vision in the middle of the day. After I knew I was safe, I decided that the plane was just on a regular patrol because it didn't come anywhere near me. Once it left earshot, I started back on the morning run.

I made it into the general area faster than I thought I would. This was good because I needed to make it a faster trip than I originally planned. My waterless excursion was already starting to take its toll.

A cut out valley on a downhill slope with a small creek running down it told me I was real close. We carved out a ten foot square in the brush right around here. I knew they had to be here. There weren't any planes following us when we transplanted them.

"Multriener, wake up, we'll be there in about an hour," Mike said, nudging me.

"So wake me up in an hour," I said, without opening my eyes.

"No, you look like shit. Go to the head and fix yourself up," he said, prodding me more aggressively.

"Damn it, Mike, my parents are gonna be glad just to see I'm alive. I don't think they're gonna care too much about what I look like," I said, still refusing to open my eyes. It was pretty much impossible for Mike to talk to me anymore without making me mad.

"I'm going to keep bugging you until you get your ass up and rinse your face off in the sink at least," he said, continuing with his constant nudge.

"Leave me the fuck alone, Mike!" My sudden outburst turned the heads of the European vacationers. I was done cooperating with him, but I did need to use the bathroom, so I got up and walked down the shaky aisle. The lavatory was vacant. I quickly shut the door behind myself to escape the onlookers.

Mike was right, I did look like shit. Sleep was obvious on my face. The cool water seemed to rinse it right off and smooth my hair down. My shank was starting to get annoying while it dug into my back. I considered throwing it out in the lavatory trash, but I decided to hold on to it and give it to my dad as a souvenir. I fastened it back into my belt and walked back out to my seat.

"Happy now?" I asked Mike.

I heard him say, "Well, you still look like shit," before I drifted right back to sleep.

They were there, all six of them. Their growth must have been stunted from the transplant, because they hadn't grown an inch since. They were still alive, but only one was producing young buds. I felt like leaving it there to grow some more, but I wasn't coming back out here again for at least a few years.

It must have been flying at just the right angle because I didn't hear the plane until it was right over head, too late to hide. It didn't pretend like it was just patrolling this time, either. It circled right over me again as soon as it could. I couldn't help but hide anyway, either that or stay and wave hello. I ran off in the direction of a large group of trees with a thick canopy and continued to run, as the plane continued to circle.

I heard the droning fade away briefly, which I took as my chance to run back and rip the plant from the ground and stuff it in my backpack. As soon as I got the zipper shut I darted back under the trees to listen for the single engine plane. It was a distance away now, but it sounded like the direction I needed to go. I knew which way was west now, and I began running back where I came from.

This time the running didn't last. My dehydration was taking its toll. I decided to make my way through dense trees with overhead cover. Every time the plane came I dived in a bush, hoping I'd be able to get out of this forest without police waiting on the outskirts.

My speed continually decreased as I got closer. Then the plane flew at that strange angle again from which I didn't hear it until it was too late. I dove in the nearest thicket anyway which turned out to be a large thorn bush. With painful pricks all over and the sun beating down on my severely dehydrated body, I couldn't get back up. I passed out in the thorn bush.

I probably would have stayed there unconscious until the police came, but the hot sun wouldn't let me sleep. Finally, I managed the will to force myself out of that bush and I continued on my instincts.

The first plane was joined by a second one, and now there was always a plane close by as I marched on. After passing through more thorn bushes and thick growth, I saw telephone poles nearby. As I made my way towards them, to the road, I stumbled and fell in a shaded area and passed out once again.

I must have been out a lot longer this time. When I woke up my neck and forehead were peppered with mosquito bites. I immediately jumped up in the peaceful meadow, and with my first listen I couldn't hear a plane anywhere. I regained sight of the telephone poles, and once I reached them I realized where I was. "I shoulda been checking my damn compass!" I yelled at myself. I reached the wrong road.

I really didn't know if I had the strength to go another half mile into the forest, but against my wishes, I decided to turn around and go back.

Now I wasn't even really walking; it was a struggle every time I had to put one foot in front of the other. Denying the urge to pass out for a third time, I realized my brief nap in the covered meadow must have thrown the planes off because I hadn't heard them since I got up.

The prospect of water was why I continued through the woods, not the idea of getting one measly plant past the cops who stole my fields. Brushing my hair for ticks every time I thought of it, I realized I was getting to the pickup point.

When I reached the spot I remembered the second crucial item I forgot: a watch. I had no clue what time it was, nor how long I'd been passed out. Did Sean already come and go? Was he on his way? Or was he still at his house, not even ready to leave yet?

I stayed there cursing for a few minutes before I decided my next course of action. I went back into the forest about thirty feet and hid the backpack under some dead brush. Then I walked to the road and stuck my thumb out.

Hitchhiking was not in the plan, but I had to get the hell out of there before the planes radioed for squad cars. I didn't know who in their right mind would stop for me. I must have looked like I had just buried a body. I continued walking up the road with my thumb out, constantly looking back to make sure no cops were speeding towards me. I didn't have anything left to do but ask God for a ride, and when I did, I heard it.

"Brad!" It was Sally. What the hell was she doing driving down Ela? Whatever it was, I didn't care. I just broke out with laughter.

"Sally!" I exclaimed, running around to the passenger side of her car. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm driving home. What are you doing hitchhiking?" she asked.

"Never mind that, just drive, please. Can you take me to the pizza place down the road?"

"Pizza? What the hell, Brad? I'm not even gonna ask. Is there anything else you need?" She put the car in gear and drove in the direction I asked.

"Nope, just to tell you you're an angel. You know that?"

"Are you delirious, Brad? You look like it."

"I don't even know," I said, before I passed out.

It felt like seconds, but it was probably more when she woke me up. We were parked in front of the pizzeria. I looked around for Matt's truck and saw it right away.

"Are you gonna be okay, Brad?" she asked as I got out, looking at me through the passenger window.

"Yeah, I'll be good, Matt's here. Thanks Sally!" I said.

"Brad, if there's anything else you need just let me know alright?" she shouted out of her window as she drove off.

If I had a gas tank, I was running on fumes. It was a struggle to make it through the door, but when I did, Matt recognized my poor situation. "What the hell, Brad?" he said, rushing out from behind the counter.

"Water," was all I said as I collapsed in a booth. He didn't need me to say anything more. He went back behind the counter and made a pitcher of ice water for me and brought it with a cup. I didn't say anything for a couple of minutes. I just drank. After three cups, I filled one to the brim and took it outside where I poured it over my head.

"You good now, man?" he asked when I came back inside.

"Yeah, I need your help, though. You think you can give me a ride?" I asked while pouring myself another cup.

"I don't know, man. I'm supposed to be watching the counter," he said, looking back at his work station.

"This isn't a normal ride. I'll hook you up with some bud if you do."

"Where do you need to go?" he asked while taking the empty pitcher from the table.

"The forest." My simple answer seemed to make something click in his mind. He knew right away.

"Let me tell my boss where I'm going," he said, walking back into the employees only section. When he came back, we went right to his truck and were off back to the forest.

"Alright, I'll tell you where, just slow roll past and let me jump out when there's no cars," I said, pointing out the spot ahead. "Okay, this is it coming up. Just drive up a bit and flip around. I'll be ready when you come back."

The water seemed to have recharged my batteries. I jumped out of his truck at the spot and ran into the brush again. It wasn't hard to find my bag. By the time I got back to the road, Matt was already rolling right up. It was like clockwork, and we were on our way back to the pizzeria.

"This bud's extremely fresh. It needs to be dried out," I said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a decent sized nugget.

"It's no problem, man. I'll just run it through the pizza oven," he said with a toothy smile.

I started laughing hard. It was a combination of things: what he just said and the fact that I was able to retrieve a miniscule amount of the weed the police thought they'd completely destroyed. I felt like I made their whole air and ground campaign pointless. I was going to get high regardless.

"You think you could drop me off at Sean's before you temporarily close for business?" I asked, finally regaining control of my laughter.

"You sure you don't wanna blaze first?" he asked.

“Yeah, I gotta get back to Sean’s. I got some business to take care of myself.”

