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The Soldier's Journal

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THE SOLDIER’S JOURNAL: A NOVEL

RANDALL RUSSELL SURLES

MASTER’S PROGRAM IN CREATIVE WRITING

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THE SOLDIER’S JOURNAL

BY

RANDALL RUSSELL SURLES, MASTER OF FINE ARTS, CREATIVE WRITING

THESIS

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Preface to The Soldier’s Journal

Introduction

My thesis, The Soldier’s Journal, is a military thriller about a female Green Beret, who, on her first deployment to Afghanistan, attempts to resolve her internal issues over the death of her father twelve years earlier. The idea for this work evolved over my thirty-year career as a Ranger and Green Beret in the U.S. Army. My goal when I began the MFA program at UTEP was to create a work of non-fiction based on my experiences in the military and the initial twenty-page sample I submitted for admission was an example of this work. My writing goals for my thesis changed over time due to the military’s evolution and to various writing styles I studied during the program.

Over the last three years, I identified four military themes that I wanted to explore: women in special operations and combat professions, the differences in the techniques used to fight the Afghanistan war over time, the effects of war on the families at home, and the bonds formed in combat teams. In exploring these themes, I realized that the best way to tell this story might not be through non-fiction as many of these books lacked the tension to engage the reader and appeared to be more historical than entertaining stories.

I decided to write fiction, but I still wanted to include true events from my own experience. Therefore, I used real events, adding details, inciting incidents, and progressive complications to engage the reader. Through research and interviews, I gathered information about these themes and integrated personal experiences to create a fictional account of the war in Afghanistan with a realistic feel. Most of the events in
the novel could have happened, and in some cases did happen, but not all the events happened to one twelve-man team over a six-month period.

**Women in Combat and Special Operations**

Women holding combat roles in the military is a very controversial subject. In 2016, Congress passed a law permitting women to perform any job in the Armed Forces, which in turn opened combat and Special Operations positions that include SEALs, Rangers, and Green Berets. Prior to this law, the military only permitted women combat training opportunities such as Sapper and Ranger Schools. Sapper is a Combat Engineer leadership school which began allowing women students in 1999 and has graduated only about seventy women (Michaels) with a less than fifty percent pass rate overall. Ranger School, considered the premier infantry leadership school of the U.S. Army, has allowed women students since April 2015, and only five women have passed (Williams, Chuck), with a less than twenty percent pass rate for women.

Though both courses provide leadership and combat training for soldiers, neither are considered assessments to enter elite units. Having personally passed both the Ranger and the Green Beret unit assessments, as well as having attended the U.S. Ranger School, my personal opinion is that schools and assessments are completely different endeavors. The schools are intended to train soldiers. There are minimum standards to enter, difficult standards for sure, but once those standards are met, there is a reasonable expectation that most students will pass the school and learn the lessons taught (Williams, Chuck). Assessments are traditionally three to four weeks long and are intended to weed out soldiers who cannot meet the high physical, mental,
moral, and psychological standards. After the initial assessment, between ten and eighteen months of further training and assessments must be passed before a candidate is accepted into an elite unit. So far, not one women has successfully passed an initial assessment for SEALS, Rangers, or Green Berets.

Historically, when opening new professions to women, the military pushes female officers through the training first in order to influence, mentor, and guide enlisted women in these career fields. The first women officers coming into these careers are viewed as figureheads by many soldiers, a way to open the career field and many soldiers assume the standards to pass are lowered to allow the women to pass. This is significant in *The Soldier's Journal*, as it explains why many question Camila’s abilities since she is one of the first female Green Berets.

Women make up only 15% of the total personnel in today’s Army. They are always outnumbered by males in their workspace, and they must contend with stereotypes and unfair treatment nearly every day of their career. I read three biographies while researching a woman’s perspective of serving in the military and conducted personal interviews with three women who had participated in combat operations with elite forces.

Carol Barkalow wrote *In the Men’s House* about the first class at West Point to accept women in 1976. This book discusses the hardships of breaking a ‘glass ceiling’ in the military, much like Camila does in my novel. The author discussed the attitudes and prejudice from both professors and students at West Point, the challenges faced by the first female Platoon Leader of a combat support air defense unit, and her impressions of the Army’s attempt to integrate women into a male dominated work
environment. Barkalow is asked by many people throughout her time in West Point, “Why are you here?” (Barkalow, 47). This a big question for Camila too. Why does she become a Green Beret? Is it enough that she wants to follow in her father’s footsteps? She wants to understand her father, and why he chose the profession, and what it meant to him.

In *I Love My Rifle More Than You*, Kayla Williams describes her experiences during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. She informs the reader that the average soldier (male and female) believe that women aren’t strong enough to carry out missions, that they are emotionally unstable, and that they have no leadership skills. She readily admits that women can have an easier time than men in the Army and that less is expected of them (Williams, Kayla, 5). However, if women take advantage of these situations, they make life harder for other female soldiers as it just reinforces the stereotypes that already exist in the Army. During her year in combat in Iraq, she questions whether she deserved the way she is treated by some of the soldiers and concludes that to be a female soldier is to decide whether you are a “slut” or a “bitch”. If a female soldier hangs with the guys and drinks with them and sleeps with them, she is not respected and is a slut. However, if a female soldier takes the other road, doesn’t hang with the guys and tries to remain aloof and professional, she is not respected and she’s a “bitch”.

Gayle Lemmon’s non-fiction book, *Ashley’s War*, describes the all-female Cultural Support Teams (CST) that were created in 2010. Their recruiting banner read “Become a Part of History” and advertised that women who applied and were selected would serve with the Army’s elite Rangers, Green Berets, SEALs and Delta Force on
operations of great importance (Lemmon, 36). CST teams trained to gather the women and children at mission objectives when the special operations conducted raids, search them to ensure they had no weapons or bombs, and question them about the activities and men who occupied the facility that was attacked. These CST women were considered “the alphas of the Army,” the best of the best of all female soldiers. They knew they were the first of something groundbreaking for women, who were still not allowed in combat positions at the time, and they felt this weight in everything they did.

I used many ideas from these three books to craft my protagonist. Camila is the best of the best, and as such is always under scrutiny. She has experienced sexism in her career, and she is very sensitive to the possibility of sexism being involved in every order she is given. Camila is aware of the “slut” or “bitch” paradigm and has developed methods to fight it in the form of becoming proficient in martial arts and demonstrating her physical fitness to her male peers in order to force them to view her as a soldier and not a woman soldier. She is also very conscious about accepting favors, always fearing the labels that might arise from any misperceived relationship.

**War: The More It Changes the More It Remains the Same**

War changes over time. The way a war is fought changes with technology and new tactics. There were significant differences in the way the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam were fought. And there were differences in the way Afghanistan was fought in the first years after 9/11, five years after the war began, and the present.

Between November 2001 - March 2003, the Afghanistan war was a Spartan affair, with very little logistics on the ground to support the soldiers. Additionally, there was lack of
information on the history of Afghanistan, there were very few books on the subject and the internet was not as mature as it is now. Maps of the country were hard to come by and knowledge of the languages spoken there was almost impossible to find. In Bagram, soldiers lived in air conditioned/heated tents, showered with warm water in trailers, used port-o-potties, and waited in long lines to use the internet or call home. Soldiers located in smaller bases such as Jalalabad had no flush toilets, no hot water, no internet, and no phone connections. Hummers weren’t armored and very few soldiers even had personal body armor. Attacks came in the form of ambushes that could be repelled, and IEDs weren’t used by the enemy. Victories over the enemy were the norm as every air asset in the U.S. military arsenal was dedicated to the efforts in Afghanistan. The country was primitive: only the top three major cities had land lines for telephones, most water outside the major cities came from wells that villagers drew up by hand, and most cities didn’t have electric plants and used generators.

After the Iraqi war began in March of 2003, however, a lot of military assets were shifted to Iraq, even though bases in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2010 became more developed. Lodging and offices were in wooden or concrete buildings that were heated and air conditioned. Coffee shops, Pizza Hut, and Burger King restaurants appeared on the bases. Soldiers were housed in individual rooms instead of large open tents and were able to pay for individual Internet connections. Cell towers were built in Afghanistan and the whole country skipped land lines altogether in favor of cellular phones. IEDs started appearing and became everyday occurrences throughout the country. Individual body armor was issued and armored hummers became more common, though this did not protect the soldiers from the IEDs, only against small arms in ambushes which became less and less frequent. Air assets became
harder to get in support of missions because the war in Iraq took priority. Afghanistan became the ‘forgotten war’.

In 2011, the Iraqi war came to an ‘end’. For a short time, some assets returned to Afghanistan; however, there was a push to end the war in Afghanistan and depend fully on the Afghanistan military to maintain security and fight their war. Additionally, the ‘War on Terror’ across the world began to occupy military assets, so Afghanistan was again stripped. However, new vehicles were employed that protected against IEDs. IEDs became less deadly to the U.S. troops, and suicide bombers became the deadliest enemy tactic.

In my novel, I wanted to show the contrasts and similarities that Ryan and Camila experienced serving twelve years apart. Telling the story chronologically, as most non-fiction novels are told, would not give the reader the side by side comparison that I desired. For this reason, I chose my current framework, which involves alternating chapters between the past and present, roughly separated by 12 years. Camila experiences the war for the first time in 2017-2018, about 17 years after 9/11. Ryan relates his experiences from 2006 in his journal which Camila reads, allowing her and the reader to compare the two time periods. Additionally, Ryan was in Afghanistan in 2002-2003, just after 9/11, and the reader has some glimpses of the changes from that time period as well during various flashbacks.

One of the key problems I wanted to show was that no matter how much the military learned over the fifteen years of war in Afghanistan, no matter how many technological advances they had, the enemy always finds methods to kill soldiers and civilians. Even though Ryan is secure inside his compound, he feels obligated to leave with his team in order to make the country safer for other Americans that are patrolling. Even though Camila feels safe in her
new anti-IED trucks, she must leave the trucks to bring the war to the enemy, to rescue hostages, and to capture bad guys. There is always a weak point and the enemy knows it.

Another significant difference in the Afghan war is the participation of multiple generations of the same family. The war has lasted so long that for the first time in the history of the United States you can regularly see fathers and sons fighting in the same war, in the same locations, sometimes together. There even exists incidents of three generations fighting in Afghanistan. A father and daughter situation such as Ryan and Camila is certainly a real possibility in today’s army.

PTSD: Effects on the Soldiers and their Families

U.S. War experiences have changed a lot over the years. During 16 years of combat in Vietnam, over 58,000 U.S. soldiers were killed of about 3 million deployed (Urban), and in comparison, during the seventeen years of combat in Afghanistan about 2,400 U.S. soldiers out of about 1.5 million deployed have been killed (Icasualties), and those figures double if Iraq is included. Over 800,000 total were killed in Vietnam, but only 30,000 in Afghanistan (Urban). These statistics suggest that America has successfully improved the survivability of the individual soldier and technology has allowed a significant reduction in non-military damage. What has not changed is the effects of war on the family and the returning soldiers. If anything, modern warfare has made the situation worse because there are more victims of PTSD returning from war than ever before.

The average non-military U.S. citizen thinks that PTSD is always associated with violence and striking out. However, sometimes it’s just an adjusting period to what’s normal.
And it’s a survival tool for the soldier. In combat, the soldier must be turned on and aware of
details to protect their comrades and survive themselves. When they return to America, they
can’t just turn that off. More importantly, do they want to turn off this survival instinct, given the
recent terrorist attacks occurring in the U.S.? And what is the happy medium?

The U.S. military recognizes that war affects soldiers and that the reintegration to life at
home takes time, patience, and assistance. Before 2002, there was very little assistance
offered to the soldiers to help them reintegrate back into their home life. Chaplains were
available to discuss family issues or conduct family and marital counseling, but there was very
little professional counseling available. This is when the suicide rates, divorces, and domestic
abuse began to rise in the military.

The military observed these trends and began to offer more counseling services to
returning soldiers. They also developed standard procedures to reintegrate soldiers back into
home life that included surveys and classes. Unfortunately, deployments became more
frequent and there was little time to fully integrate before the soldiers were deployed again.

I incorporated some of these counseling services into my plot. Because of a violent
outburst that was triggered by PTSD, Ryan’s counselor requires him to keep a journal before
he can deploy back to Afghanistan with his team. Ryan doesn’t think there is anything wrong
with his actions, even though he seriously injured a man at a gas station on a family vacation.
Initially, during the confrontation, Ryan feels confused about how to handle the situation, until
he finally reacts as he would to any threat in Afghanistan. Camila (Ryan’s daughter) and
Maureen (Ryan’s wife) are horrified by his actions and don’t understand why he would do such
a thing. Additionally, this failure to understand Ryan is what eventually leads Camila to pursue
a military career, so that she can understand her father’s actions.
The Team Mentality

In the Green Berets, the team is everything. In the infantry, the squad is everything. Each unit in the army has its division, but there is unity there, and the closer the unit gets to combat, the tighter that relationship becomes between the team members. A team that has fought together and lost teammates together is closer than family. When a unit goes to war, they are with each other twenty-four hours a day for six, nine, twelve months or longer. During that time, they learn about each other, and sometimes know more about each other than even their families back home. They share stories about their lives that they may never have shared with their wives or children or parents, about old girlfriends/boyfriends, about the last time they were in war, about their regrets and their accomplishments.

When the team finally returns to America, sometimes their family can’t understand this relationship. The wife doesn’t understand why her husband refuses to turn off his phone at night in case one of his teammates needs him, or why her kitchen counter becomes a makeshift operating table when a teammate cuts his hand instead of bringing the injured person to the hospital. Sometimes this causes rifts in the family, where wives and children think they mean less than their soldier’s teammates.

In my novel, I wanted to explore the team relationship in a Green Beret ‘A’ team. Ryan died leading a team into combat and his team in 2006 is very close. They joke, they live together, they fight together, they save each other’s lives. When Ryan dies, his team takes on the responsibility of looking after his daughter, Camila.

Initially, Camila is blind to the team supporting her. As a child, facing the death of her father, all she can see is her father’s preference for his teammates over her. Only Mark, her father’s best friend on the team, maintains an open mentor relationship
with her. The rest of the team work in the shadows, orchestrating her acceptance to West Point and looking after her in college to make sure she doesn’t fall victim to sexism or harassment. They facilitate her success in the Green Beret Qualification course, giving her difficult missions so that she earns the respect of her fellow students. Camila, however, sees sexism at every turn, not recognizing the assistance of her father’s team members for what it is. It isn’t until she leads her own team into combat, a team made up of many of her father’s old team members, that she begins to understand the team mentality, and understand why her father felt a duty to these men, a duty that was equal to that of his family.

The Military Genre

The military genre is very broad. In preparing to write this novel, I read many biographies by soldiers about Afghanistan and other wars. One thing I found interesting was the evolution of historical and biographical books during the course of the Afghanistan war. When I was deployed the first time to Afghanistan in 2002, there were only three books available about Afghanistan, and these were almost impossible to find or order in book stores. Mostly, these books were handed around the units getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan.

During the first decade of the war, however, more and more biographies and historical books appeared as Afghanistan became more important to U.S. foreign policy. Additionally, as more soldiers deployed to support Operation Enduring Freedom, the population of the U.S. became more interested because it became more common to
know a military member, either as a family or friend, who was participating in the war. Additionally, returning soldiers began to write books about their experiences.

Since my novel is a book of fiction based on many real experiences, I can draw similarities to both the fiction and non-fiction military books.

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, probably one of the best-known war novels, is a collection of interconnected short stories about how the Vietnam War affected American soldiers. Though the stories are fictional, there is an autobiographical feel to the writing. In the story “Spin,” O'Brien’s protagonist dwells on remembering, how “sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (O'Brien, 36). His remarks on joining the past to the future were significant to me and what I wanted to capture in my novel. I have a unique perspective to this War on Terror. I joined the Army in 1987 and saw almost 15 years of how the military worked before 9/11 and I have 15 years of experience after 9/11 to compare. And in those last 15 years, I witnessed the changes in tactics, technology, training, soldiers and, in contrast, I also saw the lack of change, specifically in the results of the war and the enemy’s actions.

I’ve tried to reconcile these experiences by writing both nonfiction and fictionalized real-life stories, but I never felt that short stories allowed me to express the
differences in the eras of the war effectively. My next idea was to imitate O’Brien by writing interconnected short stories that looked at events from different perspectives with reference to characters and time. Though this technique worked better than my other attempts, I still wasn’t achieving the comparison I desired. Part of the problem was that the two Armies (before and after 9/11) are so starkly different that the explanations required to orient the reader became overwhelming in details and I had a difficult time not lecturing the reader and bogging the plot down in historical detail. Another problem was the differences in the beginning of the war on terror and the present also created two completely different types of soldiers, while barely changing the enemy at all, and it’s hard to capture all of these nuances effectively.

In its current form, my novel has two main characters, Camila (the protagonist) and Ryan (Camila’s father), whose service in Afghanistan is separated by about twelve years (Camila deploys in 2017, the Ryan serves between 2005-2006), and the alternating chapters give a good balance of information and action while also allowing the daughter in 2017 to learn from her father who passed away in 2006.

Hemingway’s War Novels

Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are iconic military books about WW1 in Italy and the Spanish Civil War respectively. The most significant difference between Hemingway’s novels and *The Soldier’s Journal* are that his protagonists are irregular soldiers. Henry is an American volunteer that works as a medic with the Italians and Jordan is an American volunteer that works with the Spanish guerrillas. In contrast, my novel’s characters are all American soldiers who volunteered
to join the U.S. Army and serve. I think this is an important point because even though all of the characters are volunteers, ultimately Hemingway’s characters always have a choice to stay or go with little future impact to their life. If either protagonist quits and returns to the U.S., there are no legal repercussions. Soldiers in the U.S. Army who quit will suffer from dishonorable discharges, possible jail time, and loss of benefits.

Connected with this is the fact that Hemingway’s characters are motivated by a passion for the cause. My characters, normal soldiers, are motivated by survival of the team, of their fellow soldiers and Americans citizens. Most soldiers who go to war now in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan do not fight because of U.S. political convictions. They go to war because they are ordered, and they fight to ensure everyone on their team comes home.

Military Non-Fiction about Afghanistan

_Hammerhead Six_ by Ronald Fry is a non-fiction novel about green berets waging an unconventional war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the fall of 2003. There are many similarities between Fry’s and my own experience in Afghanistan. My personal experiences as a green beret took place about 100 miles South of Fry’s and I left Afghanistan about six months before he arrived in Afghanistan. I found many of his experiences mirrored my own and I could easily see myself creating a non-fiction book that resembled Hammerhead Six (my team actually used the same code name which is the title of the book). Fry thinks about war as I do, the battles are a series of problems to overcome through the innovation and training of the unit.
12 Strong by Doug Stanton is a novel about the initial invasion into Afghanistan led by the Green Berets in 2001. This is a very historically accurate book drawn from thousands of interviews, very similar to In Cold Blood by Truman Capote.

After reading these two books, I felt vindicated in my decision to write my book as a piece of fiction. Hammerhead Six has the feel of a history book and I wanted my novel to have more depth and intrigue, like 12 Strong and In Cold Blood. Without the access to the hundreds of interviews Stanton and Capote had, fiction was my best option to create the novel I wanted.

**Interior and Exterior Conflicts**

The protagonist of The Soldier’s Journal is Camila Mason, whose father, Ryan Mason, was killed while serving in Afghanistan when she was a child. Despite his many deployments as a Green Beret, Camila enjoyed a very close relationship with her father and felt jealous of her father’s relationship with his Army teammates. She viewed her father’s team as competition for his love and attention, especially when he insisted on spending time with them after returning from his missions. Just prior to his final deployment, however, Camila witnessed her father commit a violent act that challenged her image of him and caused her to question if she ever really knew him. As a twelve-year-old, it took time for her to process these things, and her father was killed in Afghanistan before she could resolve her feelings. This drives her to follow in her father’s footsteps by joining the military to understand her father’s thoughts and actions.

In memory of her father, Camila attends West Point and pursues a career as one of the first female Green Berets. Along this journey, her abilities as a female soldier are
constantly questioned by the military system and her male peers who are not prepared to embrace the presence of women in elite units. She is forced to constantly prove that she has earned her position in their ranks. Also, except for the mentoring of her father’s best friend Mark, she feels that she must make the journey alone and that all her father’s old teammates have let her down, which challenges her belief in her father’s team.

Camila’s internal conflict is the unresolved issues she has with her father. Though Ryan tried to spend what little time he had at home with his family, he was gone with the team more than he was home. And when he doesn’t come home from his last deployment, Camila feels deserted. Additionally, she feels ashamed because she never got a chance to tell him goodbye since she was confused over the event that happened in Orlando.

Throughout the remainder of her childhood and through her military career, she is haunted by her father’s shadow, symbolized by a poster that was made of Ryan and is commonly used as a recruiting tool for the Green Berets. Everyone she meets has high respect for her father, but the stories they tell her do not describe the father she knew, much as the Disney event does not make sense to her as something her father would do. She is constantly bombarded with positive feedback about her father and she has pushed the attack at Disney to the back of her mind for most of her life. Just before her first deployment, however, she is given her father’s journal, written in the months after the episode at Disney, and she is forced to confront her feelings for him again. During her deployment, then, with a different perspective on life, a soldier’s perspective,
she begins to understand that her father was a soldier and that combat teaches survival
instincts that can’t always be switched off.

Camila reads Ryan’s journal and learns lessons that he was never able to teach
her in person. Ryan insists that he is writing this journal to explain himself to Camila,
because he never had the chance to before. Camila only joins the military to be closer
to her father and because of her experiences in the Army, she can finally understand
the responsibility of command that her father felt and the closeness of the team.
Ironically, had Ryan not died, Camila would probably never have truly understood her
father in the way she understands him now. As Ryan states in his journal, only a soldier
can truly understand a soldier.

Camila’s primary external conflict is the sexism she is exposed to in her military
career. She constantly feels pressure to prove herself equal to or better than her male
peers. Additionally, she has experienced so much sexism in the military that she has
become bitter and almost expects it at every turn of her military life. This is
compounded by her resentment towards her father’s old team members. After Ryan
died, she easily assumed that the team was fake, that they deserted her family in their
time of need and failed to support her.

As a result of both these factors, Camila feels she must accomplish everything
alone and that she can’t trust anyone but Mark. This story becomes a journey for
Camila. As the plot progresses, she discovers more about her father, his team, and the
war. Also, she understands that the team didn’t let her down, but stepped forward to
support her in ways she never noticed during her career. One team member applies to
be an instructor at West Point to watch over her. Another is her instructor during the
Green Beret course and purposely challenges her leadership skills so that she impresses the other male students and they begin to respect her. Her father’s old commander intervenes to make sure she attends West Point.

When Camila is finally given her own team, she realizes the support she has gotten along the way, and the way the team has prepared her for the role to lead a Green Beret team. Finally, she appreciates that there are people she can trust, that have her back, and that she doesn’t have to accomplish everything alone.

Conclusion

*The Soldier’s Journal* is a novel about modern warfare. While on the surface it is about the first female Green Beret in Afghanistan in 2018, at its core it is about how warfare affects families. Children are brought up without a father or mother, PTSD stresses family relationships, and deployments make family members into strangers. Camila experiences all of these things and follows her father’s footsteps into the military in order to regain a part of the father that she lost. Along the way, she begins to understand the choices that he made that kept him away from his family. This is shown by the relationship she has with her mother as she prepares to deploy, fighting with her about the responsibility she bears, much like the argument her father had with her mother at Disney when she was little. Camila’s internal conflict about her confused feelings for her father is resolved in the end when she becomes the leader of her father’s team and finally understands the responsibilities he had and the circumstances of his death.
The external conflict of sexism in the military concludes with those in doubt coming to respect Camila as a soldier, but at the same time, Camila learns that not everyone is against her as she originally thought. This is merged with the external conflict of the team unit which ultimately reveals that the team spirit in the Green Berets is strong and that Camila understands how her father’s team supported her.

*The Soldier’s Journal* therefore fills two major niches in the military thriller genre. First, with its female protagonist, the novel addresses the new U.S. government policy of allowing women into combat professions, including special operations. While some books have been written from a biographical point of view, I have yet to find a novel that addresses the day to day struggles that women would face in these newly opened combat fields. Second, due to the framework of the novel, *The Soldier’s Journal* gives a direct comparison between the Afghanistan war in its initial years and a decade later. This comparison is not seen in the current historical books written about the war because they are usually told in chronological order about a specific period of time. The day to day experiences of Ryan and Camila over a decade apart show a side of the war not normally seen.
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“Where do you want to start?” Keith asked, his voice an irritating nasal sound. His breaths came in soft wheezes through a nose that hadn’t quite healed yet. He wondered if Miller thought he was nervous. He wasn’t. After all, it was finally over. Just a few more loose ends and he would be free of this burden.

The two men sat across from each other in the interrogation room, a white-walled compact room, barely big enough for the standard military issue table and chairs. Three of the walls appeared freshly painted, while the fourth contained a large mirror.

Special Agent Miller turned to a fresh page in his light green notebook and tapped it with a black ballpoint pen. He wore the new Operational Camouflage Uniform the US Army had adopted, commonly referred to as OCPs. “Let’s start at the beginning. Tell us about your relationship with Captain Mason.”

“Captain Camila Mason, Barbie Superstar.” Keith said the words sarcastically and immediately regretted them; they sounded forced even to him.

Miller made a note, then looked up. “I saw you with her at BAF. I assume you knew her well?”

Keith laughed, wheezing through the torn cartilage of his nose, stalling for time, trying to determine where this conversation was going. He had been surprised when the Military Police came to his office, but even more surprising was Miller’s presence.
They must think they’re onto something big. “That’s the irony, isn’t it? I barely knew her at all, but here I am, sitting in front of you, and apparently, it’s all about her and her family. The Masons.” He shook his head.

Mason. For over a decade Keith had feared that name, been shamed by that name, obsessed over that name. The Masons knew things about him, though exactly what he wasn’t completely sure.

And he still wasn’t clear why he was here. They thought they knew something, that was clear, but Keith was just as sure they had nothing on him. And right now, he just felt cheated. Things had been put into motion and this street cop was ruining his day of reckoning.

“You alright?” Miller glanced toward the mirror. “Do you want some water?”

Keith shook his head, then leaned forward, crossing his arms and putting his elbows on the table. “Camila was a surprise.”

“How so?”

“Well, she wasn’t what any of us expected for starters. Daughter of a Green Beret killed in action, graduate of West Point, one of the Army’s first female infantry platoon leaders, Ranger School graduate, one of the first females to graduate the Green Beret course. Hell, with that list of accomplishments, she was basically the Democrats’ wet dream for women’s equality in the military. We thought she was too good to be true, just a prop so they could put women where they didn’t belong.” He paused. “But we were wrong. She was the real deal. Better than a lot of us men. Better than me.”

“So, what was your relationship with her?”
Keith grunted. “Not much of a relationship really, especially since she tried to kill me. Broke my nose.” He lightly touched the bandage.

Miller looked up sharply, his pen continuing to move. “When was that?”

“A month or so ago. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised since the Masons have been trying to kill me for over a decade.”

The pen stopped. “What do you mean by that?”

“Her old man tried to kill me about twelve years ago.

“You mean Master Sergeant Ryan Mason? I heard you had a little altercation.”

“Altercation?” Keith mimicked. “I think it was a little more than that. He tried to kill me, and when he left he threatened to come back and kill me.”

Miller looked at the mirror again and continued writing. “Okay, tell me what you know about Master Sergeant Mason.”

Keith leaned back. “I only met him a couple times. He came to Jalalabad; his team was replacing my team.”

“When was this?”

“Christmas, 2005. I met him at the plane, showed him around the base, then I flew back to Bagram.”

“And you saw him again? Later?”

“Yeah, he shows up in Bagram a couple months later, banging on my door so hard I thought he’d break the hinges.”

“What did he want?”
“I don’t really know. I mean, he was yelling a bunch of bullshit about things I did. He was talking about treason. Betrayal. And to tell you the truth, I was a little confused.”

“So, you opened the door, and what did he say to you? As best as you can remember.”

“He stormed into my room, yelling my name, pushing the door against the wall and me with it. Then he just stared at me, all serious like, and said, ‘I’m going to kill you.’

“I didn’t answer though, I just looked back at him. Bearded, shorter than me, but big, muscular, bigger than the first time I saw him. I remember thinking he was on steroids or something. And I also remember being angry that he busted into my room.”

“And then what happened?” asked Miller.

“He was a fast son of a bitch. In an instant, he was in my face, looking up at me, holding my collar in both fists, forcing his knuckles into my throat and choking me. My feet were a few inches above the ground and I flailed at his hands, trying to break a finger, get air.

Keith paused. Miller waited a few moments, then prompted, “So, Mason was trying to kill you?”

Keith nodded slowly. “Yeah, I just remember thinking that no one his size could be so strong, could handle me so easily. I mean, I’m six feet three and I must have outweighed him by at least thirty pounds. I was probably lucky he didn’t rip out my throat. Instead, he threw me across the room and I crashed into the desk, flattening my chair. I felt some ribs break. My laptop shattered on the ground.”
“Then he screamed at me as I lay on the floor. ‘I know what you did, motherfucker, and it’s called treason. You won’t get away with it. Even if I have to take care of it myself.’

“It’s the last thing I remember that night. Him yelling. His body outlined by the night, framed in the open door. I saw him in shades of gray before I blacked out.

Keith went silent, remembering that night. Mason had made him question himself. It was the night that everything changed.
“I believe that what we become depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom.”
— Umberto Eco

“To be the father of growing daughters is to understand something of what Yeats evokes with his imperishable phrase 'terrible beauty.' Nothing can make one so happily exhilarated or so frightened: it's a solid lesson in the limitations of self to realize that your heart is running around inside someone else's body. It also makes me quite astonishingly calm at the thought of death: I know whom I would die to protect and I also understand that nobody but a lugubrious serf can possibly wish for a father who never goes away.”
— Christopher Hitchens
Chapter 1

November 8, 2017

7th Special Forces Compound, Elgin Air Force Base, Florida

“Captain Mason, ready?”

The sun had barely risen and Captain Camila Mason felt the cool mist settling in the surrounding woods. Goosebumps formed under her uniform. She stretched her right calf one last time as she examined the route. Littered with pine straw, the dirt path traveled straight for about four hundred meters before breaking left; she could gain ground there. Camila inhaled the thick pine fragrance that reminded her of home and released a trail of cold air which curled from her mouth. She took a modified starter's position, then stretched her gloves by opening and closing her hands around the rifle's pistol grip and barrel.

*Now or never,* she thought.

“Ready,” she told Sergeant First Class Fuller.

“Three, Two, One, Go!” A stopwatch clicked.

She pressed a stone into the sand with her left heel, a poor man’s starter block. West Point Track and Field had taught her that every second counted.

*Go Knights!* she thought fondly.

The body armor and ammunition weighed her down, almost a quarter of her own one hundred thirty pounds. Her equipment pulled as she leaned forward and her legs rushed to keep up. This wasn’t a sprint, she reminded herself. If she lengthened her
stride too much she would be crushed by the weight and probably fall, so she set her pace with short, quick steps. Dust kicked up and she tasted the grit, drying her mouth.

*Slow and steady. Keep your balance. Breathe.*

She still had to be able to fight once she reached the objective. Sergeant Fuller followed like a shadow, and she half smiled as he gulped air. As her grader, he was slick, only wearing his uniform and no equipment, but she was younger, fitter, faster.

Camila turned the corner. On the far side of a two-hundred-meter open area was the shoot house. For two weeks, she and her twenty classmates had trained there, shooting from every angle, both hands, right hand, left hand. Using all their assigned weapons: rifle, pistol, shotgun. And this was the test, the stress test, a milestone she would be identified with for years to come. Well, maybe not that important, except in her case everything was either a chink in her reputation or a feather in her cap.

“Enemy on the roof, five rounds each,” said Fuller, breathing hard.

Camila dove to the ground, identifying the targets. The Aimpoint Scope on top of her rifle was for close quarters, so she used her iron sights.

*Focus on the front sight; clear sight, blurry target. Slow breaths. In and out.*

Pause.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.

*Slow breath, new target, repeat.*

Six targets, thirty rounds. She changed magazines as she rose to her feet.

“Hostage Alley on the right,” said Fuller

Ten meters wide, Hostage Alley was a lane of paper silhouette targets about a hundred meters left of the shoot house.
She slipped running down the hill and pitched forward, automatically rolling her shoulders and ending in a half flip sitting on her ass. Cursing, she was on her feet again, mentally checking her equipment, and in forty more seconds she entered Hostage Alley, breathing harder than she wanted.

She advanced in a speed walk, weapon at the ready.

*Watch the hands*, she thought. *Slow is smooth, smooth is fast.*

The silhouettes showed men and women in different mannequin poses.

*Don't assume. The hands will tell the story.*

The closest had a pistol: bang, bang. Center of mass. She continued moving forward, keeping a steady pace, turning her upper body left or right to engage targets. Next was a woman with a cell phone. *Pass.* Her rifle moved to the next potential target, her eyes looked for the next threat. Knife: bang, bang. Submachine gun: bang, bang. Cell phone and pistol: bang, bang. *Save the hostage, kill the terrorist.* Her rifle clicked empty and she transitioned to her pistol in less than a second, then picked up the rhythm again. Knife: Bang, bang. Pistol: bang, bang. At the end were the steel targets, small round pies, one round each: pling, pling, pling. Change mags: pling, pling, pling. It felt good. It felt right.

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She cleared her weapons from the range and Fuller read her score.

*Five points for dropping an empty magazine. Five lousy points from a perfect score.* Damn.
A black Dodge SUV pulled up and the driver yelled, “Captain Mason, the commander sent me to pick you up.”

Sergeant Fuller and Camila exchanged looks, but Fuller shrugged and collected her weapons.

The driver had no further information for her on the short ride back, “Just following orders, ma’am.” She had her own suspicions, ones that made her smile. Finally, she was getting assigned a team.

Captain Carerra had seen the Colonel yesterday and been assigned a mountain team. Camila was hoping for a SCUBA team. She knew her fitness scores were stellar, and she had heard that if you had a civilian diving license you were in. The SUV moved at the 10-mph speed limit down Range Road, but Camila was bouncing her leg. She could run faster than this, even in boots.

Their first meeting, about a month ago, had been awkward. Colonel Stone had been her father’s team leader and her father’s death hung between them as he congratulated her on passing the “Q” course, the grueling year-long Green Beret proving ground that only passed ten percent of its candidates. Stone cautioned her about maintaining her edge and earning her team’s respect. He’d only brought up her father at the end. “Ryan would have been proud. Hell, we’re all proud of you, the whole team.”

She’d only been twelve when her dad was killed, but she understood the team concept. Dad talked about his team so much that she felt they were closer to him than she was, and maybe in a way that was true. She had been to war already and was very
conscious of the bonds that soldiers forged there. As a child, she had been jealous of the time her dad spent with his team. She was ashamed, but she had even been annoyed when he visited wounded soldiers and forced her to come along. They always seemed so grateful that he had come, and they laughed at his stories. She had wanted to be the one to share stories with him, but something always came up. There was always another mission, another trip, or he would ruin everything, like he had at Disney, that summer before he died.

The SUV stopped at the entrance to the headquarters building and Camila thanked the driver as she jumped out. She crossed the street to the 7th Special Forces Group Memorial wall which she always did when passing. The black stone gleamed in the morning sun. Her fingers brushed her father’s name: MSG Ryan Mason, OEF, May 25, 2006. Then she touched another name: SSG Chris Tackett, OEF, May 23, 2006. Mark had brought her to the wall after they built it; she had been in Ranger School during the inauguration. Mark had been her rock since her dad’s funeral, the only one of the team who had stepped up to help her family. They had spent hours there that first time as he told stories of the men on the wall. Stories of her dad and how he had saved Mark’s life. Stories of how Chris had sacrificed himself.

When she finally entered the headquarters office, she heard the Colonel talking on the phone in his office. He stood with the door open and his back to her. She briefly considered sitting in a brown leather chair just outside his office, then saw the framed poster on the wall above the chair.

It showed a soldier kneeling in a desert camouflaged uniform, subdued US flag on his right shoulder, unkempt beard and hair, arms outstretched applying a
stethoscope to the heart of a young Middle Eastern girl in a purple headscarf. Above the scene was the caption, “Why We Fight”.

That damn poster of her father. It was everywhere, watching her, judging her as she progressed through her career.

*How am I doing so far, dad?*

In her reflection on the glass, Camila noticed a smudge on her right cheek, which she removed with her pinky finger and some spit. Suddenly, she realized her hands smelled of gun grease and earth. She wiped her palms on her pants, then made sure her black shoulder-length hair was tied back in a tight bun. She always attempted to maintain the professional look. She hated that the guys could get away with half-assed haircuts, but she knew she was being watched, evaluated, assessed. This life she chose was a never-ending test, and the minimum score was always one hundred percent. She smiled at her reflection, then changed to a neutral expression. Too much smiling and the voyeurs would think she was a ditz. There. Professional. Now she wished that she had left the smudge.

Colonel Stone was still on the phone. He turned and leaned against a dark brown desk. In his mid-forties, he had a bulky six-foot two-inch frame with dark brown hair edged in silver. She remembered her dad had mentioned he played football at the University of Texas.

*Probably as a linebacker.*

Colonel Stone raised his voice as he spoke into the receiver, “Let me be perfectly clear, I want to know the second the family is notified.” He hung up and crossed his arms, staring into space for a few seconds. Then, he noticed her. “Captain Mason.
Camila. Come in.” He smiled slightly, then shook her hand as she entered and sat down behind his desk. She remained standing in the position of attention.

“Relax, relax,” he motioned to her. “Sit down.” She sat in a modified position of attention, directly across from him. “How's training going?”

“It’s good sir. I just finished my stress test. 95 out of 100.”

Colonel Stone nodded. “Excellent. I heard you were doing well in the course.”

“Are you checking up on me, sir?” She didn’t know how she felt about that. She didn’t want any extra attention.

“I check on all my officers.”

*Especially your new female Green Berets. Your first female Green Beret. Daughter of your dead team member.* She shifted uncomfortably and said, “Sorry sir, that came out wrong. I guess I’m just a little sensitive about being treated different.”

“Well, get over yourself, Mason. You’re going to need thicker skin than that when you get to your team.”

*My team.* Her heart skipped a beat.

“Yes sir, sorry sir.”

His voice got softer, “How are you, Camila?”

Surprised at his tone, her own voice got harder and her posture stiffened. “I’m fine, sir.”

Colonel Stone sighed. “Camila, don’t do that. Your father and I have history. It’s a fact and I can’t ignore it. So, give me a break already.”

She looked straight forward, sitting rigidly in the chair.
No shit Sherlock. But when I asked you for a recommendation to West Point, you couldn't give me the time of day. Couldn't even be bothered to write back and say you wouldn't even do it. But I got in despite you. So, don't do me any favors.

“I'm fine, sir. Can't wait to be assigned to a team.”

Colonel Stone looked at her in silence for a few moments. She thought she saw sadness there for a second, then his face hardened, mirroring hers. “Fine. We'll do this your way.” He folded his hands on the desk; a large gold ring inlaid with the Special Forces insignia of two crossed arrows glinted on his right hand. “You'll have to wait for that team assignment. I'm sending you over to Afghanistan to serve on staff with 3rd Battalion.”

“That's bullshit, sir.” It slipped out. She was a Green Beret captain, she was supposed to be a team leader, and now they were going to shove her off in some bullshit staff job because she was a woman?

“Excuse me?”

She calmed herself. “Sir, I'm supposed to get a team before doing staff work. So, I said it was a bullshit assignment. Sir.”

“Well, that's not always true. Sometimes teams aren't available immediately.”

“Are you saying there aren't any available right now?”

He paused. Sighed. “No, there are teams.”

“I knew you guys were going to screw me.”

“Captain Mason, you're bordering on insubordination,” he said, his voice getting louder. She detected a hint of anger and debated whether she might have gone too far.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his tone still dangerous.
Screw him.

“You know, sir,” she said.

“Well, why don’t you explain it, since you have all the answers?”

“You’re afraid to give me a team because I’m a woman.”

His lips tightened as he rocked back in his chair. “So, you think you have it all figured out. I’m sorry to break it to you, but it’s not all about you Mason. Whether you like it or not, you are special, that’s true.” He picked up a folder from his desk and rifled through it. “You know that this file says? It says you are a great officer, that happens to be a woman.” He leaned forward. “You’re special, Camila, because of who you are. I know you don’t want to be, but that will never change. You will always have a huge spotlight shining on you and your career.”

Camila’s mouth twitched, her temper cooled. “I don’t want to go, sir. If I have a choice.”

“I’m not asking you, because the world doesn’t revolve around you.” Colonel Stone picked up another document, a headshot of a handsome blond man. “Captain Aaron Bailey passed away this morning due to wounds received when his vehicle hit an IED in northeast Afghanistan.”

She exhaled loudly.

“I’m moving 3rd Battalion’s Assistant Operations Officer, Captain Garrot, to take over that team, and I’m sending you over to replace Garrot. On staff.”

“—I—” she took another long breath and let it out slowly, “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know.”
“Camila, you will get your team, I promise you. No one is going to take that away from you.”

“Why me, sir? Why not one of the other new officers?”

“Am I singling you out? Absolutely, but not for the reasons you think.” He held up her file again. “An effective staff in Afghanistan will save soldiers’ lives. You’ve shown that you are a great problem solver. Your evaluation reports are stellar, better than your peers. Master Sergeant Ted Granger gave you high praise in the course. I’m sending my best.”

Granger? That asshole? High praise? I fucking doubt that. Another of Dad’s old teammates that let me down.

She kept her face neutral.

“Okay, sir. When do I leave?”

“How much time do you need?”

She did some quick mental calculations. Two weeks to finish range training and some time to say goodbye to her mother--after Thanksgiving then. “Three weeks.”

He nodded. “Take a month, spend some time with your mom. The mountain passes in Afghanistan are snowed up anyway, there won’t be much action until after the first of the year.” He stood. “One month, Captain Mason. Please say hi to your mom for me.”

Camila turned to leave.

“And Camila,” Stone said. She half turned back. “We’re all on the same team. No one is trying to prevent you from doing what you want.”

“Roger sir, I understand.”
But it sure feels like it, she thought as she left the building. And after what I’ve been through, I don’t trust any of you.

*****

Head resting on one duffel bag and legs thrown over another, Camila watched planes land.

They always land after dark. Probably for security reasons.

Seven days before, Camila had landed in Ramstein, Germany and signed up for the next military plane going to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. Now, she was still in Ramstein, watching mail pallets being loaded, becoming an expert on landing planes. She just wanted to get there already.

When they brought her father home, she knew someday she would see Afghanistan. She felt it deep inside, the need to understand the land that had changed and ultimately taken him from her. She remembered meeting his body at the airfield twelve years ago: the sun shining bright in a cloudless sky, fresh mowed grass blowing on the tarmac, an unseasonably strong breeze threatening to lift the American Flag draped over the coffin. Eight Green Berets carried her father, glints of brass reflecting off blue dress uniforms.

Dammit Dad, what was so great about Afghanistan? Why did you choose it over your family? Over me?

She watched the mail being loaded. Soon, she would discover the country herself and then, maybe, she would know. Her mother never understood her
obsession, evident by the fight they’d had last week, the same fight they’d had since she applied to West Point. Camila went home to say goodbye, but she should have known how it would end.

The first days had been fine, almost normal, but as Camila packed to leave, her mom began getting anxious, like a cornered animal that knows it’s running out of time.

“Why are you doing this Cammy?” Maureen Mason said, her voice two octaves higher than normal. “It makes no sense!” She wore gray sweatpants and stood in her fighting stance that made her seem larger, like a bristling dog, despite her five-foot two frame. It was a familiar argument. All conversations during the last seven years had ended the same.

“Mom, why are we talking about this again?” Camila folded her father’s camouflage poncho liner and placed it into the green bag on the bed. In two hours, she’d catch a plane out of Pensacola to Baltimore. From there a C-17 would take her to Germany, where she would transfer to another military plane to Afghanistan. “It’s done, I’m going. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to.” She fastened the top of the bag and then said quietly, “I’m an Army officer now. I have responsibilities.”

Maureen shook her head. “I don’t understand why you joined. You didn’t have to join.” Tears appeared like magic, spilling down her face. “You had the Army scholarship. The only thing your father left you, at least he got you that scholarship. You could have done anything you wanted.”

The Army scholarship. Awarded to children of soldiers who died in combat. Her dad gave her that. But West Point was free, and she hadn’t even used it.
Camila glanced around the room, checking one final time for anything left behind. That was the first time she saw the journal. It must have been behind her mother’s back when she entered the room, but now she held it in both hands at waist level, like she was waiting for Bible study.

“What’s that?” asked Camila.

It was forest green, the size of a small bible, and she saw stains on the cover through her mother’s fingers.

Maureen cried quietly, tears running through her wrinkles like mountain streams.

“It was his.”

Camila froze. “Dad’s?”

“They found it with his things. In Afghanistan.”

“What does it say?”

Her mom sniffled. “Just stuff. Army stuff. What he did, what he thought, on that last trip.”

Camila put her hand out slowly, as if trying not to startle a wild animal. “Can I see it?”

Maureen clutched it hard, her knuckles white. “I didn’t want--” she began to breathe faster, gasping, “I didn’t want you to go. I was protecting you.”

Camila nodded. “I know.” She took a step forward, “Give it to me, Mom. Please.”

Camila took another step, putting her hand on the journal. With a sigh, her mother finally released it.
It was grainy to the touch. Camila thought of deserts in Afghanistan, her father holding the book open as he wrote, gun grease and Afghan sand staining the pages. It smelled of oil and dust, a soothing smell that reminded her of times when her father came back from training in the middle of the night, slipping into her room and kissing her softly on the forehead. She remembered that time of safety, when she knew her dad stood guard against the world. And then, like a falling star, everything changed and he was gone.

Now, sitting in Germany, waiting on a plane, she pulled the journal from the top of her bag and stared at the stains on the cover for the hundredth time. She turned to the first page and she began to read.
Chapter 2

December 14, 2005

190 Days and a Wake Up

I may die here in this dusty, dirty, stinky, nasty, desert, but at least I’ll have this stupid journal.

I wrote that in the notebook.

I’m not even there and I can already feel the cold desert air, see the miles of desolate land where nothing grows except rocks. I smell the dirt, the body odor, the open-air bathroom ditches. That’s probably not what Red meant for me to write, especially since it hasn’t happened yet. Can you cheat in a diary or a journal or whatever this is?

“A journal? What the hell am I going to write in a journal?” I had asked her.

“Whatever you want,” was the reply. “Your thoughts, your daily activities, your dreams.”

They made me see a counselor. They were worried about me. They said I wasn’t acting like myself. No shit. No one stays the same. War changes you. Life changes you.

“Doc, I’m not much of a writer.”

She was pretty. Hell, she was gorgeous. Why would they send a man to a counselor who looked like that? Petite. Shoulder-length red hair. Some perfume that made me think of sweet things, cinnamon and sugar treats. Green eyes. Nice-sized
breasts. Half the time I couldn’t even hear what she was saying through the buzzing of her hotness, like a nest of wasps in my head.

She was talking again. I shook my head. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, we’ve been making good progress so far, and I’m willing to allow you to deploy with your team, with a couple of conditions. The journal will be one. I also want you to see the chaplain while you’re over there, once every month at a minimum.”

I watched her lips move, then held my eyes shut for a full two seconds. The deployment was the important thing. Going to war with my men. Not letting them down.

“Sure, sure. I can do that.”

And now, I’m leaving on a jet plane, going to war. It was as easy as that. Don’t act crazy or, at least, what they considered crazy. That was the hard part, figuring out what they thought crazy was. And agree to their silly ‘conditions’. A journal and a chaplain? As long as I could go to war with my men - easy peasy lemon squeezy.

Maybe this journal won’t be that bad. Maybe I can write a book when I get home, or they can make a movie of my life. I could be on Oprah’s book list. Ha.

Probably wouldn’t make a good Hollywood movie though, cause I won’t romanticize this shit. Just going to tell it how it is. No more. No less.

I got up at 0300, Teddy picked me up because Maureen didn’t want to drop me off. Her last words were “Don’t wake me up when you leave.”

Teddy’s wife didn’t have any problem though, and they held hands all the way to the airport while I sat in the back of their Ford Bronco between two half-asleep kids,
their heads drifting onto my shoulders as the motor hypnotized them back to sleep.

That’s when I decided to write this journal thing for my daughter. As much time as I’ve spent away, I just wanted her to know me. I wanted her to know the kind of man I am, the things I thought, the things I saw.

Camila used to stay up with me while I loaded the car, Maureen even allowed it, bending her silly bedtime rules. I’d hug Cammy hard when I was finished, tell her to be good, then watch her in the rear-view mirror, standing in the pale-yellow porch light. Did she know I watched her as I drove away? Is that why she stood on the doorstep so long?

But not this time. I knew it would be different this time. After I had packed, I waited outside her door, but she never came out.

I tore the first page from the notebook. Do over. Hope that doesn’t screw up the binding, then all the pages will fall out. That’d suck. Would Red be pissed? Would she blame me?

So, I got here in one piece. The plane ride was long and uneventful. I slept most of the time and read one of the new sci-fi books I brought along.

Who cares? I tore that page out. Do over. Going to need another notebook before too long.
I left on a clear, crisp December morning, before the first snowfall in North Carolina. It’s hard to believe it was only this morning, it seems so far away. Planes, time changes, more planes.

I liked that a lot. It was almost poetic. What else? Do I tell about the stupid stuff? Does anyone care about the stupid shit? Do they care about my wife’s last words before I left for six months? Maybe Red finds that kind of stuff interesting, doubt the Hollywood producers do.

I wish I’d written a journal for Camila a long time ago; she might be the only one who would understand it, though probably only a soldier can truly understand another soldier’s thoughts. Soldiers have made a legacy of trying to explain themselves to the world without much success. Of course, if I have anything to say about it, Camila will grow up to be a doctor, so it’s perfectly alright if she doesn’t understand what I’m writing about. Still, I’d like to think that she would. Anyway, maybe she won’t be a doctor. I’d support her just the same if she wanted to join the Army. As a doctor. Ha. Kidding. Not really.

To be honest, and a journal sounds like the best place to tell the truth, then here’s the truth of the matter: if she ever joins the Army, I’d want her to be the best, I’d want her to be a Green Beret. Unfortunately, that’s not an option for her. Women can’t serve in combat positions, basically the definition of a Green Beret. So, second best, a doctor. If you can’t save people, at least, you know, save people.
I think this war is different. It will affect the soldiers differently, and their families. I suppose every soldier in the history of war has thought their war was different, unique. But these modern wars, they won’t be like any book you’ve read or movie you’ve seen; they will be different. There won’t be any doubt about what is really happening. There won’t be any way to hide it. The American people will see every bloody chapter. Up close and personal.

I hope they can forgive us.
I hope we can forgive ourselves.

I looked at my watch. We still had some time before landing in Germany. Better finish this journal thing and get some sleep. It’s like ten hours to Europe, and a six-hour time change. I wish there was a Star Trek teleporter. Sometimes, I just want to get there already. The sooner you start, the sooner it’s over.

Hurry up and wait.
That’s standard issue military logic. True now, been true since armies were invented, and will be true for as long as armies continue to exist.

Waiting time is abundant in the Army: waiting for planes to get to the fire base, helicopters to pick up the wounded, hot showers that come out lukewarm, a washing machine that works, a clean toilet you can sit on, hot chow. Don’t get confused. Waiting time is not the same as free time, waiting time is a consideration included in all planning, and a soldier can sometimes find a plethora of waiting time. Uninterrupted free time, on the other hand, is rare in the army: time where you are free to do and think
whatever you want, watch a DVD, write a letter, make a phone call, do nothing at all. If you’re in charge, there’s always something to plan, or check, or inspect, or recheck or re-inspect. If you’re not in charge, inevitably someone in charge will see that you have free time and incorporate you into their plans or checks or inspections or rechecks or re-inspections.

The plane left Germany at 1000 local and I was ready to kill someone.

My team was quiet as the engines roared to life and we began to taxi. My forehead was throbbing, my hands shook under the poncho liner I wrapped around myself. I’d like to think everyone saw me as calm and collected, that I hid my emotions and my face remained stoic, but no one met my eyes, so I guess not.

I had slept some after my last journal entry. Some of the guys take pills to fall asleep, but I’ve never had that problem. Even so, this time it was a little different. I won’t tell Red though, that will just give her ammunition to heap further ‘conditions’ on me. I had been restless, both physically and mentally, thinking about endings and last times and never agains. My mind churned about life, about choices, and yes, death reared its ugly head as well. And then all the things my daughter didn’t know about me floated through my brain like a burst sewage pipe. It was so much crap, but it scared me. There were so many things I wanted her to know about me, things she should understand. Why I made these decisions, why I joined the Army, why I went to war. Maybe that’s why we’re drifting apart, because she doesn’t understand these things. And Disney. Maybe a combination of the two.

And then we were landing in Germany, and that’s when it got stupid.
Should I write about the stupid stuff in this journal? About how totally ridiculous the Army can be sometimes?

You’d think by now it would be easy to go to war, that there would be some kind of playbook with a step-by-step, paint-by-numbers guide where all the kinks had been massaged out.

You’d be wrong.

Some things you might not connect with war. For instance, passports.

Of course, when I invaded Panama, I didn’t even have a passport. No one even asked, not on the way in as I parachuted from a C130 Hercules about five hundred feet above the ground, red and green streaks streaming through the moonless night from the rifles of scared Panamanian soldiers. And certainly not when they carried me off in a stretcher to a plane and flew me to an Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas still covered in blood, most of it not even mine.

The first time I went to Afghanistan I had a passport, but I didn’t bring it with me because, well, I was going to war. The truth is, when the U.S. goes to war, passports aren’t necessary. We just show our military ID cards or our guns, and that’s it. Of course, if we had to fly home for an emergency it helps, that’s one thing I learned. Birth of a baby, death of a loved one, an unexpected pregnancy would even send a man home. So, I brought my passport this time, just in case, though I didn’t really expect any problems.

Another thing you might not connect with war is metal detectors. I mean, why bother, I got guns, I got grenades, I got metal.
We had landed at Ramstein Air Force Base, a U.S. Military base for god’s sake. We were only in Germany to refuel, which took five hours for some unknown reason, and we had to go through a metal detector to get back on, which is where they confiscated my guns, my ammunition and my grenades.

I explained to the U.S. military police officer that we were going to war, he told me I had to pack it all in locked boxes.

“What if the plane gets shot down?” I asked.

“Locked boxes,” smirked the MP.

“What if we receive enemy fire when we land?”

“Locked boxes,” he repeated. My fists clenched.

“What if--?”

“Locked boxes,” he cut me off, and I wanted to rip his throat out. Then, I smiled and matched his head tilt.

“Locked boxes, Master Sergeant.”

He looked confused. “What?”

“You are a Sergeant, I am a Master Sergeant, and you will address me with the proper respect due my rank. And stand at parade rest.”

His smile turned to a scowl as he assumed the position of parade rest.

“So,” I asked sweetly, “Sergeant, how do I have to transport these items?”

“In locked boxes, Master Sergeant.”

“Damn straight.”

Small victories.
A long time ago, I went through some army training that prepared soldiers in case they should ever become prisoners of war. One of the key concepts that the instructors hammered over and over was to enjoy small victories. Sometimes, being in the Army feels like being a prisoner of war.

After the plane took off and my hands stopped shaking, I unlocked the boxes and handed out the equipment to my men. No one said a word.

*Armed again, calm, and heading for war.*

*I’ve been to war a few times but dying was never a consideration for me before. Really, it never came up. I was too busy, I had too many things to do. It’s as simple as that. But this time, the rules are different. It feels more dangerous. I got my weapons confiscated at the airport for god’s sake. It’s like the odds are stacked in favor of the bad guys. Maybe death is a little closer.*

Humph. I wrote that and I’m not changing it. I’m sure Red will have a heyday.

It’s funny, but I don’t fear death. I’ve thought about death. Thought about it a lot. About how it surrounds me and invades every moment of my life. But I’m not afraid of it. It’s more of an inconvenience. ‘Miles to go before I sleep’ and all that.

But now, for the first time, the lives of men ride on my decisions. Before, I was a cog, a part of the team, but I wasn’t in charge. But where death was an inconvenience for me before, now the lives of my men are a burden that only I can carry.
Back in hell. The heat will be here soon enough, but for me, the hell is being away from Camila, and the fear I may never see her again.

Twelve hours in Turkey for repairs to a doohickey thingamabob, that’s Air Force technical talk, and then a short flight to Afghanistan. Well, relatively short. Four hours. We landed at night, though I doubt that was planned given all the hiccups in the journey. Or maybe the Army is more devious than we think.

“188 Days and a Wakeup!” yelled Teddy as the plane’s tailgate lowered. Oh, hell. Six more months and then I can wake up and go home. But you can’t think of the time in months or weeks, you have to take each day as it comes, and before you know it you’re under 150, then in the 2 digits, and finally in the teens. One day at a time. 188 days and a wake up.

Snowflakes drifted when we emerged from the plane and the ground was covered with a light coat that made the tarmac resemble a powdered donut. It’s Monday here, but Sunday back home—donut day. Family donut day.

We walked about a half mile to a large wooden shack that looked like a good Texan BBQ restaurant, the type with large picnic tables that seat twenty people and make their own BBQ sauce. ‘Welcome Center’ was scrawled in red paint. Like a Clint Eastwood movie, except in the movie it had said ‘Hell’. Camila would so get it.

This war has more paperwork than a mortgage. Two hours of in-processing, then we’re trucked to Camp Vance, a base within a base. We’ll be lucky to get out of here in a week I’m told. We drew operational money, checked our equipment, and received final briefings. The calm before the storm.
I dropped my equipment in our temporary lodging and headed for the phone center. At least the phone lines weren’t long.

What time is it there? Minus nine and half hours, almost three in the afternoon. I tried her work number.

“Hello?” Maureen picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, babe, it’s me.”

She paused. “You there, then?”

“Yeah, took a while. How’s everything?”

“Good, can’t talk for long though, have to get back to work.”

“Okay. Just wanted to call, say I got here and missing you guys.”

Long pause. “That’s nice.”

I felt the tension. “Okay, babe, I’ll let you go. Love you.”

“Bye.” Click.

It’s always strange at first. It takes a little time for us to get our rhythm, but we always get there. Eventually.

On my last deployment, I remember talking to Cammy, she was only six or seven.

“What did you do today, baby doll?”

“Well, I stayed at Meagan’s house last night and they didn’t have any Fruit Loops, so I had to have Cap’n Crunch, and I got the prize, but Meagan said it was her cereal, so it was her prize.”

“That sounds fair.”
“No Daddy, it’s not fair, because I got the prize, see? And I needed the prize, because it was a glow in the dark compass ring, and I wanted to send it to you. So you don’t get lost.”

I chuckled; choked. “That’s okay, baby doll, Meagan can have it. I have one already.”

“Okay. Did you get my letter?”

“You wrote me a letter?”

“Yeah, did you get it? I sent it yesterday.”

“I think it will take a few days to get here, but thanks. I can’t wait to read it.”

“I drew a picture for you, too.”

“Now I really can’t wait until it gets here. I’m going to put that on the wall in my room. Did you draw it in school?”

“We’re on Christmas vacation, Daddy. There’s no school.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. So, what are you doing all day?”

“Watching TV. What are you doing all day, Daddy?”

I paused. “Baby doll, I spent all day trying to get to this phone to talk to you.”

She giggled. “No, you didn’t. All you have to do is dial the telephone.”

“We don’t have any phones where I live, that’s why you can’t call me. I had to drive to another place to get to this phone. It took me twelve hours to get here.”

“Twelve hours? That’s forever.”

“Yep, sometimes it feels like forever. But then I get here and it’s worth it because I get to talk with you.”

“Mommy says I have to say goodbye now.”
“Okay, I love you, baby doll.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

She always made me smile.

The instructors at that prisoner simulation school used to tell stories about soldiers who were kept prisoner for years and their key to survival, to not giving up the will to live, to keeping thoughts of death at bay, was to occupy their minds. Some planned the construction of a vacation home, nail by nail, board by board. Others planned a motorcycle trip across the United States, every state, every city, every stop.

So, I’ll keep my men alive, relish in my small victories, and I’ll keep my thoughts of death at bay by writing this journal.

Maybe it’s too late, maybe that trip to Disney messed things up between Cammy and me, but I’d like to think it’s never truly too late. I’ll write this journal for Camila: chapter by chapter, page by page, word by word. And then, just maybe, she’ll understand me a little better.
Chapter 3

December 15, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Disney.

It was a memory she had blocked, but it was the pivot point of her life. There was before Disney, and then there was after Disney. When her father died, there was the funeral and the memorial and the visitors. He was a hero. He was great, big man who did great things she had never known about.

And the day he left on his last mission, it had been different than before. She hadn’t even said goodbye. And it was because of Disney. Because of the blood. Because of the violence.

Then he was gone. There was school finals and Christmas and visiting relatives, and it seemed quite normal, for Christmastime anyway. And Dad was gone so much, especially after 9/11, it was almost odd when he was home. So, when he left, it was normal again. And she never saw him again, so Disney was never an issue. A dream that blurred over time. A nightmare that always lurked in the vestiges of her mind.

“Please return to your seats, we are approaching Bagram Airfield and will be landing shortly.”

The passengers were scattered throughout the plane, wrapped in sleeping bags or poncho liners, startled awake by the disembodied voice. Slowly they began to move into their assigned seats, equipment stowed, and military order returned.
The clam doors at the back of the plane began to open and she filed out with the other passengers, her eyes adjusting from the bright interior lights of the plane to a sky lit by shining stars, more stars than she had ever seen at one time. A cool breeze swept the flakes of snow that settled on her hair and uniform, and it smelled clean, like winter in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The snow crunched pleasently beneath her boots, powder still, freshly fallen. She smiled to herself as she internally confirmed her theory about landing planes and night schedules. Maybe her dad was right, the Army was more devious than they thought.

The sleepy group was led to a wooden building resembling a barn, small melting icicles grew down from the roof, drops pattered onto asphalt. Camila could see heat waves emitting from the windows and doors. ‘Bagram Airfield Welcome Center’ was printed in black typeface on a professionally made board that probably cost the Army a small fortune. She remembered the red-lettered sign Dad had described. *Apparently, hell had a makeover*, she thought.

Inside it was warm, almost too warm. There were lines and chairs and counters, very official and organized in a Department of Motor Vehicles sort of way. A Staff Sergeant introduced herself to the group and proceeded to walk them through, step by agonizing step, how to fill out customs and entry forms while they waited for luggage to be unloaded.

After an hour of administrative paperwork, Camila was sitting on her duffel bag when she noticed a soldier enter the building with a different look about him. Confident, fit, the beginnings of a beard on his cheek and chin, and a curved piece of cloth on his
right sleeve that read *SPECIAL FORCES*. She grabbed her bags and approached the doorway, “Looking for me?” she asked, offering her hand.

He looked startled at first, glanced at her name tape, then nodded and shook her hand firmly. “Captain Andrew Garrot, Andy. Welcome to Afghanistan.” He spoke with a heavy Boston accent.

Camila smiled, accustomed to such reactions. She was a woman in the Green Berets. There weren’t many. Yet.

“Camila Mason.”

Garrot nodded. “Good to meet you. That all you got?” he asked looking at the two duffel bags on her shoulders.

Camila nodded. “Yep, let’s go.”

She pushed through the door into the cold before he could offer to take her bags. She knew some might view her actions as bitchy and unnecessary, but it was a habit she had acquired over the last few years: don’t let them think you can’t handle yourself. No doubt Garrot would have offered to help another male soldier to carry one bag, but, more often than not when it came to chivalry, she would have had to wrestle both bags out of his hands, or worse, someone else would offer to help her. It was better to just show them that she wasn’t weak and dainty, and try not to be rude about it, because ultimately that came across as arrogance. But if they saw her as arrogant or bitchy, well, it was better than being seen as a girl. She was a soldier. She was an officer. She was a Green Beret. But because she was a woman, she was always walking a razor’s edge and she could never let them forget it.
Garrot followed, overtook her, and led the way across the street, gesturing at a parked hummer. Tossing her bags in the back, Camila entered the passenger side as her companion slid behind the wheel. Garrot glanced over and turned the key, “You’re a little late.”

“Got held up in Germany.”

Garrot nodded. “That’s about par.”

“Where are we going?” Camila asked as they slowly drove between the walls of sand bags and concertina wire lining the paved road. The headlights were almost unnecessary as hidden generators hummed, powering wheeled streetlights wired together and placed every fifty meters. Despite the continuous yellow illumination, she was hard pressed to identify what lay behind the walls.

“First time here?” Garrot asked and Camila nodded.

“Yes. I went to Iraq with the 82nd, but never made it to Afghanistan.”

“Well, allow me to welcome you to BAF. We’re driving on Disney Drive. Yeah, it’s really called that, there’s even a street sign. Speed limit is 16 KPH, about 10 MPH, but because of all the NATO forces, everything here is in metric. Anyway, don’t get caught speeding. You will get a ticket and you will lose your driving privileges.”

“Good to know.”

“The base is divided into camps for each unit. Special Forces are in Camp Vance.”

“So, what is it exactly that I’ll be doing?”

“I’ll show you the basics tomorrow, but most of the work takes place in the operations center behind a computer.”
“You don’t get off the base much then?”

“No way, we have to be here for the teams.”

She paused, dwelling on her fate, then said, “How long will you be here to train me?”

“I’ll stay as long as you need me, but you should get the hang of it in a couple days. I hope to get to my team between Christmas and New Year’s.” He stroked his new beard with one hand. “Give me more time to grow this thing out.”

“You excited to get a team?”

“Oh yeah,” she could hear it in his voice, and a pang of jealousy hit her gut. “I never thought I’d get a second team.”

“Second team?” She began to feel sick.

“Yeah, it rarely happens. I went to the Qualification course with the Bailey, we were close. I hate taking the team like this, but I’m glad it’s me.” He glanced over at her and she saw his eyes glint briefly as they passed a street lamp. “I’d like to think he’s watching over me, and maybe he’ll guide me to getting back at the guy who planted that IED.”

“I can see that,” she said stoically. “I bet he is watching you.” God damn it, Colonel Stone lied to her. I could have taken that team, but I’m a woman. Sexist politics. She wanted to scream.

“We’re here,” Garrot said, pulling up to a metal gate.

They had only been driving for five minutes. Garrot flashed an ID card and showed a document. He stuck his head outside of the vehicle to talk over the engine. The guard handed him a card stamped ‘VISITOR, CAMP VANCE’ which Garrot passed
to Camila. Driving a couple hundred meters past the gate, he stopped in front of a wood and canvas hut with a large sign that stated, ‘FEMALE TRANSIENT’.

“You'll stay here tonight. Tomorrow we’ll get you checked in and oriented. Your apartment should be ready then. Gym is over there,” Garrot pointed to the left, “Chow hall is back by the gate we came in. I'm in hut 54 if you need me. I'll stop by around 0430 Zulu to pick you up.” He saw Camila wince and laughed. “Afghanistan is nine and a half hours ahead of East Coast Time and zulu time is plus four. We’re only a couple hours different from Turkey, so you should be OK as far as jet leg, but you better reprogram your watch to Zulu, that’s the only time we talk here. Your head will start spinning with all the math if you don’t.”

Garrot grabbed both her bags before she could stop him, and she sighed as he dropped them on the floor inside. *Sometimes you just have to say thanks.*

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing,” said Garrot. “Well, welcome to Afghanistan. See you tomorrow.” He waved as he drove slowly away, disappearing into the darkness.

She stared out into the camp, unidentifiable shadows interrupted by sneezes of bright light as doors opened randomly for people on unknown night activities.

Colonel Stone fucking lied to her face. What a bastard.

As much as she'd strengthened her armor against the obvious sexism in the Green Berets, in the Army in general, this bothered her more than usual. There was no reason for her to trust her father’s band of brothers. Except for Mark, they had consistently failed her. Still, she had assumed once she earned the coveted Green Beret, things might be different. She should have known better.
She breathed in the cold air. It wasn’t so clean now. Chemical port-a-potties were nearby and everything smelled dusty, decaying.

Afghanistan.

Finally, she was here.

*****

Camila put her hood up as a biting wind hit her exposed face and hands.

After rolling around restlessly for thirty minutes, her mind refusing to calm, she had decided to head for the gym.

The camp wasn’t well lit--though for security purposes or energy conservation she had no idea. She’d have to remember to wear gloves next time; even jammed into her pockets she was beginning to lose feeling in her fingers. Wandering in the direction Garrot had indicated, she located the only building from which low rock music emanated and entered.

The gym was warm. A large open tent-like structure full of free weights, cardio machines and nautilus equipment. In the far corner was an octagon-shaped mixed martial arts cage.

Camila started with weights, learning the equipment and adapting her exercises to what was available. Soon, she began to break a sweat. There were about a dozen others at the gym for early morning workouts. She imagined some had just gotten off the graveyard shift, or were about to start one, or were trying to return to a US sleep
schedule, or some were like her--just couldn’t sleep because their commander betrayed them and so they were working out their anger.

She stretched a little and then grabbed a chilled bottled water from a fridge with a sign that read “if you take one out, put two in”. She took two bottles from the boxes of water beside the fridge and shoved them in. Apparently, the sign worked, as there wasn’t much space. She hit the treadmill. Once she learned the base, she’d find some running routes, get outside and breathe some fresh air.

As she ran she looked at a flyer on the wall advertising jiu jitsu classes in the afternoons. She made a mental note to look into that. Another advertisement promoted a combatives competition, the last day to register was the end of the month. Combatives was basically jiu jitsu with more rules. She had been through a couple levels of combatives training at West Point, but she’d have to practice a little so she didn’t violate any of the rules and relearn the point system. As she ran she remembered the martial arts fights she had watched with her father. He’d always been so excited, the ultimate arm chair referee, but she knew he was more than that. In the basement, Mom had allowed him his ‘I Love Me’ room, filled with plaques and military art and a gold trophy for combatives. He used to say, “I could have been a contender, Cammy, I’m good, I could have been better, but I love the army too much.”

Along the edge of the gym were piled some 200 boxes in neat disarray. Another sign was taped to the wall that said “Any Soldier – only take what you need!! Clean up after yourself – your mother isn’t here!!” Camila chuckled – some signs worked, some didn’t.
During her two overseas deployments, she’d seen the support from the American citizens for their deployed troops, and always marveled at it. Some Americans may not believe in the war, they may have a million different opinions, but one thing that united them was their admiration for the men and women risking their lives at the behest of their country. She finished her run and began sifting through the overflowing boxes. She was amazed at all the stuff. Boxes of candy, cookies, beef jerky, coffee, hot chocolate, gum, cream and sugar, Clif bars, granola, and drink mixes covered the floor. Various hygiene items were mixed in, from toothpaste to Axe body wash, usually in their own plastic bag to separate them from the food items. Cards, games, magazines, books, DVDs. Letters, pens, pencils, sharpeners. And notebooks.

Camila finished on the treadmill and rifled through the boxes. She had intended on going to the Post Exchange tomorrow, once she figured out where it was. Her to-buy list included a notebook. She had bought one at the airport in Germany, but it had gotten wet in a mysterious water fountain incident.

There were a variety of notebooks in the boxes, all sizes and shapes and designs. Some had military covers, some cartoons, and some superheroes. There were spirals and bindings. She was looking for something to put in her cargo pocket. She didn’t want to be carrying it around in her hands all day or leave it somewhere because she couldn’t secure it. She found one a little larger than her open palm that was the perfect size. The notebook was plain forest green, her favorite color, and her dad’s. It almost looked like her dad’s journal.
The rest of the box had hygiene items and some snacks, so she picked up the whole thing. Snatching a month-old *Muscle and Fitness* magazine out of another box, she headed back to her sleeping shack.

She slipped the box under her cot and lay down above it. She’d shower tomorrow, it was too cold right now, but she set her alarm for 0430 local so she could still get hot water. She had been in enough military camps to know that hot water was a commodity.

She knew she’d probably fall asleep reading with the lights on, but it was one of the few perks of being a woman in the Army and in Special Operations, you were often the only one and had sleeping quarters to yourself. On the other hand, it was also one of the downfalls. You were often the only one and had no one to really confide in.

She opened her dad’s journal. The journal made her feel warm; it was the dad she remembered, before everything changed.
Chapter 4

December 19, 2005

185 Days and a Wake Up

Afghanistan is damn cold in the winter and I hate the cold. So, it was like some unanswered prayer or early Christmas present when we found out about the helicopter heading to our fire base with emergency supplies. Only room for two, but at least I could get eyes on the ground.

We’re heading for war. For real now, not that fake stop in Germany, or the stopover in Bagram. This is where the life and death decisions will be made. This is where men will die.

“Welcome to IED Alley.”

Master Sergeant Keith Steiner met us at the airfield. He was either a lot older than I was or just looked it. His patchless uniform was the wrong size to hold his girth and his beard was almost completely gray. Briefly I wondered if this war would age me before my time. Steiner picked us up in a doorless HUMV truck, what Arnold Schwarzenegger had turned into the household word “hummer”. Of course, Arnold’s trucks weren’t supposed to be armored; ours were. Our chain of command had told us that all our vehicles would be armored when we were preparing for this mission, a little white lie which shook the foundations of my good day feeling.
Patience, I thought. I’m sure they have other vehicles. The sun shone bright yellow in a cloudless sky, making me uncomfortable in my layered clothes, but I smiled despite my misgiving. At least I was warm.

We’d spent three days freezing in BAF, conducting in-processing meetings and basically wasting time. When the opportunity to fly early to Jalalabad popped up, I didn’t think twice. I put Teddy in charge, then Mark and I were skimming over the desert in a Chinook helicopter, staring out the porthole windows at the desolate land below us.

I didn’t know what Mark was thinking, but as I watched the terrain rush by, I tried to predict the future. My mind went over scenarios of vehicle configurations and firefights that my team would soon encounter, constantly trying to think three moves ahead of the enemy and develop strategies that would allow all my men to come home.

And after two hours of flight, I was finally warm in my new home away from home. Jalalabad. So, sue me if the snow-free ground brought a smile to my face.

When I was in Afghanistan in 2002, there weren’t any IEDs. Not one. It wasn’t until the U.S. was knee deep in the Iraq war that the explosive devices began appearing in Afghanistan, more and more every year, infecting the land. It made a kind of sense, I guess. Jalalabad was the gateway to the Khyber Pass into Pakistan where they probably made most of the IEDs. Logically, a lot of them would end up here. Still, if you make it hard for the enemy to act, he’ll move on.

“You guys are staying in one of our guest rooms for the next couple days until we pack up,” Steiner yelled over the engine. Fine moon dust swept in from the dirt road we traveled, invading every cavity.
From my intelligence briefings, Jalalabad Airfield, also called JAF, was a large base, roughly rectangular, made up of many smaller compounds inside. Our helicopter had touched down on the east side, in the keyhole which was the parking area for aircraft off the landing strip. Steiner drove counter-clockwise along a perimeter road with the airfield on our left. On our right was an eight-foot-tall dirt mound with scattered towers every hundred meters. Men stood guard in the towers, dressed in shalwar kameez, the local Afghan pajama garb, their faces covered in scarves. I watched their eyes follow us.

“The current plan is for us to leave on the same plane that your team arrives on, hopefully in about three days.” Steiner glanced over at me, “You guys signed for the payroll, didn't you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, Mark is the pay agent.”

“Good. The perimeter guards are hired Afghans, and they work for you. If Mark is your money guy, I’ll go over the accounts with him.” He paused. “It’s complicated, if you know what I mean.”

I didn't, but I trusted Mark to figure it out.

Things had changed in the last two years. JAF used to be busy when the Russians owned it, and as such, it was routinely bombed and attacked by Afghan guerrillas. I remembered visiting three years ago: overgrown with desert grass two meters tall, no fence or security of any kind, displaced families living in the air control tower. We came in to drop off supplies for the team living downtown, and it was sketchy at best: anything could have been hiding in the grass. The helicopters always came in locked and loaded.
Now, it was a different story. The coalition had taken it back, resurfaced the tarmac so that military resupply planes landed on regular schedules.

“And here we are, home sweet home,” said Keith. We pulled up to a large red metal gate with a small guard house to the right. “There are four compounds on Jalalabad, and this one is all yours.” Steiner waved at the guards and they opened the gates. The compound had its own dirt walls, a base within the base. “We’re in the process of turning over responsibility for the airfield security force to the Marines who have a compound on the south end of the airfield, but we'll keep control of the guards to our compound.”

“When does that transfer happen?”


Inside the compound were half a dozen buildings, and Kurt stopped in front of the first one. “Let’s get you guys settled in. This is our guest building. The bathroom is over there,” he nodded to a concrete building beside the gate. “I'll come back in thirty minutes, we'll grab lunch and I’ll give you a tour.”

Mark and I grabbed our bags and followed him into building. He opened the first door on the right and held out a key for me. “You can change into civvies if you want, up to you.”

I shrugged. “Okay, see you in a bit.”

The room was a decent size, with two sets of bunk beds in opposite corners and two desks at the far end facing a large window. Realistically, we could probably fit eight people in here comfortably on four sets of bunk beds, sixteen in a crunch. I wondered
how many rooms were in this building. I sat on the bed nearest the door and Mark dropped his luggage and looked out the window.

“Not too bad, huh, Ryan?”

Mark was my oak; he was on the team when I took over two years ago. He was my intelligence sergeant and my friend. We’d had some deep conversations in the past about teammates’ futures and training, and some heated ones. And even though we didn’t always agree, I knew he had my back.

“A lot better than I expected, that’s for sure,” I replied.

He kicked one of his bags on the floor. “What should we do with this?”

I had made him my money manager so I could say great things about him on his next evaluation. Nothing says ‘promote me’ to a promotion board like the comment ‘efficiently managed millions of dollars in the defense of his country’. He had reluctantly agreed and then promptly signed for $250,000 in cash at BAF. My job was to make sure the best got promoted to lead future teams, whether they liked it or not. And Mark was one of the best.

“I guess we carry it around until our safe arrives. I’m damn sure not going to put it in their safe. We don’t know them from Adam.” No reason not to trust them, till we gave them a reason.

He sighed and nodded. “Afraid you were going to say that. It’s just, who knew it was so heavy.”

The money should have been my first hint that this war wouldn’t be all action and combat. I didn’t have to deal with it last time I was here, it was someone else’s job.

“Suck it up. I just hope they have hummers with armor.”
It’s strange, the relationship between us and the enemy. Sometimes I think we’re more similar than we believe.

We’re both willing to die: for our families, for our country, for our beliefs.

If you think about it, we’re trying to help each other out. Both of our military objectives are to help the other give their lives for their country. So, we both look for weaknesses to help our enemy give their life for their country.

If the definition of friendship is helping someone reach their heart’s desire, we are the best of friends.

“Where are we heading?” I asked. Steiner returned an hour later wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with a skull on it. Mark and I stayed in our uniforms, rifles slung, pistols holstered, and $125,000 apiece in backpacks.

“You know, you can leave all that stuff. We’re safe here on the base. Haven’t been attacked yet.”

I cinched the backpack straps. I was a little surprised he wasn’t carrying any weapons, but I swallowed my comments and decided that he had grown too comfortable. Then, I made a mental note to never let my guys get that comfortable.

“We’re good, thanks. We’ve been stateside so long, we need to get used to the weight.” It was still his fire base. I wouldn’t be making any friends here if I called him an idiot within the first hours I arrived. His relaxed attitude was getting on my nerves, though. And I did think he was an idiot.

“Suit yourself. Let’s start with lunch.”
The dining facility had a ping pong table, multiple refrigerators and enough table room for about fifty people. With some rearrangement and scrapping the ping pong table, a hundred people could easily eat here. A row of tables lined the far wall with a buffet of meats and vegetables. Steiner began loading up an army issue cardboard tray. “We get resupplied every week, and we have three cooks that we’ve taught how to prepare the food. Basically, they just warm it up and don’t burn it. I approve the menu every week, but it’s pretty much automatic.” There were four fridges along the side wall filled with every soft drink I could think of. Steiner pulled out a Red Bull. “We don’t get enough of these and I’m addicted.”

Other members from Steiner’s team entered in twos and threes, no one carrying rifles and only a few with pistols. We brought our trays back to a table in the center, sitting beside a pair of Afghan men.

“Shir Shah, Freddy – this is Ryan and Mark, they’re taking over from us. These are our two best interpreters.”

I put my tray down, then stepped over to shake hands. Shir looked young, probably not older than twenty-two or three, no facial hair, and he wore jeans and a blue T-shirt. Freddy was older, but not yet thirty I’d guess, and wore the traditional Afghan shalwar kameez. He had a nicely groomed black beard and spoke English with a barely detectable accent. We exchanged greetings and I sat down with Mark and Keith.

“The terps are great, we haven’t had much of a problem with these two. The others cause a little drama every now and again though,” said Steiner through bites of food. “Overall though, Jbad is really a good gig. The base pretty much runs itself. We get money from BAF every month and as long as everyone gets paid it works smooth.”
I’ve never been a fan of military-prepared food, and that’s basically what we were eating. Chicken and steak, American canned vegetables, precooked pies and cakes. Almost like we never left the U.S.

“Do you ever get fresh vegetables from the local markets?” I asked.

Steiner swallowed. “We don’t. I mean, we buy food for the Afghan workers and guards, and I guess that’s bought at the market, but I wouldn’t eat that shit.” He pointed at his plate with his fork. “I stick to good, old American made. I figure this has enough preservatives to kill any bacteria. Who knows how they handle the local food.” I nodded amiably, though I doubted the food we were eating was American. It was probably imported from Europe.

Afghan cooks hovered around the outskirts and rushed in to clean our table when we stood to leave. Steiner snaked a hand into a freezer by the door and retrieved an ice cream sandwich. “Want one?”

Mark and I shook our heads, then followed him outside.

Next came the gym, a large cement building full of free weights and cardio machines. This made me happy. A good gym could make or break morale. Even if we saw no action, at least the team could stay in shape. There were some electric fans strategically placed around the building. “The air conditioning and heating unit should be installed before we leave, I think the guys are coming tomorrow. It gets chilly in the morning,” Steiner said as we moved through. He didn’t look like he was a regular member of this facility, but I took him at his word; it was chilly right now.

Next was the motor pool, four complete bays with pits. This was impressive. Spare parts occupied the racks to the side and the place was orderly.
“You guys have a mechanic?” Steiner asked.

I nodded.

“Good, a mechanic will definitely make your life easier. The roads here will tear up your vehicles.”

We had the basics covered: food, transportation, and the gym. “Hey, where are your vehicles anyway? Don’t you store them here?”

Steiner shook his head. “Because we have the guns mounted all the time, we keep the vehicles closer to where we sleep, between the guest housing and the team buildings. The guys went on a supply run before lunch, but the trucks should be back now.”

“Mind if we see them?”

“Sure thing.”

We followed him across the compound back to the team house. The four hummers were lined up between the buildings as Kurt had said.

I looked at the dusty trucks and something in my stomach twisted. “So, these are the only trucks you have? No armor?”

“No armor,” he agreed.

“We were told all the outstations were going to have up-armored vehicles.”

“Well, that’s what we were told, too, but I guess they haven’t got around to shipping them yet.”

“So, you guys have been patrolling in these?”

Steiner paused, and I sensed he was uncomfortable with the question. “Well, we don’t exactly patrol much, you know, because we don’t have any armor.”
I wrinkled my forehead. “Don’t patrol? What have you been doing here for the last nine months?” Last time I was here we had Toyota Tacoma pickup trucks and we went on patrols at least twice a week. It was the only way to understand the politics of the area, to get the pulse of the people.

“We went on a couple patrolling missions when we first got here, got lit up by the bad guys and lost some of our team because we didn’t have armored vehicles. Also, there have been a lot of transitions happening, and we’ve been facilitating the turning over of perimeter security to the conventional units and improving the base security.”

_Basically, you’re telling me you’ve been sitting on your ass._

I pointed to the guns mounted on two of the vehicles. “What are those?” They were like our MK 19 automatic grenade launchers, but sleeker with what appeared to be a targeting screen.

Kurt patted the barrel of the weapon and smiled. “These are our new MK 47 Strikers, they’re awesome. Hardly ever have a problem with them firing, not like our old MK 19.”

I nodded. The MK 19s were always malfunctioning. “Are you leaving those behind?”

Kurt looked surprised at the question. “You don’t have these?” I shook my head.

“Sorry buddy, we were told to take all our guns back with us. You just keep the trucks.”

This day was really starting to suck. I made a mental note to request MK 47 Strikers from BAF, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t matter.

“Okay, what else.”

Kurt shrugged, “That’s about it. We can head over to the Ops Center.”
“What about security? How often do you check on the Afghan guards? Do you need us to rotate in your guard schedule while we’re here?”

“Um, we have the Afghan guards. We just pull radio watch.”

I was stunned. No American guards? “Oh, well, I guess we’ll have to get to know the guards.”

Kurt nodded. “Yeah, they’re real standup guys. They’ve been working with Americans since the beginning of the war.”

I nodded as we walked. Yep, Kurt was an idiot, and there were going to be some changes.

Back in the ‘Stan again.

Every time it’s different, and yet so much stays the same. The physical changes are obvious. The roads are better, there are more buildings, the bases are bigger, more Afghans in uniform. But the things that are the same, those are the things that matter. The culture, the people’s attitudes. It’s like they’re waiting for the other shoe to fall. Waiting for the U.S. led Coalition forces to leave, and the Taliban or someone else to come back. Can’t say I blame them given their history. Still, it makes real change harder, change that will last. I’m not sure we’ll ever make a difference if we can’t convince the people to change.

Which makes me wonder, why am I here if I can’t make a difference? Why am I wasting my time here, endangering the lives of my men, my friends? Half a world away from my family? It’s not easy, hell it’s never easy, but lately even less so. Camila and I
have been drifting, ever since Florida, and I don’t know how to fix it, but I know I can’t do it from here.

All in all, it wasn’t a great day, though I was warmer.

I sat on the roof of my guest building, thinking about the ever-growing problem list I was creating and watching a fading sunset touch the edge of distant mountains. Cammy would like that. I took a photo with my old polaroid. Some of the guys have those new digital cameras, but can they take a photo and immediately send it home? Not if they don’t have internet. I can though. I shivered and rubbed my arms. I should have worn a coat; already the evening chill was settling over Jalalabad.

I sat in my blue canvas folding chair, the same one I used at Camila’s soccer finals last summer, a can of Red Bull in the built-in drink hole. There was an unnatural silence here. Unnatural only because it was not filled with the sounds of life I was accustomed to: insects, birds, traffic. I had not acquired a sense of the normal yet and it was a weakness I needed to fix. Still, the roof was a good place for me to write Red’s journal. Camila’s journal. I should ask Keith about phones to call back to the U.S.

The light dwindled. I needed to finish up, and I had other duties tonight as well, before making calls home. I felt the hours of travel catching up to me, weighing down my eyelids. Mark was already asleep. I watched the space of land between the hard, dirt-packed walls that surrounded our compound and the mountains along the route west, back to Bagram.

Now comes the other reason I decided to come up here. I had seen the dirt huts scattered among small plots of land that grew--grew what? I didn’t know, but I should
probably figure that out. I doubted they were just dirt farmers. They were growing something out there, and if the team could use that information to their advantage, well, every little bit counted.

Though most of the huts were dark, a few gas lights moved mysteriously in the gathering shadows, lost fireflies on a winter night. Secret men doing secret deeds? Or someone taking a shit?

Dusk and dawn are the most dangerous times for a soldier according to Ranger School doctrine. It’s when the French and Indians attacked in the 1700s. No French and Indians here, but I imagine the Taliban and Al Qaida learned from the best of America’s enemies.

After I finish my writing for the night, I’ll stay up here a little longer. You need to learn the normal if you want to discern when something is wrong, and no time like the present. Small lights converge in the field, like moths to a flame. It made me anxious watching lights flutter around out there. Probably just nerves. They should settle in a couple weeks.

Suddenly an explosion cracked the night, red light shooting toward me, belching flames behind.

Oh shit.

“RPG!” I yelled as I dove for the stairs.
Chapter 5

December 16, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“This is the worst part of the job,” Garrot said in a low voice.

Camila and Garrot waited with a group of medics. They strained their ears for the sounds of incoming helicopters as they stamped their feet beside a dozen picnic benches, everyone was bundled in heavy coats, gloves, and black watch caps. Beside them, the landing zone was a circular block of pavement surrounded by frozen sand and covered unevenly by dispersed snow and ice.

They shivered under a wood skeleton of a building, four eight-foot posts at the corners holding up a wood pallet. Enough to keep a light drizzle or sun off their heads, but nothing to prevent the bitter winter wind that began to blow harder as the sun slowly disappeared. Her first sunset in Afghanistan. Dad had sent her a picture of an Afghan sunset once, and a letter. “There’s some beauty in everything, if you look hard enough.” She couldn’t see any beauty now. Just a coldness, dark shadows hiding strange men waiting quietly to do bad things.