“Multriener, we’re getting ready to land,” Mike said, resuming his annoying nudge.

The prospect of landing in America scared me. I didn’t want to be there. I told Mike numerous times I wanted to go back home to Ramadi. I felt like an asshole being on this side of the Atlantic while the rest of my unit was on the other side. The idea of me stepping foot on American soil pissed me off so much I didn’t want to wake up. I felt like staying on the plane until it turned around and went back.

“Wake the fuck up, Brad. I told you, you look like shit. You can’t just walk off the plane half asleep,” he whispered into my ear.

I considered pretending like I was still asleep and didn’t hear him, but I chose to talk instead. “Mike, what don’t you understand about the fact that I just don’t give a fuck?” “You will when you see who’s waiting for you.” His words caused my mind to flash to her. *Could she be out there? No, that’s ridiculous.* I didn’t know who Mike was talking about but I really did not care.

When the plane touched down, the pilot pulled into the terminal. I got up to make my way out, but Mike grabbed my arm and told me to sit back down. “What’s goin’ on?”

“This isn’t our stop,” he said, watching the passengers slowly file out.

“I thought we were landing in Maine,” I said, looking at him sideways.

“Yeah, but not here,” he said, avoiding eye contact.

After all the plane’s occupants had gotten off, the flight attendants started working their way through the seats picking up trash, then the plane started to taxi backwards out of the terminal.

“We should have brought a razor with so you could have had a shave.” His continuing comments on my appearance was all he had to say. He made no mention of why we were the only two passengers on the plane or of where we were going. I was only happy about one thing while taxiing through the Maine airport: I wouldn’t have to deal with Mike after I go wherever they have in mind for me.

The dark of the night made it hard to tell where we were. Then the plane finally stopped moving. After a short period Mike stood up to leave the plane. “Let’s go, Multriener. This is your big moment. Try not to stare at him like he’s got a dick growing out of his forehead.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Mike?” I asked, getting up to follow him off the plane.

As we left the plane, the flight attendant at the door said, "Have a good night, Mr. Multriener."

"Yeah, you too," I said out of habit. "Who the hell is she? How does she know my name?" I asked Mike who was walking behind me. But he ignored my query and gave me a slight shove to keep me moving.

I could hear a quiet chatter as I came closer to the end of the gate, and turning back to Mike for an answer produced no results. Whoever was out there, I was starting to get the feeling that I didn't like them. My stomach started to churn.

When I reached the end of the tunnel, there wasn't a light: there were many of them.

EIGHTEEN

Violently Nonviolent

THE FLASHING LIGHTS reminded me of the muzzle flashes from the night I was captured. They felt just as deadly. There must have been at least forty or fifty photographers and cameramen, all of whom were focused only on me. My stomach gave a sudden lurch when I realized what was going on.

When I noticed one of the cameramen panning back and forth between me and someone else, I understood the reason for all the media. The sudden lurch I experienced multiplied when I saw him, and I actually threw up into my mouth. I quickly forced it back down.

I turned backwards, maybe to run back to the plane, maybe not. I just needed to find a bathroom. Mike was behind, posing for the cameras, me with the biggest grin that I'd ever seen him muster. "Bathroom," I said quickly, hoping I wouldn't vomit anymore.

"What? Turn back around, you can't walk out on the President," he said through grinning teeth.

I didn't turn back around, though. I just gagged, throwing up in my mouth again. This time Mike understood. "*Sonofabitch*, come on, let's go," he said, forging a path through the sea of reporters. I followed him as fast as I could while he frantically searched for a bathroom. He found a janitor closet and ripped the door open, flicking the light on for me as I ran in and slammed the door.

I lost control of my stomach and began puking the airplane food into a yellow mop bucket. Three pulls of food came out before I started dry heaving. I kept dry heaving hoping more would come out, but none did. I stopped long enough to look back and lock the door.

I found myself in a dimly lit confinement once again, but this

time I didn't want to leave. I just wanted to stay there with my head in the bucket. Mike's pounding on the door didn't persuade me to leave. Instead it made me want to get comfortable on the cold concrete floor, so I did. I felt like a college kid who drank too much as I passed out right where I laid.

"Hell yeah, Brad, is this the famous weed?" Sean asked, holding the small bag to the light.

"Yep, that's all there was. Only one plant budded, and it was only a foot and a half tall. I gave the other half to Eric." I was proud of my small bounty. After drying out, it was only about an eighth of an ounce, but it was something. Not all was lost.

"It looks pretty good, when ya gonna smoke it?" he asked, eyeing his pipe.

"Ha, right now, Sean! Pass the pipe!" I was looking forward to smoking this weed for four months. It felt bittersweet to pack more than half of it into one of Sean's larger pipes. When I lit the bud it hit my lungs hard, I knew it was going to get me decently high when I started coughing.

Sean busted out laughing at my cough, but when he hit the pipe he coughed just as hard. We went on smoking like that until the whole bag was gone. By the time we were finished we were a lot higher than either of us expected to be.

"Dude, you realize how good this shit is?" I asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Yeah man," he said slowly, staring at his ceiling.

"You know how much we coulda sold it for?" I asked.

"A lot," he said simply. The thought teased my mind but not for long.

"Let's go get some pizza," I decided.

"Alright," he said without moving.

After about five more minutes of Sean and me trying to comprehend how high we were, we finally decided to get up and go to the pizza place. "You think this is like government bud or some shit, and the feds planted it to lure us in?" Sean's conspiracy theory caused his red eyes to widen.

"It's possible. I don't know, though. There's definitely something weird about it." I unlocked the door to my truck. It took a huge effort to lean over and unlock the passenger door, and it seemed even harder to put the keys in the ignition. "You know I've been thinking lately, Sean," I said as I pulled out into the road.

"Ha!" He could only laugh and he didn't stop until we were halfway there. "I'm sorry go on... Ha!" He started again, and all I could do was join him. When we finally stopped laughing, I forgot what I was going

to say until Sean reminded me. "You said you were thinking about something?"

"Oh yeah, I've been thinking, though. You know the world, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I've heard of it," he said, then burst with a short fit of laughter.

"It's pretty fucked up, ain't it?" I asked without laughing this time.

But Sean's answer was full of laughter. "Fuck yeah! It's the end of the world, son!" "No man, I mean," but I wasn't really sure what I meant. "I mean, I've been thinking about a lot this summer, with the weed fields and all. They're talking about goin' to war with Iraq and shit."

"We're not going to war with Iraq," Sean said with confidence.

"Well, besides that. I know I'm young but before this summer I thought I knew what I needed to know, you know?"

"No."

"No?"

"No," he reaffirmed.

"I mean, there's so much out there. I want to know it, everything." I think it was a culmination of the summer manifesting itself in my mind that night.

"Then go to school," he said, not laughing anymore.

"No man, not just book stuff. I want to know how the world works... Why. I think I see something bigger going on, but I don't know what it is," I said as we got close to the pizzeria.

"What the hell are you talking about, Brad? There's nothing big going on. You're just gonna be a part of the machine. And when you break, they're gonna replace you." We pulled into the parking lot and Sean seemed content to drop the subject there, but when we walked in, placed our orders and took a seat, I resumed.

"I know all that, Sean, but I'm talking about something bigger, like behind the scenes shit we don't know about."

"Are you talkin' about government shit, like conspiracies or something?"

"Well, no, but yes. But no, I mean like the patterns and cycles, people and the world around them. I see this beautiful place that we're just completely fucking up, and I'm tryin' to figure out where I fit into it."

"Um Brad, I don't mean to break your deep thoughts, but what the fuck are you talking about? Who gives a fuck?" he asked, leaning in close and speaking low.

"I don't know, man. There's just something big going on and I don't want to ignore it anymore," I said.

We resumed our normal conversations about women, drugs, parties, neighborhood gang disputes, and the prospect of graduating high school

in a year. Our orders were brought out and we continued talking about the same things we'd been talking about our whole lives. While we talked I wasn't really paying attention. I knew I was onto something, and I kept trying to figure it out while I held an alternate conversation.

Suddenly, as Sean was talking about something negligible, I understood. My summer of Living Meditation finally paid off. "I got it, Sean!"