Earlier, Camila had forced her eyes open at 0430, the bleeping of the alarm echoing through the empty transient building. The lights were still on and the only sound was the whine of the heating duct system. Assembling her shower gear, she stumbled to the showers, tripping over random ropes and boards. Though she was the only female ‘transient’, apparently there were many female support positions on the base, enough that she waited ten minutes to use one of the five shower stalls which dribbled almost warm water. After donning her uniform, she took time putting her
patches on her uniform, hesitating momentarily before applying the Ranger and Special Forces Tabs on her left shoulder. She would get the looks. And the comments. But, hell, she had earned them. She pressed the patches hard onto the Velcro and zipped up her uniform blouse.

The dining facility was a cavernous trailer that echoed with the sounds of conversations, hard plastic trays, and silverware. She grabbed a vegetable omelet and a fruit bowl, then found a place to sit at the back of the room.

She felt the eyes on her. It was normal for her to be a minority in the army; women were scarce on every deployment. In West Point, she’d grown accustomed to the attention, but it hadn’t been easy. The men couldn’t stay away, they buzzed around her and the other women, starting the most absurd conversations or gathering just out of socializing range, like they gained energy just being near women.

She had given up wearing perfume a long time ago after witnessing the ‘wave’. Once, standing at the back of a cafeteria, she had seen two female soldiers enter and walk down the line of tables searching for seats. As they passed each table, almost every soldier would look their way as if on cue, each table at equal intervals, like a wave at a sporting event. Then, she’d watch the ‘pond’ effect after the women had chosen seats. The configuration of the whole cafeteria would change around the women. Like the circles made by a pebble thrown into a pond, the spaces nearest the women filled first, thinning out in concentric circles away from their nexus.

Now, with the proof of her accomplishments on her sleeve, she gained even more attention. Two pieces of cloth on her left shoulder: the short curved one said Ranger and the longer one above said Special Forces. Only three women in the world
wore the long tab. In the course, they referred to the women as the long haired long tabbers, something the three women had all tattooed on their left shoulders after graduation: LHLT.

She heard the mumbling, the whispers, but six words were repeated so many times that they echoed clear to her above the normal breakfast din. Ranger. Chick. Green Beret. Special Forces. She concentrated on eating, ignoring the whispers that had followed her career. And so, she didn’t immediately acknowledge the man who stood across the table from her.

“Captain Mason?” She raised her head quickly. Standing there with a tray full of eggs and biscuits slathered in gravy was a man in green cargo pants and a black T-shirt. His face was pudgy and covered with an unkempt gray beard. There was a two-inch scar on his left cheek and a hole in his beard where hair refused to grow. “I knew your father.” He held out his hand, balancing the tray in his other, and she half stood to shake it over the table. “Keith Steiner.”

She relaxed and offered a small smile.

“I just wanted to tell you, he was a good man. And I’m sorry for what happened.” He gave her a tight smile of his own and walked away to join two similarly dressed men at another table.

She ate the rest of her omelet slowly, trying to get over her surprise. In North Carolina, the home of the Green Berets where her dad had served most of his life, she expected it. Even at the 7th Special Forces Group in Florida, there were still many who remembered him. But she hadn’t expected that here, not in this place that had taken him from her.
She saw the cafeteria for the first time in a new light. This cafeteria where he might have taken his meals. He would have ordered scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon. He loved bacon. She felt a tear come unbidden. She stood and quickly placed her tray of half-eaten food on a rack and left the building. As she walked back to her sleeping quarters, she let the frigid air freeze any further tears.

Inside the warmth of her room, she flipped through her dad's journal again.

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Camila opened the door after the first knock and greeted Garrot while donning her patrol cap.

"Your apartment isn't ready yet, we'll check again this afternoon, so just leave you stuff here," said Garrot. "For now, we'll start at the Operations Center." They weaved their way through a city of tents, passing a motor pool full of trucks lined in orderly rows, and walked up to a large wooden barn-like structure surrounded by rows of wire. Garrot showed his badge at the door and signed Camila in as a guest. "We'll pick up your badge today, too."

Camila paused in surprise. Above the sign-in desk was her dad's poster, big as life. A background of jagged mountains and rocky sand with her father center stage listening to the heart of the little girl, the heart of Afghanistan. She never recognized this version of her dad, he had never been bearded when he was home, only when he deployed.

Garrot followed her eyes. "Why we fight," he said.
“Excuse me?” said Camila.

“The commander wanted everyone to see that when they walked into the Ops Center, so they could be reminded of why we fight. To bring peace and security to Afghanistan so we can bring our men home.”

She nodded as Garrot spoke, but to her it brought different memories that had nothing to do with bringing peace to a foreign country.

They walked through double doors and into a huge room. Though there were over one hundred soldiers in the room, it didn’t seem noisy or crowded, but rather organized and professional. There was a busy murmur of work being conducted. Small groups of people huddled in private discussions, random computer beeps and announcements broke the humming efficiency, and beneath it all, there was the dull sound of chattering keyboards. Desks were arranged in concentric half circles, layered like a wedding cake. There were six levels, each one about one foot below the next, and Camila had entered at the top level. All the desks faced a ten-foot television screen mounted to the wall with smaller screens stacked to either side.

Garrot led Camila down two levels to a chair marked in black stenciled print ‘LNO - BAT 6’. A well-built Hispanic man in a green T-shirt looked up and nodded at Garrot, then saw her and stood. “Captain Mike Santos.” They shook hands.

Suddenly, Camila heard the random sounds around her converge into familiar whispers. Ranger. Green Beret. Chick. She mentally blocked it. This too will pass. It would take time, but eventually they would lose interest in the novelty.

“Anything happen last night?” asked Garrot.
Santos shook his head. “No news is good news,” he said matter-of-factly.

Santos reached for his uniform top and closed the solitaire game on his screen.

“Captain Santos is the night shift. He’ll report to the commander on the last twelve hours of activities and the next twelve that are planned. I’ll take over day shift today and Mike will help you finish in-processing and give you the grand tour, th--”

“Serpent, Serpent, this is Bat 6, we have troops in contact, request air support. Over.”

The radio crackled through speakers on the desk. Garrot picked up the radio receiver. “That’s us,” he said to Camila, then glanced in the direction of an Air Force soldier two rows back who was already on the phone. Speaking into a microphone, Garrot’s voice echoed through the room, “Bat 6 has troops in contact at,” he glanced at the red glowing digital clock above the large screen and continued, “0930 hours local.”

A red button beside each computer said “Troops in Contact” and Garret pressed it, then a red light illuminated the letters T-I-C above the television screens. He keyed the radio mike and said, “Bat 6, this is Serpent, SITREP over.” He spoke calmly as others gathered around a map to the far right of the screens.

“Serpent, grid Whiskey Charlie Four Five Three Six Eight Seven Five Nine.”

Gunfire in the background punctuated the coordinates. “Platoon size element, small arms, two machine guns.” The voice of Bat 6 paused without unkeying the mike as an explosion sounded, then continued and the gunfire picked up again. “Some RPGs. No wounded at this time, but they have the high ground and we’re pinned down. ETA for air support. Over.”
Garrot glanced at the Air Force soldier again who displayed two fingers sideways as he continued to speak on the phone. "Bat 6, ETA for air support is two hours, I repeat, two hours. Over."

"Are you freakin’ kidding me?" Bat 6 demanded.

Garrot frowned at Air Force, who shrugged his shoulders then hung up the phone. "Bat 6, we’ll try and speed it up, but right now we have ETA two hours, over."

Bat 6 keyed his mike. Gunfire continued on the far side in conjunction with swearing before he replied, “Roger Serpent, better send a MEDEVAC, too. Bat 6 out.”

Garrot brought up a PowerPoint slide and started typing.

“So, there’s no other help we can send them?” Camila asked over Garrot’s shoulder. “Nothing by land? No allied ground forces or air?”

“Hmm?” Garrot was adjusting the size of the map he had copied. “Just a minute, I have to get this done."

Frustrated and feeling useless, Camila walked over to the large map in front. Bat 6’s position was marked with a small star-shaped sticker. The map was large scale and didn’t show much in the way of terrain features, but there were other rectangular stickers that had unit designations.

The operations center filled quickly, powered by short radio transmissions from Bat 6. Garrot spent most of his time making slides while a gathering of people rhythmically grew and dwindled around the large map.

The Air Force soldier, whose name tag read McMillan, wandered up beside Camila. “Those guys,” he said shaking his head. “Those operators, they think air support can just appear out of thin air. But it takes coordination, and if they refuse to
coordinate, and they’re unlucky, they get slow air support.” He finished the statement with an exasperated huff. “Not our fault, ma’am. Don’t take it hard. Just bad luck.”

“I’m just wondering if there could have been some prior planning along their route.”

McMillan nodded. “Sure, but they have to plan it two weeks out. We could have given them guaranteed support, but they want to be all cowboy, shooting from the hip.”

Camila frowned at the map. It sounded like a communication failure.

Air support arrived right on time, two hours almost to the minute, but by then the enemy had withdrawn and disappeared like sand in the desert. MEDEVAC helicopters arrived one hour later to pick up two wounded and one dead soldier. Bat 6 was still on the ground with two vehicles disabled and Camila began to feel angry listening to the updates over the radio. She wondered if this is how her dad got killed. Late air support. Late MEDEVAC. One hundred men and women with the latest in twenty-first century technology at their fingertips and no solutions.

“Captain Mason,” Garrot didn’t look up from where he was typing. “Sit down and watch how this is done. This is half your job.”

Camila sat down. “I just feel useless.”

He glanced at her. “We’re doing everything we can. It’s out of our hands.” He typed a few more lines then stood up. “On second thought, let’s grab some lunch, the MEDEVAC won’t be here ‘till around dusk anyway. Mike will watch the radio.”

She ate a slow, quiet lunch of overcooked vegetables, chicken breasts and a salad. The people in the cafeteria acted as if nothing had happened. They probably don’t even know. They have no idea someone just died, two more wounded.
Helicopters inbound. How could they? The world didn’t stop. Food was served and eaten. Vehicles were gassed and driven. Toilets were cleaned. The military machine continued to function.

When they returned, Mike told them that Bat 6 was setting up security for the night. Another team wouldn’t get to them until morning. Air support would remain above them until 0200, then they were on their own until the other team arrived.

At 1630, Garrot and Camila headed for the airfield to meet the MEDEVAC helos. Camila couldn’t help wondering if her father’s body had returned to Bagram like this, met by two cold liaisons and some medics?

Camila knew what would happen next, probably sometime tomorrow. Somewhere in the United States they would come, like they had twelve years ago in April, the week before Spring Break.

She was called to the office and saw Mark standing there in his green Army suit, his left hand still bandaged from his wounds. Looking back, she realized he’d been trying to smile at her, but not really succeeding.

“What’s up, Mark?”

He reached for her schoolbag. “Your mother wanted me to pick you up.”

She smiled. “Is Dad home?” Sometimes Dad would surprise them, showing up unannounced. Mom hated it, but Camila loved seeing her dad pop out unexpected.

Mark didn’t look at her, searching for his car keys, “Not yet. But your mom is having a bad day and she asked me to bring you home.”

Mom had bad cramps, debilitating. Sometimes she just laid in bed all day taking Tylenol with codeine, leftover from one of dad’s medical procedures.
Mark asked her about school as they drove and she remembered chatting with him about unimportant things, still suspicious that her dad would suddenly appear. At the house, there were a lot of cars. She recognized some, families of soldiers that served with Dad. She smiled. He was home, and this was the welcome home party.

As soon as Mark stopped the car, she was running toward the house. She heard Mark yelling her name. As she entered her home, she saw her mother crying, three other men in dress green suits surrounding her.

“Where’s Dad?” she asked.

Her mom held out her arms and Camila entered her embrace, knowing something wasn’t right, but unsure. She felt a hand on her cheek and turned to see Mark kneeling in front of her, looking at her face. He took her hands, his own cheeks stained with tears as he spoke to her, then held her.

That’s how it would happen. A friend picking up children at school, green suits, crying wives and daughters.

*****

“Helos inbound,” said Garrot, then looked at Camila. “Hey, you Okay?” Garrot poked her.

Suddenly, she heard the faint sounds of the helicopters and strained her eyes in their direction. “Yeah. Good.”

Dots on the horizon slowly grew. The whispers became the chop chop chop of blades as the three aircraft approached.
“How many times have you done this?” asked Camila over the noise, leaning toward Garrot.

“Twice,” he mouthed, holding up two fingers, his words sucked into the whining rotors.

Camila covered her eyes as the helos completely disappeared in a whirl of sand and dust appropriately called a brown out. The debris settled as the blades slowed, and Garrot waited patiently for the door gunner to signal them forward.

Medics rushed to move wounded into waiting ambulances. Garrot and Camila brought up the rear to recover the body. The soldier was covered with a desert camouflage poncho that threatened to blow away in the rotor wash. Despite her best efforts, the wind revealed the man’s face as they carried the stretcher to the remaining ambulance and slid it in on the floor. Before covering the soldier’s face again, she gazed into empty brown eyes.

“The Sergeant Major will plan the body’s return to the U.S.” Garrot looked at Camila and paused. “Hey--Hey!” Garrot snapped his fingers and she focused. “Listen up. It happens. It will happen again. This is war.”

Camila looked at Garrot dumbly. She saw it in his eyes: he thought she was freaking out because they were carrying a dead American soldier. She bit back a reply, realizing it wasn’t the right moment. She’d seen dead soldiers before. She’d led them into combat in Iraq, she’d called their wives, and she’d inventoried their equipment. She knew it was part of the job. The difference was that in Iraq she had been in control of the environment, she had mitigated the losses, and every day she had improved the
chances her men would come back alive. Not here, not now. She’d had no chance to influence today’s events. “Did it really have to happen?”

Garrot put his hand on her shoulder. “Look at me. It’s not your fault. It’s not my fault. If you’re going to blame someone, blame the ragheads. Remember this when you get out to a fire base. It’s their fault.” Garrot paused when she didn’t answer. “Just remember: it’s their fault.”

She nodded, not because she agreed, but because she knew he believed what he said. They continued to walk. Camila wasn’t certain it was that easy to assign blame, but she was sure of one thing. She didn’t plan on doing this again. Not if she could help it.
Chapter 6

Every time I go to war, there’s always that shock-and-awe moment that puts everything in perspective, that makes it all crystal clear. Jumping into Panama, I remember seeing the red tracers zinging through the sky as I floated to the ground in my parachute. My first trip to Afghanistan in 2002, an explosion rocked our small base on the second day, closely followed by mortar rounds whistling their wise and deadly tunes.

No matter how much I train, how much I try to prepare for it, there’s always that gear-changing, gut-wrenching, holy shit instant when I realize I’m not in Kansas anymore. Basically, you can’t prepare your body and your mind for war; your reflexes don’t work like that. One moment, you’re eating a McBiscuit sandwich with your family, drinking a Coke and telling jokes. Then you’re on a plane, still thinking about them. Then you land, and you’re like, “This ain’t as bad as I remember it.” And then a RPG is heading straight for your head, and all the feelings and the reflexes come back, and you remember what hell you’re actually in.

It’s why the bad guys always have an advantage. They’re always switched on, but we have to turn ourselves on and off like a damn radio.

I couldn’t move. I kept telling myself to get up. I thought maybe I’d broken my neck, but I was in too much pain for that to be true.

I tried to listen over my heavy breathing, but I heard nothing: no small weapons fire, no loud sounds, nothing. Finally, my arm moved, and I used the wall to get to my feet, stumbling back to my room. Adrenaline surged through my body, I stopped feeling
the pain. We were under attack. No time to feel sorry. I burst in the room yelling for Mark. He hadn’t even heard the explosion. In less than thirty seconds, we ran out in body armor and helmets, rifles at the ready.

Outside was confusion. The Afghan gate guards yelled. Smoke rose from the airfield beyond the walls of the compound.

An Afghan ran up to me, one I had met at lunch, a terp, the young one. I resisted the urge to point my gun at him. “Boss, the guards say the missile went over the building and hit beside the airfield. They want to know if you want to send a team out to check—” He stopped, realizing I wasn’t the American he thought I was.

“What’s your name again?” I asked him, grabbing his arm.

“Shir Shah.”

“Great, Okay. Tell the guards to man the perimeter. Shoot if they’re shot at. Be careful, be certain.” He nodded. “I’m going to get the Americans. Go!” I looked at Mark and he nodded, then took off after the terp. I ran to the building next door where the team slept.

Once inside, I banged on doors and started yelling for everyone to get up as I made my way to the operations center in the back. It was empty and the light was out.

“What’s going on?” Steiner’s voice sounded from behind me.

I turned. He wore black shorts and no shirt, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“We just got attacked. An RPG hit the airfield.”
His eyes went wide. “Crap!” He ducked back into his room.

Others were coming out of their rooms into the hallway.

“We’re under attack!” I yelled down the hallway. “RPG hit the airfield. Go to your defensive positions.”

_The Army does a great job preparing soldiers for chaos. Training, practice, rehearsals ad nauseum. And they hammer home the PACE plan. That’s another thing the Army does well, acronyms._

PACE stands for: Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency.

_The Rangers teach you to always have four plans: one for each letter of the word PACE. Basically, it’s understood that when the shit hits the fan, all plans will disintegrate. But if you took the time to make four good plans, you should be able to flex in times of stress and address any emergency._

_IDIOT is not really an acronym, it’s just a word I use for someone who fails to make a PACE plan._

Turns out, Steiner’s team didn’t have any defensive positions. They never had a plan for an attack. No defense plans. No security plans. No reaction plans. No alert plans. They’d just been lucky. Hell, I’d been lucky. Maybe their unpreparedness and lackadaisical attitude was the weakness the bad guys saw when they targeted the area around Jalalabad. We’ll probably never know, but I had my suspicions.

Before I rolled down the stairs, the RPG appeared to be coming right at me, but the shooter overshot the roof. The missile was probably past its maximum effective
range of three hundred meters and the shooter just aimed high and prayed to Allah. I had heard the muffled explosion as I continued to tumble down to the ground floor. Later, one of our Afghan security guards said he saw it clear the roof by at least fifty meters and then explode outside the compound.

No one was injured. It was night, and most were watching movies, reading books, sleeping, or engaging in other nighttime activities. Few wander at night, except maybe to the bathroom. It’s dark, you trip over things, and it’s freakin’ cold. The hole it made wasn’t even that big, just some black marks where the rocket charred the sand. Another hole in terrain that already appeared too much like the moon with its barren landscape and fine sand. In a few days, after the wind did its job, nobody would even notice the spot where it hit.

Still, the right thing to do was to post a rotating guard at night, an American, who could take control of the situation in case, for example, there was an attack on the camp. Maybe Steiner and his team had been here too long, but I’ll go with my initial assessment: they’re just stupid.

I watched their slow, unrehearsed reaction to the event and vowed I wouldn’t let my men down as Steiner had. The roofs of the buildings made great lookouts, but they would need reinforcement. The walls of our compound weren’t thick enough, and we needed to make some adjustment to bring our best weapons to bear.

Lastly, never again would there be a time, day or night, when an American wasn’t in charge of the guard force.

*When my team gets here, there are going to be some changes.*
You need to think like the enemy to survive. Fortunately, the enemy doesn’t think like me, because I would have already overrun this base.

The enemy is like water, infiltrating the weakest areas. Apparently, right now the weakest area in Afghanistan is here in Jalalabad, which is why it falls victim to so many IEDs. I’m not exactly sure why the enemy thinks this place is weak, but I aim to change their mind.
Chapter 7

December 16, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

They transported the body to the Casualty Collection Point and lifted it onto a large wooden table. Garrot signed some paperwork and was ready to go, urging Camila on with his eyes. She ignored him.

“So, you’ll clean him up and they’ll ship him back to the U.S.?” she asked the mortuary affairs supervisor whose name tag read Feizer. “How long does that take?”

Feizer washed his hands and grabbed some paper towels. “Actually, ma’am, all I do here is check his body for unexploded ordinance, grenades, ammo and such. Then, I inventory his possessions for his next of kin.” He threw the damp towels into a small military-issue trash can. “Other than that, I don’t disturb his remains at all.”

She remembered when the wind had revealed the man’s face, the dried blood spattering his cheek. “You don’t even clean him up?”

Feizer shook his bald head. “Don’t clean him or remove his uniform or body armor. That’s the job of the medical examiner in Dover. He’ll perform the investigation and determine the official cause of death.” He gestured toward a steel door to the left of the sink as if presenting the next prize on The Price is Right, big enough for five men to walk abreast. “We’ll store him in the freezer until the next plane is ready, then we’ll do a memorial service right before the plane takes off, called a ramp service.”

Garrot stood at the door. “C’mon, we have to prep for the update brief.”

Camila thanked Feizer and got in the hummer.
“So, the CUB, that’s the Commander’s Update Brief, is given twice a day at 0800 and 2000 Afghan Time.” Garrot drove Camila back to the operations center. “I got most of the slides done before we met the helos, but I have to update some things now that we’ve recovered the body.”

When they arrived, he went straight to his computer and she watched over his shoulder.

“You’ll save a lot of time if you’re typing the slides up as the TIC is occurring. If you’re not multi-tasking around here, you’ll find you miss a lot of meals.” Garrot scrolled down, checking slides, making small changes, then saved them and printed a copy.

“They have to be saved on the briefing portal, but always bring a paper copy in case technology fails. Let’s go.”

They walked to the back of the Operations Center into a small auditorium on the top level. At the front of the room was a screen with the words Commander’s Update Briefing and in smaller letters underneath December 16, 2017.

“ Heard you had some action this morning,” said a balding, portly man at the door.

“Yes sir, Bat 6 got hit,” replied Garrot.

The man set his lips grimly, “Yes, sad news all around. Let’s try and learn something from this so it doesn’t happen again.”

“Roger, sir.”

“I don’t believe I’ve met you yet, Captain—”

“Sir, this is my replacement, Captain Mason,” said Garrot.

“Ah, Captain Mason, yes. I’ve heard a lot about you. Lieutenant Colonel Simpson, Deputy Commander.” He shook her hand.
“Nice to meet you, sir,” Camila replied.

“Welcome to the playground, watch out for the swings.” Simpson smiled at his own joke, then moved to the front of the room.

The auditorium had seating for about fifty people and was almost full. Camila sat in the back and watched the uniformed men joking and jostling each other, waiting for the meeting to begin. She was the only woman present, no big surprise. She was the tip of the spear, the new invading force into what had once been exclusively male territory. She saw it in their faces as they walked past her, saw the gears in their brains turning: military intelligence? Logistics? Admin? Then some would notice her tabs. And the whispers would begin again. Though she was aware of this, she displayed a look of calm ignorance. She had been in the minority her whole career, surrounded by men dripping egos and full of stereotypes.

She exchanged casual greetings while her mind was on other things. One man stopped before her and she looked up. The man from the dining facility.

“Captain Mason, we should get together and talk about your dad sometime.”

She nodded. “Sure.”

She watched him take his seat.

Who the hell was that guy? she wondered.

A soldier at the door announced, “The Commander!” and everyone stood at attention.

“Relax everyone, take your seats.” Colonel Atkins strode to the front of the room, shaking hands and trading remarks with various men as he did, finally taking his seat in the center of the front row besides Simpson. The lights dimmed.
Garrot wasn’t the first briefer. At least ten others stood first, giving updates on force protection, supplies, intelligence. After thirty minutes, the topics began to turn to what was happening with units at other bases, and finally Garrot stood, just to the right of the screen.

“At approximately 0430 Zulu, Bat 6 was hit by IEDs along phase line green while conducting CONOP A3741.” Garrot indicated a green line drawn on the map and the ambush site with a red laser pointer. “The team was pinned down from high ground to the north by a platoon size force and returned fire while calling for air support. Air support arrived on site within two hours and suppressed the enemy, who had mostly withdrawn into the mountains by that time. U.S. casualties include 1 KIA and 2 WIA as well as two vehicles disabled. No enemy captured. Blood trails were seen, but no enemy bodies were recovered, either. Bat 6 is still at the ambush site awaiting assistance to exfil due to the number of vehicles disabled.”

“What’s the estimated time they will remain on site?”

“Sir, Cannon 6 is in route; they should be there by 0600 tomorrow morning.”

“What was the hold up with air support?”

“Sir, they didn’t request any for this mission as it was supposed to be purely reconnaissance and no enemy activity was suspected. They received on-call air support sent from BAF.”

The commander stared at the screen and the room was quiet, then he turned and spoke to Simpson. “Alan, we should be able to react faster than this. All our units should be requesting air support when they leave the fire base.”
Simpson fidgeted under the room’s attention. “Sir, there’s not enough air support in country to cover every mission.”

Colonel Atkins sighed. “Thanks Captain Garrot. Let me know when the other team gets there and how the exfil progresses.”

“Roger, sir.”

Standing up and looking around the room, the colonel asked loudly, “Any alibis? No? All right, gentlemen, have a good evening.”

*****

Two hours later, Camila sat cross-legged on her bed in the new room that Garrot had reserved for her. Rectangular, nine feet by seven feet and about seven feet high, it wasn’t much, but it was hers. Furnished with a single bed, a wood wardrobe, a military-issue desk and chair, Wi-Fi internet, and cable television, she had all the comforts of home. She wasn’t complaining though, she knew most of the enlisted and a lot of the lower-ranking officers had to share. Tomorrow she would get a sim card for her iphone, the store had been closed when she finished the CUB.

Her newly acquired notebook rested on one knee, her father’s journal on the other.

She had been thinking a lot about Dad during this trip. When she had deployed before, naturally she thought of her father and what he would have done in her situation. But now, she was in Afghanistan, the mission from which he had never returned and it felt different. That last mission had been different for both of them.
Everything had changed after Orlando. She hadn’t helped him pack for this trip. They hadn’t joked or talked all night about the future. Dad never slept the night before a trip. He was always worried he wouldn’t wake up on time. And she had always stayed up with him, every time since she was six. It was their thing, hot chocolate with marshmallows, watching favorite movies on DVD. But not that time.

She remembered hearing him outside her door that last night, waiting for her to come out and say goodbye. She viewed her father differently during those last months before he left, because of something she hadn’t quite finished processing. She had known that he was capable of violence, but it had been a Hollywood violence; people got up after they were shot or stabbed, there wasn’t a lot of blood. But what she had seen that night changed her concept of what he did, and who he was.

They had sent her to a counselor after returning from their Florida vacation. Finally, a week before Dad’s last deployment, Dr. Reynolds had made her voice her doubts about her father.

“Why do you think this bothers you so much?”

“There was so much blood on his shirt.”

It had been six months, and this was the first time she had mentioned the blood. He nodded and continued writing.

“If there hadn’t been so much blood, do you think you would have the same reaction? What do you think your reaction would have been if your father had been hurt or killed instead of the other man?”

She closed her eyes. She remembered the stretcher with the man on it, her father walking out of the gas station in handcuffs, arms held by two police officers. At
that time, she thought it would have been better if Dad had been the victim. If he had been on the stretcher. Now, after her short career in the military, sitting here in Afghanistan, carrying American soldiers to the morgue, she wasn’t so sure.

She closed her father’s journal.

“The best way to learn is to dive in,” Garrot had explained to her when he dropped her off at her room. “Your job is to support the commander and be ready with any information he requests about the team. The team will send you an after-action report once they return to their fire base and if you need more information for the commander you can request it by email.”

But that was bullshit.

If she was going to be stuck in this staff job, she was going to make a difference. She saw her job as larger than just passing information. Sure, she reported to the commander, but it was a two-way street with the other end being the team on the ground. She owed more to the men on the other side of the radio.

She began to write a list:

Call mom
Learn Systems!!!
Make Workout Schedule / Jui Jitsu?? Combatives??
Visit wounded
Call Bat 6

She drew a circle around the last item.
First thing tomorrow, she was going to give Bat 6 an update on their wounded.

Then, she was going to figure out how to make sure they all got back home alive.
Chapter 8

January 5, 2006

168 Days and a Wake Up

Rehearsals. What can I say about rehearsals? They save lives.

Obviously, we can’t send the troops to war to practice fighting war. So, we do the next best thing: we rehearse.

If you have a large budget and you can create an exact replica of the area where the troops are going to fight, and you have an opposing force that knows the tactics and techniques of the enemy as if they were their own, that is the optimum standard.

If you downgrade to a couple run-down buildings that vaguely resemble the objective and the unit next door loans you some of their privates to be opponents, that is acceptable.

If all you have is a soccer field, some white tape to outline where buildings might be, and some boy scouts, well, at least you tried.

If you have a map and you mark all the key points and talk through the plan, that’s better than nothing.

Hell, even if you just bring up the possibility that in a hostile country there might be a small chance of an attack and note some ideas that might mitigate the whole thing, well, at least you thought about it.

“Alpha One, this is Alpha Four, almost in position. No movement.”

I watched the hummer climb the newly constructed earthen ramp, throwing mud backwards as it halted at the top. Three feet of machine gun barrel glinted in the late
afternoon sun and twisted through a ninety-degree arc over the fields to the northwest of the base. Somewhere out there an RPG round had been launched at me.

“Roger Alpha Four, hold position,” I called on the radio. “All units check in.”

I stood on the roof of the guest building, almost the exact same position where I’d seen the rocket, but now surrounded by mounds of sand bags - new additions to the compound security. When I told the story to the team I said, “It just impacted on the surface.” Only Mark laughed. None of those kids are old enough to remember the original Star Wars movie. Maybe I’m getting old, but I did have their attention, their eyes watching every word escape my mouth. I knew what they craved. These men had been trained for war. I trained them, so I knew that better than anyone. It would be wrong to say they lived for war, but they did think about it. Every day they were reminded of it: at work, at home on the television, at bar discussions where politics and tactics are perfected with the aid of beer and a shot. And now they were here, so close to the war and the fighting they could taste it, they could smell it right there on the other side of the wire. It was a drug that would make them careless, as deadly as cocaine or heroin. And it was my job to protect them from themselves.

And so, we rehearse. And they hate it.

“All units, recover. Endex. Stage the vehicles, we'll do another one after dark.”

Though no one keyed their radios, I heard the groans in my head. “Report to the operations center after dinner: 1830.”

Those chaotic hours following the RPG round were very educational for me. In general, war is not a normal way of life for Americans. We don’t walk down the street in the America and have a fifty percent chance of encountering a terrorist attack, or even a
mugging. Some countries, that’s their normal. For us, not so much. It takes time to get used to a new normal, or it takes an event. That RPG was my event. Here I was in this shit again, and the memories and reflexes started coming back. It was like being on an alien planet, where everything you touched, no matter how harmless it might appear, could kill you. In a way, it was a lucky break. The RPG had opened my eyes.

Most food stocks are flown or trucked in from BAF, and I think BAF gets most of their stuff from Germany, but don’t quote me on that. They come regularly, at least from what I’ve seen these last couple weeks, for which I’m grateful – I’ve heard some horror stories from other bases. And we get better food than most of the other agencies and units on the battlefield.

And we share what we can – one team, one fight, right?

Sometimes.

My whole body felt like it had gone through a meat grinder. Different shades of red, blue, brown, and purple waxed and waned across nearly every muscle, like a display of the best cuts in a butcher shop. Donnie checked on me every couple hours; he’s a great medic, but he wanted me to rest for a week and there’s too much to do. I think he’s just making sure I don’t head for the gym. He needn’t have bothered, I can barely roll out of bed and crawl to the computer. Just supervising the rehearsals from the roof left me breathless.
Since I had a few hours before dinner, I carefully walked to the dining facility in search of ice for my injuries. I tried not to limp too much. When I opened the door, I saw a strange bearded man standing in front of the fridge.

“Can I help you?” I asked, and the man faced me, eyes wide, almost dropping two cases of Red Bull.

“Oh, hey, uh -- I'm Chip.” Chip was short, overweight, bearded, and obviously American, but I had never seen him before.

I examined the pile of food and drink on the floor at his feet. “What are you doing in my kitchen and how did you get on my base?” I asked.

Chip put down the cases of Red Bull and walked forward, hand out-stretched. “Well, I usually work with Keith.” I ignored the gesture, half because it would have hurt too much and half because I didn’t want him to think we were friends. Chip stopped a few feet from me. “Is he around?”

“He left last month. So, Keith let you on the base whenever you wanted? And let you take whatever you wanted out of our kitchen?”

“Well, we had an arrangement. He would let me have some Red Bull and other things. We don’t get the same resupply as you. I’m with another agency off base. Downtown.”

I nodded. “Well, that's fine, I get you. You and Keith had an arrangement. I understand, man. We’re all on the same team: one team, one fight.”

Chip nodded emphatically, “Yeah, that's right.” He bent to gather his cases of Red Bull again. “So, you’ll understand when I tell you that you can’t have those Red Bull.”
“What? But, we don't have any.”

“And if you take our only two cases, we won’t have any. We just got those on resupply yesterday. You’re really going to take our only two cases of Red Bull?”

Chip appeared stumped by the question, then smiled and jammed a hand in his cargo pocket. “Hey, you want a knife? For the Red Bull?”

This guy was pissing me off. Sure, there were deals made before my team got here, that happens, and they can result in misunderstandings. But a bribe? Really? “Look, Chip was it? If you're starving, I'll help you out. We got lots of canned veggies, we got some bread, we can even probably throw some meat your way--I’ll have to look at the last inventory. But if you’re here for creature comforts, and you don’t even have the good sense to not take the things we’re short on, I got to tell you – get the hell out of my kitchen and off my base.”

“Hey man, don’t be like that. I only really need these Red Bull. What do you need? I have other--”

I could feel may face turning red. “If you offer me a bribe one more time I will come over there and beat the crap out of you with a can of Red Bull, I swear to God. These are the food stores for the whole compound, they’re not mine to trade. Here’s what’s going to happen: you’re going to leave, with nothing. Then you can come back with a wish list of things and a memo from your agency explaining your dire supply situation. When you come back, you will notify the guards and wait for one of my men to come and meet you at the gate. Listen up, I want you to understand this last part, so pay attention. You will never come on my base again without an escort. I don’t trust you and I don’t want you trying to bribe one of my men. If I hear you’ve violated
anything I’ve just told you, you will never get another thing from us again. Do I make myself clear?"

Chip dropped the case he was holding and backed out of the kitchen door. “I got it, no reason to get like that.”

I followed him out and watched him get into his vehicle. A shiny new black Toyota Tacoma pickup, armored, with tinted windows. Must be nice.

“Hey,” I called. Chip looked out the window and I threw a can of Red Bull underhand which he barely caught before it hit him in the face. “Merry Christmas.” Chip looked confused for a second. “One team, one fight. We don’t need to be fighting each other.” Chip pursed his lips, then nodded once and drove out the gate. I went to find Shir Shah. We were going to need to have a meeting with the guards to see who else had been given permission to enter the compound.

Like I didn’t have enough problems.

The mission is -- unspecific.

Our mission statement: conduct activities to support the peace and prosperity of the AOR – Area of Responsibility.

So, during our preparation, we came up with a variety of activities that met those requirements. Indirect actions such as setting up temporary hospitals, building schools, holding town meetings. Police actions such as road blocks, search and seizures, and general patrolling to demonstrate presence in the area. And lastly, combat operations. Though sometimes, to tell you the truth, everything just overlapped.
“I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you. I think we have a legitimate target.” Mark dropped a folder on the table. “Baber Pacha. Bomb maker.”

Mark and I had discussed what we considered ‘appropriate targets’. Targets we were willing to risk our lives for. First priority: anything that posed a danger to the team or the base. Second priority: anyone that threatened American lives. Last priority: anyone that posed a threat to innocent civilians. I’d classify a bomb maker in all three categories.

Teddy whooped. “Hot chow! Now I get to kill me some bad guys. This rehearsal crap is for the birds.” The rest of the team started talking among themselves.

“Keep it down,” I yelled above the team and my body screamed at me in return. I took a slow breath as the room quieted. Above the pain, my stomach began to flip flop. It was too soon. The team wasn’t ready. A couple more weeks. I took another slow breath, then turned to Mark, “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, I have reports from multiple sources identifying a warehouse of bombs five miles from here.” Mark paused for effect, looking around the room. “I know you wanted me to vet all the information and take it slow, but I think it’s in our best interest to take this guy down now. He’s affecting Jalalabad. We stop him, we make Jbad safer for the population and us.”

A million more things went through my head then, each one a variation of the question: Was the team ready?

They all looked at me.
I nodded. “Sounds legit. Write it up, Mark, and I’ll look at it.” I looked around at the team. “If the intelligence requires a quick decision, we’ll figure it out. But this is our first bad guy, let’s do the work. We plan and prepare like we trained to do.”

*Was the team ready?*

I stood. “Mark, how long do you need to prepare the intelligence so we can request authorization to hit the target?”

“It’s a lot of stuff. At least a couple days. I have another meeting with the source tonight.”

“I’d like to go to, then.”

“If you don’t mind drinking tea and eating pistachios, the more the merrier.”

*****

Freddy translated for all Mark’s interviews. Mark needed continuity with his information sources, and they got more comfortable speaking to the same terp every time. Personally, I hadn’t spent much time with Freddy, but I liked the tall, soft-spoken Afghan.

When Mark and I entered the room, Freddy was already sitting against the far wall with the source drinking tea and we greeted them both, then sat before them. Freddy introduced me.

“Freddy, ask him about Baber,” Mark said.
Freddy preferred to listen to all that was being said before translating rather than attempt a simultaneous translation, so there was always a delay in which Mark and I could fill with short conversations on how to proceed with the interview.

“He says that Baber has left the area, that his daughter was sick.”

“Well shit,” said Mark.

Freddy spoke more with the source, then to us. “He says that Baber will return, that he has no doubt about that. However, he has more information about Jalalabad.”

Mark took out his notebook. “Tell him to go ahead.”

“He says he has come today because he wants to tell you that there are strangers that have come to live in the city over the last week,” Freddy translated. He exchanged more words with the guest. “Like ten or maybe some more, he doesn’t know exactly how many. But they are staying with some men that often go out at night and come back early in the morning, the men he mentioned the last time he spoke to you.”

Mark leaned toward me and whispered, “Men that go out at night are assumed by everyone to be working with the Taliban, because good men would work during the day and return to their family in the evening.” I nodded.

Freddy had continued his conversation with the Afghan. “Also, he says there is a Westerner that comes downtown about once a week, maybe an American but he’s not sure, and he sells cable.”

“What kind of cable?” asked Mark.

“He says he does not know, but the man is fat and has a beard.”

“Can he get a photo of the cable?”
“He says he has not seen this cable, but he has a friend that has seen the man sell the cable to Abi Jan, who owns a shop of electronics.”

Mark took notes and nodded. “Alright, tell him if he could get a photo of the cable and the man, we would pay him for that.”

I looked at Mark. “Why are we interested in someone selling cable?”

Mark shrugged. “You never know when this information means something. I document everything, and one day all the pieces fall in place and it all makes sense. But most of the time I just write a lot.”

Freddy waited patiently till our conversation was over, then continued. “He says that there is a man that will come to you to tell you untrue things, that his name is Ali Bakar, that he has six fingers on his left hand.”

I tried not to laugh. “You really can’t make this shit up, can you?” I told Mark. “Does he have metal teeth or a flying metal hat that chops things?” Freddy started to speak to the man, but I stopped him. “Just kidding, Freddy, don’t ask him that.”

“He says that Ali Bakar is working with the Taliban and trying to trick you.”

Mark took more notes.

“He says he will go now, and thanks you for helping Afghanistan.” Mark and I rose to shake his hand. “I will take him to the gate,” said Freddy and then escorted him out the door.

“I still have five more people outside to interview,” said Mark.

“I’m glad it’s you and not me, I’m already exhausted.”

“It’s the job.”
I returned to the ops center and found Captain Stone answering emails. He stopped and turned toward me as I entered.

He had been quiet before when Mark described our target, I knew he had the same doubts. We shared the same responsibility. He’s one of those watchers, all quiet, but when he says something you know it’s important. I love that about him: he let me run the team, but I know he’ll step in if he felt I was doing something wrong.

“You don’t think we’re ready.” He said it matter-of-factly, it wasn’t a question.

I sat down at the conference table. “No.” I shook my head. “No, I don’t.”

Stone clicked a ballpoint pen. “So, when then?”

I sighed. “Sir, they haven’t been battle tested yet. They need more training.”

He leaned back in his chair, balancing on two wooden legs, then replied quietly, “They’ll never be battle tested if you don’t let them go to battle.”

I knew he was right. I knew why I didn’t want to let them in battle: because that’s where I would lose control, and anything could happen. And sure as hell, anything would happen.

Captain Stone stood up. “Let me know when you think they’re ready. If you want my opinion, I think they’re the best I’ve ever seen them, but if you think they need more, I’m good with that.”

I nodded again. “Soon, sir.” I knew I couldn’t keep them bottled up on the base forever. “It will be soon.”

He patted my shoulder as he left the conference room. I sat there for another twenty minutes, gathering the strength to walk the thirty yards back to my room without
limping. It would take me another fifteen minutes to get my equipment on for the night rehearsal.

*We know it will happen at some time, but not till the first friend falls does it really hit home. Death is final. Men who we drank beer with on the weekends, they might not come back. But the mourning has to wait, because we have promises to keep. And miles to go before we sleep. Hopefully.*

Before I could even get into my bed, there was a knock on the door. The glowing numbers of my clock said 2215.

I’d learned to recognize the knocks, this one didn’t sound life or death.

Mark was at the door.

“Ryan, you might want to come to the Ops Center.”

I threw on a shirt and saw the team assembled around the table when I entered.

The radio crackled. “Serpent, this is Eagle 6. Estimated time for MEDEVAC and air support?”

“Eagle 6, one hour more for both.”

Mark started explaining the situation in between radio transmissions. Eagle 6 had been hit by IEDs. Bang, two dead and two wounded right then.

“Roger. Update: three KIA, three WIA, all vehicles disabled. Enemy disbursing.”

It was as close as some of the team had come to combat. I watched their faces, a mixture of fear and excitement. They knew our team could get hit next, but they still
wanted to fight, to test themselves. None of them left the operations center till the MEDEVAC arrived.

If I had been there, if my team had done that mission, would it have ended any different? I dissected the attack. Two vehicles hit by one IED. I made a mental note to ensure our vehicles were spread out farther during rehearsals the next day. Their biggest guns were taken out in the initial explosion. We should bring additional machine guns, even if they aren’t mounted, at least we could keep their heads down.

I planned the training exercises for tomorrow in my head as I listened.

Another team arrived shortly after the MEDEVACs took off, moving them back to base. By then, only Mark, Captain Stone and I were listening.

“I submitted the plan earlier,” said Stone. “Just to get a first look from BAF. For when we’re ready.”

“Roger Sir,” I replied. I felt them leave as I thought about rehearsals, preparations, and risking the team’s lives.

I didn’t sleep well that night. Mark was in the Ops center when I entered early the next morning.

“It was Baber Pacha,” he said. “BAF picked up chatter identifying Baber Pacha as the leader of the attack on Eagle 6.”

“I thought he had a sick daughter.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. But higher has no doubt he planned the attack.”

So, what did that fuckin’ mean?

If I hadn’t been so anal, training my team for the last three weeks, keeping them safe, then they would be out there making the world safe. Cause that’s what we do.
Maybe we would have gone after Baber Pacha a week ago, maybe we would have stopped those bombs from being made, or sold, or set up. Or maybe it wouldn’t have made a damn bit of difference, because the bombs were already on the market a month ago. Or maybe one of my guys would be lying dead somewhere, shot on a raid.

Am I damned if I do and damned if I don’t?

I think I finally understand that phrase.

My guys are ready. They were ready when we arrived. They’re as good as they’ll ever be. And if we can save American lives, then we need to do it.

_Ever since that explosion I’ve thought about nothing but the security of this base and my men. But I’ve been thinking about it all wrong._

_I realize now that I can’t protect them forever._

_We’re warriors and we need to fight._

_Now is the time._
Interlude 2

Interview with Keith Steiner

July 01, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“And then what happened?” asked Miller.

Keith was day dreaming, remembering the last time he saw Ryan. “What?”

“Ryan Mason beats the crap out of you and then what did you do?”

“Nothing.” He traced the scar on his cheek, remembering the impact with the desk.

Miller laughed, almost a bark. “So, let me get this straight: Some guy you claim to barely know storms into your room, throws you around like a rag doll, and you let him leave? And you expect me to believe that?”

Keith spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. “He was gone when I came to. I couldn’t have done anything even if I wanted. Anyway, he broke three of my ribs and cracked a tooth. I spent a week in the hospital.”

Miller grunted. “Alright, why do you think he was looking for you? What was he talking about?” He turned a page in his notebook, then closed it and looked at Keith again. “What’s this about treason?”

Keith stared back calmly and shrugged again.

“Come on, Keith. You know.”

Neither man spoke as they stared at each other.

“You know, don’t you?” asked Miller again.