"Shhhhhh... what do you got?" He turned around to see if anyone was looking.

"I figured it out. I understand. I'm here to live."

"No shit, keep it down. People are starting to stare," he warned, but I didn't care.

"Sean, don't you get it? We're not living. We can't live like this—this isn't life. Look at the times Sean. I want to live."

"Yeah, I do too, man. But that's not some big revelation to be yelling about."

"I'm not yelling." I lowered my voice anyway. I wasn't high anymore, it was something more. I was enlightened. "Sean, I am nothing. Listen now: everything is nothing, so... I am everything!"

"What?"

"Just listen. What is God, Sean?" I threw it at him like a curve ball.

"Huh? I don't know," he quickly replied.

"Neither did I until now. Sean, we're God." I let it sink in for a few seconds before I continued. "You're not God, Sean, and neither am I, but together we are. Do you hear me?" But he only looked at me confused. "Sean, this is important. Listen now: when you deny the separation of yourself from the rest of the Universe, then you become God."

"Brad, shut up. People are looking at you like they're gonna call the cops," Sean was starting to get angry now.

"They won't. They should be listening, though." I thought about standing up and letting everyone share in my discovery, but I decided against it. "So check it out, I just became one with God, right? And I got pissed. I got mad at everyone for letting the world degrade like it has. I got mad at everyone who doesn't give a shit about it, either.

"So I'm real pissed all the sudden, right? You know what I decided to do next?" Instead of answering my question Sean just shook his head in shame. "I decided to fix it! I'm going to fix the world, Sean."

He let out a little laugh and asked, "How are you gonna do that, Brad?"

"I don't know, doesn't matter yet. I'll figure it out. Didn't your mom ever tell you 'You can do anything you set your mind to?' When you're one with the Universe, all you have to do is look within yourself to find

the answer to any question that was ever asked. I mean, that's the perfect microcosm, but you can find it everywhere, Sean. So maybe in order to figure out how to fix the Universe, I need to learn how to fix myself, you know what I mean? It's like some positive-negative shit. I see it all right now. I'm gonna fix the world!" And I did see it: I was enlightened. I knew I was experiencing something I never had before. I didn't let my inability to explain it to Sean slow my mind down. My stomach churned as I realized the implications.

"You mean like the 'God created man in His own image' thing?" Sean asked, suddenly less skeptical.

"Yeah there ya go! Something like that." I was happy to have him on board.

But his optimism quickly shifted away. "So you think you're gonna change the world all by yourself, Brad?"

"Well, yeah. Why not? If anyone wants to help me that's cool, but if they don't, I'm not gonna let that hold me back." It only made perfect sense to me. That night everything made perfect sense. I finally understood.

It seemed like I hogged all the sense for myself, though, because Sean was dumbfounded and aggravated. "You finally did it, Brad. Yes, you finally did it. You finally went fucking insane!" He shouted just loud enough so only I could hear his anger.

"Maybe—depends how you define insane—if by insane you mean different than everyone else, then yeah. But I kinda happen to think you're all insane and I'm the only sane one right now."

"Shut the fuck up, Brad. Let's go, I can't be seen in public with you like this. There had to be something in that weed."

Sean drove back—he was convinced I was too high to do anything at the time. We drove in relative silence but I knew what I had in the pizzeria wasn't something to be taken lightly. I tried my best to commit certain rudiments of the knowledge to memory before my perfect union was severed. I knew it wasn't going to last forever because if it did, I wouldn't be alive anymore. There wouldn't be any more need to live if I accomplished permanent union with God.

The eighth of an ounce of that weed gave me a life time supply of truth and knowledge. I never forgot that night. Though, some days I tended to believe more of what Sean said.

Years later, the curtain gradually rose for Sean, too, and he slowly understood what I was saying that night. When I told Eric, he knew I was onto something, right away.

After that night it was impossible for me to ever try to live a normal life again. I wasn't able to anymore. I had seen my destiny.

When I woke up, the left side of my face and hair was wet with

vomit. I was laying in a small puddle of my drool. Mike was pounding and speaking in a loud tone that penetrated the metal door. "Damn it, Multriener. You can't stay in there and leave the President standing around looking like an idiot."

I chose to ignore his complaints and continue my silence like I was still passed out. I couldn't believe the damn President of the United States was out there waiting on me, after all Azooz and I had gone through together. We devoted our lives against that very man and everything he stood for.

I reached for it like I'd never contemplated murder before. Its point was still as sharp as ever. I held it, looking at it like it was a foreign object that I couldn't figure out. I knew exactly what I made it for, and when I made it I was convinced I would end up using it. Maybe it would end up serving its purpose after all.

Bang! Bang! Bang! "Get the fuck out here, Multriener!" he half-growled, half-yelled.

I stashed the spearhead back where I kept it the whole time and climbed to my feet. A dirty rag was all I could find to wipe my face off. Then I did it, I left my last safe haven to finally meet my destiny.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" Mike asked as I walked out steady minded and confident.

"Wow, and I thought you looked like crap when you walked *off* the plane. Look at you now." He was walking beside me as I made my way down the hallway back to the mass of journalists. "He's been fielding some questions while you were out, so get ready to make another appearance."

"Yeah, yeah whatever, I got this shit, Mike. You don't have faith in me?" I asked, continuing down the hall. When we made it there, I didn't hesitate to turn the corner and face the camera flash inspired flashbacks.

The reporters asked dozens of questions all at once, none of which I understood. I didn't stop walking, however, until I reached my target.

"Please people, let's have a little bit of peace and quiet to welcome home a true American hero," he said, quelling the media.

American hero? Not yet, I thought. He extended his hand for a shake, but I didn't offer mine. "You don't want to do that. I didn't wash my hands in there," I said, pointing towards the hallway from which I just came.

He gave an annoying laugh and continued, "Oh, alright. I gotcha," then gave a smug wink. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, the reason why we're here: About two months ago, Corporal Multriani's parents received a knock on the door from his brother Marines letting them

know that their son had been killed in action in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq.” He paused, taking a deep breath in through his nose and out the same way. “It must have been horrifying for them. I pray every day for the families of our fallen heroes. No doubt by now that you’ve all heard of young Bradley’s actions on that fateful night. When his commanders heard, there was no doubt that he should be posthumously promoted to sergeant. So that, ladies and gentlemen, is why we’re here tonight,” he said while giving a crunched smile and a wave to the cameras. Those who weren’t taking pictures were clapping and speaking amongst themselves in a dull roar.

The President let the applause continue as he pulled something from his pocket: sergeant chevrons. He continued to give smiles, nods, and waves in all directions as he unclipped the backings from the pins and prepared to promote me.

I decided to let him get close before I struck. As he pinned the three stripes on my collar he started talking again, “You know you really deserve this Sergeant—” but I wasn’t listening. I was eyeing his secret service agents standing fifteen feet to the left. There were four of them, wearing sunglasses, looking unmoved by any of the night’s proceedings.

The way I was about to strike, they wouldn’t be able to defend him at all. This was it. Now’s the time.

“Mr. President, can I ask you something?” I began the attack just as I had planned.

“Why sure, son. What’s botherin’ ya?”

“Well, in these times, I often think back to you and people like you. You know politicians and other rich influential people of the like?” This was pure improvisation.

“Uh huh,” he nodded.

I wanted to do this for so long but I never thought I would have the chance. “Well, I was wondering who you all are fighting for?” I asked, taking a step back after he was done pinning me.

“Excuse me?” He gave a nervous glance around, but just like I planned, his agents left him helpless like they were in on it, too.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to overstep my bounds, but I do have the freedom of speech, right?” I built my defenses as I went on the offense, strengthening my attack.

“Of course you do, and to answer your question, I fight for you, son.” He looked at me like a parent looks at their child the first time they ask where babies come from.

“I understand what you’re saying there, but to me and a lot of other people it seems like you’re fighting against us. Like, you have a hidden agenda or something.” I suddenly realized the cameramen

were probably broadcasting live—it made me nervous at first but then I used it to empower me—he couldn't retreat now.

"I assure you, I have no hidden agenda of any sort," he quickly said.