“You seem to, so why don’t you tell me?” asked Keith.
Miller reached into a bag on the floor and threw the notebook on the table with a dull thump.

“What’s that?” asked Keith.

“Ryan Mason’s journal.”

Keith reached toward the green book, stopped, then looked at Miller.

“Go ahead,” said Miller. “You can touch it. We already categorized the evidence.”

Evidence? Keith touched the cover, scratching one of the stains with a fingernail.

“You’re mentioned a lot in that book,” said Miller.

Keith continued to nod. “I bet I am. But probably not for the reasons you think.”
Part 2

“A father’s tears and fears are unseen, his love is unexpressed, but his care and protection remains as a pillar of strength throughout our lives.”

— Ama H. Vanniarachchy

"One of the things I am very aware of not having in my life is the love of my father. ...but I know now that it is hard to make up that loss in the life of a daughter.

It's your dad who tells you that you are beautiful.

It's your dad who picks you up over his head and carries you on his shoulders.

It's your dad who will fight the monsters under your bed.

It's your dad who tells you that you are worth a lot, so don't settle for the first guy who tells you you're pretty."

— Sheila Walsh
Nothing is ever easy in the Army, and sometimes it moves slower than molasses. Only the routine makes all the bullshit bearable. Figure out your daily schedule. Then, step by step, work your way through the day. Start with making your bed, emptying your trash. Then go to the gym and eat breakfast.

Emergencies will always pop up; everything seems to be an emergency. Your routine will be interrupted, of that you can be certain. But afterward, when the smoke clears, and you have a moment to reassess, you can look at your watch and think to yourself “it’s time to eat” or “it’s time to go to the gym”. It’s almost like meditation in a way. It lets your mind reset. The familiarity will get you through the day, the week, the fear, the nightmares.

Sometimes, I only got as far as making my bed.

I’ve started humming an old cadence since I arrived in Jalalabad. “I’m not the problem solver, I’m the problem solver’s son, but I’ll do the problem solving till the problem solver comes.” It’s my made-up version to cadence we can’t sing anymore because it’s too graphic.

When I was in Afghanistan in 2002, the team used to send up a quick 5Ws report: who, what, where, when, why. Then, we’d take off into the sunset and do great things. Things are a lot more complicated now. It takes time to get authorization for a mission, and in the meantime, I solve problems. Not normal problems either, crazy stuff
that I am definitely not qualified to fix. But I don’t really have a choice, because if not me then who? And the problems always come when I least expect it. So, I stick to my routine, and take my bumps as they come.

The air conditioning in my room was maxed out; it helped me fall asleep under the heavy wool blankets—but getting out of bed in the morning was always harder because it’s so cool.

My alarm rang. Like really rang, ringalingalingaling, loud as hell. I almost missed a deployment once because I overslept, so I bought the loudest alarm clock I could find. The clock has hands that glow in the dark, and it actually rings a bell. I keep it on local time so I can tell dark from light.

I slid to the floor and immediately got goosebumps.

Another day.

It’s 0300. That’s what time I’ve been waking up, my reverse time schedule. Most missions will require hours of driving, and we have to arrive before first prayer if we want to capture anyone. First prayer is when the ghouls come out.

Shirtless, wearing only my black silk running shorts, I sat down at my desk and flicked on the lamp. My bruises were almost gone, but the healing took longer than it used to. Must be getting old.

Mark had another target, someone who stored bombs. It would be a good first mission: make sure our vehicles are working, force the guys to think tactically again. I hated to risk lives for a cache, though. Afghanistan had so many weapons squirreled away that capturing one didn’t really make much of a difference. Bomb-making equipment, bomb makers, terrorist leaders. Those were risks I’d take. Still, it was our
first mission, and it would get us off the base and out of our routine. Out of our comfort zone.

So, we prepared, but the decision to launch and the actual launching turned out to be two different things. Higher headquarters demanded a plan outlined on six PowerPoint slides showing our purpose and route. Once submitted, our plan took at least a week to be reviewed by various entities. We also requested air support along our route, which required a minimum of two weeks. In the meantime, we waited, prepped, and rehearsed. We settled into our base, into our routines.

I mixed an orange flavored powdered pre-workout drink and sipped on it while flipping through Pashtu language index cards: You, Go, Stop, Security, One, Two, Three. Finally, I was awake. I grabbed a T-shirt and the two piss-filled Gatorade bottles, then entered the hallway where my skin instantly warmed. While my room was freezing, the hallways weren’t air conditioned and probably ten degrees warmer. Outside it was cool, probably high forties, but it would get to seventy by noon. Jalalabad was in a valley; the rest of the country got bogged down in snow, but we did alright here.

I made the two-hundred-meter journey to the bathroom and tossed the bottles into the trashcan just outside the door. Not for the first time, I pondered the double jeopardy of hydration – everyone stayed hydrated and drank all day, and call me lazy, but it was too far to make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I’d hate to be female.

Urinal didn’t flush. Number one on my problem list of the day.
I began a weight lifting routine at the gym around 0330. I thought the elliptical machine was broken and added it to my mental problem list, then tripped over the cord and plugged it in.

By 0500, I was showered and in the Operations Center. We had a phone we could use to call back to the U.S. there, and I tried every morning to call home. No one had picked up since I had spoken to Maureen when I arrived. I wasn’t really worried, it was Christmastime, maybe they were traveling. It wasn’t planned, but plans change. Would have been nice to talk to Cammy though, say Merry Christmas to the family.

After the call, I started reading classified emails in the operations center. Four more things popped on my list of things to do: ammo count, look for some equipment BAF lost, send one of our terps back to BAF, and prepare for a week delay in our food resupply. I took notes for the team meeting and dropped some emails in Captain Stone’s mailbox. Then I began the paper drill that came with responsibility: training schedules, intelligence updates, evaluation reports, award submissions, accountability problems, supply orders, and any other thing that higher requested. This paper machine created by military admin idiots didn't stop for the war, especially not in Afghanistan where having communication was the rule not the exception. When I came in 2003, there was no internet in Afghanistan. Hell, except for Kabul, the country didn’t even have land lines. We spoke to higher through satellite antennas, and you could only burst so much information, like a one-page word document. Now, we talk way too much.

We still had proficiency and maintenance requirements even though we were deployed in a combat zone, and headquarters had no problem sending reminders. We
had to maintain our proficiency in weapons, radios, first aid, and demolitions. Some of the guys needed to go to promotion boards when we got back. Contrary to popular belief, war isn’t just about fighting the bad guys anymore. Communication has made it more complicated and raised the expectations to a new high.

At 0800, I was back in my room studying Pashtu again. Around 0900, I grabbed some dehydrated eggs and bacon. By then, most of the team was up. In our normal life, back in America., we were all up and doing physical training by 0630. Here, it wasn’t necessary, especially since most of our missions would take place in the middle of the night. I let them sleep in as long as they got their work done and were staying in shape.

At 1000, I conducted my daily team meeting where I assigned tasks and priorities for the day. It takes a lot of work just to keep the base running. Workers must be organized, supervised, and paid. The compound perimeter had to be inspected and improved. We had about twenty different buildings on the compound and things were always breaking and needed to be fixed. Vehicles needed to be inspected and maintained. Weapons needed to be cleaned and ammunition needed to be inventoried. By now my problem list had been reduced by three and grown by nine.

You know, there are times when you have to bend the rules a little. People who have never been in charge of men’s lives will tell you that’s not true, that you can always make the correct decision, and that the right decision is clear. But that’s because those people don’t know that kind of responsibility. They’ve never felt the weight of a human life on their shoulders.
“Hey, Ryan, um, I need some guidance,” said Mark. The team meeting was over and everyone but Captain Stone and I had filed out to complete their assigned tasks.

“What’s up?” I was about to log on to the secure computer again, but I spun my chair around. Captain Stone, seated at the computer beside me, kept on typing, but I knew he was listening.

“Sorry to bother you with this, but I’m kind of lost.” He held out some documents, and I could tell he was uncomfortable. “Payday is coming up for our workers and Afghan Security Forces, and I’ve been looking over the accounts the last team left, and I kinda need to know what you and the Captain want to do?”

I took the documents and studied them. It was a multi-page spreadsheet with a list of names: Achmed, Farid, Shir Shah, four pages worth. Beside each name was a dollar sign and amount. “Pay them, I guess. I don’t see the problem.”

“Well, Keith was the last guy who did the salaries, he told me the first two pages contain the authorized salaries for the workers and the guards.”

“Okay.” I flipped through the other pages.

He paused and I looked back at him.

“And they paid the salaries as depicted on the second two pages.”

Oh.

I looked more closely at all the documents, then put them down on my desk side by side. The same names were on both papers, but the salaries were different. Some were half as much as the authorized amounts. “What did they do with the rest?” The
asshole had kept two books. There had to be a couple thousand dollars unaccounted for. Each month.

Mark shrugged and rolled his eyes.

I felt my face turn red and I clenched my teeth. Crap. Goddamn idiots!

“Mark, get the guys back into the operations room, now.” I didn’t turn around, I was still studying the documents.


_The Army isn’t perfect, it can’t anticipate every need of its soldiers. And that is especially true for the unconventional war that my men fight. For me, there was always a clear line between right and wrong: keep my men safe, bring them home. Ultimately, I was willing to stand before a panel of my peers and tell them I did what I did to save lives._

_I’m not sure Keith has these same set of morals._

“Well, we could buy better weights for the weight room?” said Teddy.

“Stop.” I glared at the team from the head of the conference table, Captain Stone sitting beside me. I had just explained the accounting situation to them. “We’re not stealing government money. I didn’t tell you about this problem so we could vote about what we’re doing with stolen money.”

“But—"

“Teddy, just stop.”
There was silence. They knew when I was angry. I looked at the documents again shaking my head. “Goddamn idiots!” I massaged my forehead; I was beginning to get a headache. I looked at Mark. “We’re not playing this game. Pay everyone the amount they’re supposed to get paid.” I shook my head again, crumpled up the false salary sheet in one hand and gave Mark back the real salary list. “Keith gave you this mess?”

“Yeah, he put off my finance briefing till about an hour before the plane left, then went over it real quick with me.”

“What a douche. He was pulling some scam with our food too. Just get those guys paid what they’re supposed to get paid, got it?”

“Roger, I got it.”

For all intents and purposes, I had just given half the Afghans in my employ a fifty percent raise. Merry Christmas, or Happy Hanukkah, or whatever they celebrated in this country.

“Look, guys, I told all of you about this because I want to be clear on how we’re running things. Everything is above board. If you run into anything shady I want to know about it.” I looked around the room. “Understood?”

After the team left, I looked at Stone and Mark. “I can't believe we have to deal with this shit.”

War can be calm and boring, except when it’s not. I always revert to a part of my routine after getting side-tracked. Hit the gym. Eat lunch. Authorize the purchase of
vehicle parts. Walk the security perimeter, watch our Afghan neighbors watch us.

Dinner. More emails. And before bed, a quick rundown on my problem list.

Inevitably, I end the day with a list of about five problems I haven’t been able to solve. I call them roll over problems. On rare days I’d end with zero.

Finally, at the end of the day, I try to get some uninterrupted sleep. But there were always interruptions and things that needed tending.

Every day is the same. There are no weekends here, no days of rest. Sometimes I’d give the guys a day off, but there weren’t any days off really. There is always something to do, someone to pick up or something to drop off at the airfield, or a generator that goes down and needs fixing. But I try to give the guys free time; they need that. We all do. To stay sane.
Chapter 10

December 17, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Camila wiped the sweat from her eyes and retied her ponytail. Back in the gym again, her home away from home. Click-clacking behind a computer cluttered her head; working out cleared it.

She had woken at 0400, made her bed, and headed for the gym. Physical fitness in the Army made first impressions, especially in the Green Berets. When her father used to leave for the gym he would tell her he was working on his soul. She understood that now.

She had learned the benefits of establishing a routine in college as a Plebe. That first year had been hell, never a moment to herself. She felt she got it worse than the rest, though they all had it bad and it could have just been in her head. Her worst enemies were made on the mat. Army combatives were based on a lot on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, something she excelled in, and no red-blooded male liked to be choked into unconsciousness by a girl. The upperclassmen had ways to make her pay for their embarrassment: pushups, demerits, running extra laps. A bloody knife she found buried to the hilt in her pillow. One step at a time had gotten her through the hazing.

She had applied to West Point because of her dad. She could picture him now, sitting at the table in camouflage pants and a brown T-shirt, his blouse hung on the back of his chair, black boots that looked so huge back then. Hell, he had looked so big. When she was little, she’d thought it was funny when he called his military shirt a blouse, she thought it was a joke. It wasn’t until she entered West Point that she
realized that was the actual military term. Blouse, Small Regular, Operational Camouflage Pattern, 1 Each – that’s what her clothing record said.

Her dad had been her giant. When she played at her friends’ homes, their fathers were round. In comparison, her dad was all angles: broad shoulders, trim waist, a haircut that made his head look almost square. Where other fathers were soft, he was solid. Running in the house once, she came around a corner and ran straight into him at full speed, her head colliding with his abdomen. She thought she had hit a wall. He caught her before she could fall and laughed while scolding her in his deep baritone, “See Cammy, that’s why we don’t run in the house.”

He was always dispensing lessons, but his favorite was, “If you’re going to do something, do your best.” So, she set her goals on West Point, because that’s where she would be made into the best soldier, like her dad. The best of the best. And maybe she would find her father’s shadow.

Now her routine started with making her bed and ended with reading his journal.

The octagon in the gym was empty so she entered and began stretching on the mats. She began some Jiu Jitsu warm up exercises: shrimping, rolling forward and backward, jumping. She then began an easy pace on the treadmill, thinking about Bat 6.

Air support. There were two kinds: helos and fixed wing. Helo pilots belonged to the Army, fixed wing belonged mostly to the Air Force, so it would be easier to communicate her needs to the Army. At least they probably spoke the same language. She could probably get the info from that stuck up Air Force shit McMillan. *Not fair, be nice, he’s just doing his job. You’ll get more cooperation with honey.*
She increased the speed.

Bat 6 should receive their wounded next week, then they would start planning new missions. They probably wouldn’t conduct any until February though because of the weather. Snow tended to slow everything down in Afghanistan, and it shut down most of the enemy’s logistical support from Pakistan since the mountain passes were closed. Still, Camila wanted to solve the air problem before they left again.

She started to breathe faster, and she upped the pace again. The Combatives Competition flyer was taped to the wall before her. Competing was the quickest way to prove to the men that she was a warrior, not a woman. She knew there were women out in the world who would take offense to that thought. They would say she was a woman and a warrior. But she didn’t want the men she worked with to see her that way. She wanted to be a soldier they fought with side by side.

The environment in the Operations Center was already changing, as it always did when she showed up for a new job. During the first week, the men would divide into two groups: one would ignore her completely and one would cluster around her desk, telling bad jokes and war stories, offering to help and giving unnecessary advice. Group One saw her as an unwanted distraction. Group Two saw her as a possible conquest.

Captain Turner, who sat beside her, was in the first group. He hadn’t given her the time of day since she’d arrived. Once, she’d asked for help looking through the old folders and he looked at her briefly, then went back to watching a movie on his tablet. Her method of dealing with that sort was to ignore the slight and continue being a team player and hope he came around.
The other group was actually more problematic. The Air Force guy, Mac, sounded like he might be in Group Two. Maybe he was just being nice by telling her about air support requirements, but would he have offered that advice to a man? Next, the encounters would progress to casual lunch and coffee invitations, which would make the haters in Group One treat her even worse because they saw her as the reason other men weren’t doing their jobs. Then, it would get weird.

It happened every time she started a new job in the military where they didn’t know her. The only thing that stopped this progression of attention was to change her image. She wasn’t a potential date, but a potential battle buddy they could depend on in combat.

She slowed the treadmill to a fast walk, sucking in air, hands on hips.

She only wished the competition was sooner.

*****

“Captain Keesner, please.” After a shower and a quick breakfast, she was back in the Operations Center calling Bat 6.

“This is Master Sergeant Andres, who’s this?”

Camila recognized the gravelly voice from the radio. “Sergeant Andres, this is Captain Mason.”

“Who?”

“Captain Mason, I’m your liaison up here in BAF.”
Andres suddenly laughed loudly into the receiver, making Camila physically jump. “My what? I have a what in BAF?” he asked, laughing again. She heard voices in the background and Andres speaking off the receiver. “Some chick who says she’s our liaison in BAF.” She felt her neck turning red.

Another voice came on, this one with a Southern twang, “Captain Keesner speaking.”

She paused briefly, “Hey, Captain Keesner, this is Captain Mason, your liaison here in BAF.”

“Just a minute.” She could hear loud voices through the phone, including a lot of laughing, and then Keesner’s twang in the background: “Hey, if you can’t keep it down, get the fuck out.” Silence followed, then Keesner spoke again, though his voice sounded more distant. “Alright, I have you on speaker with my team sergeant, Master Sergeant Michael Andres.”

“Sorry ma’am, you caught me off guard is all, no disrespect intended. No one has called us from BAF since we arrived.” At least Andres sounded sincere.

“No problem, Sergeant,” Camila replied.

“What can we do for you?” asked Keesner.

She paused again, gathering her thoughts. “My name is Caption Camila Mason and I’m calling to report on the status of your wounded.” She felt the silence and continued. “John and Eddie are doing well. I checked on them this morning and the docs say they should be able to return to duty by the end of the week. I’ll start looking for transportation back to your fire base.”
She heard a combined ‘thanks’ from the two men, then Andres added “Tell them we’re waiting for them to get off their asses before we head out again.”

“Roger that. I also met Sergeant First Class Franco at the MEDEVAC helo last night.” More silence. “His memorial will be tomorrow afternoon on the ramp before we ship him home.”

“That whole situation was fucked up,” said Andres and she heard the two men speaking quietly, then she must have been muted because she didn’t hear anything.

Keesner came back after a minute. “Sorry about that, Mike’s still a little emotional about the air support that day. We all are. I know it wasn’t your fault, but it’s easy for the guys to blame Big BAF in the sky and everyone that works there.”

“I understand. Actually, it’s the real reason I called you.”

“How’s that?”

“This is my second day on the job, and I’m trying to figure it out. My first day was when you had that TIC yesterday. So, I need to know: what do you need from me? How can I help you?”

Keesner sighed. “Look, Camila, I’ve been here for six months and I’ve never spoken to any liaison in BAF. I know we’re supposed have one, but it’s supposed to be another Green Beret from our unit. And we haven’t had any direct communication with anyone at BAF except by email. I send stuff up into a cyber black hole and sometimes things come back, usually none of it good. I talk to Serpent on the radio when I do operations, and he never has anything good to say either. So, you can understand when we’re a little underwhelmed by your offer to help.”
“So, I am assigned to your unit. I relieved Captain Garrot who was moved to Team 7334.”

“Well, that’s something at least.”

“And I’m a Green Beret.”

More silence.

“And I’m here to help.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know any women had graduated the course yet.”

“I’m one of the first. I went to the same training as you did. And I’m here to help.”

Another pause. “Well, we’re talking, so there’s that. I don’t know how you can help me though.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time. Let’s start with your biggest problem.”

“Air support.” He said it like a curse word.

“I thought you might say that. What’s the problem? Why can’t you order it ahead of the mission?”

“Man, you are new, aren’t you?”

“Just fell off the turnip truck.”

“All right, from our perspective, here’s what happens. We get intelligence on an objective, a bad guy or someone with explosives or a medium level leader, something, but we need to react fast or he’s gone. Air support and MEDEVAC requests require two weeks to implement, unless it’s emergency support during a TIC. So, we submit the mission as a Reconnaissance since we can leave within twenty-four hours if we don’t expect enemy contact.”
She took notes. “Okay, I got it, Chris. Let me work this and get back to you.”

“Camila, you fix this and we’ll make you an honorary team member.”

She smiled, “I’ll remember that.”

She hung up and logged into her computer.

Camila had twelve-hour shifts, but they were really thirteen since they had a half hour overlap on each end for debriefs. Other than that, the rest of the time she could manage as she liked.

She planned workouts twice a day, before and after duty, plus lunch if she was able. Theoretically, as a Green Beret, she needed to be ready to go on a mission at any moment, though she felt the boys club would throw more obstacles in her way before that happened. Still, she didn’t need anyone to doubt her fitness abilities.

There were a lot of files documenting her father’s missions in the Operations Center, and it was interesting to read his journal and compare what happened from his point of view and the actual reports that were submitted. It gave her a better understanding of the Las Vegas Effect: what happened downrange, stayed downrange.

She noticed an increase in Red Bull orders after the Chip incident and a request to evaluate the fair market salary for a cook.

She started preparing her CUB slides for the evening, then saw Sergeant McMillan return to his desk. “Hey, SGT Mac.” Every soldier she’d ever met with a similar name had whittled it down to Mac, so she took a guess. Regardless, everyone liked nicknames. In the Qualification course, ‘long haired long tabbers’ had been the go to nickname for the three women in the course, and they had embraced it with pride.

McMillan turned. “Ma’am?”
She walked over to him, “I have some questions about air support, thought you might be the resident expert.”

He smiled. “That I am. What can I do you for, ma’am?”

“Well, I was wondering where I could find the unit that conducts all the helo air support. I want to learn about their capabilities.”

“I can tell you all about that, ma’am.” He sat down behind his desk and started clicking through files on his computer. “I have a PowerPoint slideshow right here that shows all the air asset capabilities we have here.”

Camila cursed to herself. Of course he had a PowerPoint presentation.

“Well.” She paused. She hated playing the damsel in distress card, but she would swallow her pride to help Bat 6. “To tell you the truth, I don’t have much experience with helicopters, and I wanted to see if I could get them to show me around.”

McMillan already had the slideshow on his screen, the title slide showing a striking cobra. “So, the Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 367 is currently supporting us. Their compound is beside the airfield, almost right across from the welcome center.” He began to stand up. “I could show y—”

She put a hand on his shoulder before he stood. “That’s Okay, I wouldn’t want to bother you while you’re on shift. I’m sure I can find it alright. Thanks so much though!”

She left before he could say any more.
Chapter 11

January 29, 2005

142 Days and a Wake Up

0200 movement tomorrow. Our first combat mission.

I know we’re ready, but it doesn’t stop questions from cluttering my mind. We need to go. The guys are anxious, I can see it in their eyes, like they’re afraid the war will pass them by and they’ll be cheated out of their fair share of the experience. The guys need to go on a mission to get it out of their system. I understand, I felt the same my first time over here. They need to test themselves, show they aren’t cowards, maybe to themselves if no one else.

The responsibility weighs heavy, I think for Captain Stone, too, because it’s all ours. We’ve grown as an Army, matured. Our missions don’t come from higher headquarters. The team develops its own intelligence. Ultimately, Stone and I decide which missions are worth going on. Obviously, we report up to higher our final missions plan, but they don’t evaluate the worth of the mission, just how we are conducting it. They have no idea what’s going on here except what we tell them.

The whole team is at risk every time we leave the compound. But after the RPG last month, I should have realized that we’re not even safe here. And if we don’t bring the war to the enemy, then you better goddamn well believe that the enemy will bring it to us. The only real question is whether we want to be the pitcher or the catcher.

Pre-Combat Checks. These used to be done right before every patrol back in Vietnam, and they teach PCCs in Ranger School, but the real Army has forgotten its
roots, forgotten how to lead. I haven’t. I had everyone line their vehicles up at the exit to the base and walked down the line.

The first of the fifteen-truck convoy was our Afghan Security Forces. Eight guys jammed into a small pickup full of ammo, armed with AK-47 rifles. The team paid their salaries, armed them, fed them, and trained them. You could say they were mercenaries. All I know is they worked for me and they did what I said when I said it. Most of the time.

“Why aren’t these water cans filled?” I asked Shir Shah. I still didn’t know how old Shir was, I heard he had started working for the Americans when he was sixteen, that someone had stopped in the street after he yelled ‘Welcome Americans’ as they drove past. Good story, I’d have to ask him about it someday.

Shir Shah chattered with the mercenaries. “They don’t get thirsty, boss.”

I pulled two empty 5-gallon cans out of the back and threw them on the ground.

“Bullshit. Fill them up. Every time we rehearsed they were drinking water off our trucks. Every truck brings water, gas, and food.”

The next truck was my first team hummer, Mark riding shotgun in the passenger seat.

“You good?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Just finished my checks.”

I glanced at a big hunting knife attached to his chest. “What’s that for?”

He touched the handle. “This was my dad’s, from Vietnam.”

“Your dad wasn’t in Vietnam.”
He pulled the knife out of its sheath. “Yeah, but if he had been in Vietnam, he
would have carried a knife just like this. Anyway, you never know when you need a
sharp knife.”

“True that, buddy. Might need to open a letter or kill a snake. Just promise me
you won’t bring your daddy’s knife to a gun fight, OK?” I patted his shoulder.

I looked up at Teddy standing behind the .50 caliber machine gun mounted on
top. “You good, Teddy?”

“Ready to rock and roll, top,” he replied.

At the rear of the truck was our newest teammate, manning another smaller
machine gun. “How you feeling, Chris?”

“Good Sergeant.”

“How much ammo you got for that gun?” I asked.

“Um, well—” He looked at the boxes he was sitting on.

“We got 5000 rounds for the MAG 58 in the back, and I got another 5000 for my
baby up top,” Teddy interjected.

“Thanks, Teddy. Square him away will you?”

“Roger that.” I moved to the next truck, listening to Teddy’s mentoring. “Listen
you fucking newbie, you think we’re playing a game here? Huh? Goddamn cherries,
fuckin’ Nintendo generation.”

Next came two Afghan Army Trucks and another Afghan Security Force Truck,
each with eight guys. None had water and the Army trucks didn’t have gas cans either.

I would have preferred just to travel with the Afghan Security Forces. While I
didn’t trust anyone in this country 100%, I trusted the Afghan Army guys a lot less than
my Security Forces. The Afghan Army forces were paid by the Afghan government. I trained the ASF, the Afghan Army came trained by someone else, but I wasn’t sure of their capabilities or their loyalties. Plus, the Afghan Army could always choose not to follow my instructions and I couldn’t do anything about it. If the ASF messed up, I could fire them or dock their pay. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but I was required to bring legitimate Afghan authorities on all my missions, so I was stuck with the Army guys.

“Why do we need gas can? Where are we going?” asked the Afghan commander. He was very proud of his English. He was a little guy whose uniform was too big for him, though it was pressed.

“We’re going far. We’ll give you the gas.”

“We are fine, if we need more we’ll stop at gas station.”

“Where we go, there are no gas stations.”

“Where we go?”

“Look, either fill up or you’re not going.” I turned to my mercenaries, threw their empty water cans on the ground. “Water.” They looked at me without moving. I kicked the cans. “Ooba,” I repeated in Pashtu. “Now.” They nodded enthusiastically and grabbed the cans. The Afghan Army Captain was in my face.

“You can’t go without us.”

“Watch me.”

His dark features crinkled into a scowl; my face was impassive. It wasn’t a show either, I really didn’t care. While he was correct in theory, I’d anticipated this and had some contingency plans. Always have a PACE plan.
He yelled in Dari and one of his soldiers rushed forward. “Benzin,” he said touching the gas cans.

“Don’t forget the Ab,” I said as I patted the water cans with a smile. *That’s right fucker, I speak your language, too.* My Pashtu was better than my Dari, but I would let him wonder how much I knew.

I moved on to Stone’s hummer.

“Do you have to antagonize them, Ryan? We’re supposed to be fighting together,” said Stone.

“Hey, he was being a dick. Do you want to tell him where we’re going?” It was common knowledge that the Afghan Army couldn’t keep a secret. If I told them anything, best case scenario would be we hit a dry hole and the bad guys would have left, worst case we’d get ambushed or hit by an IED.

“No, but there’s probably a more diplomatic way to do it.”

“That’s your area of expertise. I’m just doing pre-combat checks. I told him to fill up on gas and water, he wanted to start a debate. Why don’t you get off your ass and soothe his bruised ego?”

“Okay, okay. Damn, you’re in a mood today.” He slid out of the hummer.

“Truck’s good, just finished radio checks.” He grabbed my shoulder. “Chill, Ryan. We’re ready.”

“I know, I know. Now, go do your job and schmooze with the other officers.”

His hummer had the Mark 19 automatic grenade launcher on top. “Joe, you got a handle on that?”

Joe gave me thumbs up. “Good to go, Top. She’ll do fine.”
I had my doubts. The gun regularly let us down in training.

My medic was next on the ATV. “Where’s your helmet, Donnie? Come on man, we talked about this.”

Donnie unstrapped the helmet from the back of the ATV and sheepishly put it on.

“I just thought I could start without it.”

I slapped his helmet. “You know more than anyone else about head injuries. It’s not a joy ride.”

He nodded.

“Let’s try and do this right.”

Two Afghan Security trucks followed and then two more Afghan Army vehicles. To my surprise, I saw Afghan Army men coming up with water and gas cans; either Captain Stone had made an impression, or I had. Of course, my mercenaries didn’t have water. I tossed the cans from the trucks. “Ooba.” They started moving.

Next, our Psychological Operations team, four guys in one truck. “Staff Sergeant Delaney, how’s everything going?”

“We’re up, Sergeant, no problems.”

Instead of a top gun, they had a huge loudspeaker. Delaney’s team was attached to us, but we treated them like part of the team. Hell, I’ll never turn down four more American gunners, and their Pashtu and Dari language abilities put mine to shame.

“Good. I’ll call you on the radio when I’m ready, then do that thing we talked about.”

He smiled, putting his helmet on. “Sure thing.”
Next came my vehicle. I nodded at them as I walked past. I’d already done my checks.

The last two vehicles were more mercenaries. They already had water, I guess the word had gotten passed.

I slid into my seat next to my driver. Mario was our mechanic, a last minute addition to our team. He was probably the youngest guy here, not more than two years in the army, and the only American on the team that wasn’t a green beret. I’d put him on my truck so I could watch out for him. His hands beat a rhythm on the steering wheel. “You good, buddy?” I asked him.

“I thought I was just going to fix trucks at the base, Sergeant. I hadn’t planned on going on missions.”

“Well, if the trucks break down on the mission, how am I going to get them back?”

“I just hadn’t planned on it, that’s all.”

“You’ll be fine, buddy.”

I keyed the radio. “Okay, get ready to move. Delaney, hit it.”

The loudspeakers crackled followed by the sound of helicopter blades chopping in the wind, then a recorded voice announced: “Ten years ago a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn’t commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum-security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, they survive as soldiers of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe
you can hire -- the A-Team.” *The A-Team* television theme song echoed through the compound as I spoke into the radio again.

“Move out.”

_I think I broke a rib. Some vehicles broke down. And we’re an hour late. Not the best start to our first mission. Just bad luck really._

_Few will admit it, but every soldier believes in signs: good and bad. Good things come in groups. Bad things come whenever they want. I’m not usually a superstitious guy, I try to make my own luck by being better prepared than the enemy, but so far it didn’t bode well for the mission._

Two Afghan Army vehicles broke down before leaving the base and we switched them out with two of our extra Security Force vehicles. Twenty-minute delay. We were losing darkness and would be cutting it close to arrive before first prayer. Then, forty minutes trying to escape the city of Jalalabad. Note to self: leave earlier, miss the crowds, avoid the traffic. Just like vacations. Why the hell there was traffic at 0300 is beyond me. Good guys doing good things? I doubted it.

Then I broke my rib, I think. Mario drove too close to a building and the SAW machine gun I manned from the passenger seat stuck out just enough to clip the wall, smashing it back into my chest. Body armor only stops bullets from ravaging your internal organs, but a barrel jammed into your chest still hurts. We’ve barely started and I’m already wounded, no hail of bullets or big explosions required.

I grunted when the gun slammed into me.
“You ok?” Mario asked, slowing down.

“Just keep some distance from the buildings.” I tried to re-configure the machine gun so it wasn’t sticking out so much.

I took a deep breath and it didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. I guess it could be just bruised. Only eight hours left if everything worked out: three hours there, three hours back, two hours on the objective. No problem. I let the breath out and felt a stabbing flash of pain. Yeah, probably broken. Breathe in. Ow. Breathe out. Ow. It was going to be a long day.

A light rain began as we left the city limits which kept the sand down, so we made good time. The road was nice by Afghan standards, but it was a dirt road and there were a lot of bumps. And every bump hurt.

According to the maps, there was only one spot worthy of concern, a dry riverbed lined with low mountains on both sides. It was the only way to the objective and it was perfect for an ambush if the bad guys knew we were coming. But our maps were a little old, and the riverbed turned out to be wide and the mountains not so high.

We reached the objective just barely under the cover of darkness. Just barely, but still after the first call to prayer. It was a huge compound at the edge of a small village. The green metal door was ajar, and at first glance not to be in use. We took it by force, our Afghan Army partners entering first. Inside the first wall was nothing. Sand, sand, and more sand. There were three sections, each the size of a football field and divided by earth walls. At the back of the last section were some living areas. The women and children began wailing when we entered the last section. There were no men.
We broke out the metal detectors and began to search the long stretches of sand for ammunition and guns. Sometimes the Afghans buried things. After two hours, we had barely gotten through the first courtyard, so I left the engineers to their jobs and walked out front to check security.

We had U.S. hummers at each of the four corners of the compound. Most of the Afghan trucks were parked at the front. The village was starting to wake up and some locals had clustered around the American trucks.

Mark was out front talking to some of the Afghans when I walked up to him. “So, this seems to be the right place,” he told me. “There are only women and children out back though. The owner is gone.”

I nodded. “We got here kind of late, too. Missed first prayer.”

“There’s that. His wives claim not to know him.”

Damn.

I heard a yell and turned just in time to see Shir Shah sprint a couple feet and tackle a man in the street.

Mark was next to Shir a few seconds later, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Then Mark and Shir, grabbing an arm each, walked the man up to me.

“Ryan, meet the owner of this fine establishment.”

He didn’t try to struggle, just looked at the ground.

Mark clapped Shir on the back, “Shir saw the man asking for information from the crowd, then turn and bolt. Great tackle, buddy. Worthy of the NFL.”

I clapped Shir on the back, too. “Good job, Shir. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, boss.”
We were approaching our deadline, so I called it. The owner hadn’t admitted to storing anything, and we couldn’t find any weapons or ammunition with the metal detectors. We let him go with a warning.

If we didn’t leave soon, we wouldn’t get back before nightfall. “Load up,” I said into the radio, and everyone began to file out.

Usually we would try and choose a different route back, so if the bad guys had followed us they couldn’t set up an ambush. Unfortunately, there was only one route in and out of this place. Thirty minutes into our return trip, the call to stop came over the radio.

“How does a tire just fall off?” I asked the Afghan Army commander while Shir translated. I had walked back along the halted convoy and Shir Shah was speaking loudly with the Afghan commander, then he turned to me and explained the problem.

Initially, it was a serious problem; we had to call back to the base to have parts delivered and request a crane in case the parts didn’t work. The Afghan commander called for help from his unit and after three hours a few more trucks arrived. We felt they had enough security to wait on their own, so we started back to the base again.

Mark’s hummer started leaking brake fluid about an hour later. We had extra fluid on board, so we kept going, stopping to refill every hour. At this point I just wanted to make it back to base before dark. We were still two hours from base when one of our Afghan Security vehicles wouldn’t go into gear. I towed it with my hummer at a top speed of 15 miles an hour.

“Hey everyone,” Mark yelled over the radio, “Happy freakin’ Plant Appreciation Day!”
“Is that a real thing? Is that like Arbor Day?” I asked on the radio as we plodded along.

“It’s a real thing, but Arbor Day is something different. That’s like Plant a Tree Day.”

“Well then, happy freakin’ Plant Appreciation Day to every—"

The explosion cut me off.
Chapter 12

December 17, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Camila arrived at the airfield early.

The operations room was minimally staffed during memorial services and everyone was expected to attend. Truly though, everyone wanted to attend.

The ramp of a C-5 Galaxy plane was down, facing the assembling audience like the mouth of some mythical monster. On a normal day, the airfield was like an ant’s nest, hundreds of individual movements accomplishing a larger goal: planes landing, helicopters taking off, vehicles moving equipment, personnel going about their business. Not today though. Not now.

The airfield was shut down to traffic. A pedestal and microphone were set up to the right of the ramp. Formations of soldiers began to march slowly toward the aircraft and form a three-sided human shield around the back of the aircraft, fifty-man fronts. Individuals with no units to fall into, such as Camila, lined up behind or to the side of the formations, automatically making clean rows and columns. Camila noticed the mysterious Keith among others dressed in jeans and tee-shirts in the row before her.

Except for the light rhythmic contact of rubber boot soles on the tarmac, it was quiet, a quiet she had not seen at any other time on this base of thousands. Finally, about a thousand people were assembled. A uniformed man wearing glasses approached the podium and lowered the microphone.

“Sergeant First Class John Franco. Some of you are his friends, his comrades. Many of you here today may never have met him. Thank you all for coming.”
A strong wind blew snow across the tarmac, dispersing random flakes among the formations, and Camila could only hear random words: "going home" and "sacrifice." She moved closer, as did others.

"John was a sheepdog," she heard the chaplain say. This was a term familiar to Camila, though she wasn't sure the exact origins in this context; it was often used to describe special operations soldiers. "The Lord, in his wisdom, has allowed evil on this Earth, and when that evil takes on human form they become the wolves of this world. But he does not leave his flock unprotected. For that, he has his sheepdogs." The chaplain paused for effect, raising his eyes to meet the watching soldiers. The wind calmed.

"During 9/11, it was the firemen and police, the sheepdogs, that ran up the stairs as others ran down. When people heard about the hijacking of United Airlines Flight 93, most thanked God they were not on that plane, but not the sheepdogs. They thought, ‘I wish I had been on that plane’. A sheepdog thinks, ‘Maybe if I had been there, I might have made a difference’.”

Camila felt tears well in her eyes. She’d heard versions of this speech before, and she always had the same reaction. She saw others discreetly wipe their eyes.

“Sergeant First Class John Franco joined the Army to defend his country, he joined the Green Berets to make a difference. John Franco was a sheepdog. He fought the good fight.” The chaplain bowed his head. “Let us pray.” He then said, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and was joined by the hundreds before him.
The sun speckled fading rays through large gray clouds as a desert camouflaged military vehicle fired up its engine and slowly drove behind the pedestal. Camila saw the U.S. flag-draped casket sticking out the back.

Eight soldiers lifted their fallen comrade off the vehicle and began a solemn march to the giant plane’s ramp.

A high-pitched whining sound suddenly sliced the air. Bagpipes played “Amazing Grace” as the men made their way into the cavernous belly of the aircraft, taking slow steps in cadence, the coffin its only cargo. Then the ramp began to lift with a soft whine and every soldier saluted.

At last the plane’s giant doors clanked shut and "Taps" echoed through the wintry air as the sun began to disappear behind the mountains.

Salutes lowered, commands were shouted, and several hundred soldiers marched to the edge of the tarmac and were dismissed.

Camila watched the plane. Massive engines began to roar. She stayed until the plane taxied to the end of the airfield, revved its engines even louder, and thundered into the air.

****

Thirteen years ago, her father must have had a similar ceremony. It would have been warmer in April. No snow on the ground. Maybe some birds singing.

He probably left Afghanistan in a military plane after the ramp ceremony, but he didn’t arrive that way. Camila assumed that after the coroner in Dover examined the
bodies, they left in contracted planes, maybe because each body went to a different location to be with the family. Her father had arrived in a small plane with ‘Kalitta Charters’ printed on its side in neat black capital letters.

There had been a small formation of men in uniform that day, but she couldn’t remember how many. It wasn’t the focus of her attention when the plane landed. She did remember hearing the shouting as the plane landed, and the soldiers saluting. There was a firetruck on the tarmac with a ladder extended high into the air and a giant American flag blowing in the wind. The whining of the bagpipes also played “Amazing Grace” as the ramp doors opened. A civilian met the open doors with an airport elevator and two men inside the plane pushed a coffin onto a platform which slowly lowered to the ground.

She walked behind her mother. Camila had touched the coffin gently with only fingertips, her mom had kept her distance. The wood was still cold from the air conditioning in the plane. Then they moved aside as a group of eight men marched up to lift the coffin. She remembered Mark in the formation.

She had wanted to see her father, wanted to open the casket so she could give him one last hug, but the soldiers marched to the hearse, a real hearse. Camila and her mother followed in their car to the military chapel. The chapel on base never seemed real to her. Slick and uncluttered, as if it had just been cleaned, it existed to serve multiple denominations and attempted to offend no one.

Strangely, Camila felt nothing. She did not feel her father’s presence here in this place.
When the service began, men stood on the stage and spoke about the dead. Her father’s sense of humor — sarcastic. Always ready to help. Giving to all around him. Responsible for his soldiers. Never failed his men. Selfless to a fault. Anecdotes were told, stories of a life and a man she didn’t recognize.

And afterward, strangers greeted them and hugged them at intervals. Camila perfected the fake sorrowful smile as she maneuvered her mother out of the church through hordes that wished to greet them, telling how much they admired her father, how he was a great man, how he saved a life or changed the world. Through it all, her smile remained.

Her memories of her father were sporadic: hugs, homework, long absences, occasional letters from faraway places. But they didn’t match the man described to her in those last hours at the church. Or the bearded stranger in the ‘Why we Fight’ poster. Or the other memory, always on the edge of her mind: the red and blue lights, a battered face, a blood-stained white shirt.

It wasn’t until they were home, away from the eyes of her dad’s friends, that the tears fell freely. Was her dad’s life at home, with his family, like the sad smile she used? A mask to hide his real self? Had she ever really known her father?
Chapter 13

The explosion separated my whole chair from the truck and I soared a hundred meters forward, plowing into the road. I breathed in dust and choked.

_Fuck, fuck, fuck._

I tried to move, tried to get up, tried to see. I was lying on my side still connected to the chair, and I couldn't move. I couldn't see. _I'm dead or blind or paralyzed_, I thought. Then I thought about all the things I would never do with Cammy.

I sat in the road, thinking about coaching soccer and teaching her to drive and walking her down the aisle, and I realized I was rocking. I started bouncing harder, and I felt the seatbelt holding me down. I stopped, willed my hands to my face, my goggles. I felt my fingers through shredded leather gloves as they wiped my goggles, smearing grime and caked sand, leaving streaks of blood through which I saw sunlight.

I don't know how long it had been since I went flying, but everything suddenly came into focus. I could see, I could hear, I could feel.

Machine guns fired behind me. People yelled. Another explosion, and then all I heard was ringing. I severed the remnants of my seatbelt with my boot knife and rolled to my side on the road, moaning at bruised ribs and cursing loudly, but happy to be moving despite the pain. I staggered to my feet and balanced precariously. Ripping off my goggles, the scene appeared before me in brilliant color. The convoy had stopped, machine guns were firing into the hills to the north, grenades were exploding on the crest sending bursts of sand and rock into the air. I saw my men speaking into their radios. I looked toward the scarred earth where the explosion had come, pausing on
the ruins of my vehicle, then saw a man scrambling up the sandy hill behind the wreckage. *I don’t think so, bitch*, I thought.

Energy returned to my limbs. My rifle was still strapped to my body, hanging loose in front of me. I grabbed the gun in my right hand and ran to the hill, then followed the man, scrambling up the loose dirt. My body armor weighed me down, my feet sank into the sand and my thighs burned. My head hurt. One foot in front of the other.


My breath came in gasps, interspersed with coughing as I inhaled dust. I pushed the talk button on my radio handset but heard nothing. Touching my waist, I felt burnt uniform and blood where my radio was supposed to be. I turned back, yelling at the convoy and pointing to the top of the hill. I was close, I could see his sandals as the man disappeared over the crest.

Almost at the top, and saw a black-bearded head peek over, frightened eyes widen, then disappear. I sucked in dust and air, coughing some more, and followed. He was only fifteen meters away trying to run down a steep bank and I launched myself into space, tackling him and landing heavily. I felt bones break beneath me like a baby bird.

*Got you motherfucker.*

I felt dirt fall from above and looking up I saw two team members crest the hill. I sat on the man, trying to breathe. My left calf hurt and my hand came away bloody when I touched it. The man squirmed underneath me, but I dug my heel into his neck.

“Got you motherfucker,” I told him.
I don’t think I passed out then, but I don’t remember anything else till I was being carried in a stretcher.

Donnie had a hand on my shoulder, walking beside me. “You’ll be fine, Ryan.”

I didn’t speak, but I heard the team talking around me in a hazy, ringing dream.

“Freakin’ chair just popped out of his truck like a Lego.”

“Unbelievable.”

I heard the engines roar and the vehicle began to rock. I think the unpaved road did more damage to me than the explosion. Or maybe the adrenaline was wearing off. But it hurt. It hurt a lot. And I thought of Cammy, and how I might be able to talk to her tonight. Then, I did pass out.