"You might not be doing it consciously, but there's definitely something really bad going on, and if you didn't know, then I believe I'm doing you a favor by informing you." I glanced down at my slightly heavier collar.

"Please son, if you see something wrong, I want to know right away," he said, mustering a convincing look of concern.

Fire and maneuver. Fortify the defenses, and don't let off the suppressive fire. "You see, a while back, probably before I was even born, maybe you too, Americans lost the control of their country. I can't really tell you when it happened, though. Maybe we never had control in the first place." *Take cover, drop to a knee, and reload.* "Well, I was thinking, while I was held prisoner in Syria, you know? I was thinking: if it isn't me, my family, or any of my friends who's got control, then who does?"

"Well, let me tell you," he began. *Pick up the suppressive fire. Keep his head down while maneuvering in for the kill.*

"So after a few more days in Syria, having nothing to do but think, I think I might've figured something out."

His face grew pale, but before he could interdict, I continued. "It's obvious who's got the power, and you might say, 'Well, they're American people, too.' But the truth is, Mr. President, is that America is a deeply divided country. You know you got different classes, races, creeds, and everything else that makes us individuals, and from what I've seen is that the people in charge of this nation are fighting for themselves. You know, to keep themselves in power." He was sweating profusely. The large group of people in that small terminal made it uncomfortably warm. "Okay, you're gonna have to bear with me. See, I had a lot of time to think about all this while I was gone. So, we got the people in charge fighting to stay in charge, but who are they fighting?"

"Now son, I don't want to—" *Bring in the reinforcements, prepare for the flank.*

"They're fighting off everyone who's not in power, that's who. So what's the end result of all this fighting? I asked myself this question quite often in captivity. The end results are deeper divisions among the American people."

"You got my back, Azooz?"

"I'm with you, Bradley."

“You got me, Nate?”

“I got ya, dog.”

“So somewhere in the 40s I think it was, we became a world superpower or something like that. We carried the position well for a little bit, but then our divisions started to manifest in something they call *foreign policy*, and we started fighting those who threatened our power, right? And again, sir, what did it cause?” I was still high from that weed I smoked five years ago.

“Now I know where you’re goin’ with—” He clamored to get a word in, but he’s had his chance. It’s my turn, now.

“Deeper divisions among not only the American people, but now the people of the entire world, too. Who still comes out on top? The people who’ve been there since it all started, sir. That’s who. And we all know who’s still on the bottom right?”

Call for close air support and heavy artillery. Prepare for the final assault! “So where does this leave the American people in this mess? Well, I’ll tell you where I’m at, sir, and where most everyone else is, too. We’re not only hated by well more than half of the world, but we’re also hated by well more than half our own countrymen. I know what you’re thinking, ‘Damn, that’s a shitty situation.’ But you wanna know what makes it shittier? Excuse my language. While we’re sitting here, in the gutter, with ninety percent of the world plotting our deaths, we’ve got poverty and all sorts of political bullshit threatening to destroy us from within.

“We got people spending large percentages of their lives in and outta prisons because they tried to escape their situations the cheap way. A prison cell is no place for a drug addict, sir. I know my mother shouldn’t be worrying about her checking account when trying to get medical attention, either. Do I really even need to mention the environment? We all know that’s about to collapse.

“And I know for a fact police don’t have to be corrupt. And yes, sir, I have to say it: You should really try to resist going to war based on economic whims and personal grudges.”

I could hear what I was saying, but I wasn’t sure if he could. *Deny his escape routes before the decisive moment.* “You doin’ alright, sir? You look like I did when I stepped off the plane.”

“I’m doing just—” *This is it, the final assault.*

“Good, just wanted to make sure you’re still following. So here’s the thing, right, I asked you who you’re fighting for because, to me, it’s obvious we’re at that point in human history where we have two major paths we can follow. One of them being the path to total destruction with a bloody end, and the other one I see brilliant children

learning about the wars of the past and studying how they can prevent new calamities.

“So to me it kinda looks like everyone who’s fighting to maintain power is actually steering us in a speeding bandwagon down that hellish path. And while they have control they keep fighting everyone else, just as long as they can maintain power to the bloody end.”

Battle damage assessment: Target destroyed. I felt like collapsing on the spot. It’s time to let him talk.

“Well,” he was speechless. For about a minute he seemed to be looking around the room for someone to tell him what to say. After giving several quick nervous smiles to the cameras, all still rolling, he finally figured out something to say. I was interested to hear what it was going to be. “Well son, what do you suggest we do then? Should we just scrap the whole thing and start over?”

I wasn’t expecting such a valid question. This was one thing I hadn’t considered. “I think, um, I think we have a lot of work to do, sir. No I don’t think we should scrap it all. I just think we need to re-analyze our role a bit and how we play it. I think we can carry the role a lot more maturely.” I knew coming to the truth of the situation was the easy part. Finding solutions was going to be a lot harder.

“That’s very interesting, Sergeant. I’d like to hear more of your ideas sometime.” He was trying to regain face.

“See, there’s the problem, sir. It’s not only me you should hear it from. It’s all the people. I have complete confidence that, if given a real opportunity to do so, we can come together and find some answers that might actually work.”

It seemed like it took him a moment for my words to register before he spoke. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Sergeant, but I still appreciate your service to this country to the highest degree possible. Is there anything I can do for you, personally?”

I wasn’t expecting that, either, but the idea came to me quickly. “Yes, sir, do you think you could give me direct orders back to Ramadi, Iraq, effective immediately?” I knew I was going to pay for this later, but this was my only chance.

He cocked his head, looked at me strangely, and then said, “That’s not what I was expecting at all. I guess none of this was expected. But yes, if that’s what you really want. You want to wait in America a few days to see some friends and family?”

“No sir. That would just make it harder to leave again. I need to go right now.” I noticed one of his secret servicemen give me a slight grin.

“Very well, then. Sergeant Bradley Multriani, I hereby order you to return to Ramadi, Iraq.”

“It’s Multriener, sir, but thank you very much. And try not to take it too personal what I said. I understand you didn’t grow up as privileged as I did.”

The President gave a final wave to the cameras then receded down the same hallway I did earlier to vomit. Maybe he was going to do the same. He was followed by three secret service agents. The fourth went to talk to Mike.

As I turned around, I would have been knocked over if camera flashes had physical force. I considered stopping to answer a few questions, but I had just used every bit of energy I had in reserve. I wasted no time forcing my way through the reporters and boarding the plane. Mike was soon to follow, so I made sure to fall asleep before he came.

Third Time's a Charm

"YOU SAID YOU'RE leaving next year?" I asked, still in awe of her courage.

"Yep, probably mid to late summer. I want to have enough money to be able to live for a while before I settle down with a job," she said, shifting her position to wrap an arm over my chest.

"You know I get out of the Marine Corps next summer?"

"Really? What are you gonna do?" she asked with more of a perk to her voice.

"I haven't really put too much thought into it. I just wanna get back to college and get my education." I still couldn't comprehend what it was going to be like getting out.

"That's good. You should," she whispered. No need to speak any louder—the only sounds were our voices and breath.

"I guess. Maybe I'll leave America after I graduate," I said, straining even harder to see that far into the future.

"Where would you go?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not America, that's the important part right?"

She giggled a bit before answering, "Yes, sir." She rose to her knees and gave a crisp salute. "That's the important part, sir!" She cut her salute then fell back down on top of me. "Is that how they do it in the Marines?"

I wanted to wrestle to change positions and find myself on top of her, but I could only laugh and answer back, "No, close though."

We stayed there another hour or so, talking, laughing hard, just really getting to know each other. After a while we decided I should walk her to her house before everyone woke up in Owen's apartment.

On the way there we stopped at a pancake house and she offered to

buy breakfast for me before I would never see her again. I took up the breakfast offer but I didn't want her to buy.

In our booth over breakfast we continued our explorations of each other. As I got to know her I started to get the feeling that we were made for each other—the way we connected. I'd never met anyone who was right there on the same level as me. With the way her eyes were seeing right into me, I didn't want to meet any one on the same level again. I just wanted to explore her; Jasmine. I didn't know how to handle the situation. I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't. I couldn't believe I found a woman like this, she was more than anything I could have ever asked for. Maybe I shouldn't have asked because I was never going to see her again after we finished our meal. I wanted to lie to myself and pretend like it didn't hurt. I couldn't believe it, but I knew I was in love.