*****

I woke up in a bed, but not in Jalalabad. Not my bed. In a hospital. I could smell detergent, cleanness. I could feel the stiff sheets. Bright lights blinded me, and I closed my eyes again. I felt pressure on my calf. I heard people talking.

“Awake.”

“—not finished, increase meds.”

I thought, “No, wait.” I tried to say, “No, wait.” Then the darkness came again. I saw Cammy smiling at me.
Chapter 14

December 17, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Dad mentioned their Disney trip a lot in his journal. She remembered the trip, of course. The trip that changed everything.

She had heard a noise and sat up in the back seat of their Chevy Blazer, thinking maybe they had arrived at Disney World. Dad had returned three weeks earlier and packed up the family for spring break to see Mickey Mouse and friends.

Instead, she saw red lights and police cars and ambulances surrounding a small gas station, the cop cars making a protective half-moon.

“Where’s Dad?” her mom asked, yawning.

They led him out, hands cuffed behind him. His white Polo shirt was stained dark, like he had spilled a Coke.

Her mom opened the door and yelled his name.

He turned his head toward them as the police forced his body in the opposite direction. Camilla couldn’t hear him but saw the word “sorry” on his lips before they pushed his head down into the black and white sedan, the lights making his shaved head shine like a Christmas tree.

Camila followed her mom out of the car and they both stood just outside the barrier of police cars.

“Stay here,” Mom told Camilla. She dashed up to the police, confronting them. The car with her father drove away as a stretcher rolled out of the door. The man’s head was black and blue and red. He was unconscious, and his mouth hung open,
dripping blood, and Camilla could see where he was missing teeth. His arms were strapped to his side, but his right forearm was bent at an odd angle.

Camila and her mom stayed in a cheap motel near the police station. Mom had remained silent, but her face never relaxed. Camila knew her mother’s moods. This one she had seen a lot lately, ever since the last time her father returned. It was silent anger that would just as quickly lash out at Camila if interrupted. So, Camila curled up under the covers to sleep without saying a word.

The next day, they drove to the station, but her mother went in alone and came back after 30 minutes, her dad following behind. He walked, marching as he always did, so proud, arrogant. How could he be proud after what he did to that man?

They stopped outside the station and she could see them arguing, her mom faced away from her.

“I had to do it,” she heard her dad say.

Her mom shook her head fiercely, “Ryan, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. But you’re always in the middle of everything.”

“You don’t understa—”

She stopped him. “You could have just walked away.”

He paused. “No, I couldn’t have.”

“You could have just walked away and drove us away, and we could have gone to Disney World like a normal family.”

“We can still go.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Really? How can we go? How do I know you won’t flip out again? Hurt somebody else?”
“It’s not like that.”

“Did you see that guy? Did you see what you did to him? What could he have possibly done to deserve that? Did he call you a name? Did he bump you wrong?”

Dad looked down. “It wasn’t about me.”

“It wasn’t even about you? So, you stuck your nose in someone else’s business? Again?”

“People could have got hurt.”

“Could have? Did anyone else get hurt besides the guy you beat the shit out of?”

He glanced up, met Camila’s eyes.

“I saw a situation that need to be taken care of.”

“What, because you say so? Are you the only one that can take care of situations?” She paused. “You’re so arrogant, you think only you can solve problems. You’re not in Afghanistan anymore. You’re not in the war. You’re in America, and there are rules here, and laws, you dumb shit.”

He sighed. “I know, but sometimes I get confused.”

Camilla saw tears glint in his eyes.

They hugged then. It was the last time she saw them hug.

They drove back home, and Camilla never asked about it. She was afraid. Her dad had done that to the man. She knew he went to war, and in war people died. But until that moment, the dead of war were the same as the dead on television: faceless, nameless, forgettable. She didn’t think she could forget that man’s face as they rolled him to the ambulance.
When they got home that night, Dad reached over to hug her and she tensed before he could touch her. He stopped just short.

“Baby, Cammy, it’s alright, it’s over.”

“Why?” she asked quietly.

“Because sometimes, sometimes, you have to do bad things to make people safe.”

She hadn’t understood then, and in the next few months before he left again, she had warmed slightly to him, but it was never the same as before.

*****

The emblem beside the gate said “Scarface HMLA-367” and at its center, a drawing of a Cobra preparing to strike.

The marine guards to Camp Cobra asked Camila for ID and then waved her in, giving brief verbal directions to the operations center. Camila had no idea how she was going to solve the air support problem, but it seemed reasonable to meet with the people who provided it.

“Can I help you?” The man sat behind a computer at the entrance, drinking from a plastic cup.

The operations center wasn’t what she had pictured. A pool table took up a quarter of the room where two men in flight suits dueled with sticks. Half the room was occupied by a large screen television and about twenty sparsely occupied chairs.

“Sorry, I’m looking for HMLA-367’s operations center.”
The man saluted her with his cup, “Found ‘em”.

Camila nodded, “Great, I’m Captain Mason from Camp Vance.”

“You working with them Green Berets?” the man asked, standing and thrusting his hand out. “We love you guys. Next best thing to a jarhead. I’m Dixon.”

Camila smiled, shaking his hand. “Actually, I am one of those Green Berets.”

Dixon took a second look at her. “My apologies, I stand corrected. We love you guys and gals.”

“No apologies necessary.”

Dixon leaned back in his chair, “Well, what can we do you for?”

Camila winced slightly when a pool player made a loud break. “I’d like to talk to you about the request process for air support.”

Dixon gestured to a seat and she took it. “Look, we don’t control the system. It sucks that it takes so long, but there are reasons. Some of them are even good reasons.”

Camila nodded. “I understand the system, someone has to prioritize air support, I got it. I wanted to ask you about your training.”

Dixon cocked his head. “Training?”

“Yeah, you guys have training requirements, right? Even though you’re in a combat zone? Things like so many hours under night vision goggles? Weapons training for your door-gunners? Or conducting a specific number of route reconnaissance flights a month? Things like that?” Dixon was nodding with a curious look on his face, so Camila continued. “And you guys rotate your crews too - some training, some on alert, some resting – right?”
“Right.”

“So, I was thinking, if you let me know what type of training exercises you are required to do, I could set up some appropriate training areas for you.” She paused. “Maybe set up some realistic scenarios with live participation from some Green Berets.”

Dixon looked intently at Camila, a smile creeping to his face, “That’s mighty nice of you. And you would do that because…”

Camila returned the smile. “The better trained you guys are, the better you can support us. There’s no ‘I’ in team.”

“What about the little hole in the ‘A’?”

She stopped and thought for a moment, then chuckled.

Dixon’s eyes shone with laughter too. “You know Captain Mason, you’re alright.” He glanced at the computer. “Well, I think we can go over our training calendars with you, see how you might help us out.”

She smiled. “Help each other out, you mean.”
Chapter 15

February 5, 2006

137 days and a wakeup

When you’ve faced death, when you’ve looked it in the eye, that’s when you know what is really important. That next thought, after realizing you’re not going to die, is what you hold dearest.

Cammy.

I was awake. I was in a hospital. I needed to talk to Camila.

“Can I have a phone?”

The nurse pursed her lips, thinking. “You’re on some pretty heavy pain killers. I was cleaning your wounds and you didn’t even flinch.” She hesitated, left the room and returned with a portable phone. “Just a few minutes. You need more rest.”

I did some drowsy Afghan clock math in my head. It would be late, but they might be up if I was lucky.

I suddenly felt very tired as I punched the buttons, like a drunk calling home for a ride. You know you’re wrong, but you do it because you know it’s the right thing to do. Each number I pressed felt heavier than the last, and I paused before hitting the last one. I hadn’t successfully called home since I reached Jbad. If she answered, I knew how the call would start. It rang twice.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sorry it’s so late.”
“Jeez, it’s 11 at night, have some consideration. I have to work, Cammy has school. We have lives too.”

“I know,” my voice grew louder, “I said I was sorry.”

“Don’t get that tone with me, you’re the one that called late. How hard is it to have some common courtesy?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I’ll try harder next time.”

She paused. “Did you get my letter?”

“No, no letter yet. I’ll check the mail today. Can I talk to Cammy?”

“She’s already asleep.” She paused. “You should read the letter before you call back though.”

“But—"

“Just read the letter.” Now her voice was getting louder.

“Listen you b—"

Then I heard the dial tone.

When you reach a certain level in your training, you are never at one hundred percent strength. When you push yourself to be the best, there is inevitably a lingering ache or pulled muscle. And when that heals, something else pops up to replace it. And you learn to live with it. And you continue on with the mission.

“I’m ready to leave,” I told the nurse.

She was dilating or titrating or doing something to the IV line. “Well, I don’t think the doctor is ready for you to leave yet.”
“I’d like to talk to him then, please.” I’d been in the hospital at BAF for a week, five of those days I’d even been conscious. It was time to get back to work.

“I’m sorry, but the doctor is unavailable right now.”

I started pulling off EKG leads.

“Master Sergeant Mason, what do you think you’re doing?”

“If you don’t get the doctor now, I’m checking myself out.”

“You are not authorized —”

“Ma’am, does it look like I give a fuck?” I reached for the IV line in my left forearm, but she placed her hand on mine.

“Okay, Okay. Just don’t pull anything else out. Please.”

I still hadn’t spoken to Camila, but that’s not why I needed to leave. It was the team.

If I didn’t think I was ready I wouldn’t have pressed the issue, but I needed to get back to the team. On the third day after I woke up I tested myself. At 0200, I hooked my EKG leads to the soldier in the next bed and proceeded to do a one hour workout of alternating air squats and pushups. It was hard to arrange with the IV in, but I finally turned it off and laid the metal stand on its side. No headaches. No heart attacks. There was pain, sure. I was more bruised now than I had been after my tumble down the stairs, but they’d already told me I didn’t have any broken bones, not even my rib. I could almost breathe without pain now. All my shrapnel wounds were scabbing. No infections. So, it was time. If the doctors had their way, I’d be in here a month. But there was nothing they could do for me here that Donnie couldn’t do back at Jbad.
“Master Sergeant Mason, what’s this I hear about you wanting to leave?” Doctor Edgeway retrieved my clipboard from the door as he entered. The nurse started replacing EKG leads as he spoke.

“Look doc, I’ve been under observation for five days now. I think I’m 90%. Thanks for everything, but I’m ready to go back to my team.”

“Well, we’d like you to be 100%.”

I gave him a look. “Is anyone every 100%, doc? I haven’t been 100% in over 10 years. I’m always 5% down for some reason or another. Torn muscle. Tweaked shoulder. Tendinitis. 90% is probably as good as I’ll get until the bruises heal.”

“I have to insist that you stay.”

“For what? I mean, what are you waiting for? I’ve seen my labs, they’re all normal. Some of them better than normal, right? So, what are we waiting for?”

“We don’t know, that’s why it’s called observation.”

“Let me ask this a different way. If all my labs are normal or better, what do I need to do so I can convince you to let me go back to my team? What can you do for me here that my medic can’t do for me at my firebase?”

“You shouldn’t be concerned about your team Sergeant Mason, they’ll be fine without you. You just need to concentrate on getting better. Rest.”

I sat up. “Doc, you don’t understand. I’m giving you a courtesy right now. You need to convince me to stay, otherwise I’m gone. You may force me back here eventually, but I’ll just leave again. I’m confident that I’m fitter than your average soldier in the field right now, and I’m willing to prove it to you here and now so we can get past it. That way you feel good about letting me go and I feel good about leaving.”
He looked at me over the top of his clipboard. He was a young doctor, probably not too far out of med school, and I’m sure he was used to overseeing the situations, used to having his orders followed.

“Doc, if I’m ready to go back, I have to be with my team. If one of those guys gets hurt or killed while I’m here and healthy, you and I are both to blame. Work with me here, walk me through your diagnosis and your reasoning, give me some physical tasks that you would consider equal to combat. Let’s come to an agreement.”

*****

“Doc said he’ll let me come back in a week.”

“That’s great news, Ryan,” said Stone.

After our talk, the doctor let me speak to my team and said I would have the freedom to move around the base, as long as I returned to the hospital every night.

“Mario’s ramp ceremony is tomorrow.”

“That’s not your fault Ryan.”

“If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

“And mine.”

It was hard to argue that, so I didn’t.

“While you’re up there, look into our prisoner, see if he’s giving up any information.”

“I’m on it. I was planning on paying him a visit as soon as I hung up.”
“Everything’s going good here. All quiet too, since the passes are all snowed in. Take whatever time you need to get healthy.”

“Sir, I’m healthy now. I just have to prove it to the doc.”

The doctor said he didn’t feel comfortable letting me go back into the field in under two weeks, but if I wasn’t getting headaches, dizziness, or vomiting, he could rule out a concussion and would sign off on a clean bill of health. My worst wound was on my right calf, but it was just skin I’d lost on the landing, and it was scabbing up nicely. All the other cuts and bruises were almost healed. And the two weeks were probably good for my bruised ribs.

I dressed and signed out at the nurse’s desk.

It felt weird walking without any combat equipment.

I guess they stripped me before the MEDEVAC came. The nurse said I showed up naked as the day I was born. I had some mysterious visitors from Camp Vance who I didn’t know. One claimed to be my liaison. Whatever. I asked him to bring me a uniform. A little loose, but I’d lost a couple pounds in Jalalabad.

I’d seen the prison briefly when I’d arrived, so I knew vaguely which way to go. The ground was covered in a couple inches of snow and I mentally thanked the liaison for bringing me a new set of long underwear. Not sure where he got it, but I was glad for it.

At the entrance, a large sign advertised 45th Military Police Company and underneath 96th Military Intelligence Company. The prison was guarded by military police. I wondered if they kept American and Afghan prisoners here. As crazy as it might sound, I knew that soldiers committed crimes during war, and the criminal
investigation division was part of the police company, and they would be charged with investigating American crimes while the interrogators from the intelligence company would investigate the terrorists. It would make sense to keep all of them co-located, less guards needed.

“I’d like to speak to one of the interrogators please,” I told the guard beside the gate.

With a slightly bored look, the guard checked my identification and then gestured with his head, turned around, and walked inside. “Follow me.”

He led me through a maze of concertina wire. On either side were structures that barely passed for large wood shacks. At the very back, the guard opened the door to a more solid structure and yelled down a hallway. “Got a visitor!”

“Quit yelling!” came the reply.

The guard nodded to me. “Go on in, straight down the hallway to the right.”

I walked down the wooden hallway, passing numerous empty rooms on either side, my footsteps loud in the surrounding silence. A soldier was leaving as I approached the last doorway. “I’m going to lunch. You got this one, Miller,” he said.

I entered without knocking and was greeted by a young sergeant who stood up quickly behind his desk. “Good afternoon, Master Sergeant.”

I stuck out her hand, “Hi, I’m Sergeant Mason.” We shook as I took the measure of the man before me. His military issue glasses sat on a long, hawkish nose and his short haircut barely hid a receding hairline. I’d bet money he was bald in less than five years. His desk was a nest of half empty chip bags and soda cans strategically placed around piles of paper and a large Arabic language book.
“What can I do for you, Master Sergeant?” he asked in a high voice. He was young, probably not more than twenty, twenty-one at most.

“Why are you learning Arabic? The bad guys here all speak Dari or Pashtu or some other tribal language.”

He put his hand on the book, his face serious. “The really bad guys, the Taliban and Al-Qaida, the true believers. They speak Arabic. The others, they’re just pawns.”

I thought for a second and nodded. “Fair enough. So, can you tell me if my prisoner was a true believer or not?”

Miller gestured for me to sit down and he followed suit. “Not sure, Sergeant. Who is your prisoner?”

“My men just brought in a prisoner, about a week ago. I’d like to know if you got any information from him that we could use.”

“Well Sergeant, unfortunately that’s not how it works.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can’t come in and get the intelligence we discover. It has to be vetted by our higher headquarters. Those are the rules.”

“Say again?” I could feel my face turning red.

“The interrogation reports are classified and need to be scrubbed by my higher first; by the time you could see it, we’re talking weeks by the way, you probably couldn’t use the information anyway.”

“So, you have nothing I can send back to the guys? At least let us know if there was any follow-on information your guys acquired?”
Miller shook his head again, “I’m not supposed to release any info from the investigation until higher—.” He trailed off under my glare.

“Really?” I asked.

“What?” Miller asked. “I mean, excuse me, sergeant?”

“That’s all you got for me? Information you can’t release? Why should we even bother to risk our lives capturing these guys?”

Miller had a confused look on his face. “Wha—? To bring security and democracy to Afghanistan?” It came out as a question.

I nodded slowly. “Really?” I said again. “Is that your goal or theirs?” I leaned forward. “Why are you here, Sergeant Miller?”

He paused, considering the question, then said weakly “To bring security and democracy to Afghanistan.”

“That’s your reason for getting up every day.”

“Of course,” he said.

“You might want to think about that answer. Americans are dying as we speak, to bring security and democracy to this country. Maybe you and I should concentrate our efforts on making sure as few as possible give their lives to that goal.”

Miller seemed to consider my words, then he opened a notebook on his desk. “When was the prisoner brought here?”

“One week ago.”

“And from where?”

“Jalalabad.”
He moved his finger down a column in the book. “I have one guy, looks like he was messed up pretty bad. We put him in the hospital wing of the prison for a few days then released him.”

“You did what?”

Miller heard the growl in my voice and looked up. “We didn’t have any evidence.”

“That motherfucker killed my driver and almost blew me up.”

“There’s no proof of that.”

“You snot-nosed piece of shit, he was running away from the blast area. Why else would he do that.”

“Is there a problem here,” came a voice from behind me.

I turned and saw a man with Major rank, his nametag read Patterson.

“Yeah, I got a problem sir. This fucker just released the man who blew up my hummer.”

“Sir, we had to. By the time he got out of the hospital, a week had passed. And the capturing unit didn’t turn in any paperwork.”

Patterson came into the room and Miller handed him a folder, which he leafed through.

“The problem is that we have to prove their guilt, the prisoners I mean,” said Patterson. “Mostly, the capturing units are filling out the basic information on the turn-in documents, but it’s not enough. We need fingerprints linking a bomber to bomb components, or eye witness accounts of prisoners installing IEDs. Mostly what we get is a description of where the prisoner was in relation to the IED and some character witness statements from his neighbors.” He shrugged. “We can only hold them for ten
days, that’s including the time they spent with the capturing unit, and when we send requests for more information back to the capturing units they usually go unanswered or we get the information too late.”

“You have to be kidding me. And you don’t even give the team the courtesy of a phone call?”

“We assume they sent in all the info they had,” said Miller.

“You guys are fucking ridiculous. You know we’re fighting a war, right?”

“Calm down, Sergeant,” said Patterson. “I understand you’re upset.”

“Upset? One of my guys is dead because of this fucker, and you guys let him go, and you’re not even sorry. Fuck you guys.”

I stormed out of the prison. What the hell are we fighting for anyway, if the Americans soldiers supporting us aren’t even doing their job. What the fuck?

When I got back to the hospital, someone had left my mail on the bed. A letter each from my parents and my brother. And a large, official-looking manila envelope from my wife.
“You think that will work?” Captain Keesner asked.

“I think so,” said Camila. “It’s worth a try at least, better than what you’re doing now, right?”

“I guess. I still don’t know if we can meet the time requirements.”

“Look, just give me the info as soon as you get it, as much of the 5 Ws as you can. Let me work it after that.”

He sighed into the phone. “Like you said, it’s better than what we’ve been doing. Worst case scenario, we don’t have air support, which just puts us back to square one anyway.”

“Trust me Chris, I’ll make this better.”

Camila hung up. She had a plan to solve Bat 6’s air support problem, the feasibility of which remained to be seen, but she hoped for favorable results.

She’d volunteered to sit in for the night shift liaison, Captain Santos. He didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth and headed for the gym. Camila wanted Bat 6 to know about her plan for air support as soon as possible.

As she waited for Santos to return, she clicked through the folders on the share drive. Historical files dating over a decade could be found. Concepts on how to win the Afghanistan engagement, new initiatives from new commanders, new priorities, new visions.
A folder called TICs caught her eye. Troops In Contact. Maybe she could learn something to help BAT 6, some enemy tactic that the intelligence guys hadn’t noticed. Inside she saw sub folders dated by year and before she could stop herself she clicked a folder titled 2006. Now the folders were divided by call sign. And there it was, her father's team: Hammerhead 6.

She remembered all his military equipment stacked in the garage, all the boxes stamped with inked hammerhead sharks. The black shirts he wore to workouts, stamped the same. His shorts.

She hovered the mouse over the folder, then double clicked it quickly, afraid it would disappear like a mirage. Nine dates appeared on the screen. She knew the history. Mark had told her about the whole deployment, from start to finish, every attack on the base, every IED, every ambush. She wanted to know all the details, she wanted to know her father’s experiences, she wanted to picture him problem solving through the attacks, anticipating the explosions, preparing and training his men. They had all come home except Chris and her dad, maybe not whole, but everyone else had come home. Her dad made that possible.

The cursor traced a slow path through the dates.

January 19, 2006. The day Mario was killed.

May 23, 2006. Mark was wounded, and Chris died

The arrow stopped over the last. May 25, 2006. Dad’s last battle.

Two clicks and small images began to appear across the screen. JPG photos waiting to be enlarged, reports written in Word documents, posthumous awards in PDFs: Purple Heart, Silver Star, Combat Infantryman Badge.
“Hey thanks,” Santos interrupted her thoughts.

She closed the folders and stood up. “Did you get a good workout in?”

“Yep, always nice to interrupt the monotony with a workout. Come back anytime if you can’t sleep.”

Camilla nodded and smiled. “Sure thing.” She stood, staring at the empty screen briefly. “Have a good night,” she said, turning to leave, remembering the thumbnail image of a blackened hummer flipped on its side.

****

She left the operations center in a daze, making her way to her small apartment by reflex. She needed to work out, clear her head, feed her soul.

Someone grabbed her arm.

“Hey, you alright?”

Her eyes focused on a familiar, chubby bearded face. Keith.

“Sorry.” She wiped her face with both hands. “Just tired. How have you been?”

Keith shrugged. “You know, Groundhog Day. Nothing much changes around here.” He paused. “Anyone ever tell you that you look like your father?”

Camilla stared at Keith. Most people who knew her father had been in his unit, now her unit. Keith was someone outside of 7th group, and she was sure she had never met him before BAF. Balding at the crown of his head, his beard was unkempt and more grey than brown, while what hair was left on his head seemed to be winning the war against gray. He was wearing the same clothes that she had seen him in the first
time they’d met: cargo pants, untucked polo shirt, Oakley boots. He looked like a civilian trying to act military; she had met more of those in the last years than she’d like to admit. His eyes were squinty, piggish almost, and his mouth always revealed tobacco-stained teeth when he tried to smile.

“How did you know him, were you in the same unit?”

“No, I was in 3rd group. We weren’t great friends or anything, I knew him in passing.” He paused. “Still, Ryan, hell, he was a legend. *Why we fight* and all that, you know.”

The posters had started appearing while she was in West Point. She remembered the first time she saw one in Plebe year, walking down the hallway on her way to history class. Her father, in a U.S. desert camouflage uniform with a dark brown Afghanistan Pakol hat on his head, kneeling in the sand before a small Afghan girl dressed in light green traditional dress with a purple scarf covering her hair. The whole scene was framed by tall mountains in the background. Her dad held a stethoscope to the chest of a little girl, who stared up at him with bright green eyes. The poster became the face of the Green Berets in war, suggesting the other side that was necessary for victory: winning the support of the people. At the top of the poster, in dark blue lettering, were the words *Why We Fight*.

“How did he become the poster child?” Keith asked.

Camilla shook her head. “Wrong place, wrong time I guess, just like every other thing in the Army. He never had a chance to tell me that story.”

Keith shrugged, then thrust out his hand which she automatically clasped. “Well, see you around then, gotta make this meeting.”
She watched him plod down the hard-packed road toward the prison and wondered briefly what it was that he did.

*****

“I want to be a Green Beret,” Camila had told Mark.

When she was 16, at the beginning of her junior year, it had been Mark that spoke to her about college, not her mom. He had come to her with flyers for college and a printed list of scholarships that she could qualify for as the daughter of a veteran killed in combat.

“That’s a goal. Yessiree, Miss, that is a goal.”

“How do I do that?”

They sat at the dining room table, the paraphernalia scattered across it’s wood surface.

“It’s not possible. As of right now, women aren’t authorized in combat arms positions, which includes special forces.”

“And Green Berets?”

“Special Forces, Green Berets, same thing.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, the unit is Special Forces, they wear the Green Beret.”

Camila absorbed this information. “So, I can’t become a Green Beret?”

Mark shook his head. “Not right now, there might be a change in policy someday.”

“So, what is the closest thing I can do as a woman?” She finger quoted the last word.

“Well, there are a few positions for women in elite units. Also, the CIA or FBI.” He began writing on a notebook. “Basically, all of the jobs we are talking about have the same
pre-requisites.” He showed her his notes. “They have physical fitness tests that include running, sit ups, and push-ups. You need a college degree with a good GPA. Languages are a plus. And martial arts would be beneficial.”

Camila already had good grades. She had avoided sports after her father died so she could spend more time with her mom. But she ran on her own, something that brought her peace and allowed her to clear her mind.

“You’re going to have to work twice as hard as the guys,” Mark had told her when she showed him her completed application to West Point. They had discussed her goals, her future in the military. “I don’t want to put pressure on you, but I want you to be prepared. You will have to be perfect. You’ll be watched, always. No mistakes.”

That was the key to Jiu Jitsu too. No mistakes.

Mark had made her a workout routine that she stuck to through the rest of high school. She got faster and stronger. He spoke to her mother, and without mentioning anything about the Army, he convinced her that martial arts would be in her best interest for self-defense, especially when she went to college. He quoted statistics of sexual abuse and rape on college campuses. It wasn’t hard to convince Maureen after that. By the time Camila was accepted to West Point, she was a Purple Belt.

She joined the Jiu Jitsu team and the cross-country team in her Plebe year. She was the only woman on the Jiu Jitsu team, and she received her brown belt in her senior year, the same year they announced women could apply to be Green Berets.

When she was assigned to the 82nd as a platoon leader, she spent her evenings grappling and finally earned her black belt the same year she applied for the Green Beret Qualification course. She had made herself five physical goals to prepare herself.
Run a marathon in under 3:00 hours, which she had done just after graduating West Point. Walking the Bataan Death March, all twenty-six miles with a sixty-pound backpack in under thirteen-minute miles. She had done that last year. Do one hundred situps in two minutes and one hundred pushups in two minutes. She had been doing that on her Physical Fitness test for the last three years. And do twenty consecutive pullups. She never got past fifteen, but it was more than ninety percent of the guys that applied.

*****

If she was going to do well in the combatives competition, she would need to practice with other soldiers, especially out of her weight class.

“Hey, mind if I join in?” she asked the three soldiers in the octagon. They were practicing Jiu Jitsu dressed in uniforms, barefoot. One was reading out of a large book with glossy pictures.

“We’re just learning,” said the one with the book.

“That’s Okay,” she replied. “I just want to learn and get in shape.”

The three looked at each other and shared a nod.

She entered the cage. She was wearing black workout tights and a sleeveless tee shirt, maybe not the most appropriate clothes for rolling, but given their apparent level she didn’t think she would end up in any compromising situations. Still, next time, she would have to wear a uniform.
“Have you ever done any Jiu Jitsu before?” asked book man, whose name tag read Adams.

“A little. I studied some in college.”

“Well, we’ll take it easy on you since we outweigh you by so much,” said the one sitting on the mat whose shirt read Burns.

“I can usually hold my own.” She began to stretch. “Did you guys do some warm ups?”

Adams flipped through the book. “They have some warm ups in here, but we skipped them.”

“Lots of the warm ups help to build muscle memory on the moves. It’s all connected. You want me to show you some that my teachers taught me?”

She smiled as they all nodded.

She’d been here before. Almost every base or deployment she had been on, she had started a Jiu Jitsu club. Some soldiers still kept in contact with her. Some won competitions.

She had yet to meet one that could beat her.
Ryan Mason’s journal mocked him from the table.

What had he discovered about Keith? Which deals? Did he have proof? What proof was there? In the end, it would be just Keith’s word against a dead man’s.

“We’ll get back to the journal soon enough,” said Miller. “I have a few more questions about your relationship with Captain Camila Mason.”

“I already told you, I saw her on the base. We spoke about her father.”

“Why? If you didn’t know Master Sergeant Mason, why bother with his daughter.”

Keith rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Have you ever been to combat, Miller?”

“I’ve served in Bagram. More times than I care to count.”

“Right, and you have a combat patch. For serving in an area designated as a combat zone by Congress. Congratulations.”

“I also went forward to other bases.”

“To conduct investigations. I understand. But have you ever been in combat, in a firefight? Heard bullets thunk into the side of your vehicle? Watched the enemy through your scope and seen him fall as your finger tightens softly on the trigger?”
the hot blood of your teammate soak through your fingers as you try to save his life?"

He leaned forward. “Have you seen that kind of combat?”

Miller shrugged. “We all have our jobs to do. You’re avoiding the question.”

“You wouldn’t understand my interest in a fallen brother. A Green Beret who
gave his life for his country and his family. How could you?”

“I’ve lost friends. Try me. Anyway, what does this pretty speech have to do with
Captain Mason?”

“Master Sergeant Ryan Mason was a Green Beret. He was killed by Baber
Pacha in May 2006. Sergeant First Class Elizarraras died on August 1, 2005 - killed by
Baber Pacha. Staff Sergeant Lewis died on October 5, 2005 - killed by Baber Pacha.
Do you see my connection with the Mason family now? Don’t you think we have
common interests?”

Miller wrote in his notebook. “Okay, I can buy that. You have a bond of
brotherhood. You felt a common goal in finding Baber Pacha. Captain Mason gets
assigned to Pacha’s stomping grounds, you recruit her to help bring him down.”

“I didn’t recruit her. She agreed willingly. She’s part of the brotherhood too. She
understands.”

“Maybe.”

“More than you ever will.”
Part 3

“One day I'll tell my daughter a story about a dark time, the dark days before she was born, and how her coming was a ray of light. We got lost for a while, the story will begin, but then we found our way.”

— Nick Flynn

“The monsters are gone.”

"Really?" Doubtful.

"I killed the monsters. That's what fathers do."

— Fiona Wallace
Chapter 17

February 1, 2006

130 Days and a wakeup

Two weeks of vacation in BAF and I’m finally flying back to the team. Two weeks to replay the attack in my mind. Did I do everything I could have? Mario died because we went there. What else could I have done? How can I do better next time?

We shouldn’t have gone on that mission. It wasn’t on our list of priorities. Before we left America for this godforsaken place, Stone and I made a list of missions for which we were willing to risk the lives of our team members. Weapons caches weren’t on the list. Especially empty ones.

We need to do better. I need to do better.

No one met my plane.

Most of the planes to Jalalabad came to resupply the Marines who were located on the southern side of the airfield. My team only met planes that had been pre-coordinated. I made sure mine wasn’t. Call it an inspection. Call it PTSD. Call it paranoia. Call it what you will, but I wanted to make sure things were going according to plan, that security was being maintained even in my absence, that my guys did the right thing even when I wasn’t watching.

I walked the half mile from where the plane landed. I had acquired a backpack’s worth of things at BAF. It hadn’t rained for a few days I guess because each step kicked up a cloud of dust. Two men waited outside the compound gate. As I got closer I saw that one was a large, bearded American standing beside the gate guard, his T-
shirt two sizes too small. The other man squatted across the street from the compound gate, and I recognized Shir Shah.

“Hey Boss!” said Shir. He crossed the road.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“The owner of the sandwich shop where the planes land, he’s my uncle. He called and told me someone was heading this way.”

I filed that away. It was troubling that the Afghans on my compound knew more than my men. “I’d like to meet him.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

I turned to the American. “Who are you?”

I immediately categorized him as a contractor. Contractors did a lot of the logistical, technical work on the base: keeping the internet working, the phone lines up, and the generators functioning. It was a brisk morning, but his shirt was soaked through and his face dripped, making dark sand beneath him. “Hi, sir. I’m Ben.” He held up a card that was hanging around his neck. “Keith gave me this card so I could go on the compound when I needed to, but the guards won’t let me in.”

“Let me see that card?” He slipped it off his neck and handed it to me. It was obviously homemade, probably on our compound printers. In large, bold letters was printed *SF Compound Admission Pass*. I put it in my pocket. “Well Ben, Keith doesn’t work here anymore, which is why your badge doesn’t work. What is it exactly that you do?”

“I run the generators.”

“The generators that are located outside my compound?”
He nodded.

“So why do you need to come in my compound?”

“Well, I have equipment in there.”

“I see. So, is there an emergency right now?”

“What?”

“I said, do you have an emergency right now?”

“Well, no.”

“Great, then come back later. I don’t have time to figure this out right now.”

“But—"

I turned and Shir followed me through the gate. “Have you ever seen that guy before?” I asked.

“Sometimes, boss,” said Shir. “He came on the compound to work with Keith once in a while.”

I wondered if Keith had given entry badges to others, and if so, how many.

“How are you feeling, boss?” asked Shir.

“Good as new, buddy. How are things here? Any problems with those other Americans trying to get on base?”

“No way, Boss. No one but the team gets in now.”

I heard a few yells in English as some of the guys recognized me, and before I got to the Ops Center most of the team was crowded around asking questions.

“How ya feeling, top?”

“When’s our next mission?”

“How were the nurses?”
It felt good to be home.

*****

I dropped my gear in my room after telling the team to meet me in the Operations Room. Halfway to Ops, I froze and stared.

Painted on the wall was a giant eagle flying over a United States flag blowing in an imaginary wind. At eye level was a framed photo of Mario with a short paragraph printed beneath. “SSG Mario Rodriguez was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina on February 3, 1982. He joined the Army in 2000 and served for six years as a mechanic. On January 29, 2006, he was killed by an improvised explosive device during an ambush near Jalalabad, Afghanistan articulated by Baber Pacha, a notorious member of Al Qiada, who shall be brought to justice by the US Special Forces. He died trying to make Afghanistan a safer country. Honorary member of Special Forces Operational Detachment ‘A’ 772.”

The team had assembled around me as I read the plaque.

“Chris painted that while you were on vacation in BAF,” said Mark.

I nodded. This was good. This brought accountability to the enemies.

“You did a good job, Chris.”

“I knew he was good for something,” said Teddy through a mouth of chewing tobacco.

I turned. “Let’s do this meeting.”
“What’s next?” I asked.

We’d had a quick meeting. I got caught up on the base activities, they got caught up on pretty nurses, sponge baths, and red tape. Now I had Captain Stone and Mark in the Ops center.

“We knew you’d be back soon, so we concentrated on base security and improvements. We also started training our partners,” said Captain Stone. “You probably didn’t notice, but the Afghan Army soldiers froze and didn’t return fire at all, and the Afghan Security Forces sprayed lead at everything on both sides of the road. We’re lucky there weren’t any civilians around.”

“How are they looking now?” I asked.

“Teddy’s been working drills with them,” said Stone. “They’re better, but it will take time.”

“Well, it’s winter. The passes are closed, so not much movement,” said Mark. “I’ve been keeping an eye out for Baber Pacha, but based on the reporting history, I don’t expect to see much on him until spring.”

“Okay,” I said. “Keep gathering intel, I don’t want to go on another long-distance mission unless we are ninety five percent certain the target is worthwhile. But we can still run some mobile hospital sites around the airfield and up by the passes, maybe we can convince some people to open up and talk with us. Get outside the wire, meet the people. Try and get someone on our side.”
“I’ll make a list of nearby towns that my intelligence sources call home,” said Mark. “I could sell the medical services we’ll provide as a reward for providing good information.” He jotted down notes.

I stretched my arms over my head and cracked my neck. “Let’s wait a week or two, let me get my feet back on the ground. I need to walk around in my armor and kit for a while, see what injuries get rubbed wrong by the equipment.”

“It’ll take a week to get mission approval anyway,” said Stone.

Someone yelled down the hallway, “Mark, your boyfriend’s here.”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“Freddy,” Mark said. “Guess we have a surprise meeting.”

Shir Shah stuck his head into the room. “Boss, you have to talk to our Afghan guards.”

“Sorry, Ryan, I forgot,” said Mark. “We have a salary problem. We told them it would have to wait till you got back.”

I stood up. “I thought we solved that already. We pay everyone what we’re supposed to pay them.”

Mark shook his head. “That’s part of the problem.”

“Shabeer says he’s going to quit and take all his guys with him,” said Shir. 

Who the hell is Shabeer? “And Shabeer is—?”

“The ASF commander.”

Oh yeah. For some reason I was not picking up on these Afghan names very quickly. I could pick Shabeer out of a line up though: big man, not tall, but stocky. Solid.
“Shabeer is outside,” said Shir. “He wants to talk to you right now.”

Mark started to get up, but I stopped him. “I got this, Mark. You do your interviews.”

He sat back down and said, “Can’t make this shit up, can you?”

“Nope.”

Outside the building were two trucks. Six armed Afghans lounged on the trucks, brown wool blankets thrown over their shoulders. Shabeer stood in front of the lead truck.

I shook hands with the large man. “As-salaam Alaykum.” May God be with you, good morning, hello, hey, all of the above. I looked at Shir and nodded toward Shabeer.

“Tell him it’s good to see him again.”

Shir and Shabeer exchanged words and then Shir spoke to me.

“Boss, he wants a raise. He says the cooks shouldn’t make more money than his men, it’s insulting.”

“I agree.” I paused, collecting my thoughts. Damn he was a big Afghan, he had to be doing steroids. Afghans didn’t get that big on their own. I think I’ve only met maybe half a dozen that were bigger than me. His black hair and beard were obviously dyed, and I wondered how old he was. He spoke to Shir again.

Shir turned back to me, “He’s asking how much of a raise you are going to give his men?”

I shook his head so Shabeer could understand before Shir translated. “I’m not. I can’t.”
Shabeer spoke excitedly and Shir translated again, “He says he’ll quit if you don’t give him a raise.”

I nodded. “A man has to do what a man has to do to take care of his family and to uphold his pride. However, I’ve spoken to other firebase commanders. Shabeer’s men are getting paid twenty five percent more than any other base. I don’t think he’ll find better salaries elsewhere. If he does, he should take it.”

Shir translated and Shabeer nodded quietly, looking at me. He stroked the left side of his beard with one hand, and I noticed a faint scar under his beard, and wondered if he got that defending Americans or fighting Russians. He talked directly to me in Pashtu and Shir translated, “Shabeer says that he won’t be able to find a better paying job, but he can’t work for less than the cooks.”

“I understand. There are some things that a man can’t tolerate.”

Shir continued without speaking to Shabeer. “He says he’s going to quit and take all his men with him.”

“I understand, I get it.” I spread both hands. “And if that is what he must do, then he should do it. I can’t change their salaries. That’s dictated from Bagram. If I could, I’d pay them triple for all they do for us. But it’s not my money and it’s beyond my control.” I put out my hand again and Shabeer took it with a puzzled look on his face. “You will be missed.”

The Afghans spoke briefly, and we continued to shake hands.

“He says you won’t have warriors to fight with you on your missions,” Shir said.

Ryan nodded again. “He’s right, we’ll have to find others that will work for what we can pay. Hopefully, they can overlook their pride. And of course, we’ll have to delay
our missions so we can train them. But we'll try to manage. Afghanistan still needs protecting. The job goes on. I doubt I'll find anyone as good.” With my left hand I grasped Shabeer’s shoulder. “Tell him we will miss him and his men and tell him thanks for everything he’s done for us.”

Shir translated. Shabeer’s face maintained a serious look and there was a long pause. Then he spoke to Shir again.

“He says he will continue to work for you,” Shir Shah said. “Fighting with you to protect his country – there is honor in that. He can be proud of that.” Shabeer smiled as he clasped my shoulder.

I felt a sense of relief. With a bluff like that, I should play more poker. “Thanks Shabeer and I thank you for your loyalty.”

Shir Shah and Shabeer exchanged more words, and then Shabeer turned and walked carefully over the icy ground back to his sleeping quarters.
Chapter 18

January 1, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

The man charged like a bull. She recognized the cliché as soon as the referee said go, but nothing described the movement better. He had almost no neck. His head, with its blond flat top, perched like the top block of a pyramid above his massive shoulders. His arms swung by his sides, helping his bulging legs propel him forward. She thought she heard him snort.

The gym equipment had been moved to the perimeter of the gym to make room for collapsible bleachers around the octagon. There was standing room only, and any dynamic move was rewarded with loud cheering. She’d made it to the semi-finals of the combatives competition, dispatching her first two competitors with ease.

She has been confident she would make it to the semi-finals, unless she had the bad luck of being paired with one of the best at the beginning of the competition. Fortunately, that hadn’t happened. Physical fitness meant a lot in Special Operations. Though it was unfair, it was what most men saw first when they looked at her. Someone weaker. Someone that would let them down on a mission. Someone that wouldn’t have the physical strength or intestinal fortitude to carry a wounded comrade to safety. She had to prove every doubter wrong with every breath she took.

Competitions were how she had established herself in the Infantry and now, the Special Forces. Men respected hand to hand combat. And they didn’t tolerate excuses with reference to size and strength. She knew size could matter, but she also knew that strategy would always win.
She had watched The Bull in his first two matches. He must have weighed at least 250 pounds. Army combatives didn’t have weight classes. The enemy didn’t care about weight classes, why should the Army. Skill would prevail. This monster used his weight as a skill, and did it well. He had dispatched his first two opponents almost identically. He charged, his victim froze, and he slammed his opponent to the ground with his full weight. The match was over before it began. His last opponent had left on a stretcher with a broken arm.

Camilla played the frozen target until the last possible moment, then fell back just before his arms could reach her, placing her feet into his stomach. She heard a whoosh of air as she somersaulted backwards and thrust her hips up. Using his momentum, she pushed The Bull higher, causing him to fly over the wall of the octagon cage and into the bleachers. She rolled to her feet and jumped, turning 180 degrees in a stylish, acrobatic flip she had practiced many times. By leaving the combat circle, The Bull had effectively forfeited the match, which was only emphasized by the fact that he was now unconscious. Medics rushed in to tend him and the unfortunate bystanders that hadn’t been quick enough to move out of the way.

Had The Bull been calmer and more calculating, Camilla wasn’t sure how she would have taken him down, but she had foreseen this ending after watching his second fight. She waited for the referee to raise her hand.

Someone from the crowd yelled, “No fair, she’s a ninja!”

Then she heard someone else remark, “I’d like to show her some ninja moves.”

It always came to that. No matter how big the obstacle she overcame, someone would always minimize it with some remark. If a guy had won, he would get back slaps
and high fives, be called a ninja and that would be the end of that. She’d never hear some girl from the sidelines yell how she’d make a ninja out of him.

Anyway, it didn’t matter. She had already accomplished her goals. As soon as the competition started, the teams had formed. Units had banded behind their members. After her first win, members of her battalion had appeared near her corner, offering advice and bringing her water. After her second win, she had a cheering section. This last bout had been rewarded by cheers from all around the gym. She now had fans from all sides. It didn’t even matter if she won the finals, she’d made her mark.

“You need a massage?”

She turned around with a look of disdain that immediately turned into one of shock and joy.

“Mark!” She jumped up and hugged the large man hard.

“I thought you might need a corner man, but you seem to be doing fine all by yourself.” He returned the hug, his full sleeve tattoos standing out starkly against her pale back.

Camilla pulled back, still holding on to his forearms. “When did you get here? Why are you here? How long are--”

He raised his hands, removing her grip in the process. “Hold on, I’ll explain everything, but I think you have some other priorities right now.”

She cocked her head. “What’s that?”

He nodded to the octagon. “Don’t you have another fight?”

She glanced at her final opponent who was warming up, shadow boxing on the other side of the cage. Not nearly as big as The Bull, he was about six feet tall, lanky,
and muscular. She shrugged. “He’s got a few weaknesses.” If she won, great. If she lost, she knew they’d still be talking about her. The girl who almost won. “It will be a good fight.”

Mark looked at her. “Think you can win?”

She stretched her arms above her head and closed her eyes. “Fifty fifty. He’s good. I’m glad you’re here though.”

He lifted her chin with the thumb and index finger of his left hand, his other fingers missing below the knuckles. “Good to see you too, kiddo. Now, let’s see you take this guy.”
Chapter 19

February 15, 2006

127 days and a wakeup

We give our bad guys codenames so we’re not talking freely about them in front of the Afghans or the interpreters. We didn’t always do this, but our first couple missions were dry holes, empty. So, we put two and two together and decided someone was informing on us. We haven’t figured out who the informant is, but the codenames seemed to have fixed the problem.