“Can I write to you while you're in Iraq?” Her question came like an answer to my prayers.

“What?” She caught me by surprise. “Yeah, you'd do that?”

“Hell yeah I would, I would love to,” she said, digging in her purse for money to pay the bill.

“No, let me pay for it,” I offered.

“Noooooo, you're about to go off and fight for my freedom. It's the least I can do.” She continued to dig.

“Not really. Why don't we just split it?” I compromised.

“I guess that's fair,” she said as she found her cash.

“Now, you can't just say you're gonna write and never do it, 'cause it really sucks waiting for those letters that never come.”

“Brad, I promise you'll hear back from me very soon,” she said, laying down her money and putting a hand over mine.

“Do you really exist? Are you real?” I had to ask because I couldn't believe women like her were anything other than imaginary.

She laughed, “Shut up. I'm really gonna write to you, and you better really write back.”

After our bill was paid, we said our goodbyes and embraced for one last kiss before she made the short trip to her house by herself.

“Wow, Multriener, you got some balls, you know that? You basically just ruined any chance of getting out of the Marines with any benefits at all.” Mike found his seat next to mine.

“What?” His statement came like a blow worse than anything I took over the past two months. “Bullshit, Mike. I'm going to college when I get out. Nobody's taking that away from me.” I snapped out of sleep quickly this time. I had to find out what he was talking about.

“College? Ha, not on the government's tab. Not after you talked

to your Commander in Chief like that." He seemed content with my misfortune.

"Fuck no, damn it. I risked my life every day for seven months last year and I'm about to go back and risk my life for the rest of this deployment, too. How the fuck can you say that?" I felt like rushing back off the plane to find the President and ask him.

"Yeah, you're goin' back to Iraq. He couldn't deny your wish in front of the media. But once you get there you can expect to start being processed for a dishonorable discharge." He smiled as he found a small airplane pillow and positioned it behind his head.

I tried to run through all the possibilities in my head, but I knew he had a valid argument. There's no free speech in the military, and now they could take everything I worked so hard for: my healthcare, college, and all the other benefits.

"I admire you, though, kid. You got balls. That's for sure. I wish you the best of luck with changin' the world and all."

Mike fell asleep in his seat and the plane never moved. I sat there turning over his prediction in my head repeatedly. All I saw in my future after the Marines was college. If they took that away from me, I didn't know what I would do.

Several times I considered waking Mike up to display an argument I thought of, but I would quickly realize the counterpoint on my own. I just sat there in my seat hoping that somehow Mike was wrong.

After three hours of maintenance to the plane, it began to taxi and finally took off. On the flight I tried to sleep occasionally, but I was too bothered. As we landed in the same European countries, I stepped off the plane to scout possible homes for after the Marines. While I was out looking around, Mike was making and receiving nonstop calls on an iridium phone he received from one of the President's men.

After each call, I bugged him for a little insight into my future. But like most questions I ever asked him, he never gave me a straight answer.

The flight seemed to take significantly longer this time, and when we arrived in Kuwait I felt much closer to home. We stayed in Kuwait for two days where I was given a simple rifle with none of my old bells or whistles. It would do just fine. Mike continued making phone calls all day. I guess it took a lot of organizing to bring someone back from the dead and into the fight.

When we were sitting on a bench, waiting for a military flight from Kuwait to Al Taqaddum, Mike fished something out of his

pocket and presented it to me like a gift. "What's this?" I asked before I noticed what he handed me.

"They're lance corporal chevrons. I got the call from your chain of command this afternoon. You're no longer a Sergeant." He wasn't acting himself, though. He didn't seem happy to inform me of my demotion.

I just laughed, turning them over in my hand. "So I go from two stripes to three, then down to one in less than three days? That's too good."

"I was in the PX when I got the call, so I decided to pick them up while I was in there." There was something odd about his demeanor.

"Gee thanks, Mike," I said sarcastically. "That was kind of you." I quickly stripped myself of the Sergeant chevrons I felt I didn't deserve and pinned the Lance Corporal chevrons on. They didn't feel right, either. Nothing they would ever do to me could strip me of the leadership of a Marine non-commissioned officer.

"No problem, buddy. Listen, I just wanted to say sorry for being an asshole to you this whole time." I knew he was going to do something weird like this.

"What?" I wasn't sure I heard right.

"I mean, I thought you were just another one of those anti-government fucks that they always assign us to follow." I really didn't like Mike talking like this, I preferred the asshole Mike.

"Mike, I am anti-government. Well this one at least." I wasn't sure if he was confused or what.

"I know that, and you're actually doing something about it. Most of the fucks we watch just do a lot of talking and that's it. You got balls, Multriener, and I respect you for that."

I didn't know what to say. A CIA agent is telling me he respects me for wanting to overthrow the government. I was confused.

"Do you still have your little sharpened stick?" he asked. Was he talking about my shank?

"Huh?" I couldn't believe it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ha, sure you don't. I thought you might like to keep it. That's why I put in your man-dress for you."

I didn't know what to say. "Well, thanks I guess." Was he serious? He had to be. How else could he know? Did he want me to bring it to meet the President?

"Don't mention it, and I mean that. After that little speech you gave to the President, we're gonna be listening for quite a while. So please, don't mention it," he said, looking forward as he spoke.

"I was under the impression that you guys were already listening for quite a while."

"Yeah, well we have been. I read your file the day I was assigned to you—something about some marijuana fields in 2002?" He glanced at me then looked back forward.

"That was you guys? The airplanes?" I couldn't believe this.

"No, the FBI and the DEA like to do the air thing. We're a little more covert than that." He glanced down at his watch.

"Islander Twelve, Islander Twelve," a woman's voice said over a loudspeaker.

"That's us, Mike, let's go," I said picking up my backpack.

"No Multriener. It's all you from here, man." He continued to sit.

"What? You're not coming?" Five minutes earlier I might have been glad to hear it, but now I didn't know what to think.

"Nope, I'm stayin' here, Brad. But listen, you want to change America, right?" He was looking me in the eye now.

"Well, yeah. There's no secret about that anymore."

"Good. Personally, I think it needs it. Professionally, I'm supposed to stop it. But if anyone can do it, I think you have a pretty good chance. There's hundreds of ways to do it that we know of, and we try to keep those suppressed, but really if you go about it the right way, it won't be that hard."

"What the fuck? Are you serious? Stop fuckin' around, Mike." I knew he must be messing with me, back to his old self.

"No, kid, I'm telling you right now: If anyone can do it, it's gonna be you. Just use your head, alright?" He stood up and faced me. "Good luck, Multriener, and stay safe out there." He extended a hand which I shook reluctantly, still not knowing what to think of the CIA agent turned sympathizer.

"Alright, then. See ya later, I guess," I said, turning to board the flight.

"Oh, I won't be too far off!" he shouted as I walked away.

* * * * *

IF MIKE HAD ever confused me in the past, he really did a good job that time. I wasn't sure if he meant what he said or if he was trying to build me up to make for a bigger catch.

The trip to Al Taqaddum was a little more than an hour of turbulent flight. Once there, I was given new ammo, a flak jacket, a helmet, and a few other small pieces of gear. I spent the day there and got to eat at their famous chow hall, which was the best food I ate in a long time.

My anticipation grew to a peak as my next stop was going to be Ramadi. When my anticipation peaked and started to roll back down, it was replaced by anxiety. I started to wonder about my fellow Marines who never left. Whenever I asked Mike about them, he always pled ignorance. As I got on the helicopter—for Camp Ramadi, an Army base—that was all I could think about. The flight was only twenty minutes. When we flew right over Ramadi I could recognize all the roads, even in the dark, from the sky like I was back on the ground already.

I could see the Euphrates and the Habbaniyah Canal diverging as we flew in from east to west, and that beautiful place where they split—Hurricane Point. We steadily lost altitude as we came over Camp Ramadi. Then, finally, the dust cloud began to stir on the ground below. With a rough bounce we had landed.