The terps are big believers in the saying ‘knowledge is power’. And because they speak to all our intelligence sources, all our workers, and all of us, they generally do know more about what’s going on than everyone else. I think their feelings got hurt when we stopped telling them the names of the bad guys.

Score one for the good guys.

While I’d been in the hospital, command issued some new rules to make our lives more difficult. Apparently, the United States was becoming more civil and the people of Afghanistan, or at least the pawns of the bad guys, had voiced their complaints to the new government. Now, we weren’t allowed to attack before daylight without special permission. Special permission was code for we would never be allowed to attack before dawn unless Osama Bin Laden was in the house.

Score one for the bad guys.

Fortunately, daylight is subjective.
“Who is it?” I asked.

“Captain Kangaroo!” said Mark

“Who’s that?”

“Our first target, the compound we attacked when we lost Mario.”

“That asshole again? Is he going to have munitions this time?”

“95%. We got him now. Different location, closer though.”

“Is he working with Pacha?”

“Nope, haven’t proven that.”

“Mark, I’m not willing to risk anyone’s life for a few guns.”

“Bombs. Demo.”

Shit.

At 0100 local, a light rain started as I did PCCs. We left quietly. Well, as quietly as a ten-truck convoy can leave. I wanted to get there, snatch CK, and get off the objective before 0600 if possible. The new mechanic, Corporal Smith, checked all the vehicles the night before, American and Afghan. We still had to switch out one before we left the gate.

We arrived faster than initially expected and I changed the plan to have the attack party walk up so we could surprise the bad guys, allowing the vehicles to follow up afterward. I figured we’d surround the compound before daylight and attack after sunrise. Or at least knock on the gate at sunrise.

“Boss?”

I was looking through my night vision goggles. “What is it, Shir?”
“Boss, this is my auntie’s house.”

“What?” I let my goggles fall around my neck.

“If you had told me where we were going, I could have told you earlier, but I didn’t know we’d end up here.”

“Well Crap. Is Captain Kangaroo a relative too?”

“I don’t know, what’s his real name?”

I looked through the goggles again, staring at Shir. “Noor Muhammad.”

Shir’s green image shook his head. “I don’t know him, boss.”

“Well, if you go up and talk to your auntie, do you think they’ll come out without causing any problems.”

“Yeah, sure, no worries. My auntie, she is going to kill me though.”

I watched Shir’s green outline walk up to the house and yell over the wall. Dogs barked and a woman yelled back. The door built into the metal gate was opened and Shir went inside. Ten minutes later, eight men walked out and sat on the ground in front of the house. Shir came out last

“Cover me,” I said into the radio, then I walked over to Shir by the gate. “Any problems? What took so long?’ I asked him.

“They had to make tea.”

The door opened again and I moved against the wall on instinct. Some children came out of the house with tea on trays, serving the men who sat on the ground first, and then the raiders.

The Afghan soldiers and my team searched the men for weapons. Mark identified Noor Mohammad. Auntie’s husband brought out all of Noor’s luggage, which
included four burlap bags of TNT. Shir guided the team through his auntie’s house, but we didn’t find anything more even with the metal detectors.

The situation was surreal to say the least. Drinking tea beside five bags of explosives, and everyone being nice as they can be. We took five prisoners. Noor Mohammad, his three traveling partners, and Shir’s uncle who owned the house. And we pulled off the objective by 0535 local, despite the tea

“Boss, I know a short cut back, I’ve been here a couple times before,” said Shir.

Of course he had. “You okay, Shir? Us taking your uncle prisoner?”

“Sure, no prob boss. I don’t think Auntie liked him anyway.”

“All right then, lead us home.”

In reality, both to and from trips were quite pleasant with good scenery and reasonably cool weather. Also, everyone in the convoy felt a lot less stressed traveling a different route home. It was a good mission. Thank God, because I think if we had gotten blown up again, it would have broken all our spirits.

*****

“We’ll call it The Best Terp Contest,” I told the team. “One-hundred-dollar bonus to the best terp of the month.”

We got back before noon, cleaned the equipment and locked up our prisoners. Now, we were having our evening team meeting. I’d had an idea while I was in the hospital, and today’s events had rekindled my memory.
“I think we can all agree that some of the interpreters are better than others.” I noted the nods from all team members.

“Some of them don’t even get out of the damn vehicles. Freakin’ cowards!” Teddy punctuated the last word by spitting in a Coke can and ignoring the tobacco juice dribbling down his chin.

Mark shook his head. “It’ll never work. They don’t have it in them. They’re greedy but they’re comfortable with their pay. One hundred dollars won’t make a difference.” He continued to shake his head as he spoke, arms crossed and a tight, a knowing smile on his lips. “It’ll probably make the Terp Wars worse.”

Freakin’ Terp Wars! The interpreters came from different backgrounds and tribes and even nationalities, and they were jealous of each other’s wages and any favoritism shown by the Americans. And they were whiners! Oh my God!

“Well, let’s vote.” I opened my arms. “Nominations?”

“Shir Shah,” Mark spoke up.

“Yeah, remember our first mission?” Teddy spit. “He tackled that guy like a linebacker.” He poked his tongue into his bottom lip. “It was awesome!”

“The Lion King, man.” Chris looked like a blond surfer and liked to play the part. He had thought it was hilarious that ‘Shir Shah’ translated to ‘Lion King’ in Farsi. But then again, he was young enough to have been raised on the movie. Hakuna Matata.

Someone started humming the theme song to the movie and the others began to join in. Teddy grabbed a football that was lying on the floor and stood up, offering it to the fluorescent lights while chanting, “The circle of life!”
“Ok, Ok.” I was laughing with the rest. “Shir Shah, AKA, the Lion King, is nominated, anyone else?” I looked around the room as the men continued to hum. I shrugged, “Alright, Shir will be the first winner of The Best Terp Contest.”

The men filed out of the room, humming Hakuna Matata.

Mark lingered. “Shir deserves it, but this terp contest won’t make the others work any harder.”

I put an arm around his shoulders. “Come on Mark, laissez faire and all that. It’s the American way. Quit worrying. Anyway, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Connecting to families back in America is important for moral. I make sure I talk to my guys one on one about their family life, offering advice where I can, judging their psych profile. I’m not a brain doctor, but I’ve worked with these type of men, I’ve seen family scenarios go bad and affect missions. I try to keep the pulse of my team.

As for me, I keep it bottled inside. It doesn’t help the team if they think I’m not one hundred percent invested.

I tried to call home again, but no answer.

In my room was the envelope. Divorce papers already drawn up, and a note.

“Don’t call home, we’ll talk about this when you get back. I don’t want to do this on the phone and I don’t want this to affect your mission over there. So, do what you have to do, come back in one piece, for Cammy’s sake if nothing else, and then we can talk about it.”
Bitch. And I say that because she’s already taking me out of the game, because I’m investing time in analyzing my family situation instead of planning on how I was going to keep my team safe. I don’t blame her for the divorce, hell in the last five years I’ve been gone more than nine months a year, and even before that I was usually gone for at least half the year. But that’s not my fault, and she knew what she was signing up for. She’s the one giving up.

The least she could do is let me talk to Cammy.
Chapter 20

February 14, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Camila’s job could best be described as ninety nine percent boring inaction interspersed with one percent of complete and utter chaos. She filled in all the blank space solving problems. While others watched movies, read books, and listened for a radio call for help, she refused to do any of those things. She knew that a radio call for help was too late, there was nothing that could make a difference after that. She spent her free time on the phone with Bat 6 or trying to make allies with others on the base to ensure the survival of her guys. That’s how she saw them now, they were her responsibility. They would live or die based on her work.

Every morning and every evening she attended a CUB with the Colonel and his staff, reviewing what had passed over the last twelve hours. Her notebook seemed to fill of its own accord, mostly with scribbled notes of information that she never referred to again but felt she had to write down just on the off chance she might need it. When she wasn’t briefing, or preparing for a brief, she was tracking down information requests for her team. She spoke to the team on the phone almost daily about logistics, improvements, and upcoming missions.

One thing she still hadn’t solved for Bat 6 was gaining access to the information their prisoners provided to the interrogators in BAF, something she meant to solve today.
Camila approached the Intelligence Fusion Center, a huge compound situated at the southern part of the base. It was surrounded by shiny new concertina wire and guard towers. The door was heavily armored, with a camera and a buzzer.

“Fancy meeting you here,” said a voice behind her.

Turning her head, she saw Keith dressed in his normal casual attire. She smiled. She wasn’t sure if this guy was going to come in handy, but she’d get more with honey than vinegar, and a woman’s smile was worth a lot in the middle of Afghanistan. “So, you’re in the intelligence business?”

“You could say that. What about you? What brings you here?”

“I’m just trying to fix the dissemination of information around here. It seems to be stove piped. Do you have any control over that?”

“I might, depends on what you need.”

“All I want is a speedy turn around on prisoner interviews. The guys at the ops center are telling me that all the information has to get vetted fifteen times and I might see it in a couple months which doesn’t help my guys on the ground.”

“No, it doesn’t. Same shit they pulled on me ten years ago.” He scratched his beard, then pulled a badge from beneath his shirt and flashed it at a screen underneath the buzzer. He touched a four-number code and Camila heard the locks on the armored door release. “Come on, I’ll sign you in and get you to the right place anyway.”

“Thanks.”

Inside was a desk manned with two armed guards and a panel of television screens. Keith showed his credentials and signed a clipboard. “Fill out the rest of this
and give them your ID card," he told her. In exchange, Camila got a badge marked visitor that she clipped to her lapel.

Outside of the guardhouse was a large compound. There were numerous buildings and on the far right was a fenced off area with a red sign that showed bolts of lightning. “So, you work with military intelligence?”

Keith shook his head. “This is the Intelligence Fusion Center. The largest amount of manpower comes from the military, of course, but almost all the agencies are represented.”

“And you work for one of those agencies?”

He nodded to a building with a sign that said ‘CIA’. “That’s my office. Stop by if you ever want to talk. Right now, I’ll take you over to the Officer in Charge and let you sort out your issues with him.”

“Is he your boss?”

Keith snorted. “The military is running this compound, so Special Agent Miller manages the ‘fusion’ of intelligence. But I don’t have a military boss.”

He led her to the largest building, labelled only ‘HQ’, and walked in.

Her father’s poster stood watch over the administrative desk, like a ghost that promised to haunt her.

“Miller here?” Keith asked the soldier at the desk.

“Just a minute.” The soldier dialed a number and said a few words. “He’ll be available in about five minutes.”

“Alright Captain Mason, I’ll leave you to it. Miller and I don’t see eye to eye on everything, so I’ll get back to my part of the war.”
Camila shook his hand. “Thanks for the help,” she said.

“Anytime. Open invite, come visit, when you want to see the other side of the war.” He winked, then turned and left.

Camila examined the other military art on the walls, avoiding her dad and his patient.

“Can I help you?”

Camila turned to see a short bald man with glasses perched on a large Italian nose. He wore a uniform with Chief Warrant Officer four rank, and a nametape that read Miller.

“Hi, Captain Mason.”

“Let’s talk in my office.”

He led her down a hallway and into a small, sterile office where they both took seats across from each other.

“I knew a Master Sergeant Mason once upon a time, any relation? Cause you look just like him.”

She nodded. “My dad.”

“Why we fight?”

“Yep, that’s him. How did you know him?”

“Let’s just say he opened my eyes to our real purpose in Afghanistan.”

“He seems to have that effect on people, or so I’ve heard.”

“Anyway, what can I do for you?”

“Are you in charge of the interrogators?”
Miller leaned back and made a face. “Actually, I’m CID. Mostly I do investigations on U.S. personnel. But the agencies wanted a single person to be in charge of all the military pieces, and I happened to be the highest rank. And it didn’t hurt that I used to be in interrogator here, too.”

“I need help getting the information that our prisoners provide, so we can do follow up missions.”

“Deja Vous.”

“What?”

“Your dad had the same problem, and I found a work around for him. Give me the prisoners your looking for and I’ll try and work some magic with the interrogators. Anyway, I know their boss back in Germany, I’ll figure something out.”

“Easy as that then?”

“Well, nothing is ever easy, but your dad paved the way on this one.”

Thanks dad, Camila thought. Always looking out for me.
Chapter 21

March 25, 2006

87 days and a wake up

I don’t want to jinx us, but after five missions, we’ve had no wounded or dead, and less than one hundred days. The guys are feeling confident. It’s a good thing and a bad thing. At some point, we will get hurt, and most likely it will happen because we’ll get too cocky, take too many chances, overlook the obvious because we got complacent. My job is to remind them that other soldiers are dying, our friends and comrades around the country, because they got sloppy. My job is not to let it happen to us.

“Mickey Mouse – arms dealer – bad guy.” The guys were still joking around when Mark began.

“Listen up,” I barked.

Over the last five briefings, he and I had become aware that it didn’t matter to the guys why we went out, so we decided to reduce the intelligence brief to the bare minimums.

Mark pointed at the map with the tip of his pen. “It’s about a four-hour drive, we’re leaving at 0100.”

“Also,” I added, “We have some new restrictions.” I pulled a folded piece of paper out of my pocket, an email I’d printed earlier, and began to read. “In order to demonstrate our support for the Afghan government, all raids will be briefed to the local
government. This is of the utmost importance if we are to infuse the Afghan populace with confidence in their government.”

“What the hell?” asked Teddy. “Now we’re supposed to tell them we’re coming? Everyone knows they’re all corrupt as crap.”

“Calm down,” I raised my voice to match his. “I got this.”

“Fucking bullshit is what it is.” Teddy continued. “What do those guys know? They aren’t out here every day. They haven’t met these assholes. Do they even know what they’re asking us to do?”

Grumbles spread through the room.

“I said don’t worry about it, I got this. Now get some sleep.”

They filed out, still talking about the email.

Mark paused at the door. “Are we going to call the Afghan Governor and let him know?”

I started to erase the white board we had used to brief, sterilizing the information, “I’ll tell him, don’t worry about it.”

“If you tell him, Mickey Mouse won’t be there when we get there. You know that, right?”

“I said I got it Mark.”

Mark stayed a second longer, about to say something, then left.

*****

Ten minutes before dawn we had the target building surrounded.
“Shir, come to me,” I called into the radio.

Shir jogged over.

“Call the governor.”

“Boss, he won’t be awake.”

“Just call him, okay.”

Shir dialed and listened to the ringing, then gave me an ‘I told you so’ look. “Just the answering machine.”

“Leave a message, tell him: Raiding Mickey Mouse’s house, consider yourself notified. Sorry we missed you, let’s do lunch.” Shir paused a second, then smiled evilly and started speaking in Dari.

Sleepy men started to exit the compound and the Afghan Soldiers grabbed them and escorted them to a holding area.

“OK, search the house.”

The local Afghan police came, and after a quick talk with Shir Shah, and yes as a matter of fact they had called the governor, the police helped block off the area.

Thirty minutes later, with ten crates of ammunition and about 25 pounds of crude explosives, I went over to the detained men from the compound and stood next to Mark.

“Well, they’re not the most loyal bunch. They dimed out Mickey as soon as I started the questioning.” He nodded to the man at the end.

“What about the rest?”

Mark thought for a second. “You mean, would it be worth it to bring them back and interrogate them? Maybe. Probably not. All my sources say that Mickey is pulling
the strings around here and throwing his weight around. The rest just follow for fear of him."

"OK. Easy mission. One prisoner, let's get out of here."

*****

"Hey boss," said Shir. We returned to the compound without incident, and I was heading to the dining facility for some dinner. Six missions no contact. Not that I was counting.

“What’s up, buddy? How’s the Best Terp?"

Shir Shah licked his lips. “Boss, I got an offer for more money from the Brits.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I don’t have any more money to give you. You heard what I told Shabeer. I wasn’t lying. It’s not up to me.”

Shir paused. “But I’m your best terp.”

I nodded. “Yes, you are, that’s true. You’ll be sorely missed. But do what you have to.”

“Well, maybe I’ll try it out and then if I don’t like it, I’ll come back.”

I nodded to him. “You could do that. That’s a plan. But we might not have room for you.”

“How’s that?”

“As soon as you leave, I’m going to have to look for someone to replace you. Also, I’m going to have to promote one of the other terps to your position, and the new guy will get the lowest of the terp’s salaries. When you come back, you’ll have to start
at the bottom, if we haven’t found anyone to replace you. There might not even be a job for you.” I sat down on the steps to the dining facility. “At best, you’ll only get about half as much pay.”

He looked stunned. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“You do that. Hey, good luck. Shir, you know I’m not threatening you, right? I just want to be up front with you. I don’t want you to have any misconceptions about how this is going to work.” Shir stared at the icy ground.

I opened the door and stopped, turning to face him again. “Another thing you might want to consider. The Brits, they come and go. The U.S., we’re stupid, we’ve been here consistently from the beginning, and we’ll probably be the last ones out – we always are.”

Shir seemed to think about that for a second, then smiled big. “You are stupid, aren’t you?”

I winked at him. “You know it better than most.”
Chapter 22

February 21, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“Serpent, Serpent, this is Bat 6. Troops in Contact. Over.”

The team had launched three days ago. They had completed their reconnaissance mission last night and were heading home. She had been dreading this call, but she felt ready for it too, better prepared than the first time for sure. She felt her heartbeat accelerate.

“Bat 6, this is Serpent, sitrep, over.” Camila spoke on the radio calmly, glancing at McMillan who was already on the phone, her stomach doing flips. Now she would see if she could make a difference.

Camila was keying the mike as soon as they requested air support, speaking as McMillan signaled with both hands straight up displaying all ten fingers spread wide.

“Close Air Support, a pair of Apache helos in ten minutes, MEDEVAC helo at your location in fifteen.”

“Roger Serpent.”

McMillan came up to his desk, excited.

“Your guys were lucky today, HMLA-367 was conducting a recon exercise just south of Bat 6.”

Camila nodded absently, dialing another number. “Right, and Minnesota NG air ambulance was doing night vision goggle exercises ten miles north,” Camila finished. She looked straight into McMillan’s eyes as she finished punching numbers.

McMillan’s mouth fell open.
“CPT Winston, good afternoon, how are you, sir, this is Camila. Yes sir, could you have your men prepare to move, I have a team pinned down in your vicinity. Yes sir, I’ll send the sitrep with grids to you immediately. Thank you, sir.”

She put the phone down and got behind the computer. Not looking up as she began typing, speaking softly so only McMillan could hear, she said slowly “Some people make their own luck.”

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“Now you see why Colonel Stone sent you here?” asked Mark.

They were sitting in the Green Bean, one of three coffee shops located on BAF. Camila had been stunned when she first arrived. Coffee shops, Burger King, Taco Bell, Chili’s. The amenities on the base were pretty crazy. Not to mention the nail salon and the massage parlor. But after three months on the ground, she had taken it in stride. Infantry and Special Forces didn’t get comfortable very often, so she was more than willing to take advantage of the perks while she could.

“Fuck that guy. Stone lied to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The guy I relieved, Garrot, they gave him a second team. That should have been my team.”

Mark took a sip of coffee, then asked “Do you think you were ready for a team?”

“Damn straight!”
“Really? Do you really think that? Right out of the Qualification Course, thrown into combat with a team you didn’t know? You think that would have been the best decision for anyone?”

“I’m a goddamn Green Beret, Mark. I earned it. Why can’t they just treat me like everyone else that earned it. It’s fucking sexist and unfair.”

Mark shook his head. “Cammy, you got it all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one is holding you back. Stone’s not trying to keep you down.”

“It’s obvious. From not writing my West Point recommendation, to this sham of an assignment, showing favoritism to other officers.”

“No, Cammy, he’s not. He didn’t write you a recommendation because he went up their personally to talk to the commandant. They probably didn’t even read your application. You were in the moment you told him you wanted to go.”

She paused. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Why should he? The team takes care of the team. Your dad was part of the team. You’re part of the team.”

A harsh laugh escaped from her. “You’re the only one that took care of me.”

“Are you kidding me? Brian applied to West Point as an instructor to watch over you. He had to pass SCUBA school to do it, and he hates the water. Teddy Granger was your lead instructor in the Qualification Course, do you think that was by accident?”

“Granger? All that asshole did was screw me over with the hardest missions. All the other students knew it too.”
“Exactly, and you completed all the missions, and you gained the other students’ respect, who were all male by the way. And then Stone sent you here and you’re kicking ass and saving lives, already making a name for yourself. Colonel Atkins has already sent reports about you back to Stone.”

“He has?”

“Of course. Cammy, you’re not alone.”

Maybe not, but sometimes it felt that way.
Chapter 23

April 1, 2006

82 Days and a Wake Up

How do you describe the interpreters? They varied in age from 22 to 44 and they came in all sizes: single, married, gay, straight. Some were good translators, but few were great interpreters. Understanding the nuances of the language and the significance of what a person said took talent. Add to the fact that they weren’t soldiers, and they were scared, it was hard to find good interpreters. But we did have two great ones: Freddy and Shir Shah. And in my ignorant belief in the American Dream, that anyone could be great, I tried to make them greater. But there is no American Dream in Afghanistan. I don’t even think there’s an Afghan Dream.

“Ryan, we got a problem,” said Mark.

What now?

I followed Mark back to his bedroom and found Freddy sitting on a chair in the corner.

“So,” Freddy said. “I am not your best terp?”

Oh, Shit. It had seemed a good idea to bring a little American competitiveness to Afghanistan. What could go wrong? I guess Freddy had heard about the contest.

I hadn’t really considered Freddy when I made the contest, he was already the highest paid terp. I was really trying to target the operational terps, the ones that accompanied us on missions. Still, I should have anticipated this. Freakin’ Shir Shah
had probably returned to the interpreter building and shouted, “I got $100, I got $100.” And then waved the money in Freddy’s face and sang slowly, “And I’m the best terrup.”

“I work hard for you, Ryan.” Freddy spoke slow, perfect English with lengthened vowel sounds. “But if that is not enough, if I am not your best terp, maybe I need to leave.”

I knew the team couldn’t lose Freddy, that wasn’t an option. However, I wasn’t in any position to give another raise either. I looked at the tall Afghan dressed in a long gray baggy shalwar kameez. Freddy wouldn’t look me in the eye. Early twenties, thrown into this war in his teens, but probably involved in some war his whole life. Really, he was just a kid, and sometimes I forgot that.

I put on my best smile, trying to put him at ease. “Freddy.” I held the ‘e’, trying to sound friendly. Freddy still didn’t look at me, his form of sulking, and I sighed and glanced above his head at a calendar pinned to the wall. Then I smiled for real.

I took a step forward and opened my arms. “Freddy, what are you talking about, of course you’re our best terp.” I turned to Mark, “Where’s his money Mark, didn’t I give you that hundred-dollar bill?” I nodded to the safe in the back of the room and Freddy turned toward Mark.

Mark frowned, “Yeah, yeah. Um, I put it in here, hold on.”

Freddy looked back at me. “No, no Ryan. If I am not your best terp, then I must leave.”

Another battle in the Terp Wars. “Freddy, you’re our best terp too. You and Shir tied. We were just playing a joke on you. Ha! April Fool’s!”

Freddy glared at me. “What?”
“April Fool’s, Freddy!” I laughed. “It’s April First,” I said pointing at Freddy. “Got you!”

Mark turned around with a $100 bill in his hand. Then he said hesitantly, “April Fool’s, Freddy.”

Freddy looked back and forth between us, frowning. “What is this,” he paused, then pronounced the words slowly, “April Fool’s?”

“What, are you kidding me Freddy? You’ve been working with Americans for almost five years and you’ve never heard of April Fool’s Day? That’s crazy, right Mark?”

Mark nodded, “Crazy.” He was catching on now.

I sat on a chair in front of Freddy. “April Fool’s Day is when we play jokes on each other. We were just playing a joke on you.”

Freddy was quiet for a moment, then said, “I don’t believe you.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Freddy.” Ryan nodded to Mark, “Google April Fool’s Day.”

Mark sat behind the computer at his desk and typed a few words.

Freddy read over his shoulder. Slowly, he began to smile and nodded. “April Fool’s.” He turned back to me. “Good one Ryan, you got me.”

*****

I had just walked out of Mark’s room when Chris ran up behind me. “Ryan, we got a problem outside.”

Jesus Christ, it never stops!
“What’s up?” I tried not to sound as pissed as I felt. If the men saw me get angry every time they brought me a problem, they’d stop coming to me with problems, which creates its own kind of problems.

“Some civilian outside wants to talk with you.”

Brian led me to a row of metal bunkers at the back of the camp, lined up against the dirt mound that divided us from the Afghans outside the base. I knew they were there but hadn’t had a chance to see what was in them. I figured they were extra parts to the vehicles or construction supplies.

Standing in front of one of the bunkers was Ben. I was still amazed that he was equally wide as he was tall. Even though the sun had almost set, he was sweating up a storm, drops of perspiration clotting the sand between his feet.

“Ben, right?” We shook hands, mine came away wet. “What can I do for you?”

“Hey, yeah, I need to get into that bunker there. It’s got some of my things.”

I squinted at the bunker in question.

“I tried to open it, but my key didn’t work,” Ben continued.

I nodded slowly. “Yes, well, we weren’t told about anything of yours on this base. As far as I know, everything in this camp belongs to my team. Speaking of which, how did you get on the camp? I thought I took your entry pass.”

“I brought him over,” said Chris.

“Well, we’ll see what kind of equipment you’re talking about, and if you have some hand receipts or paperwork, we’ll see what we can do. Open it up Chris.”

Chris shrugged. “It’s just a bunch of cables, Top.” He pulled out a chain with a dozen keys and approached the door.
Ben nodded, droplets flying everywhere. I ducked my head so my patrol cap kept most of it from my eyes. “That’s right, cables. I’m a contractor here and I use those cables to fix your generator and connect electricity to your buildings.”

“Oh, okay, so they’re our cables, and you’re the tech guy that hooks them up. As in, they’re the Army’s cables.” I looked at him. He squirmed.

“Yeah, well, yeah, that’s right. The Army’s cables. See, we have a compound on the other side of the airfield, but we don’t have the space, so Keith said we could keep them here.”

“Sure, that makes sense,” I said as the lock clicked open. Chris opened the double doors to reveal thick black cables rolled up inside, about 4 inches in diameter.

Ben stepped into the bunker and started gathering a large roll.

“Of course,” I said, “Since this is Army equipment, there must be some inventory sheets to keep track of it. I mean, I’m not claiming anyone is taking any of it, but that’s what inventory sheets are for, to prove it’s all there and no one gets blamed for anything.

Ben stopped what he was doing. “Um—“

“I’m sure Keith kept the paperwork, since it was on our camp.”

Ben nodded his head slowly. “Uh, yeah, I think he did.”

That shitbag Keith had his hands in a lot of things. I shrugged. “Ok, no prob, you need some right now?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Alright, we’ll look for Keith’s paperwork, but in the meantime, how much do you need? Chris can sign some over to you.”
“Well, I—”

“No problem big man, don’t worry about it. What’s your full name again?”

“Um, Benjamin Jacobs.”

I turned to Chris. “Measure how much he needs, have Mr. Jacobs sign for it, and get a copy of his ID and all his contact information.”

“Hey, hey - I,” he stammered again, “You know, I have a meeting I need to go to, I didn’t know it would take this long. How about I come back later and get this?” Ben put the cable back in the bunker. “I don’t want to bother you though, I know you’re busy. Keith gave me a second key to the bunker, maybe you could do the same? You could just leave the paperwork inside and I’ll sign it, that’s what we did before.”

I patted Ben on the back. “Sorry big guy, we only have one key. But no problem, just ask for Chris when you come back and he’ll help you out.”

Ben stood, eyes shifting. Then I guided him to the front gate.

“Just tell the guards that you need to talk to Chris, okay?”

He walked out of the compound, seeming about to say something, but never did.

I wiped my hand on my pants.

I went back to the bunker as Chris locked it again. “Chris, move all the cable to another bunker, then find out who his boss is.” I sighed. This job was giving me a headache again. And Keith was becoming a pain in my ass. “I have some questions for him. And I bet he’ll have some for me.”

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“Baber Pacha?” I asked Mark for only the third time that day.

Staring at the computer screen, Mark shook his head. “You know I’ll tell you as soon as I have anything.”

“I want get that guy, Mark.”

“I know you do. So do I.”

I stood in the doorway of his room.

“Ryan, I doubt I’m going to receive any info while you’re standing there. I’ll come get you as soon as I get a hit.”

“I know. I’m just getting tired of all this administration stuff, it’s driving me crazy. I mean, we almost lost Freddy.”

“No, we didn’t,” said Mark, then continued typing.

“What do you mean we didn’t? He almost walked because of my stupid idea.”

“Freddy wouldn’t have walked out, you pay him too much. His feelings were hurt. He might have left for a couple weeks, but he loves his job.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before? I thought we were going to lose him.”

“To be honest, I was freaking out a little too, but later I realized what was happening. We need to stop letting the terps play us like that.”

“What else do you think they’re doing?”

“They’re probably ripping us off every time we buy something, but I don’t know how to figure that out. Anyway, as long as they’re happy, maybe they won’t betray us.”

I tapped the door. “Is that a possibility?”

“I don’t think so, but this is Afghanistan. Be prepared for anything.”
Chapter 24

February 21, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Camila hadn’t eaten dinner, there hadn’t been much time between the TIC and the CUB. But while preparing for her brief, she’d been having very un-green beret thoughts. She wanted to skip or dance, she found herself humming as she jotted down notes about the mission.

“Good Morning, Sir,” Camila greeted the Colonel. She stood at the front of the conference room. A large cork board was affixed to the wall behind her, though she had seen no one use it since she arrived. A dinosaur, used before the bright lights of projectors and all-knowing computers.

Colonel Atkins nodded. “How are doing today, Camila?”

“Fine sir, thanks.” Glancing to the back of the room, she asked “Can someone turn on the lights, please.” A large map, larger than the cork board, was revealed with the light, hastily taped to the wall and pinned to the cork board with thumbtacks. Camila moved in front of the white screen, and turned toward the map, using a red laser pointer to highlight areas while she spoke. “Early this afternoon, at about 1500 local, Bat 6 was ambushed just east of phase line red while conducting CONOP A354, at about here.” She made small circles with the red laser. “One vehicle was immediately disabled by IEDs and the team took up a defensive posture on the West side of the road and called for air support.”

“Do you have slides today?” asked Lieutenant Colonel Simpson.

Camila paused, turning to face him, “No sir.”
Simpson’s neck turned red. “This is pretty unsat Captain, a map taped to the wall. No one else seems to have had a problem getting their slides done.”

Camila calmly looked at the XO. “Sir, are you unclear of the location of the activity?”

“That’s not the point, there—”

Colonel Atkins held up his hand. “It’s alright Alan, obviously Captain Mason was working with the team and she didn’t have time to make slides.” He had a slight smile on his face. “Go on, Camila.”

“Right, sir.” Her red light danced around the map. “HMLA-367 was conducting night recon training south of the ambush site and was able to respond within ten minutes. The enemy was unable to disengage from our team due to the quick air support response and were disrupted. A MEDEVAC helo from the Minnesota National Guard was conducting night vision training about ten miles north and was able to speedily evac two US wounded from the site back to BAF. The skirmish resulted in zero U.S. KIA, two U.S. WIA, twenty-five enemy KIA and two POWs captured.”

There was a faint murmur as Camila continued her briefing, moving the laser east. “Fifty miles east, a platoon from the Australian Defense Force was conducting routine patrolling. I notified them of our disabled vehicle and they moved to aid our team, simultaneously intercepting some enemy personnel retreating from the objective, and resulting in a total of twelve more POWs captured. With the assistance of the Australians, Bat 6 recovered all equipment and is currently enroute back to their fire base. They should be arriving,” she looked at her watch, “In about thirty minutes. The two wounded are enroute to BAF now.”
Camila turned off her laser pointer. "Are there any questions, sir?"

The Colonel moved his gaze from the map to Camila. "Seems the team had a lot of luck this morning."

"Appears so, sir," Camila nodded.

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Camila knocked on the Deputy Commander’s door.

"Come in," said Lieutenant Colonel Simpson. "Shut the door."

She posted in front of his desk. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"I did. I believe in transparency, so I wanted to tell you that I'll be sending a progress report back to Colonel Stone."

Camila’s mind raced over what she had done over the past months. "About what, sir."

"Concerning your inability to adapt to your environment."

"I don’t understand, sir."

"Really? You have no idea what I’m talking about?"

She remained at attention. "I really don’t, sir."

Simpson tapped notes on his desk. "So, let's take today as an example, your lack of briefing slides. The standard is pretty clear."

"Actually, it’s not sir. I haven’t seen any policy that states we have to give our updates on slides."

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“See, that’s what I’m talking about. You’re not self-aware enough to adapt to your circumstances. Your predecessor made slides, everyone else made slides with no problem, and yet you want to be different. There’s no place for that here.”

“Sir, the TIC happened two hours ago. I was facilitating their support. There wasn’t any time to make slides.”

“CPT Mason, those are just excuses. Your job is to keep the Commander informed. Do you think you did that effectively?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re wrong. Look, I don’t know the details of how you got here.”

“Colonel Stone assigned me here.”

“Not that. Here.” He gestured to her left shoulder tabs. “I resent that you finagled your way into Special Operations.”

“Sir, I earned my way here just the same as everyone else.”

“Right. I doubt that. But it’s irrelevant, you’re here now, so we have to make do. If you’re going to make a good staff officer, you’re going to have to conform.”

“Since you brought it up, sir, I’m not a staff officer, I’m a Green Beret. I should be leading a team, not working staff.”

Simpson began typing on his computer. “Captain Mason, I wouldn’t hold my breath on that. I’m not sure Special Forces is ready for female Green Berets. If you change your attitude, you might be a good staff officer, but I doubt you’ll see a team. You’re dismissed.”

She paused, thoughts whirling through her head.

“Captain Mason, I said you’re dismissed.”
“Roger, sir.” She did an about face and left the office.
Chapter 25

May 2, 2006

51 days and a wake up

For the last four months, we’ve been working with the Afghan Security Force, ASF for short. Basically, these warriors were hired by the first Green Berets that arrived in Afghanistan, back in 2001-2002, and they have worked for every team over the last five years. Since they aren’t members of the Afghan National Army, the Afghan Border Police, or the Afghan National Police, they are viewed as mercenaries and not a legitimate combat force. We are required to work with legitimate government forces on all of our missions, but we still lean on the ASF because they know the area and we train them and trust them.

Now, we have reached that phase in the war where legitimacy is more important than safety. We are being told to disband our mercenaries, thank them for their service, give them termination bonuses, and offer them a chance to continue their service working with legitimate organizations.

The Afghan Army company assigned to work with us is not as dependable. If we have an emergent night mission, they don’t answer their phones. They’re not located in our compound, so if we’re attacked, who knows how long their reaction time is. Also, I’m not sure if they’re loyal to us; I didn’t train them and I don’t pay them. Fact is, Afghan soldiers are lucky to receive a salary some months which sometimes makes me wonder where their loyalties lie. And their salary is significantly less than our beloved ASF.
“Shabeer says that he and his men won’t join the Afghan Army. He hates those MoFos.” The terp swearing never sounded right, but Johnny had learned most of his English from enlisted Americans, so it was hard to blame him. And Johnny had stepped up to replace Shir. As far as the Afghan National Army being MoFos? I had to agree.

I stood in front of the dining facility with Teddy, Johnny, and Shabeer. I glanced at the bulging Afghan leader and wondered who had put him in charge. Maybe they had a big pit fight and he was the last one standing. Sounded about right. I guess it didn’t matter, because ultimately it worked.

“Tell him not to worry, we have a plan.”

A quick exchange between the Afghans, and Johnny continued. “He says it’s an insult and—.”

“I got it Johnny, I got it – tell him to go through the ceremony, take the bonus. We’ll talk again and figure this out afterward.” I looked at Shabeer and spoke slowly, so he would understand. “Don’t worry.” Then, I turned to Teddy. “Go get them formed up.”

Most of the ASF were milling around in front of their barracks and Teddy tried to round them up. I went over to Colonel Brown who would read their disbandment orders, congratulate them, and offer them employment in the Afghan National Army. “We’re almost ready sir.”

Brown nodded, wiping sweat from his ample forehead. “Man, it’s hot here.”

I squinted at the elderly reservist, forcing a smile to my face. “First time out of Bagram, sir?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” he nodded enthusiastically, “I wanted to get out into the action, so I volunteered to fly out here for this ceremony.”
I contained my sigh. Freakin’ Fobbit. What a great word. It had been circulating a lot recently, referring to soldiers that stayed inside the firebases, also called FOBs, and never went outside the wire on missions. This guy thought he was on the front, a base surrounded by one thousand U.S. soldiers that had barely ever been attacked, much less overrun. “Well, sir, glad to see you could get out from behind the desk, I can only imagine how much you hate it.” Hey, I might actually have a future in politics after a statement like that. “Looks like we’re about ready, if you want to follow me up to the front sir.”

The ASF were in a pretty good semblance of a formation, and Teddy called them to another good facsimile of attention as the colonel and I walked to the front. Colonel Brown took out his prepared speech, probably written by the Public Affairs folks, and began to read in English as Johnny translated simultaneously.

I let the meaningless words wash over me. “thanks for your service to your country”, “saved lives, freed your country”, and finishing with “continue to make a difference in the Afghan National Army.” The Americans clapped and the ASF joined in hesitantly.

When Colonel Brown finished, I walked up before the ASF, forty bearded men with AK-47s slung over their shoulders. “Johnny, tell them thank you, from the bottom of my heart. We have fought together, and sweated together, and bled on the same sand. I could not ask for better brother in arms. They have played a large part in freeing their country and should be proud of their accomplishments. I wish you luck in your future, wherever they shall take you.” After Johnny said the last word, I walked among them with Teddy, shaking hands and clapping shoulders.
After Colonel Brown had been escorted to the plane, I returned with Teddy to the compound.

“What are we going to do?” Teddy’s asked. “We can’t operate without these guys, they know the terrain. Hell, they know all our tactics. If the enemy starts paying them, we’ll be in a world of hurt.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I know, now shut up for a minute and let me think. Get Shabeer and Johnny, then meet me at the dining facility.”

I was sitting at a table when they arrived, looking at the notes I’d written last night.

“Shabeer, I need three cooks.”

Johnny translated the request, responding to me “He only has one.”

“I don’t care how many he has, we can train the others, but I need three.”

“Boss, we should just hire some from the town—“

“Johnny, I don’t need input from you right now.” I stared at him, he needed to learn when to shut up. “All I need from you right now is to translate. We’ll talk about this later, but this doesn’t have anything to do with you.” Looking at Shabeer, I continued talking, “Tell Shabeer to choose three cooks from the ASF members.”

Johnny looked like someone had pissed in his cornflakes, but he carried out the translation. Shabeer had a confused look on his face, but he shrugged and Johnny gave me three names that I wrote down.

“Now, four mechanics.”

“Boss, none of his guys know anything about vehicles—“

“Stop it, Johnny. One more time and you’re fired. Just translate.”
Shabeer looked between me and Johnny. After Johnny translated, Shabeer rubbed his beard with one hand. Four more names went into my notebook.

“I’ll also need three engineers, two medics, and two radio experts.”

I wrote more names.

“Tell him that’s all I can do. We will have to release the rest, I can’t justify any more.” Looking again at Shabeer while Johnny translated, I saw the big man nod, understanding. “They can either stay with the Afghan Army, in which case they will still be fighting with us, but I can’t guarantee they will stay here for their whole career, and they will have to follow orders from the Afghan Army commanders.

Shabeer’s face was hard to read.

“Johnny, tell him that they can have one week to make a decision, and then they have to leave.” I turned and walked back to our building. Teddy followed.

“How are we going to pay for these guys, Top?”

“We’ll send up a request for more local contractors – we need field mechanics, field cooks, and field engineers – these were jobs that the ASF filled intrinsically, but that the Afghan Army can’t support. Also, the Afghan Army only have infantrymen, they haven’t been taught other professions – they need medics and communication experts. Until the U.S. trains the Afghan Army in these professions, we’ll support with contractors.”

Teddy was quiet for a moment, then said quietly, “I am speechless. Think they’ll buy it?”

“What’s to buy? It’s the truth. If you believe it, it’s the truth. I need those men filling those positions to succeed in my mission. Do you doubt that statement?”
Teddy thought for a second, “No. That’s a true statement.”

I nodded. “You bet your ass it’s true.” I stopped. “Don’t ever question the morality of what we just did. I plan on training every one of those guys to be experts in their assigned profession. Could we have hired men more capable at these jobs? Absolutely not, I need a field cook to cook for the force and be able to handle a weapon and follow orders. Do you know how long it would take to find a cook willing to follow us into combat and at the same time be effective? Who cares if he burns boiled eggs, he’s a killer first, then a cook. Also, another question, are we abusing taxpayer money?”

Teddy paused, “No?”

“No, of course not. Do you think any taxpayer out there want to see us die? No. We are investing their tax money in the best way to keep us alive.” I started walking again, “Anyway, we’re both taxpayers, and we agree, so that’s two votes.”

*****

“Master Sergeant Mason – did you call the governor prior to your raid.”

Captain Stone came and got me when they called. Our commander, Major Fields, was on the phone.

“You do realize that it’s a death warrant for my team. It’s like asking someone to ambush us. There are no good guys here, they’re all corrupt.”

“I understand your concern, Sergeant, but can you please answer the question? You were given orders to inform the Afghan civilian leaders before you conducted raids, did you do that?”
“Of course I did. It was an order, right?”

“Even though it put your team at risk?”

“Hey, I do my best to mitigate the situation; but orders are orders. And I weigh the mission on the lives of my men every day. The same as you guys do in Bagram I’m sure, weigh each of your decisions against the lives of the men on the ground.”

I didn’t know exactly what would happen when I left that message for the governor, but I can’t say that I expected this. The governor had complained directly to the Afghan president that he hadn’t been informed of the raid. The president had spoken to some U.S. generals. And it rolled downhill from there.

“So, you called the governor, and what did he say.”

“Well, he didn’t exactly answer his phone, so we left a message.”

I heard cursing.

“You were told to inform him before you did the raid. If you didn’t speak to him, you didn’t inform him. Even you can see that, right?”

“Well, the instructions were kind of vague. We left a message, therefore informing him. It’s not our fault he didn’t pick up. I guess he’s not the guy you want to answer the phone at two AM in the morning, huh? Or in this case 0350. And if we had to wait until he woke up, we would have been putting the team at risk, especially for the trip back to base. I weighed the risks and made the call.”

“It was the wrong call. Next time call and talk to him before you leave the base.”

I paused.

“Sergeant, did you hear me?”
“I heard you sir. Roger sir, call first and talk to the governor and let them know we are coming first so they can set up an ambush. Got it. Hooah!”

“It’s not like that. We are on the cusp of winning this war and turning the country back over to the Afghan authorities. We can’t do that if you undermine that authority.”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

“Well, you don’t have access to all the information I have, Sergeant. Just do it.”

“Roger sir, Nikes all the way!”

I hung up before he pissed me off more, or I said something I might regret.

“What are we going to do,” asked Stone.

“I guess we’ll have to call from now on, not like we have any other choice. Not sure we’ll be conducting a lot of missions though.”

*****

“Freddy wants to take some vacation time,” Mark said.

“Is that a thing?”

Great. First Shir, now Freddy. Our best terps.

We were eating lunch. I hadn’t figured out how to proceed yet after the telephone call with Major Fields. I wasn’t planning on putting my team in any more danger, so we would have to stop doing missions for a few weeks. It felt good to stand down and relax for a bit. Probably what we should have planned anyway.

“Well, if you think about it, Freddy and Shir have been working for the US in some capacity for about five years. In a real job, they would get retirement benefits,
health benefits, vacation days, annual raises and bonuses. But they just change bosses every six months or so, and no one ever really considers that.”

“Good points. Where’s he going?”

“He’s going to Kabul to get married.”

“And he didn’t even invite us? Sure, we'll let him go. How long?”

“He asked for two weeks, but he’s not leaving till next month. We could use one of the other terps for translating our intel sources while he’s gone. We’ll meet with our best intel sources before he leaves and then schedule some meetings for when he returns.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be working off the base anyway, so there won’t be much time to do interviews.”

“Hopefully.”
Chapter 26

February 24, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“I can’t believe he said that to me.”

She sat across the table from Mark at the Green Bean.

“Don’t worry about it, Cammy,” said Mark. “You knew there would be assholes when you signed up for this job.”

After her discussion with Lieutenant Colonel Simpson, she had returned to her desk and written up a Power Point slideshow describing Bat 6’s attack, then sent it directly to Simpson. He hadn’t asked for it, but she had needed to calm her mind. If he wanted professional, she would show him professional.

“I know. Still, what do I have to do? Every time I think I’ve done some good, someone throws it back in my face.”

“I said don’t worry about it.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re about to go into combat. You’re not going to be stuck behind a desk for your whole career.”

“And neither will you.”

“I don’t have much faith in that now.”

“Have faith. Trust me. Now come on, let’s get changed and hit the gym. Some jujitsu will clear your mind of all the bullshit. You need the practice anyway.”

The octagon was empty when they arrived. She used to roll with Mark when she was younger, in high school. He was never belted, but he was probably equal to a high
blue belt or low purple. She was better now. He outweighed her by at least seventy pounds, but she was a lot better.

She’d taken it easy on the three soldiers she trained with, they didn’t know when they were beaten so they didn’t tap fast. They thought they were stronger, so they tried to muscle their way out of positions. It led to injuries. But that was the difference between a Black Belt and the rest. She was in control, she was always in control. She would get them into an arm bar, she knew she had it locked and any experienced fighter would have tapped, but as soon as she felt them try to muscle through, she gave them space and then she was on their back choking them. When they didn’t tap, she’d allow them to escape. They would stand up, trying to catch their breath and she would give them a few seconds, then catch them in a judo throw and they’d be on the ground again with her in side control and then she’d start the locks and bars again. It wasn’t all domination. She had shown them the basics and allowed herself to be caught in some techniques, even if they were slow, as long as they had proper form. And if they didn’t, she would sip away like a snake, lock them up quickly, make them tap and then show them how to do it correctly.

But she didn’t have to hold back with Mark; he was a veteran. It took her longer to catch him, but she flowed from one move to another until she did, never giving him time to catch his breath or think or use his strength against her. And he never tried to muscle his way out when he was caught, always tapping as Camila tightened her locks.

“You’ve gotten a lot better,” he said.

“I got my black belt last year.”

“Nice.” He was breathing heavy and they had only been rolling for 15 minutes.
“You’re out of shape,” she told him.

“Maybe. Or maybe you’re in great shape, and I’m just above average.”

“Nope. Just out of shape.”

“Maybe I’m just old.”

“You’re fat, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe I’m lulling you into a false sense of security, so I can surprise you next time.”

“Maybe, let’s try.”

She got sloppy the next time, and he slipped out of her arm lock, but ten minutes later he was tapping from a rear naked choke.

It was fun to roll with Mark. It felt like home. It almost made her forget about the Deputy’s sexist speech. Almost.

****

Every time Bat 6 went on a mission, Camila felt like she was part of the team. She couldn’t help it. Their successes were her successes. Their failures, hers. When they got shot at, she felt like she was on the ground waiting for a MEDEVAC and air support.

“Serpent, this is Bat 6. Returning to base with two PUCs. No casualties to report.”

“Roger Bat 6. Read you loud and clear. We’re tracking your return.” Camila put down the radio. Another successful mission. No casualties. Two prisoners. She knew
that her efforts weren’t the only reason Bat 6 was successful, a lot of it was luck. Right
time, right place. But she felt that she had tightened up the other factors to make
Those were the things she controlled in her world, and she had done her best to take
out the chance factor. The team covered their end with good Standard Operation
Procedures and rehearsals, and good leadership. Really, the only unknown factor was
the enemy and what he knew.

She opened the slide presentation, clicked to the slide that read ‘Persons Under
Control (PUCs)’. One hour till the CUB briefing. She could make it. Santos would
show up any minute to relieve her for dinner. But she’d skip dinner if her slides weren’t
perfect. When she began her journey down the road of being a Green Beret, Mark had
told her what would be expected. “You’ll have to be the best,” he’d told her. “You’ll
have to be faster, stronger, and smarter than the men. Well, most of them anyway.
Trust no one. No one, and I mean no one, is your friend. You can trust them to defend
you in a firefight, but don’t let them see weakness, cause you’ll never get that moment
back. After they see weakness, even a little, even just once, no matter what you do
after that, you will always be judged on that weakness.”

Her standard before had always been excellence, but excellence here in the staff
was in the eye of the beholder. She would never let Lieutenant Colonel Simpson see
anything but perfection from now on.

“Ready to eat?” asked Santos as he walked up beside her desk.

“Almost.” She reviewed the slides one last time, clicking through them quickly.
They were good. No, they were perfect.
Chapter 27

May 9, 2006

44 days and a wake up

For weeks we had been receiving information that the bad guys were gunning for us, even more than usual. The information began to get more specific. There was a four-man team. They would try and kill us this week. Yesterday, three separate sources told us it would happen today. When asked why they thought we were the target at this time more than before, the answers came back the same. The Americans were too successful, people were too happy with their new lives, commerce was returning, people were beginning to feel safe. Because of all these things – the Taliban were coming to kill us.

“Boss!” Johnny burst through the dining facility door out of breath. “Boss! Come! Hurry! There’s a bomb!”

“Here it comes,” said Mark.

“Teddy, take charge of the walls till we see what’s going on. Chris, grad your kit and meet me outside.”

Everyone started moving, they knew their places. Rehearsals paid in dividends.

In between missions, I’d made a point of gaining rapport with our neighbors. Once a week my medics held a small clinic for women and children. We distributed donated clothes, toys and school supplies to the local families and schools. On more than one occasion we had paid the teacher’s salaries, using my own money and some donated from friends of mine in the U.S. It was worth it. We needed their support for
my men to leave this place alive. In return, over the weeks and months, our neighbors
began to trust us and depend on us for medical help and other things. And they started
to tell us things. Now they told us we were marked for death.

I had increased the number of Afghan patrols around the compound – greater
numbers and greater frequency. I also increased the number of Americans on guard
inside the compound, at least two team members were awake at all times, one in the
ops center and one outside patrolling the perimeter and checking on the guards.

Outside the dining facility, Johnny explained that the Afghan patrol had found a
wheelbarrow in a field behind our compound. Beneath a pile of onions and potatoes,
the guards saw a missile canted at an angle and aimed at the compound. The patrol
had moved the wheelbarrow a couple blocks farther from the American compound.

Chris was waiting for me at the entrance to our compound. The body armor still
rubbed my wounds, but I felt whole with it on. We followed two Afghan cook-warriors
and Johnny out the gate. The wheelbarrow was two blocks away. I didn’t know exactly
what to expect, but a six-foot missile with an alarm clock connected by wires was
probably not it. Chris and I both stopped in front of the wheelbarrow, and then
simultaneously scrambled for cover behind a dirt wall about 20 meters away. The three
Afghans followed.

“You know, this won’t protect us at all,” said Chris.

“Shut up! I feel better if I can’t see it. You’re the engineer. What do we do now?”

Before Chris could answer, the two cooks leapt past us heading for the missile,
yelling something to Johnny as they disappeared behind the dirt wall.
“Boss, he says don’t worry, they disarmed these things all the time during the war against Russia.”

“I hope they know what they’re doing,” mumbled Chris, covering his ears.

We waited for a few minutes, and soon heard others from the team coming up the street behind us. I got up and started moving in their direction, trying to stop them from coming closer. Suddenly, the cooks hurdled over the dirt wall with big smiles on their faces and an alarm clock in their possession.

Chris took the alarm clock from the Afghans and examined it. Pointing at the wires, he said “It looks like it was rigged against tampering. See, here are the two wires they cut, then this wire should have been connected to make it explode if the other two were cut. This is like basic bombing 101. The bad guys suck, they even messed this up.”

“See, no problem Boss,” Johnny told them, a large grin on his face.

Then, the alarm rang, and I almost had a heart attack.

*****

We stored the missile in our ammunition depot, a guarded compound about two miles from where we lived. We usually conducted a weekly ‘blow’, where the engineers would give a demolitions class to the team and blow up all the rockets, missiles, ammunition, guns, and anything else we couldn’t use. We’d move about 20 miles into the desert, away from any living thing, and pile everything up with US demolitions on top and blow it to smithereens.
“We should use this to our advantage,” said Mark after we drove back. The explosion was huge this time with the added missiles, and in retrospect we should have traveled a little farther into the desert. Sand and pebbles rained down on a local village. I owed them a visit, maybe hand out some donations and conduct a mobile medical mission. We didn’t want any more locals upset with us than already were.

“What do you suggest?”

“I don’t know. We got some good photos of the bomb. Some of the local children even came up after it was disarmed to check it out. Maybe we could send those back to BAF and they could print out some posters. Have the picture with the missiles and the kids, and something beneath stating that the Taliban don’t care who they kill, but we’re here to help. The reality is that those missiles would never have reached our compound, they would have blown right there at the intersection or in the field and hurt the neighbors.”

“That sounds good. Use some psychological operations, gain the trust of the locals and make the Taliban look bad. I like it. How long do you think it will take for BAF to make them?”

“Not sure, couple weeks.”
Chapter 28

February 25, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“Okay Miller, you’ve had my PUCs for two days. Tell me something useful that I can send to my guys on the ground.”

She had returned to visit Miller a few times, basically to start a professional relationship. Once she brought him some homemade brownies that mom had sent. Last time, she pulled a six pack of red bull out of her backpack which she had swiped from the SOF chow hall. His eyes had lit up. He actually might have been going into withdrawals, the normal dining facility had run out. It was all worth it though if she could tighten up the war factors within her control.

“Well, we did three interviews so far with each. I sent the reports up and haven’t yet received the releasable information yet.”

“Oh, come on.”

Miller smiled at her reaction. “However, I highlighted a few items of key information to my boss in Germany, asked if I could release it to you in order to influence immediate follow on missions.”

“And?”

“He said yes.”

“Chief, I could hug you. What have you got?”

He handed her a single sheet of typed paper. Her eyes scanned the paper. Her heart beat faster.

“Thanks, you the man.”
He tipped back a Red Bull. “Yes, I am.”

She headed back to the operations center, but all she could focus on were two words printed on the paper in her pocket.

Baber Pacha.

*****

Camila stood outside Colonel Atkin’s office door. Colonel Atkin’s aide had grabbed her as she walked into the Ops Center and informed her that the commander wanted to speak with her. The second time in two weeks she’d had to speak to the brass. After her experience with Simpson, she wasn’t looking forward to it. Colonel Atkins was the Commander for all Special Operations in Afghanistan. Colonel Stone was back in the U.S., and for administrative purposes he was her commander, but because she was in Afghanistan she would have to follow Colonel Atkins orders while assigned here. Despite Mark’s reassurances, she didn’t get her hopes up about taking a team.

She heard raised voices behind the door. There were no real walls in the Operations center, most were made of flimsy wood, more to give commanders a small barrier to conduct business behind, but any conversation above normal decimals could be heard through the walls and beyond.

“This is bullshit politics, sir, and you know it!” Simpson said from behind the walls.

Camila couldn’t hear the response, but she heard stomping and came to the position of attention against the wall as Simpson stormed out. He paused in front of
her, she could smell the coffee on his breath. “I hope you’re happy Mason. Your political connections have gotten you this far, and now men are going to die. Their blood will be on your hands.” He breathed on her for another second, then turned and moved through the Ops center and out of the building.

“Captain Mason, come in,” said Colonel Atkins.

She entered and reported. He returned her salute. “Sit down.” The chair was uncomfortable, hard wood. “Do you know why you’re here Mason?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, I’ve been speaking with Colonel Stone, and we’ve decided to give you a team.”

Her heart fluttered.

“Obviously, you know how Lieutenant Colonel Simpson feels about that. I, however, disagree with him. So does Colonel Stone. You’ve demonstrated that you understand the battlefield, and you’ve provided excellent support to the detachments on the ground. Colonel Stone tells me you have an excellent record as a platoon leader and in training. There’s no reason not to give you a team.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No reason to thank me, you’ve earned it. Just don’t prove Lieutenant Colonel Simpson right. Look after the team, analyze the missions. Safety first, bring them home. Got me?”

“Yes, Sir. Where am I going?”

“Your team will arrive tomorrow. You’ll deploy in about two weeks once the team gets acclimatized and finish their administrative requirements.” He stood up and
reached out his hand. “We’re sending you to Jalalabad. Congratulations, Captain Mason. Don’t let us down.”

*****

“You knew the whole time?” Camila asked. She sat across the table from Mark. Her plate of baked chicken and overcooked vegetables was barely touched, and she watched Mark devour three hamburgers.

“Stone and I discussed it,” he said between chewing and swallowing. “We couldn’t put you on any team. Not that you wouldn’t excel, but we couldn’t be sure that having you take charge of a team wouldn’t freak the guys out and put them more at risk.”

“That’s stupid.”

“No, it’s real. Real combat, real lives at stake. We were waiting for the right team.”

Her mind was spinning. She had felt so alone in her career. Her against the world. She still wasn’t sure what to believe.

“And now we have it, my team.”

“Wait, what? What did you say?”

“You’re taking over my team, when they arrive tomorrow. I’m going to be your team sergeant.”

No fucking way. She felt emotions well up inside her and she almost cried. She had been ready to face down the team, challenge any of their sexism head on and take
control. But now, now she knew she wouldn’t have to do it alone. She had a partner.

Mark was on her side.

“Hey Captain Mason.” Keith walked by with some of his dressed down buddies.

“Hey Keith.” She watched them select a table a couple rows back, then turned to look at Mark. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked Mark. He continued to stare at Keith.

“How do you know that guy?” he asked.

“Who, Keith? I don’t, not really. Around. He’s some kind of intelligence guy.”

Mark looked at her. “That’s the last guy to see your father alive.”
Chapter 29

May 16, 2006

37 days and a wake up

The wheelbarrow bomb woke the team from their slumber figuratively, even though it never blew up. Someone was definitely out to get us. We’d been riding high on our successes for the past couple months: no ambushes, no injuries, no deaths. I’m sure the guys felt like they were invincible, like we had figured out the combination to war.

Before, I was worried that we had become too complacent. Now, I’m worried that it doesn’t matter. The bad guys could hit us anywhere, at any time. All we could do was be ready. And hope it was enough.

“Ryan, you’re going to want to hear this,” said Mark from the doorway of the ops center. I was mulling over emails. “Ryan?”

“What?”

“You’re going to want to listen to this.”

“What is it, I got problems to solve here.”

“We got good intel on the bomber and he’s going to try and hit the compound again.”

Crap. “Okay.”

I followed him to the interview building.

The man was old. His head and beard were mixed grey and white. The wrinkles on his face were carved rivulets that would force rain out of his eyes and mouth. He
sat against the far wall conferring with Johnny, but they both stopped talking when I entered.

Mark came in behind me. “Johnny, introduce them.” He bent to pick up a notebook from beside the tea tray.

“Boss, this is Haji Bobi.”

“As-salaam Alaykum,” I greeted the old man, bowing slightly.

Mark flipped through the notebook, then showed it to me.

“Look Ryan, we got sketches here of bombs connected to cell phones. There are formulas in here, chemistry written in English. The whole book is full of this shit.”

I flipped through the notebook slowly. “Haji brought this?”

“He says the notebook belongs to his son, who is working with the Taliban, but doesn’t want to anymore.”

Haji stroked his white beard, his eyes shifting between the two Americans. He began to speak and Johnny translated. “Boss, he says his son went down a dark path, away from Islam. But Haji convinced his son of the wrongness of that way, how Islam was distorted by the Taliban and the Koran should not be interpreted that way. Now, his son wants to speak to the Americans, to tell them of a bomb that was being set up against them.

“Where is his son?” Mark asked.

A short exchange, then Johnny continued. “He says his son is afraid. Afraid of the Americans and afraid he may be seen coming to the American compound. Haji came to speak for him, to speak to the Americans.”

“We need to meet him.”
“He will only meet at a hotel in the city.”

Mark looked at me. “We can do it. We have Afghan clothes, we have some cars.”

“Do you know this guy, Mark? Have you met him before?”

“No. But I got a feeling about him.”

“This is the exact trap I would do if I was the Taliban.”

“I know, man. But can we afford not to?”

*****

We had conducted reconnaissance missions in Afghan clothes before, but this mission was different. A recon in a vehicle when the only person who knew you were coming was the terp that was sitting at your side was a whole different mission. In order to meet this bomber, all the cards were in his hand – he knew the time and the place when we would come. Almost all the cards. Risk mitigation was my forte.

We got dressed carefully, asking Johnny for advice on how to wear the Pakol on our head and how to wrap the blanket so that we didn’t stand out. Before, we didn’t have to walk through town and pass close by people, just sit in the back of a car with our faces partially covered.

Captain Stone and I had one quick discussion about whether we should go or not. “Do you believe him?” was his first question.

“I don’t know, but I’m not sure it matters.”

“We can just hold in place.”
“I’d rather be on the offensive.”

“So, your mind is already made up?”

“Pretty much.”

“Alright, how do you want to do it?”

I loved this guy.

Only Mark and I would go. Pistols and stun grenades hidden under our blankets, we looked each other over one last time. Johnny gave us a thumbs up, but I still thought we looked like Americans wrapped in blankets. You can put lipstick on a pig, it’s still a pig. Two hummers armed to the hilt were on standby with Captain Stone and Teddy in command. The hotel was close and they could be there in ten minutes, if we could hold out that long, in case something went wrong, but nothing was going to go wrong. Please God, let nothing go wrong.

I had Shabeer and three cooks go in 30 minutes prior. They still couldn’t boil an egg, but I trusted them with an AK-47 to back me up. They lounged at snack shops near the hotel.

Johnny drove. I was really missing Shir and Freddy about now. On the plus side, Johnny had done the first meeting and he already knew the bomber’s father. We thought familiar faces would be a good thing to help calm the situation. The hotel was in the shape of a U and stood three stories tall. It was early, 1800 local, and the streets were still active in trade. I saw Shabeer on my right as we drove into the center of the ‘U’. He nodded. I might have to give him a bonus out of my personal checking account if we lived through this because his presence alone made me feel better.
Johnny led us up the stairs, taking two at a time. Mark and I followed more slowly, taking in the situation, looking for anything out of place. We passed a few men on the way up, and I felt their eyes on me, burning a hole in my back. They had to know I was an impostor. I knew they knew. Eyes behind curtains watched us, I felt them. I squeezed the stun grenade in my hand under the blanket. Finally, room 216. Johnny knocked twice, then pushed the door open and disappeared into complete darkness. *It’s a trap.* That’s all my mind could think. *Don’t go in, you won’t come out.*

I followed Johnny. The door shut. My hand went to the grenade ring. I moved against the left wall. I knew Mark was against the right wall on the other side of the door. We had rehearsed this. Knowing each other’s positions, without knowing. A lamp in the center of the room flicked on, showing the old man in sick, yellow light and beside him a boy, maybe 20 years old, barely able to grow a sparse beard. A tea cup shook in the boy’s hands. Haji picked up his own cup and sipped, shaking less than his son. I could see the shadow that was Mark on my right, Johnny stood between us.

“As-salaam Alaykum,” Mark said. His job was the source, my job was the rest of the room. Mark sat on the floor and poured tea from the pot on the floor.

The room was small. Haji and his son were against the far wall, Mark sat down on cushions against the wall on their right. I moved slowly along the left wall and glanced into an alcove that contained a hole in the floor which made up the bathroom. Empty. I felt the eyes of the room on me. I turned back to face the door and squatted against the wall. Underneath my blanket I switched from grenade to pistol, pointing the muzzle at the door.
The boy looked at the floor, then whispered to his father, who then spoke to Johnny. The terp sat on their left and spoke out loud. “What do you want to know?”

Mark spoke softly, Johnny translating. “Your father has told us some things about you – that you were working and studying in Pakistan, that you were recruited to set up bombs. That you were ordered to do us harm. Is this true?”

The boy looked up. “You will not arrest me?” Johnny’s translations were quick. Mark shook his head, “You are trying to help us, trying to do the right thing. We do not arrest innocent people who are trying to serve their government.”

“I am not innocent. I have not been directly responsible for killing people, but I could have stopped it from happening and I didn’t.” Mark didn’t interrupt him, and after taking another sip of his chi, the boy continued. “I was trained in Pakistan to make bombs and to kill infidels. I have studied there for more than four months with many others. I have been on four missions with my instructors, observing and learning from them. I have seen men die from the results of my teachers’ actions.”

The boy paused again to drink more deeply from his cup, not looking at the Americans. Then, he reached into the blanket that was wrapped around him. I shifted my pistol, roughly aiming at his head, my finger taking up the slack.

Mark picked up the tea cup and refilled the boy’s cup, but I knew he would use it as a weapon if necessary; hot teapot to the head will put a dent in any plan. The boy removed a notebook, similar to the one the old man had brought yesterday and opened it on the carpet in front of them. I returned my pistol’s muzzle to the door and tried to breathe normally. “Four of us will come across the border within the next week,” the boy said. “We will be given a location in which to wait. The bomb materials will come
through another contact and we will be notified by phone when they are near so that we can pick them up and assemble them.” The boy picked up the tea cup again.

“Do you don’t know when?” Mark asked.

“No, we will be notified within the week when to come across the border, a man will drive us to the city at that time.”

“What is your target?”

“We were given four priorities. The group leader will decide on the target once we are all here and the equipment is ready. The first priority was you.” He stopped speaking and lifted his cup once again to his lips.

“You mean American soldiers,” Mark asked.

“You,” that single word not needing any translation by the Americans though Johnny did so anyway. “You, the Americans who are influencing the people, building schools, giving food and school supplies to the nearby villages, giving medical treatment and free medicine to the people in the city. You who are bring order to Afghanistan. You are the most dangerous group to the Taliban and you are the first priority.”

When Mark didn't say anything, he continued, “My teachers realize the effect you have on the people – it is why I am here right now, speaking with you. You bring hope, hope that the people have not had for a long time. Trade is returning to the cities, and prosperity to the people. The roads are safer, the people are happier. The people know that you are responsible for this and so do the Taliban. Their first priority is their most dangerous enemy.”

“And the other priorities?” Mark asked.
“If we could not target you successfully because of your security, we were then to target American Females. Third was any member of an American Non-Government Organization. Lastly, any foreigner.”

Mark took notes. “How were you going to attack us?”

Putting the cup down, the boy flipped open the notebook and turned it 180 degrees to face Mark. The opened pages showed sketches of a motorcycle with a canister attached to the rear. “We were to fill the kerosene bottles with explosives and connect it with electric cables to a cell phone. The canister and motorcycle could be left beside a house or car and activated by calling the cell phone.”

Blue kerosene canisters were everywhere in the city, used for cooking in almost every household.

“Won’t you get in trouble because you are here?”

“My teachers thinks I am with my family in Jalalabad. They don’t know I am talking with you now. If they knew, yes, they would kill me.”

“Why are you telling us? What made you want to come to us?”

The boy whispered briefly to his father, then spoke to Mark. “My father is the reason. My father taught me my religion and about the Koran. I left my family four months ago to learn more about my faith and I went to Pakistan. The more time I spent there, the more I realized that the religion I was learning was not my religion.” He paused. “I have seen the prosperity you have brought to my people and the sacrifices that your soldiers have made to protect my homeland. I now know that the Taliban are evil. They are solely bent on killing and destruction and it doesn’t matter to them who gets in their way, innocents or soldiers. They have no goal of peace in their souls, they
want only war. This is not my religion, it is not my god. I want to help my country and being on their side will not do that.”

*****

Johnny drove slowly as Mark flipped through the new notebook. I tried to calm my mind. I needed a shower.

Shabeer’s two cars caught up to us and Johnny sped up. The ride was only ten minutes back to base, but I didn’t feel safe. I began to count the number of blue bottles on the back of motorcycles. We were only halfway back when I reached 30. Holy shit. They were everywhere.

“ Johnny, stop,” said Mark. Freddy pulled to the side of the road, Shabeer’s first vehicle moved ahead fifty meters and the other stopped behind us. “Johnny, here’s some money, buy us one of those blue bottles at that shop there.”

Johnny ran in.

“Might as well pick one up, show the guys what to watch for.”

Johnny came back and Mark carried the bottle in his lap.

At the compound, a young Afghan man in front of the gate waved at us.

“Hey, is that Shir?” asked Mark.

“I think it is,” I replied, rolling down my window. “You lost?” I asked Shir.

Shir put his fist out and I bumped it. “I was lost, but now I’m found,” he said.

“Boss, you guys still got a job for me?”

“Maybe, what happened with your high paying job?”
“I did get paid more, but I was bored. I think you guys got me addicted to the action.”

“Hop in. I think we can scratch that itch.”

*****

“So, what do we think?” I asked. We had dropped Johnny and Shir at the terp building and then parked the car in front of the Ops center where we met the rest of the team. The notebook was open on the table. The engineers were looking at the sketches and formulas.

Brian, my senior engineer, pointed at the sketches in the book. “Electric circuits connected to cell phones. They’re doing this in Iraq.”

“We haven’t seen any intel about that happening in Afghanistan though,” said Mark.

“Probably because the cell phone tower structure wasn’t in place until just recently,” said Brian.

My first trip to Afghanistan, most of the country didn’t have land lines except in the capital, and cell phones were just a dream. Then the Americans and their allies came, to make it a better place and give it civilization and give another advantage to the bad guys. Win some, lose some.

“All of the notes seem legit, equivalent to my training. On the last page, the wires are attached to some big bottles,” continued Brian.
Mark reached down and picked up a large empty blue metal bottle, about the size of a small beach ball. “The source said they would be connected to one of these.

“Hell! Those things are everywhere,” said Brian.

“Yes, they are,” I said. “It’s a good thing we have a man on the inside. The source says that the attack could come any day, the bombers will be in Jbad within the week and then they’ll wait to receive their equipment and orders. So, we need to be ready. We need to make a plan and start rehearsing it.”

“Well, since we don’t know what type of compound or building we’re going to hit, I’ll start rehearsing with the Afghan Army on flow drills and taking down a variety of options,” said Teddy.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s get commo and med checked. Prep personal equipment. We’ll also do an American only rehearsal taking down a vehicle. I’ll have a detailed training plan by tomorrow’s meeting.”
Chapter 30

February 25, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“Really? He wrote that stuff down?” asked Mark quietly. “That’s surprising.”

They walked out of the dining facility and Camila shivered as a gust of wind bit through her Gortex jacket. As soon as Mark mentioned Keith, Camila made the connection in her father’s journal and told him about it.

“Yeah, I got the feeling it was the first time he had ever kept a journal,” Camila said. “Some psychologist asked him to do it.”

“Huh. I didn’t know he was seeing a doc.”

“We had a problem, me and dad, that last year before he died. We both needed someone to talk to.”

“Yeah, Ryan told me a little about Disney. Not sure I understand the problem. It sounded pretty obvious that your dad was in the right, even the police let him off.”

“It was — hard for me, that’s all. Anyway, why did Dad come back to BAF?”

Mark shook his head. “I don’t really know. It was after I got hurt. I didn’t even know he came back, I was already back in states by then. Some of the guys told me later that he was talking with one of our information sources, trying to find out who set up the IED that got our convoy. He came back from the interview, went straight to his room, and packed his bag. Stone spoke to him briefly, said that Ryan flew back to BAF with Shir Shah to get Keith arrested.”

They arrived at the stairwell to her apartment.
“The team was the last to find out about the fight. Everyone in BAF knew about it, the whole camp. Ryan went to Keith’s apartment and beat the holy hell out of him. Then he left. Got in a hummer and drove out of camp Vance. Someone had to get the medics and an ambulance to bring Keith to the hospital.”

“Where did dad go?”

Mark shrugged. “Ryan and Shir drove off the base. The MPs at the gate let them go, there was no reason not to. He was armed, and he had his documents. And about an hour later, they found the hummer blown to smithereens. The damage was so bad—” Mark paused and looked at her.

“What?”

“It was a bad blast.”

“Mark, it’s been over ten years. We buried his body. I’m good.”

Mark shook his head. “There was no body. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. The bomb was huge. They had to identify the remains with a DNA test. His DNA was all over the wreckage.”

They were both silent.

“Then who the fuck did we bury?”

“Cammy—”

“So, we buried an empty box? And no one wanted to tell me about it?

“Cammy, you were so young.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. Jesus Mark. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“I – I don’t know.”
She stared at him, noticing snowflakes drifting around them. How long had it been snowing?

“Good night, Mark.” Her boots clanged up the metal stairs.

*****

At breakfast, she met her replacement for the first time. Captain Allen Rogers had been injured in an ambush earlier that month, not too bad, but enough that he wouldn’t be going back to a team any time soon. Camila would show him the ropes and then be officially assigned to her team. My team. Finally.

“Our job is to save American lives, plain and simple,” she told Rogers as she stabbed an almost defrosted strawberry. “We stack the deck in their favor, we coordinate, we plan, and we orchestrate their success.”

Her head wasn’t completely in the conversation; her mind was still cluttered with Mark’s betrayal. He was supposed to be her rock, the only person she truly trusted. Now, even that was screwed up.

“No shit, Mason. I just came from a fire base. I think I know what the job is.”

His aggression brought her back to the present. This was important. Training Rogers to support BAT 6 was the most important thing she could do right now.

“Listen, I know you think you understand how everything works here, but until you’ve lived the staff job you don’t know,” she told him. “You can make a difference here if you don’t waste your time like the rest of the idiots. You need to be proactive. You need to look for solutions.”
“I don’t need a lecture from you.”

“Hey, sir.” The two captains looked up to see Sergeant McMillan standing over them with an empty breakfast tray.

“Yes? What do you want, Sergeant?” asked Rogers. He stared up at McMillan, fork halfway to his mouth.

“Captain Rogers,” said Camila, “This is Sergeant McMillan. He works in the Ops Center and he’s in charge of getting air support for our guys on the ground.”

He nodded. “Okay, good to meet you.” His tone grew softer.

“You too, Sir. Sorry to interrupt, I couldn’t help but overhear and I just wanted to say that you might want to listen to what Captain Mason has to say. Since she got here, she’s reduced air support and MEDEVAC flight times by 50%. And her team is never left overnight after an attack. She always has contingency plans to get them pulled out. I’ve been watching her and so have the other liaisons. We’ve all learned from her. You might want to listen to her, I’m just saying. Have a good morning, sir.”

He turned and walked toward the exit.

They finished eating in silence.

*****

When Rogers and Camila got to the Operations Center, she saw a small change in his attitude. It was a start at least.
Rogers had been in the Operations Center before but had never been introduced to the CUB slides and various other mandatory reports. He listened to her, and she felt him watching her interaction with the rest of the people in the room.

Next, Camila introduced Rogers to the planners at the helo base of operations, explaining their training routines and her strategy to speed up air support. Rogers listened quietly. She introduced him to the interrogators and Special Agent Miller. She gave him tours of the allied force compounds, pointing out the areas of responsibilities that overlapped with the American forces.

Finally, she made call BAT 6 and put them on speaker so she could make introductions with Captain Keesner and Master Sergeant Andres.

“Good to meet you,” said Keesner. “Look forward to working with you. I got to tell you, Camila left you some big boots to fill.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Anyway, mind if we talk to her alone? Off speaker?”

“No prob, she’s all yours. I’m going to head for lunch.”

“I’ll meet you there,” said Camila. “Afterwards, I’ll take you by the MEDEVAC unit and we should be about done.” Then, off speaker she asked, “What’s up, guys?”

“Thanks for getting us those fingerprint kits, and the info on the prisoners,” said Andres.

“That was probably the hardest thing I had to do for you by far, the paperwork for the kits alone took me two days. I’ve told Rogers to maintain daily contact with the interrogators when you have prisoners here. That should fix your intel gap.”

“I wish we could thank you in person. Thank you for all you did for the team.”
Camila’s chest tightened. “Hey now, Chris, you did all the hard work. Anyway, I’m leaving you in good hands. Rogers is a lot farther ahead than I was when I got here.”

“I know what you did for us,” said Andres, his gravelly voice softening, “We all do. We won’t forget.” He paused. “See you on the other side.”

“See you there,” Camila agreed.

*****

Mark was waiting for her, sitting on the stairs below her apartment.

“How’s the changeover going?” he asked.

Camila wasn’t sure how long he’d been waiting but his cheeks were red and his boots were covered from the falling snow.

“Better than I expected.”

“Look, I wanted to say I’m sorry. You had a right to know.”

She put her hand up. “I know why you did it, Mark. But I’m not a little girl anymore. If we’re going to work together, you need to recognize that. It’s the only way this is going to work.”

“I know,” he said. “I know you’re not a little girl anymore. I don’t think anyone could ever accuse you of that.” He held out his hand. “We good then, Captain Mason?”

She smiled slightly. “Better than good, Master Sergeant Simmons.” She hugged him.

When they parted, he held her shoulders. “Ready to train?”
“You bet.”

“Okay, get some sleep. The team arrives tonight. I’ll get them settled tomorrow and then next week we’ll start training.”

She shivered, but not from the cold. Mark sensed her nerves.

“Chin up, little ninja.” It was the name he used to call her when they went to jujitsu competitions. Back when things were simpler. Back when she hadn’t known so much. “Remember what happened to the little girl who got everything she wanted?” he asked.

She laughed at the mis-quote from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. “She lived happily ever after,” she told him.

What were the chances of that happening to her?
Chapter 31

May 18, 2006

35 Days and a Wakeup

Humanitarian missions aren’t combat missions, but they’re just as dangerous, maybe even more so. These missions were more touchy-feely, and they give a different kind of satisfaction for us. Combat missions were stealthy, surprise-oriented, you get in and out quickly, and there was a feeling of security in the quickness of it. But humanitarian missions had to be advertised, and the team stayed for the day, and the enemy had time to plan ambushes or attacks. Combat missions normally ended with one less bad guy on the playing field. Humanitarian missions ended with happy children, happy families, happy Americans. And sometimes, happy bad guys.

“No, Ryan, he has not called,” said Mark.

It was the second time I’d asked today. After waiting a week, I began to think the whole meeting had been a dream. Then, I would see one of those damn blue gas jugs pass me on the back of a motorcycle and the hair on my arms would stand up. We needed to take these guys down. If not for our safety, for some American in the future that was going to have to deal with it.

“I got an idea,” I told him.

“What’s that?”

“What if we make a target for them?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“We do a mobile medical site, advertise that we will be there for three days. We travel somewhere in the direction of the border. They’re coming from Pakistan, right?”
“That’s what the source said,” replied Mark.

“So, we make it easy for them. We pick a place somewhere halfway between our compound and the border, meet them halfway so to speak. Advertise a three-day event and set up camp and security there. They’ll hear about it, try to send the equipment and the men and either bomb the event or ambush us on the way back to the compound. Then, when the source gets the call, we pull up shop and catch them with their hands in the cookie jar.”

“Well, I can see a couple problems with that plan.” Mark started ticking fingers.

“We won’t get air support covering us for three days. We’re going to be two to three hours away from the compound and ground support. The whole plan pivots on our source being totally legit with us, otherwise we walk ourselves into a big trap.”

“You don’t trust him?”

“Ryan, I don’t trust any of these idiots. I trust you, I trust those big gorillas on our team, and I trust me. Everyone else is suspect. Everyone. That being said, I think this guy is on the level and he will help us. He took a pretty big risk when he met with us at the hotel.”

“Him? What about us?”

“I almost shit my pants,” Mark laughed.

“I almost pulled the ring on the grenade like three times.”

We hadn’t spoken about that night yet. There hadn’t seemed to be anything to say. We’d came out alive, we’d got all the information. Usually, we would have done a review of how we could have done better. That time, neither of us brought it up.

“So,” I asked. “Other than all the holes in my plan, what do you think?”
Mark shrugged. “Might work.”

“Got any better ideas?”

“No.”

“I’ll brief Stone and we’ll start planning. It will be a good mission to end on.”

“Hopefully, not our last,” mumbled Mark.

_Hopefully, _I silently agreed.

****

I packed my day bag for the mission and thought about Cammy.

I still couldn’t believe she wouldn’t even let me speak to Cammy. But we were almost at a month, I’d be home soon.

My bag packed, I began disassembling my rifle, laying the pieces on my bedspread. The weapon was clean, but I wiped off each piece again and applied some lubricant. It was relaxing, thoughtless work, and allowed my mind to dwell on other things.

I hadn’t spoken to Cammy since the day I left. The divorce papers said she would get full custody, but I wasn’t going to sign that. The note explained that it was better if I just signed them because it would cost a lot of money in lawyers, and she would win in the end. She gave friends of mine as examples. Tim, John, Wayne. They lost everything, including the children in the divorce. The courts didn’t support the troops. The women always argued they were alone with the children all the time because their husbands were deployed, and the courts seemed to agree.
But I was going to fight it.

I finished with my rifle, then moved on to my pistol.

I had to make it right with Cammy when I got back. Maureen couldn’t prevent me seeing her. Surely the court wouldn’t allow that.

I reassembled the pistol, then holstered it. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind of my family problems that were so far away. I had another family to take care of first before I could face the enemies at home.
Chapter 32

March 4, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“Serpent, this is Bat 6. Checkpoint Delta.”

“Roger, Bat 6. I have you at Checkpoint Delta. Serpent out.” Camila set the receiver down, then updated the slide she had open on the computer.

“Do you have to put all of that on the slides?” asked Rogers.

“There’s a format,” Camila replied, not looking up. “It’s pretty detailed, and there are some detail Nazis in the CUB. It doesn’t seem to matter if the information is important, if it’s part of the format, you’d best include it.” She stood up. “Okay, this is your show now. Follow their movements, document their checkpoints. I now dub thee the official Bat 6 liaison.”

Rogers sat down. “Doesn’t look too difficult.”

“It escalates fast, you’ll see.”

“I guess. Thanks for showing me the ropes. I know I was an ass before. Sorry.”

“No prob, it comes with the long hair.” She grabbed her notebook and stood up.

“Hey, I’m trying to say I’m sorry.”

“I got it, no prob.”

“I just didn’t know that any of you had graduated yet?”

“Any of whom? Green Berets? They graduate every year.”

“You know what I mean. Women, graduating the course.”

“Look, Allen, I went through the same course as you.”
“I know, I know. It’s just, when we heard they were letting women in, there were all kinds of rumors about making the course easier. Things like that.”

“And what do you think they did to make it easier?”

“I don’t know exactly. Just easier. Not the same as the one I did.”

“So, that makes sense to you? You went, what, last year? You think between my class and your class they changed the whole curriculum? We didn’t have to climb ropes? Easier time on the obstacle course? Run slower?” Camila felt the emotions rising, but she tried to keep her voice steady. Making a scene in the Operations Center wouldn’t fix any rumors about women in Special Operations. “If you think the physical part of the course is what makes a Green Beret, you might want to take another look at that. But just for your information, I run a six-minute mile, and I can run a marathon averaging seven-minute miles. I can carry sixty-pound backpack twenty miles in less than five hours. So, rest assured, the physical image of the Green Beret is safe.”

“Okay, okay.” He raised his hands. “I just wanted to say sorry, and I was trying to explain my attitude.”

“And I said, no prob. I get reactions like that all the time, I’m used to it. I accept your apology. Now, take care of my guys.”

He nodded. “Roger that. Where are you going?”

“I thought I’d go over to the airfield, say bye to the MEDEVAC guys. I think they made me some cupcakes or something. A little ‘going away’ party.”

“Have fun.”

“Sure. Let me know if you need anything, my flight isn’t for another week.”

“I think I got it.”
“I’m sure you do,” she said over her shoulder as she left the ops building.

*****

Camila had just bitten into her second vanilla cupcake when she noticed people scrambling around her.

Blades began to turn outside. A medic ran by. “You guys need any help?” she yelled after him.

The medic didn’t lose stride, “Always use another gun, can’t guarantee a ride back though.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she yelled over the spinning blades, following the medic into the back of the Blackhawk helicopter.

The aircraft took off slowly and started to pick up speed, two COBRA security helicopters escorting, one in front and one to the rear. The organized quadrants of the base quickly disappeared, looking like any small city in rural America, to be replaced by chaos beyond the fence line. Little rhyme or reason had been invested in the shanty town neighborhoods of suburban Kabul. Sheet metal lean-tos, unfinished concrete structures, and half built wooden structures fought for space, all connected by narrow dirt streets, and everywhere, people moving, like a disturbed ant’s nest. Then, like a clear line in the sand, the desert spread before her. No sign of life for miles.

She checked her weapons for the eighth time. On BAF, she carried them every day, and wiped them down every night, but she hadn’t fired them in the last six months.

Mark had wanted her to start training with the team as soon as she had been assigned,
but she didn’t think that would be fair to BAT 6. The least she could do was devote her full attention to training her replacement. She was kind of regretting that decision now.

Camila watched the passing terrain below, fine sand and rock formations lit orange and yellow by a fading sun. This was the land through which she would lead her team on convoys and patrols. She examined the ground below, trying to see the ambushes of the future, the high ground needed for her team to gain the advantage. Scenarios began to play through her head.

Two hours after liftoff, night had fallen and the moon was just rising.

“Two minutes,” said the medic next to her. The helo in front sped forward to recon the site.

She watched her helo’s shadow in the moonlight, gliding along the ground as men moved below like toy ghosts. Chemical light sticks guided the helicopter into a landing zone where stretchers were staged. Camila saw men, probably medics, hover over their wounded, checking vitals and securing bandages. Two flight medics jumped off before the wheels hit the ground and rushed over to the wounded, Camila on their heels.

Beside the stretchers, a man yelled medical information and another soldier was writing on his hand as the flight medics prepared the wounded men for travel. Camila took a knee beside the writing soldier, his name tag read ANDRES. She grabbed her notebook from her cargo pocket and thrust it into Andres’ hands, who immediately began copying data into it. He ripped the top page off and almost threw it at the flight medics as they began moving stretchers back to the aircraft.
Time slowed for Camila. She wanted to stay. She wanted to help Bat 6. She watched Master Sergeant Andres. Average height, long hair, and a bearded face lit by green chemical lights. His movements were confident as he arranged security and organized the wounded. Here was a leader of men; a warrior, thought Camila. She glanced at the helo and saw the last of the wounded being loaded. Standing up, she lightly patted Andres’ shoulder and shouted, “Good luck!”. Andres gave her a thumb up. She ran to the helo.

As she rose into the air, Camila saw Andres put her notebook into his cargo pocket and yell to his men, words lost over the noise of the turning blades. There was a brown out during the takeoff, dust stirred by the helo blades blocked her vision of the ground for a moment, then it cleared and Camila caught a last glimpse of the soldiers: glowing insects around toy vehicles, growing smaller until they fizzled out like falling stars.
Chapter 33

May 22, 2006

31 Days and a Wake Up

We constantly work outside our comfort zones in Afghanistan. It’s my job to make my men into leaders, prepare them for the responsibility of promotion. Sometimes easier said than done.

Donnie was the team medic. Naturally, if we were to set up a mobile medical treatment center, I expected him to come up with a plan. I realized that his medical training had not prepared him for that. The first plan he came up with was laughable. No flow, no security.

“How can I figure this out?” he asked me.

“Figure it out,” I told him. “Use the team.”

He went back and gathered the rest of the team. His second attempt was better. By his fifth plan, I thought we had a good starting point. I didn’t tell him that when we got there everything would change. I didn’t want to break his spirit.

“Donnie, where do you want this shit?” I asked, lifting a plastic table off the back of the hummer.

“I don’t fuckin’ know. This is nothing like the sketch you gave me.”

“They never are.”

“Damn it, I’m a doctor, not a planner.” Donnie went to grab another table.

“Hey, you’re in charge of this goat fuck. You organize everything and tell us where you want stuff. We’ll move it.” Donnie’s hair stuck out at in odd places and his
eyes had a wild look. “Take a breath man, use the team. They each have their own expertise. No hurry, let’s just get it done right.”

The engineers could establish the standoff and barriers so the patients and Americans would be in less danger in case of an explosion. The weapons sergeants could set up security. Jim needed to figure out flow: where a patient entered, was searched, and was first seen to be triaged. Then, did the patient go to general medicine, dentistry, or the pharmacy? Where was the exit? Who passed out the toys and notebooks on the way out? Who ensured the patients didn’t slip back in to double dip on treatments and goodies?

Mark had selected a school for the medical site. It stood beside the main highway that led to Pakistan. A three-foot dirt wall surrounded three small one room buildings. Johnny and Shir had recruited medical students in Jalalabad to help treat the people and we had purchased drugs from Jalalabad pharmacies.

In the end, we didn’t advertise. We arrived early and took the building by force. Mark, Stone and I decided it would give the bad guys too much of an advantage and it didn’t pay to give the bad guys an opportunity to react. The Afghan National Army secured the immediate area and another outer ring. Schools were the norm for doing this type of medical mission. Obviously, classes would have to be canceled, which bothered us the first time we did one of these, but then we realized that school would be canceled anyway so the kids could be treated.

Teddy immediately assumed responsibility for the security of the site, organizing Afghan Army soldiers and talking the commander through the plan. I watched him briefly. I trusted him. He would do a good job. I started walking around the compound.
My job was to take a step back and holistically look at the plan. I needed to let the team to do what they did best.