The crew chief of the bird signaled to me by pointing at me, then himself, then out the back door. I understood; *follow me*. I stood up, and we waited for the dust to clear as the rear ramp lowered.

The crew chief again signaled for me to follow and we were off. Cold chills ran through my body as I set foot on Ramadi dust. A short run through the thrust of the rotors that threatened to knock me over, and the crew chief pointed me in the direction of eight awaiting gun trucks.

I had to take a knee as the helicopter took back off, stirring up the dust again. Once it cleared, the noise of the bird was gone. I could see MAP Red hurrying out of the trucks to greet me with cheers.

I didn't have to run to them, because they all ran to me first! For only one platoon, the cheers were deafening, the smiles were blinding, and my joy was paralyzing. When they reached me, I was greeted with a series of punches, shoves, and pounds on my helmet. "Watch the arm! Watch the arm!" Staff Sergeant shouted. "Heh heh, Multriener! Motherfuckin' Multriener, back from the dead," he said.

"Yes, Staff Sergeant, reporting for duty," I declared with a huge smile.

"Heh heh, there won't be much duty for you, not 'til you heal up, from what I hear," he said pointing at my right arm.

"No, it's my left one, Staff Sergeant. What about you? Are you all healed up now?"

"Oh you know me, Multriener. They can't keep me down for long. You ready to go back home?" he asked, nodding over to the gun trucks.

The invitation couldn't have sounded sweeter. "Oh yeah, I think I am. What about everyone else, though? Is everyone else okay?"

"Most everyone's okay. Evans isn't here though, he's back at HP on crutches."

"He's gonna be alright though, right, Staff Sergeant?" He gave a simple nod. "And everyone else is good then?" And another nod accompanied by a smile.

"Let's go, Multriener. Let's get back to HP," he said to me, then elevated his voice to speak to the whole platoon. "Let's go! Mount up, Red!" And that we did.

Larson beckoned for me to sit in his truck. There was an open seat in almost all of them, but I decided to accept Larson's invitation. The ride back to Hurricane Point was full of nonstop questions. I asked most of them, trying to avoid telling my long story. I found out that when the second truck bomb got into Hurricane Point and hit the Battalion Combat Operations Center, it only caused a lot of minor casualties. The ones who really needed help got it fast because the Battalion Aid Station Corpsmen lived right next door and were on scene working less than a minute.

There was one question I was burning to ask, but I didn't yet because I feared the answer: what happened to Azooz's family?

Pulling up to Hurricane Point, I noticed the wall had been rebuilt and the seven-ton truck was up-righted. It seemed like we were daring someone to try something again. As the seven-ton pulled forward to let us in the gate, I noticed at least a hundred Marines and Sailors hanging out in front of MAP Red's hooch. "What's goin' on there?" I asked Larson.

"It's for you, man. It's a barbecue. Hope you're hungry," he said, giving his signature laugh that always gave away his sinister motives.

"Oh shit, I don't need all this. I kinda just wanna relax. Know what I mean?" I couldn't believe they were going through all of this for me.

"Well, too bad. We're gonna get you nice and fat." He followed his statement with another laugh. I joined him.

As soon as we pulled up and parked, the roars overpowered the sound of the eight diesel engines. We were rushed by more than half of the base at once and I couldn't help but be so happy. Sodas and cheeseburgers were thrust at me from every direction. I even had a few people whisper to me that they had a cold beer I could have once this all died down. I denied their offers, though. I didn't feel like getting in anymore trouble on my first night back.

I made my way into the hooch to drop my gear. Some tried to follow me in, but only one was allowed. "Hey Evans! How're your legs, man?"

"Eh, I'll get used to 'em. They aren't gonna ever be right again,

though," he said looking down at them, banging a crutch on one of his two casts.

"Damn dude, you're gonna be alright, though?" I didn't know what to say of his new situation.

"Yeah, I'll be good, eventually. They got me doin' paperwork and shit, but at least I'm still out here with everyone, you know?"

"Yeah, tell me about it. I can't believe I'm back here again—for the third time," I said, laying my gear on the rack that was laid out for me. "Hey, can I ask you a question?" My stomach churned at the prospect of it.

"Yeah, what's up?" He maneuvered his crutches to help him take a seat on his rack. "Oh wait, I got something for you. It's around here somewhere." He started searching through his belongings in his pack. Then he found his Bible and pulled it out from within the pages. "This came for you the day after you died. Martinez gave it to me when I came back. He was saving it to give to your mom when he saw her in person, but he thought I should do it, instead."

He handed me an envelope, and when I looked at the return address I almost forgot my question. It was from Jasmine. She finally wrote. I had a strong urge to open it right away, but instead I put it in my pocket and worked up the courage to ask him. "About a week and a half or two weeks ago, was there a call that came down to send units to the Ma'Laab to defend a family out there?"

"Um yeah, I think I heard about that. Red went on it."

"What happened that night? Did they save the family?" I prayed he knew something I didn't, chills ran down my spine.

Then a smile engulfed his face and I was sure he had good news. "Oh yeah, no. But Larson's got a picture of the woman they found in there. I've never seen anything like it; half her face was blown off. You wanna see it?"

The chills that ran down turned into flames shooting up. It took every ounce of self control I had not to punch him in the face. While the flames threatened to consume me, it felt like I was being pulled apart and crushed at the same time.

I was going to explode like the truck bomb that took away Evans' freedom of movement. "What's wrong?" he asked. My condition was obvious.

I was paralyzed with anger. I couldn't move or talk. But my paralysis quickly subsided, and when it did I found myself rushing out through the back door.

The wall was finished and high, and in my rush I almost fell into Larson's fighting pit. The shadows prevented it from having any bottom in sight. I detoured my route and left the walled-off backyard. I

collapsed on the other side of the wall where Larson had knocked me out months ago.

Tears started to manifest again, and just like last time I was here, the moon was staring down on me. But this time I couldn't see the man on it; only a skull who refused to say a word.

I repeatedly apologized to Azooz, but I got no reply. My body shook violently with anger and I was sure I was going to be ripped to pieces by invisible hands.

Then I heard it, the back door opened then slammed shut, and the sound of crutches making their way outside. I considered getting up and running again, but I couldn't move if I wanted to.

Evans didn't need to shout for me or ask where I was. He knew, and he made his way to me rather quickly. As he got closer, it felt harder for me to breathe. I didn't look at him as he sat down next to me with his back against the sandbag wall.

"Hey man, I'm sorry if I offended you or something. She was just a Haji, though." His poor attempt to make amends did just the opposite.

"You dumb sonofabitch!" I didn't have to look hard to find my voice. "She was somebody's mother!"

"Hey, don't get upset about nothing. Even if she was somebody's mother, she was just a Haji's mother—not that big of a deal," he was starting to get angry, too, but not for the same reason as me.

I couldn't stop, though. "What the fuck is wrong with you, man? Did the war do this to you, or were you always like this?"

"What are you talking about, Multriener? There's nothing wrong with me." He was definitely angry now.

"Don't you fucking get it, dude? That type of mentality is what's responsible for most of the suffering in this world." I stopped yelling but I held a firm tone. I didn't think he would understand. The way he grew up, he probably wasn't well acquainted with the suffering I was talking about.

"That's pretty typical of you, man," he said. "You always thought you knew everything." I could tell he was at that point where, if his legs would let him, he would have fought.

"No man, just try to think about it for once. What good is that shit gonna ever do for you?" I was kind of hoping he could fight. I didn't care if he was twice as strong as me.

"It doesn't matter, Multriener. It doesn't matter what I think. I'm a nobody."

"No Evans, it does matter. That mentality's a virus, man. You got the sickness and you're gonna give it to everybody else. And you know what scares me? One day that shit's gonna be an epidemic in America,

if it isn't already, and you're gonna start seein' this war on that soil. You want that? How do you think your wife would like that one?"

"Don't talk about my wife," he warned.

"I'm just sayin', man. When that type of mentality spreads, that's what's gonna end up happening." I didn't care what he didn't want me talking about. I wasn't ever going to be afraid of saying what I wanted.

For a minute there was silence while my words seemed to sink into his mind. The only thing that sunk into mine was the fate of Azooz's family. I looked back up and the skull was still staring down on me.

Evans finally decided to break the silence. "Why did you take it so personally about that woman anyway?"

I wanted to ask him how he couldn't take it personally when an innocent person dies, but instead I paused and decided to tell him the whole story. It took a long time to explain and I probably left out a few details, but I told him everything I could remember from the battle up until now. As I sat there talking with him I remembered that night in the pizza parlor. If I ever wanted to make a change in him, or anyone for that matter, I would have to successfully do it within myself first. I liked to think I didn't need to, but I had a lot to learn.

Any anger we had towards each other subsided as Evans' insincerity did the same. Through some of the better parts of the story we even shared some laughter. "Yeah, I almost killed the President, too."

"What? Why didn't you?" he asked between laughs.

"I decided he wasn't worth it, and someone would just take his place afterward. I decided to be *violently nonviolent*, I guess you could say. If I want to fight the ignorance, that's exactly what I have to do; fight their ignorance, not them. You could fight them if you wanted, but that would only lead to more fighting in the end. You know what I mean?" I tried my best to explain.

"Yeah, I can see that," he said, stroking his chin like he had suddenly become a wise man. "But God help anyone who tries to hurt my family," he added.

"Oh, same here, don't think I got all soft on you."

Telling the story of Azooz seemed to calm me down a little bit. When I told Evans how good of a guy he was, it felt like I made him a little less dead.

"So you said he had a girlfriend?" he asked.

"Yeah, they grew up together. They were supposed to get married." It was hard to tell him about everything Azooz lost.

"She lives in Ramadi, then?"

“Yeah, now that I think of it. He said she lived right next door.” The realization hit me like one of Azooz’s butt strokes to the head. Suddenly, I knew what I had to do as I scattered to my feet.

Evans read my mind the way a fellow Marine could and said, “Good luck,” as I ran to the party to find Staff Sergeant.

Iraqi Diaspora, Amriki Diaspora

“YOU WANT TO do what, Multriener?”

“I want to go to the Ma’Laab right now, Staff Sergeant. I know we just got back, but you don’t understand. I’ll explain it on the way if you want, but please. If you let me do this, I won’t ever ask anything from you ever again.” I was literally begging him.

“I don’t know, Multriener. That’s a tall order. It might not even get approved.” He wasn’t budging.

“Staff Sergeant, you gotta respect the wishes of the dead.” He might have thought I was joking and talking about myself, but I wasn’t. I was talking about Azooz.

“This better be good, Multriener.” His Boston accent was like a breath of fresh air, because I knew what was going to follow. “MAP Red, get on the trucks!”

I ran inside to get my gear on, grab my rifle, and ran back out to Larson’s truck. “Nope, Multriener,” Larson said as he arrived with his bulky gear on. “You got your own truck. You think you got fired or something?” He followed his statement with his high pitch laugh.

“Right,” was all I could say as I ran back to find Gibbons, Martinez, Keyes on the truck ready to go like usual. “Wow, good to have you guys back.”

“You too, Sergeant,” they all said.

“Ah, so you heard I got promoted, huh?”

“Yes, Sergeant. We heard before you did back when you were dead,” Keyes answered on behalf of the crew.

“Well, then you didn’t hear I got demoted? It’s Lance Corporal,

now." I was happy to break the news as Keyes slowly rolled to the gate behind Larson's truck.

"Are you serious, Sergeant?" Gibbons asked.

"Yeah, I'm serious, so you can stop calling me Sergeant." I opened my flak jacket to show them my collar.

"Roger, Lance Corporal," Gibbons said.

"Don't call me that. Just call me... Brad."

Staff Sergeant's voice came over the radio and said, "Multriener, tonight's your lucky night. The mission got approved." His words brought painful anticipation to my heart. I was deathly afraid at what we might find. "Roger up when you're good."

"Alpha Two," Lewis said.

"Alpha Three," Larson acknowledged.

"Alpha Four," I said. The words felt so good to say: *Alpha Four*, my crew.

"Alright, we're pushing," Staff Sergeant said. The seven-ton pulled forward and we left the gate.

Even in the night, Ramadi looked as beautiful as ever. It was obvious the violence stayed out after the battle. The city was already halfway rebuilt and painted in pastel colors. I wished I could have enjoyed it more, but only one thing was on my mind as we rolled down the main artery of the city. I wished Alpha One would pick up the speed, but soon enough we got to the dimly lit street.

"This is it—dismount," Staff Sergeant said over the radio.

Gibbons and I left the truck and ran up to Alpha One where Staff Sergeant stood. "This is the house, Staff Sergeant?"

"Yep, this is where it all went down," he said, looking at it. It was a small one story building in one of the many poor districts of Ramadi. I wanted to go into Azooz's home, but I knew what I had to do.

"He said next door, so I guess let's try this one, Staff Sergeant." I pointed to the home to the left of Azooz's.

"What? Who said?" Staff Sergeant didn't like being left in the dark but there was no time to explain.

"I'll tell you later, Staff Sergeant. Right now you just gotta trust me," I said, directing the rest of the Marines where to go.

The gate was slightly open. Larson let himself in, and the rest of Alpha section followed. Larson took point as we began the meticulously fast process of room clearing.

Less than two minutes after we entered, we found out there wasn't a soul in the place, so we left. I told Larson which house we had to go to next as we ran out and towards the house to the right of Azooz's. This time the gate was locked, so Larson propped himself

against the wall and clasped his hands palms up, making a human ladder. Gibbons climbed him over the wall and unlocked the gate.

We rushed in the house the same as the last one, but this time there was someone in there. We knew by a woman's terrified scream as soon as we opened the front door. I followed the sound of the scream while the other Marines cleared the rest of the house for threat.

When I found her, she was clutching a young boy in her grasp and huddling in the corner of her dark bedroom. She was crying furiously. All I could do was say, "Shhhhh, it's okay. Zien, zien."

But that did not appease her. She continued screaming at an ear-bursting pitch. I didn't know what to do. I didn't think she would ever stop.

Then I tried it: "Azooz... Ani Azooz's sadik," I said, pointing to myself. I wasn't sure if she would understand my poor Arabic, but she must've understood something because her cries ceased.

"You know Azooz?" she asked between nervous gasps.

"Yeah, I knew him. You speak English?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes, Azooz teach me. Where is he? Does he know about his mother?" She was eager to hear about her love. I didn't know how I could tell her until I heard Azooz's voice tell me.

"Yes, he knows. They're in Paradise together." My words reinvoked her cries and brought tears to both of our faces. "Is this his little brother?" I asked. She nodded, her sobbing prevented her from speaking.

After another fit of sobs, she finally managed to ask, "How do you know we called him Azooz? Only his family calls him Azooz."

"That's all I ever knew him by. In the end we were family," I said, removing my helmet and taking a seat on the ground where I stood. I looked back to the door and saw Staff Sergeant watching in silence. "Staff Sergeant, can we stay here for a minute?" I asked.

"Take your time, Multriener," he said, comfortingly, before he left the room.

"He saved my life, Azooz. He was a great man, and he asked one thing from me, to save yours. You can come with us, and we'll send you wherever you want. You can take whoever you want with you. But one thing's for sure: Azooz wanted you to leave this country until the war's over."

"I will stay here tonight, tomorrow," she said wiping her eyes on her sleeve, "tomorrow you come to get us, please?"

"Yes! We can take you now if you want. The war's over for you."

She didn't stop crying, though, "The war will never be over for

me. I need to say goodbye and collect my things. It is safe here for one more night. You come for us tomorrow.”

I could only nod my head yes. Now my tears prevented me from speaking. I wanted to stay here forever. I wanted to protect her and Azooz's brother from anyone who wished them harm. I cried for her, for the little boy in her arms who looked just like Azooz and stared at me with fear. I cried for Azooz and his mother, then I cried when I realized everyone in Iraq who's ever cooperated with Americans will meet similar fates.

I damned the war, but I never wanted to leave. I wanted to move to Ramadi permanently and hunt down the people who killed Azooz's mother. I wanted to protect everyone. The bloodshed was not nearly over in this country, but damn it, I wanted it to be. I didn't know what to do as I sat there crying with Azooz's fiancé.

“Majid Ibrahim Alwani,” she said.

“What?”

“Majid Ibrahim Alwani,” she repeated. “That was his name, Majid Ibrahim Alwani.”

“And what's yours?” I felt stupid for forgetting.

“Naida. What is yours?” She seemed to gain some control.

“Brad, Bradley Multriener.” I did the same. “What's his?” I asked, pointing to the boy.

“Nuri Ibrahim Alwani, but we will call him Azooz,” she said, mustering a smile. “Leave us now. Tomorrow, be back.” She stood up, pulling Nuri up with her. “Thank you, Bradley,” she said before she broke back into tears.

“Afwan, Naida.” I got up to leave her alone.

Staff Sergeant gave the order for everyone to go back to the trucks. He and I were the last to leave the house together. “We need to come back tomorrow, Staff Sergeant. We need to get them out of here. Their lives are in danger.”

“Isn't everyone's out here, Multriener? Isn't everyone's?”

* * * * *

THE RIDE BACK to Hurricane Point was a silent one. My Marines didn't need to ask—my tear streaked face told them first. No one ever asked what happened that night. I think Staff Sergeant warned them against it.

When we got back, I found my rack and tried to sleep, but sleep was difficult. Sleep was rarely easy to find after that night. But while laying awake in my bed, I remembered the letter in my pocket and considered burning it. How could she ever understand what goes on

out here? I still can't understand it. I don't think I'll ever meet anyone who'll come close to understanding me.

After staring blankly at the small envelope for twenty minutes, I finally opened it and read:

Brad,

I'm so sorry it took me so long to write, but I didn't know what to say. I have no idea what you're doing out there, but whatever it is, I know you're doing some good for those people and I admire you for that.

I've thought about you every day since we met and you saved me from that guy. I wrote this letter many times in my head before I decided to write it on paper.

I hope things are treating you well while you're overseas, if that's at all possible. I'm currently lifeguarding, saving up for my excursion. I should be leaving by August next year, which brings me to something I've decided to tell you. I hope you don't think I tell every guy I meet this, but if you want, you can come with me when you get out of the Marines. I remembered you said you would like to leave the country too, and to be honest, I would feel so much better about leaving if I went with someone like you.

So there you go. The offer's out there if you want to take it. I hope you don't think I'm crazy or anything.

Anyway Brad, I can't tell you how lucky I considered myself after I met you, and if it means anything, I'm proud of you.

Yours,

Jasmine

I must have read it over again at least ten times, cursing myself each time for thinking about burning it earlier. I kept looking at the word *yours*. Could it be true? Was she mine? What does that mean?

Finally, after I reread it so many times I practically had it memorized, I decided to write back:

Jasmine,

First of all, I don't think you're crazy... I know you are. That's why I like you so much.

I'm not sure what you heard about me, but I am alive, just in case there was any confusion about that. If you don't know what I'm talking about that's probably a good thing, but if you do, I'll explain later. So yeah, you should write your phone

number in the next letter and I'll fill you in on some missing details. If I tried to write it all down here, it would be like a book. I don't know if you'd want to read all that.

And yes, you're crazy. Why would you think it's not worth anything to me knowing that you're proud of me? Jasmine, that's worth the world to me, and believe it or not, I've thought about you every day since we met, too.

You have no idea how much I would love to leave America with you, and I hope you'll keep writing after I tell you this, but right now I can't. I have a couple things I need to take care of back home before I can go.

*Also yours,
Brad*

EPILOGUE

THE FULL MOON was just as bright above me in America as it was in Iraq. This time I couldn't see Nate's face, nor Azooz's, but I could hear their voices. "So they didn't discharge you for all that shit, man?" Nate asked.

"Nope, I thought they were for a while, but then I got an anonymous email from someone claiming to be in a three lettered organization that started with a C."

"Yeah?" Nate asked. Azooz was listening, too.

"Yeah, he said there were plans to discharge me, but the President wouldn't allow it. He thought that if I was discharged dishonorably it would be more of a reason to dishonorably discharge him."

"Hell yeah, Brad. So you're out now, right?" Nate was getting excited. He always loved stories about the little guy coming out on top.

"Yep, I'm all out. They promoted me back up to Corporal about a month before I left."

"It is well deserved, Bradley. But how did you get this beautiful home?" Azooz asked.

"What, this thing?" I nodded to the one story house behind me. "My mom bought it. You see, the government gave her a bunch of money when I died, and she took it all out as cash right away because she's paranoid like that, you know?" I paused to think about how my mother finally made her escape to the Montana wilderness. She's living in her log cabin with Paul. The government doesn't know that, but they'd like to because she still has the money.

"How do you afford payments?" Nate was curious.

"It's easy. I got two roommates: Nick and Jasmine."

"Who are they?" Azooz asked. I'm not sure if I ever told him, maybe he forgot.

"Nick's my brother. He did three and a half years in prison, but

now we're going to school together. And Jasmine, well, I'm not exactly sure what you'd call her, but I'm thinking about making her my wife."

"There you go, Bradley!" I guess the word *wife* got Azooz excited.

"Whoa, take it easy, man. I said I was thinking about it. I still gotta make sure we can live together. I don't feel like walking into a divorce, you know what I mean? I wouldn't wanna do that to any kids or anybody."

"I guess that is the smart thing to do, Bradley." Azooz settled down a bit.

"But I do love her, and she loves me. I can't tell you how much I love her," I said to my two best friends.

"Thank you, Bradley," Azooz whispered.

"For what, Azooz?"

"For getting Naida and Nuri to Jordan. They're doing great for themselves there. They're so safe."

"I know, I still talk to them through email. It's no problem, Azooz. You would have done it for me, right?"

"You know I would have, Bradley." Azooz's dedication sounded firm, that's something I always admired about him. "And what happened to the Revolution, Bradley?"

"It's still alive, and well too." I was quick to defend it. "We're going to change America, Azooz. We're gonna change it all. But right now, while I'm working on that, I'm working on changing myself."

"Huh, why?" Nate asked on behalf of Azooz.

"Because, man, I came to realize I can't expect the entire world to undergo a drastic change if I can't even do it myself. I'm workin' on it guys, you know you can count on me."

"That is true," Azooz said.

"Yeah, and Jasmine would never let me forget it, either. I think she's crazier than I am."

"Bradley?" Azooz whispered again.

"What's up, man?"

"How is Ramadi doing? It is my home, I miss it."

The question also got Nate's attention. It was a good one, and it wouldn't be easy to answer. "It's doin' good, man. Will it stay that way? I don't know. Sheik Sattar was killed on the first day of Ramadan, but that only made the Awakening he started grow stronger. For the past year or so Ramadi's been steadily rebuilt, and it's really safe there, too. But I can't tell you if it's gonna stay that way."

"It will Bradley. The people of Ramadi are strong. They will not lose control of the city again," Azooz said, firmly.

“I think you’re right, Azooz,” Nate said.

“Yeah, I think so, too,” I said. Azooz’s conviction got to me. I started to remember why it hurt so much when he died. Then I started to think the same about Nate. “I think so, too. I just really miss you guys, though. I wish you could see it.”

“What are you talking about, Brad? We can see it—we miss you, too, man.”

“No Nate, I mean I wish you could see the city again. I wish you could see your families again. I just really miss you guys, you know? I just really miss you.”

Thank You. With all the Essence of my being, I thank You. I know that within me You have made it so that I may never be separate from You, and You have given me true freedom. I Love You because You are that which Is. Not because of a belief I was taught to believe. To me, all of those things, held onto too tightly only tie me down below water keeping me from reaching Your Surface. Instead I let my mind be open and free and my heart becomes wholly linked to Your Love. I ask that You let me remember this Forever. I ask that You Remind more people so that as we learn to Love all as we Love You, we can continually walk in Your Kingdom, Your Paradise even here on this beautiful Earth You have given us. It is You that I Love above all, as All. I can worship You through any religion, a combination of them, or by none. My heart will simply sing Forever of Your Love. Thank You.