People began to form a line that hugged the outer wall. This wasn’t their first rodeo—they probably knew the procedures better than we did. We weren’t the first ones to conduct medical treatments here. Before we even saw one patient there were over two hundred people. Mark helped organize the patients in lines, while questioning them on their opinions about America’s aid to their country and the Taliban’s influence in the area. We separated them into two groups. Men were on the right with two dedicated medical students to help them; their line was the longest. On the left were the women and children who would be seen by the other six medical students and the two American medics. Men in Afghanistan traveled freely and could get treated at any hospital in the country. The Taliban had refused treatment to women when they took over. Female doctors were not allowed to work, and the Taliban would not let male doctors treat women. Most areas still didn’t have female medical practitioners and would not allow their women to see male doctors. Last time we had tried just treating women and children but had almost caused a riot among the men. So now, we just stacked the treatments in their favor.

I walked myself through the flow. The patients would pass through the front gate of the school to be searched by the guards. Then, they would be led to the triage desk, manned by Tim, the junior medic. He would listen to the patient’s primary complaint and decided if they needed to be seen by a professional, or if they just needed vitamins or an aspirin. He tried to send only the patients that could be helped to the doctors.
Then the patient would be led to see the doctor, either Afghan or American, and after the examination, they would be led to the pharmacy to receive any necessary medications. Lastly, the patients moved to the exit at the back of the school and children would be given toys, women would be given some food, and men would be given a handshake.

The flow finally looked good, everyone was in place. I looked at Mark, “We ready to start this show?”

He nodded.

I spoke into the team radio. “Okay, let’s get this started. First patients coming in.”

I spent an hour watching the flow, moving security around, identifying areas of delay.

“Hey Ryan, everything is going fine. Why don’t you treat a few people?” asked Mark.

“Huh?”

“You’re a medic, go treat a few people. We got this.”

I had been a medic, a couple years ago, before they had promoted me. Now, I was in charge and had other responsibilities. Still, everything seemed to be going smoothly. I went to the side servicing the women and children, setting up shop in a corner of the classroom. Three of the Afghan medical students were already seeing patients in other corners. I hadn’t treated patients in over five years. I guess I thought it would be like riding a bike. Not so much.

Tim escorted my first patient into the room. She had no nose.
“Salam Alekum,” I greeted the woman. She was wrapped in a black shawl, but her face was uncovered. From the number of wrinkles on her face, I would have considered her older than fifty, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if someone told me she was thirty. Afghanistan was a hard country to live in and tended to suck the youth from its people.

I glanced at Shir who had stuck with me to translate. “Ask her why she came to the clinic today.” It was my go to question, always let the patient explain their problem in their own words.

While Shir listened to the woman, I went over my options on how to treat her nose. It looked like one of those large dollhouses that open so you can see all the rooms. The ragged cartilage divided the hole into separate chambers. A fly hesitated between two brown eyes, then moved down over the brink and onto the top cartilage shelf before disappearing inside her face.

“She says her hearing is getting worse,” said Shir.

I paused, watching the fly walk out of the hole and stop at the corner of her mouth.

I reached into my bag, took out an otoscope and inserted the instrument into her ear. I almost asked, “Did you notice that you’re missing a nose?”

There wasn’t much I could do for her nose anyway, but I did notice a slight ear infection. I covered the opening in her face with a sterile gauze, hoping to keep out dust, and handed her a prescription for antibiotics for the infection.

“Shir, take her to the pharmacy and bring in the next patient.”

“Roger, boss.”
I had picked the side that serviced the women and children intentionally, figuring their needs would be easier. I’m not sure exactly why I thought that, but I had spent most of my time in Afghanistan talking to men and very little to the women and children.

I was sitting on my camping stool when Shir returned with the next patient. Like a blue ghost, she floated through the heat waves of the afternoon and sat in the chair before me. All I could see were her eyes, pinholes of violet through the mesh of dark blue material that covered her entire body. An older woman followed behind her. A brooding presence wrapped in a black shawl, she had darting, suspicious eyes and a small mouth with thin lips.

“Salam Alekum,” I told both women.

The younger one made no reply, the older replied in kind.

“Why have you come to the clinic today?” translated Shir for me.

“She passes out, falls to the ground, for no reason,” replied the mother-in-law.

“For how long?”

“Three months.”

“Has she hit her head recently.”

“No, there is no reason. She is lazy.”

The patient just sat quietly on the chair and watched the volley of questions and answers. She was 19 years old and recently married.

I reached out to the girl’s chest with my stethoscope, pausing before it touched her. “Can I listen to her heart and lungs?”

The mother-in-law spoke briefly to the girl who took hold of the stethoscope and pressed it to her chest. With minor corrections translated by Shir, I finally managed to
listen to her heart and breathing through her Burqa. I reached for her wrist. “Can I take her pulse?” After a short pause, the mother-in-law nodded. I felt her pulse through the thin blue material, fluttering fast like a small bird. My mind considered and discarded possible diagnosis for her condition, trying to think of questions that would confirm or deny them.

Three months. Fainting spells. Normal vital signs. Was she pregnant? No, she had a normal menstruation cycle. Just married. I checked her pupils for concussion signs, they dilated normally but her right one appeared slightly larger.

“Does she have headaches?” I asked.

“Yes. Often. But I think they are an excuse not to work.”

“Has she had nausea and vomiting?”

“Once, and she ruined a dress. We will never get it clean.”

“But she didn’t fall? Or hit her head?”

“No. There is no reason for this behavior.”

All the signs led to a concussion, except for the cause. I excused myself and walked into the next room where Donnie was working.

“Well,” he said as he continued to bandage a little girl’s arm. “Probably a concussion.”

“That’s what I thought, but I can’t figure out what caused it.”

“Her husband probably beats her.”

“What?”

Donnie shrugged.
“She was probably forced into marriage with an older guy she didn’t know. He doesn’t love her, she doesn’t love him. This is a very chauvinistic society. He probably beats her when she doesn’t do what he says. They’re newlyweds. I’m sure they have issues.”

“What the hell? Are you sure?”

“What? No, I’m not sure. Just putting two and two together. Why don’t you ask her?”

I returned to the patient.

I looked at the mother-in-law, then the girl, then I asked, “Does your husband beat you?” and Shir paused before translating. “Ask her,” I told him.

Before Shir could finish the question, the mother-in-law was on her feet yelling. Then, for the first time, the girl made a sound. She stood also and began screaming, alternating between facing her mother-in-law and Shir and me.

“What’s going on, Shir?” I asked.

“The mother-in-law is calling you names and telling the girl to be quiet. The girl is saying that her husband beats her every day, that he clubs her in the head, that he is a bad man.”

“Wodariga!” I shouted. “Stop!”

Both women were immediately silent. The whole room was quiet, and everyone was staring at me.

It was obvious that her husband was beating her so severely that she had a concussion, maybe multiple concussions. And I was pretty sure that I was the only
medical professional this girl would probably ever see. Her husband could kill her tomorrow and face no justice.

I looked at the girl again and saw dampness darken the cloth around her eyes. She sniffled, and tears glinted through the holes in her burqa. “Shir, tell the mother-in-law that if her son doesn’t stop beating his wife, she will die. That if she doesn’t go to Pakistan and get treated, she will die.” Then, I turned and glared at the woman in black, I bowed my chest, I tried to look as menacing as possible, and I guess it worked because she cowered. “And tell her that I will come back to this village in six months, and I will ask for this girl, and if she tells me her husband is still beating her, I will arrest her son.”

It was all I could think of, and it was the best that I could do.

Shir took the women to the pharmacy, I prescribed some anti-anxiety pills for the girl and gave a final glare to the mother-in-law.

My last patient was a little girl, about eight years old. An old man followed Shir into the room, carrying her in his arms like a baby. I guess he might have been her father, men were known to have multiple wives and some significantly younger, but the age difference appeared to be generational.

He set her on the chair.

“Boss, he says that she is weak, that she coughs a lot.”

Her eyes never left my face, big and brown with long eyelashes. I looked at the father and made a motion with my stethoscope toward her chest, and he nodded, smiling through blackened teeth. I heard a click and glanced up to see Mark with the camera.
“What are you doing?”

“What, put the stethoscope to her chest, I’m going to make you famous.”

I touched her hand first with the stethoscope, and let her feel it before moving to her chest. I listened to her heart through the thin purple shawl, beating rapidly even for her age. Her lungs sounded clear, and I smelled the honey on her breath as Shir asked her to take deep breaths, perhaps from a treat her father had bought her on their journey here.

Mark took another photo. “National Geographic, here we come.”

“Whatever. Now go bother someone else.” I changed my voice to a higher octave as I spoke to the child. “I have to find out why little Sally here is weak and coughing.” She brought her shawl up to her face, but I caught a shy smile before she covered her mouth. I felt her pulse again at her wrists, and looked at her fingers and hands, already growing calluses from carrying buckets of water or other daily tasks.

My questioning revealed nothing. My final determination was vitamin deficiency, to which I prescribed some Flintstones vitamins. She probably had worms too, most of these people did, but any treatment I gave her would only be temporary. The only permanent solution was to make sure her drinking water was clean and her food was washed and cooked properly. I made a note to give classes on those topics next time we held a clinic.
An hour before dusk we stopped letting patients come into the school. There
was some heated discussion from those who hadn’t been seen, but they dissipated
when they realized we weren’t changing our minds. Some still squatted along the wall
but must returned to their homes. The last patient left the school enclosure just as the
sun set.

“I think that went well,” said Mark.

I nodded. My mouth was gritty. I hadn’t drunk enough water today.

“No one died, so that’s a win.”

“Well, I can do better than that. Johnny just got a call from our insider. The
bombs have already been delivered to this side of the border. He’ll call again when he
has an exact location.”

“So, it worked?”

“Our plan worked. Who would have thought?”

Stone walked up. “Pretty good showing, huh?”

“Yes sir. And we have info on the bombs.”

“No shit?”

“Let’s get the guys ready,” I said.

Let’s save some lives.
Bang, bang. The target fell, throwing sand into the air.

Camila knelt behind the engine block and changed magazines.

"Top gunner is wounded," Mark shouted at her.

She put her weapon on safe, grabbed a mag that had dropped to the ground, and hurdled into the back of the hummer, pushing Teddy aside. She aligned the machine gun sights on three targets in the valley, about six hundred meters away, and pushed the butterfly trigger. Click. Nothing. She started immediate action, pulling the charging handle back twice. Then pressed the trigger down again. The machine gun spit fire and smoke; rocks and dust danced around the targets as they fell to the ground.

Seeing no more targets, she keyed her radio. “Sitrep,” she asked, still scanning the horizon.

“Alpha one: ammo up, 1 minor wounded, equipment up”

“Alpha three: 500 rounds for machine gun, no casualties, two flat tires. I think the engine will still run.”

“Alpha four: All up.”

Camila keyed her mike again. “Alpha four, split your machine gun ammo with Alpha three.” She glanced at the back of her truck. “I'm up on ammo, one serious casualty, equipment up. I'm coming off top gun to give first aid.”

She heard affirmations in her ear as she knelt beside Teddy.

“I'm hit in the right leg,” he told her.
Camila grabbed a tourniquet from a pocket on his body armor and started applying it above the wound Teddy had indicated.

“ENDEX, ENDEX, ENDEX,” said Mark.

Camila cleared the machine gun, her rifle, and her pistol. Today had been her culmination exercise with the team. Her team. It was like the stress test she had done back in the U.S., but this one lasted for almost three hours and included movement in vehicles, engaging targets with a variety of weapons, and making split decisions about common situations. It wasn’t a pretty range like back in the US, but she had felt tested. It was effective.

She felt the adrenaline leaving her body. They had been training hard at the ranges in BAF for the last two weeks, getting to know each other. Half her team were old members from her dad’s team, and the other half were new to her. But she felt it was a strong, close team. Mark had worked with most of them for almost 18 months, and they had been on missions in South America together. They joked with each other, which made her jealous. They were open to new ideas. It was a good team.

“What was the deal with the magazine recovery?” asked Mark.

“What?” Camila asked.

“Why did you stop and recover your magazine before you jumped into the back of the hummer?”

She shrugged. “Reflexes I guess. They docked me points during the stress test back at home base.”
“Next time leave it. There are no points here, but every second counts. If it’s the difference between leaving a mag on the ground and getting to a machine gun five seconds faster, I’d rather have you shooting lead at the enemy.”

“Roger that.”

“Hey,” Mark leapt onto the hummer to stand eye-to-eye with her. “Don’t do that,” he said in a low tone of voice. “We are a team, you and me. We are the leaders of this team. The team will never see us divided or disrespecting each other. We may disagree, but we are always on good terms in front of the team. We offer each other advice, we take it and move on.”

“How does that make me look in front of the team? You, correcting me on little things.”

“Camila, it wasn’t a little thing. Any team member who saw what you did would have said the same thing, anyone who saw it was thinking the same thing I was. When I correct you on those things, the team knows I’m doing my job. I don’t expect you to be perfect, I expect you to do your job and learn. If anyone questions you, I will take care of that.”

Camila let something go inside her, something she didn’t even know she was holding in. Finally, she had an ally that she trusted. Finally, someone had her back and wasn’t look for weakness. It felt good to be part of a team. Her team.

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“Jalalabad. The Valley of Death.” The laser pointer targeted a location on the large map of Afghanistan just short of the red border with Pakistan. “CNN has dubbed Highway 1 between Kabul and Jalalabad as The World’s Most Dangerous Road.” The pointer traced a slim black line running East to West. “Shootings on the highway occur daily. Attacks by armed groups on security check points have increased. Hundreds are killed every year in car accidents, thousands injured. And that’s just getting to Jalalabad.”

*Good thing we’re flying,* Camila thought.

She had been surprised to see Keith at her team’s intelligence brief. They were launching in three days. This was the staff brief for their area of operation. Keith, representing the Central Intelligence Agency, was giving a threat brief in conjunction with the military intelligence experts.

“Over 400 IED explosions within a twenty-mile radius of Jalalabad. Women, children, soldiers, civilians. No one is safe.”

Keith clicked to the next slide.

“All caused by this guy.” A picture of a bearded, male profile with a question mark in the center appeared on the screen. “Baber Pacha. The man who controls the Taliban resistance in that province and who has been doing so for over a decade.”

*Baber Pacha. Dad had hunted him.*

Camila glanced at Mark sitting beside her, saw a look in his eyes that she didn’t recognize. Anger? No. Hate.

“I’ve been trying to find this guy for twelve years, first as a Green Beret, and for the last eight years as head of intelligence for the agency here in BAF. He’s a ghost.
He’s careful. Everyone works for him, but no one knows who he is. Or at least, no one is willing to betray him.”

He clicked forward, the screen went black.

“Lights,” said Keith.

When the lights came on, he was standing in front of the room with his hands behind his back.

“But he’s starting to make mistakes. We have some good sources. I need your team to be ready. We’re going to get this son of a bitch.”
Chapter 35

May 23, 2006

30 days and a wakeup

It gets tougher as we get nearer the end of our tour. The stakes get higher. No one wants to be the last person injured before we leave this country. The last one dead. And it's harder for Stone and me to make the decision to leave the wire. But some things are worth it. Saving lives is worth it.

Sometimes I forget that I'm always on Afghan time in this country. When we hadn't received the call back from the source by 2200, I put the guys on a sleep plan. I, on the other hand, couldn't sleep. Because, you know, it could be a trap. So, I kept making my rounds, checking security. My guys, my responsibility.

Johnny got the call at 0830 the next day.

"Boss, there's three of them at an Afghan Army base about ten minutes down the road."

That's damn close. Too damn close. We needed to move now.

"Where's our guy at? The informer?"

"He says that he told the others he was staying with his family in Jalalabad last night. He's supposed to meet at the base around noon."

We'll hit them before noon.

I was eating breakfast with Mark and Stone. "Ready?" I asked them.

"I'll get the guys," said Mark.

Stone was already looking at a map.
The Afghan Army compound was one of many along Highway 1 between Kabul through Jalalabad to Torham Gates, the border crossing into Pakistan. The coalition forces saw this highway as key ground used for moving troops and providing much needed aid to one of Afghanistan’s largest populations. As such, they had convinced the Afghan authorities to reinforce their posts along the highway.

Our team had visited this post before. They were supposed to be on our side, but now they were harboring bombers that were definitely not on our side.

“What are we going to do?” asked Stone.

“We have to go in,” I told him.

“I know, but how? Are we bringing our Afghan Army unit? Are they all in on it?”

“Hard to tell.”

The two of us were huddled over the map on the hood of my vehicle.

“We got to take them down,” I repeated. “We can’t let bombers get away. People will die, most likely Americans.”

“No one is saying we’re not going, Ryan,” said Stone. “We all agree. But how?”

We were quiet for a long time.

I blew out a long breath. “We just do it. Now. We drive up to the gate like we’ve done a hundred times. We leave our Afghan Army partners outside so they don’t get involved, we’ll have them do a perimeter security one hundred meters from the base, set up roadblocks. The post soldiers let us in. We know which buildings they’re in, so we surround the buildings and find the commander of the base. Just us and our Afghan Security Force cooks and such.”

“Then what?” asked Stone.
“Then we tell them that we are arresting the men, we confiscate the explosives, and we leave.”

He paused. “I’m not—"

“Sir, do you have a better idea?”

He shook his head.

“What if there aren’t any explosives?” he asked.

“We drink tea with them and wish them a good day.”

“What if they’re dressed like soldiers? Or worse, are soldiers?”

“Same plan.”

“Ryan, I mean, an American unit wouldn’t allow that. Wouldn’t allow another country’s soldiers to arrest their own soldiers in their own country.”

“Yeah sir, I know. But this is Afghanistan. Here, this shit happens every day.”

I don’t think he believed me.

“We have to go now if we’re going to surprise them,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s gather the guys and do a map rehearsal at least. Shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes tops.”

I drew a rough sketch on the back of the map. The compound was about fifty meters long and thirty meters wide. There was one gate in the center of the fifty-meter wall that paralleled the road. Along the outer walls were living quarters for all the soldiers and on the left side as you entered the gate was the dining area. In front of the dining area was another long building that paralleled the dining building and the bombers were supposed to be sleeping in the room nearest the gate. The entry road
went about ten meters into the base, then turned left toward the dining building, past the room where the bombers stayed.

The plan was for the Afghan Army to block off the roads and not let anyone in or out of the compound. The team and our Afghan Security personnel would drive all the way to the dining building, allowing all of our vehicles to enter, then surround the bomber building and search for the base commander. That was it. That was the plan.

There might be up to five hundred Afghan soldiers in the compound and they might all be against us. But I didn’t see any other choice. And it was entirely possible the Afghan soldiers didn’t even know the bombers were there, or that the bombers were relatives of some officer in the Afghan Army. All I knew was that if we didn’t capture these guys, an American would probably die. And I didn’t know if I could live with that.

We walked the team through the map, then did final prep on all the equipment. Stone took the Afghan Commander aside, and I’m not sure what he told him, but there were no questions about the mission for which I was grateful.

“Shir, I need to talk to all of Shabeer’s guys.”

“Yes, boss. I’ll get them.”

About five minutes later I was standing before fifteen hardened Afghan men with AKs strung over their shoulders. These men had fought the Russians for a decade, and the Taliban after that. They had probably been at war their whole adult lives, and half of their childhood.

“We’re going into the Afghan base to get some Taliban.”

After Shir translated, I heard them murmur among them, but I wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.
“We don’t think the Afghan Army soldiers know that they have Taliban staying with them, so we don’t want to hurt the Afghan soldiers unless they attack us,” I continued. “So, do not fire first. Don’t act aggressive. Don’t intimidate them. We don’t want to start a fight in there. We will be outnumbered. If possible, we want to do this without a shot fired.”

Shir translated, and I watched their faces. Shabeer spoke back to Shir.

“Boss, Shabeer says they trust you. Lead and they will follow.”

And that’s about all you can ask.

*****

The gate to the base was unguarded and open. The first truck, an Afghan Security truck, went straight in. That’s when the plan fell apart. I had underestimated how much room there was and only four of the eight trucks made it through the gate. The road was so narrow that it was impossible to turn around or back up. The first truck stopped right in front of the dining building, and in front of them were fifty Afghan soldiers, their weapons slung as they filed in to get their morning meal.

Then it got worse.

Shabeer’s men jumped out and brandished their weapons in the direction of the Afghan soldiers, yelling at them. From their motions, I guessed they were telling them to put down their weapons. The original fifty were quickly joined by fifty more who began to also yell, and all of them began to unsling their rifles and surround the first truck. The other three trucks unloaded and pulled security around their trucks, and the
men from the trucks still outside began to run into the compound. It was quickly getting complicated and confusing and dangerous.

I knelt beside the second truck passenger door watching everything unfold in slow motion. “Shir, tell them not to fire,” I told the terp kneeling at my side. He stood up and yelled at the Afghan soldiers in front of the dining facility.

“No, to our guys. To Shabeer’s guys. Tell them not to fire, to aim their weapons down.”

Shir yelled again.

Shabeer’s guys and the Afghan soldiers continued to point their weapons at each other and yell. I looked behind me and saw the Americans targeting Afghan soldiers. Chris was on my back gun and whispered loudly “If one guy fires, we’re all going to die.”

Teddy was on the top gun. “Yep,” he said, then spit.

The Americans and Afghan Security Force ran through the gate and began to surround the building where the suspected bombers were supposed to be located, screaming for people to freeze and causing more confusion, not recognizing the tentative situation we were all in. Some of the soldiers began to lift their rifles to their shoulders.

Suddenly, an Afghan Commander came out of the dining facility. He glanced between his men and us. Then, in a commanding voice, he spoke to his men. All of the Afghan soldiers lowered their guns.

And that’s when he came out. From the bomber building, a man exited. He didn’t wear a uniform like the Afghan soldiers, he wore the normal clothes of an Afghan civilian and was in bare feet and carried an AK-47 rifle on automatic aimed at the
Americans. He didn’t say anything, just looked through his sights at each American as he passed them. Time seemed to stand still as he walked carefully between the soldiers and the American forces, finally disappearing into the dining building.

It was like they held their breath while the stranger walked among them, everyone frozen in their position, afraid to move or shoot. After he vanished, it was like an enchantment had been lifted and everyone started to move at once.

Another man in local garb exited the same building, this one had shoes on and he yelled as he pointed his AK-47 rifle at the Americans. One of Shabeer’s men grabbed the muzzle of the lone gunner and yanked it out of his hands, swinging it back and striking the man on the head with the butt stock. The man fell to the ground. Mark leaped forward and knelt on the fallen man’s back, all 230 pounds of him, and was rewarded by a painful cry. He began to secure the man’s hands behind his back with plastic flex cuffs.

Another man ran out of the building, and Mark lay prone on his guy while aiming at the other. Two more of Shabeer’s guys came in behind the running man and tackled him to the ground while another came up and butt stroked him on top of the head.

One of Shabeer’s cooks cried out in excitement, pulling hundreds of machine gun rounds out of the window of the building where the bombers had run from. Stone approached the room cautiously from the front, but before he could enter, two more Afghan Security soldiers opened the door from the inside. The two shouted in excitement and dunked back inside, followed closely by the Stone and myself.
Inside were small yellow cardboard boxes and blue propane tanks rigged with wires. Something untwisted in my stomach. We got the guys. I left Stone to address the explosives, and I went back outside to defuse the confusion.

We had done it without a shot fired, so far. And as long as we didn’t get killed in a cross fire in the next five minutes, we saved some lives.

*****

Captain Stone spoke with the base commander as Shir translated, explaining why they were there and asking for him to have his men secure the compound and let no one leave. The commander dispersed his troops, which is when I started noticing a large amount of civilians coming out of the buildings on the compound.

“Who the hell are these guys?” I asked Mark.

“No idea.”

Bryan and Chris exited the bomber’s building with electronic cables, cell phones, and blue kerosene bottles. “I think this is the place,” said Bryan. Chris held up another yellow box that said “Sweets” in English. Opening the lid revealed explosives and another cell phone wired to them.

“Line up all the men in civilian clothing against the wall,” Stone told Shir, who quickly translated to the base commander. The Americans helped in the process as the Afghans showed little initiative to participate. Finally, the civilians were lined up. “Take pictures, I want photos of every one of those guys.”
Stone brought the base commander over to the back of the pickup where Bryan had consolidated all the explosives. “Shir!” he yelled. “Get over here, I need you to translate!”

Stone pointed at the explosives. “Where did these come from? How did they get on your base?” Shir translated quickly, but without the angry inflection Stone gave his words.

“He doesn’t know, this is the first time he has seen them,” Shir translated.

I reviewed security around the base, then returned to watch Mark get photos of all the men. The Afghan men were lined up against the base outer wall and frisked by Shabeer’s men. Mark took front and profile digital photos and then came back to get thumb and forefinger fingerprints. Biometrics were becoming more common in the combat zones. We could trace fingerprints from IED equipment. And identify people that continued to be present when suspicious things were going on.

Some Afghan soldiers remained where they were in front of the dining building. Most were smoking as they watched us. I wondered what they were thinking? The hairs started to raise on the back of my neck. There were too many unknowns here.

The rest of the team and the Afghan Security forces gathered ammunition from the room where they had found the explosives and placed it into the back of the pickups. Bomb blankets were placed around the explosives.

Stone began to get angry. The commander seemed to cower beneath his loud questions. “Who are these men? Where did they come from?”

“He says he doesn’t know,” translated Shir. “This is the first time he’s ever seen them, but he will ask and find out for you.”
“Are you the commander? How can you know nothing about these men? How did they get on your base?”

“He says that the real commander is visiting family in Kabul, he was just in charge for right now. And he doesn’t know how they got in the base.”

“They just leave the freakin’ gates open, so of course they don’t know how the bombers got in here. They don’t even know how we got in here,” I told him.

Stone shook his head.

“You finished, sir? We got to go.” We were exposed. We no longer had surprise on our side. And we were never going to figure out who was on the side of the bombers, but I had no doubt that someone, at least one person, was in league with them.

Stone looked around. “Mark, you done?” he yelled.

“Roger, sir.”

“Let’s get out of here, Ryan,” he told me, walking back to his truck.

“C’mon everyone, grab everything and let’s move out. And I mean everything!” I yelled.

Truck’s engines burst into life, someone moved to the rear of the caravan and started backing the trucks out into the main street in front of the base.

Shir tapped me on the shoulder. “Boss, the ammunition you took, it belongs to the soldiers. The bombers were staying in their Ammunition Supply Point. The commander—” Shir stopped. He must have seen the anger in my face.

“Shir, everything goes.” I got in my vehicle which immediately started in reverse towards the exit. I yelled over the engine to Shir. “If he wants it back, tell his
commander to come to our compound when he gets back. We want to talk with him anyway.

I watched as the commander spoke excitedly to Shir, who said a few words in return and then jumped into the back of the last truck.

*****

We laid the components out on a grey tarp in the courtyard of the school where we had conducted the medical treatments.

“This would have messed us up bad,” said Bryan, repeating what I was thinking.

There were eight cell phones with various cables, two metal sky blue kerosene cans, and two yellow cardboard boxes with the word SWEET printed in black lettering on the top and on all four sides. The box was open and inside were more cables hooked into C4 explosives.

“Bryan, how do you think this works?”

Bryan moved forward to stand on the tarp between the components, he had a two-foot-long stick in his hand. He began to move things around with his stick and free hand. “I think they’re divided up like this, two cells per, one pair with the SWEET box and one pair with the kerosene bottle. I don’t understand how the cell phone connects into the kerosene bottle yet, we’ll have to open the bottle to do that, or send it up to higher and have them do it, but I don’t want to send anything up that might be armed. I’ll take a closer look when we get back to camp.” Moving to the side of the SWEET box, he continued, “Basically, they connect this cell to the explosives in the box, place it
in the box in this space right here that has been left open, and seal the box. They can put this box anywhere, strap it to the back of motorcycle or bike, leave it somewhere next to a car or building and then they call the cell phone and BOOM!” He made a motion with his hand simulating an explosion.

Everyone stayed quiet for a moment.

“Bastards,” someone said quietly.

“Okay guys, let’s get back to the base. Bryan, you and Chris pack this up. It’s safe to travel, right?”

“Roger top. I’ll wrap everything in the explosive blanket just in case. But we removed the batteries from the cells, so I don’t see a problem.”

“Okay guys, it’s noon now. If there’s not much traffic, we should be home in a few hours.” Everyone scrambled into their vehicles and I switched on my team radio, keying the mic. “Great job guys. We definitely saved lives today, maybe even our own. Last mission. Let’s get back to base and start packing for the flight home.”

As usual, my vehicle was the last American truck to leave. As we were about to pull onto the highway, a little girl of about ten, wrapped in a large purple scarf ran up to the vehicle and banged on the hood.

We stopped and Shir came up from the truck behind us.

“She didn’t get anything, boss,” translated the Shir.

I glanced around the truck, but everything had been given out. I touched in my pockets and felt something in my right cargo pocket, then pulled out a notebook I had grabbed from a pile of school items earlier.
She stood in front of my door, piercing green eyes, her hands palm up at chest level. All I could think of was that this was our last mission. Going home to see Cammy. Thirty days left to pack up and ship out. Nothing could stop the smile on my face.

I gave her the notebook, a half bottle of warm Gatorade and a melted Snickers bar which I had been saving for the ride home.

She smiled, her hands full.

Then, we pulled out slowly so as not to coat her in dust.
Chapter 36

March 11, 2017

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“You ready?” Mark asked Camila.

They were eating their last dinner in BAF together, her whole team.

“Would it be cliché to say I was born ready?”

Mark laughed. “I know for a fact you weren’t. It was a lot of hard work to get you here. A lot of people pitched in.”

“I know.”

“Did you know your dad wanted you to be a doctor.”

“I didn’t know that actually, until I read it in his journal. Who knows? I might have gone that direction. If things were different.” She cut into her steak. Friday night was surf and turf at the dining hall.

“Are you moving your stuff over to the barracks tonight?” Mark asked.

The team had a large building to themselves as they planned for the deployment. Camila hadn’t moved her stuff while she was still training her replacement, and there was no time when they started training together.

“Yeah, I’ll do it after dinner. I don’t need any help,” she added quickly. “I only have a couple bags.”

“You’re on a team now, we help each other. That’s literally the definition of a team.”

“I just don’t want to be a bother.”
“Hey guys,” Mark raised his voice and the private conversations at the table stopped. “The Captain needs to move her stuff over to our barracks after dinner.”

“Where’s her room?” came two simultaneous replies.

“I’ll show you when we’re finished.”

Camila smiled. “I better leave now so I can have everything packed when you get there. Give me about fifteen minutes.”

“You got it,” Mark replied.

“And thanks.”

“For what?”

She looked at the team as they went back to their table talk, then back at Mark.

“Fifteen minutes.”

Camila had never really unpacked, so it would only take her a few minutes to stow the last of her clothes. As she walked to her room, she thought about arriving at Jalalabad, her father’s last mission base. Would it be like he wrote about it? Would the same interpreters be there? Freddy, Johnny? Would Shabeer, the big Afghan Security leader be there? Would they remember her father?

Security first, she reminded herself. Check the perimeter and the kill zones outside the base. Brief the guards on who has access to the base. Check all the buildings and equipment to see what was available for use on mission and protecting the base. Meet the other American forces at the airfield, determine their usefulness.

Her mind tumbled with the knowledge she had learned from her father’s journal and the many discussions she’d had with Mark over the last weeks.
They would use the vehicles at the compound, but it wouldn’t be the old unarmored vehicles her dad had inherited. Her team would have armored hummers and MRAPs, Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, that would protect her men from IED explosions. Heavy armored trucks with remote weapons on top. So much had changed since her dad had fought. And yet, she would be fighting the same enemy. If what Keith said is true, the same man.
Chapter 37

May 23, 2006

29 Days and a Wake Up

I wasn’t the best student at school, it’s one of the many reasons I joined the Army. But I remember one book in particular, about two guys, one smart and one not so much, Of Mice and Men I think it was called. I forgot who wrote it, but I remember the title because there was a on the first page, a quote someone else wrote: The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

Perfect. I couldn’t have selected a better place myself. A steep hill to our left, almost impossible to climb. The Kabul River to our right. Tactically, it’s called channelization. Nowhere to run. The perfect place for an ambush.

The explosion came from the cliff side, and it was a big one too. Every time we get attacked, I see how unprofessional these bad guys are, and thank God for that. I would have put the IED into the face of the hill, explosives coming out parallel to the ground. Bam, everyone dies. They buried it at the base of the hill, and they set it off early. It blew through Mark’s engine block. From the rear of the formation I saw the hummer lift off the ground in a roar of fire and dust, flipping into the river. Chunks of rock and earth the size of my head peppered my truck over a hundred meters back in the convoy.

The subsequent enemy fire came from across the river, about five hundred meters away. It was a good plan, except Teddy can reach out and touch bad guys almost a mile away with his grenades, and they began falling less then fifteen seconds after the blast.
Doot doot doot doot.

The rhythm of the gun above my head was like a jack hammer, random explosions shooting geysers of earth up at less than one second intervals across the river. I looked up the cliff face, expecting more enemy there, but they weren’t that smart I guess.

Within thirty seconds, the enemy fire had almost stopped. Not sure what their objectives were, unless it was just to stop us.

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” I said on the team radio. “This may just be the tip of the iceberg.”

I heard Stone on my vehicle radio calling for air support. It was eerily quiet.

“Mark’s still under.” It came over the team radio, it sounded like Bryan, and it sent shivers down my spine.

What the hell was going on?

I left the truck and start walking up the line of trucks to the front. “Bravo One,” I called Stone over the radio. “This is Alpha One, I’m running up the river side of the convoy.”

“Roger,” I heard him reply, Serpent talking in the background from his vehicle radio.

“Teddy, I’m going forward. Maintain rear security.” Teddy was loading more linked grenades into his gun.

“Got it,” he replied, slamming the cover into place and yanking back the charging handle.

I started to run, checking on vehicles as I passed.
“Sitrep, now, anyone. What’s going on up front?” I said on the radio.

“The first hummer went into the river, we still got people in the water,” Bryan said.

“Mark,” I said, moving faster, dodging through tight places in the convoy. “What’s your situation?”

“Wet,” came a static reply. “Trapped underneath the hummer with Chris.”

“Everyone keep watch,” I said, then I started shedding equipment left and right along the convoy path: body armor, helmet, Camelback.

Mark’s hummer was upside down in the river.

Bryan was in the vehicle just before Mark’s and I handed him my weapons.

“Watch my guns,” I told him.

At the river’s edge I saw two men in body armor struggling against the mud to pull themselves ashore. Bryan and I pulled Donnie out of the river and then helped Johnny.

“Mark and Chris are still down there,” Donnie said, sitting on the ground and breathing heavily.

“Go to my vehicle.” I pushed Bryan and pointed back the way I had come. “Help with rear security.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Keep everyone on high alert. They’re already running, but they might be back.”

I grabbed Donnie by the shoulders, “Get a quickie saw. I’m going in. Don’t argue. Do it.”
I dove into the water. I was in my T-shirt, boots and pants by then, but I was a strong swimmer. Anyway, it was less swimming than using the hummer to drag me down further after the initial dive.

The vehicle had almost completely flipped over and was sitting at almost 270 degrees, the passenger floorboards were closest to the surface, only about two feet under the surface. The passenger door was leaning against the side of the river like a fallen domino, with about two feet of space from the upside down soft hummer roof to the river’s floor. I saw green light shine from a slit cut in the driver’s door that was closest to the river bottom, just big enough for a grown man to fit through. I swam toward the light. Squeezing through the hole, I surfaced and saw Chris and Mark. The area barely fit our three heads. The water was just below our shoulders. Someone had stuck a green chemical light to the roof/floor with what looked like tape.

“Mark, what—” I saw his hand then, about a foot under the water, smashed between a bent machine gun and the roll bar.

Mark smiled sickly, “Won’t budge. Sorry. Doesn’t hurt much though, so that’s good. Chris is a little out of it, might have a concussion.”

I shook my head, “No problem buddy, quickie saw is on its way.”

“How’s your swimming?” I asked Chris.

He shook his head, then grabbed it and moaned.

“Guess we’ll have to work on that later. Where’s the body armor?” I asked.

“We ditched them,” said Mark and he pointed down.

I took a breath and dove, finding two sets lying on the roof against the river floor. I pushed off the plastic roof hard and broke the surface again.
“Okay Chris, I’m going to give you one of these, and I’ll take the other. We’ll hold our breath, sink through the slit in the roof, crawl along the bottom of the river till we’re clear of the truck, then drop the armor and swim to the surface. I’ll be right with you, okay, so don’t worry.” His face was bleeding from shallow shrapnel wounds. “You okay? Can you hear me?

“Yeah, go it. Sink, swim,” Chris replied.

“I’ll be back,” I told Mark as I clasped thumbs with his left hand.

He smiled again, this time for real, “I know you will, Terminator.”

“Ready?” Chris gave a thumbs up sign. “Deep breath when I count to three, okay?” He nodded. “One. Two.” I saw him take a deep breath and I gave him an extra second. “Three.” I gulped a breath of my own, we let go of the seats we held on to and sunk through the roof. We sunk pretty easy, but I could see him struggling when we hit the bottom. We crawled along the bottom, armor plates loosely attached to our backs, until we cleared the vehicle. Grabbing him tightly under the arms, I took off his armor and dropped mine, then we pushed hard off the bottom. We broke the surface together. Hands reached out and pulled him onto shore.

“I’m going back down, hurry up with that quickie saw.” I yelled, treading water, then took another breath before anyone could stop me, and was back with Mark breathing stale air in a much smaller space. Was the vehicle sinking?

He was calm, his knife gripped in his free hand.

I looked at him and I knew then what he had already determined. “No time,” I said quietly.
He shook his head slowly, “No time.” He handed me the sheathed knife with a slight smile, “I knew this would come in handy.”

Mark already had a crude tourniquet made from his scarf, just above his wrist. He began to twist it, using a pen for leverage, and I tied it off. The water had climbed to our necks.

I clipped the sheath to my belt and pulled the blade free. The physics of the task boggled my mind, as I wanted to swing it fast and hard, one fell swoop, no pain.

Mark saw me stalling. “Sorry buddy, you’re going to have to saw it off.” He brought his belt up in his other hand. “Don’t worry, my knife is sharp, it won’t take long.” I looked at him and closed my eyes, I might have been crying but there was so much water, who knows. He grabbed me by the shoulder and I opened my eyes again. He was so composed. His eyes were bright in the green light, like kryptonite. “Just three fingers, should go quick.” He paused and nodded his head. “Do it.” He said, then put the belt between his teeth.

I did.

He was right, it was quick. Three slices. Forward, back, forward, and his arm fell limp into the water. There was less blood than I thought there would be. Guess those tourniquets work, or the cold water constricting the blood vessels.

Mark had dropped the belt and was breathing fast and hard. The water was over our chins. “We have to go, now,” I told him.

He nodded, concentrated and began to take slow deep breaths. I couldn’t bring him out like Chris, the slit in the roof would only allow one of us at a time to pass because of our size.
“You go first, I’ll push you through and make sure you don’t get snagged, then I’ll get another breath if I need one.

“Okay.”

“Start swimming as soon as you get out, I’ll help as soon as I can.”

He nodded, concentrating on his breathing.

“You ready?” I asked, sheathing the knife at my side. Mark’s breathing had returned to somewhat normal and he nodded again. I put my hand in front of his face with three fingers. “OK. Three.” I lowered a finger, then a second, we both took deep breaths, and I lowered the last finger. He went down first, using his injured arm like a flipper. He got stuck twice going out and I had to cut away parts of his uniform with the knife. Finally, he bulldozed through. I watched him briefly. I could tell by his rushed movements he was starting to panic. Instead of crawling forward and clearing the vehicle, he grabbed pieces of the truck with his good hand, propelling himself forward and on top of the truck. I was out of air and I returned to the space. If he passed out, I’d bring him to the surface and we’d revive him. But we just had to get to the surface.

My head surfaced and I got a half breath before the truck pushed my head back under the water. It didn’t sink fast, it seemed to be slipping, and I kicked for the sliced roof. There was just enough space for me. I had to claw at the soft sand in the river bottom to pull my body through. I didn’t know what was holding it up, and I didn’t care. Running out of air, I quickly managed my way around the vehicle, saw Mark struggling to the surface in front of me, and pushed off the bottom, grabbing him as I passed and helped him to the surface. Arms reached for him.

“Where’s Chris,” someone asked.
“He went down to help,” another voice replied. “I tried to stop him.”

Jesus.

I took another breath and dove back. The hummer was completely upside down now. I scrambled around looking for Chris.

He wasn’t struggling when I found him, his legs trapped under the roll bars. There was no way he could hold up the hummer, it was way too heavy. He must have seen it collapsing and crawled under it using his body to allow me space to escape. He had put body armor on to sink and was still wearing it. He never had a chance.

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Of the two prisoners, one was dead. Their hands were tied and they were hooded when the truck flipped into the water, and he was launched into the water. We never found the body. The other one was lucky as hell. He had been thrown clear of the vehicle as it flipped, and we found him unconscious in the mud beside the river. Some singed clothes and a broken arm as his only souvenirs.

It took us three hours to tow Mark’s vehicle out of the water, by then the attack helos were circling and MEDEVAC was fifteen minutes out. I swam down to tie rope under Chris’ arms so we could all pull him out. The men were silent through most of the process, except for simple instructions.

The rest of the convoy was mobile, so we stripped the damaged vehicle of all equipment then dragged it out of the kill zone. Afterwards, we set up a security perimeter for the MEDEVAC helos to land.
Bryan had shrapnel in his right shoulder, but other than Mark and Chris, no one else was injured.

Chris and Bryan were the explosive experts, and they were both gone, so I set up the demo to blow the hummer. I’d be damned if I was going to leave anything for the bad guys to use. The math of explosives occupied my mind and someone kept handing me C4 to plant on the vehicle which kept my hands busy. Finally, I just doubled whatever amount my calculations had come up with. ‘P’ for plenty. My mind was calm when I finished. I turned and I saw everyone looking at me.

“Mount up. Let’s go.”

They did. And we did.

One minute later the hummer exploded in a ball of fire.
Chapter 38

March 13, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

When Camila finished the last entry of the journal, she closed the book.

That motherfucker.

What kind of man could sit across the table and talk so calmly about someone he had betrayed.

She wouldn’t let him get away with it. Her father had failed to stop him, but she wouldn’t.

She thought about all the information she had read in the journal, everything that could incriminate Keith. She should turn it over to Miller at CID. He and Keith already didn’t get along.

She wanted to march over to Keith’s room right now, confront him, then shoot him in the head. She was sure that’s what her father was going to do. But he had failed. Why? What had happened that day? What had Keith said that had stopped her father from beating Keith to death?

She felt tears of anger invading her eyes and she looked around the open bay that her team occupied. Only about half the team was there, some making last checks on baggage, some relaxing, reading, or watching videos on tablets.

“I’m going to the Green Bean,” she told Mark, whose bunk was closest to hers.

“Get my last fix.”

“Can you bring me back my usual?” Mark asked.

“Sure, cream and two sugars?” she was already halfway to the door.
“You got it.”

She looked at her watch. Six hours to take off.
Chapter 39

May 24, 2006

29 Days and a wakeup

When we signed up for this job, we knew that people were going to die. We may walk the battlefield with the appearance of invincibility, but in the back of our minds we prepare for our death. We update our life insurance. We ensure our loved ones have our bank passwords. We write our last letters to our families, hoping it will explain our choices in life, our choices in death. But we don’t think about our friends dying. We don’t prepare for the man on our left or right not coming home. We don’t prepare for that absence. We don’t prepare for the host of emotions that follow. Sometimes, we lose control.

“Why were you on the base?” I asked the last bomber. Shir translated, and I heard emotion in his voice.

The law allowed me to conduct what were called ‘field interrogations’. I could question prisoners to determine time sensitive information. Those were just fancy words for information my team could use for immediate follow on missions. The makers of the bombs, the leader of the bomb cell, another bomb cell operating in the area or somewhere else in Afghanistan. Information that saved lives.

The law did not allow me to torture him, no matter how much I wanted to. No matter how much I wanted to smash the man’s face into a bloody pulp. No matter how much I wanted to break fingers, hands, arms. No matter how much I wanted to make him pay. The experts say that torture doesn’t give any more accurate information than
other forms of interrogation. They say it doesn’t help. But I’m pretty sure it would help me. I’m pretty sure that I would feel a lot better.

I had contained myself till we got back to base, but I immediately took our last prisoner into the questioning building, Shir in tow.

“He says he was visiting his cousin.”

“What’s his cousin’s name?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“He doesn’t know his own cousin’s name?”

“He says it’s Farid.”

Jesus Christ. Really? I stood up and towered over him.

“Is his cousin in the Afghan Army? Assigned to that post?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“How long was he going to stay?”

“He says he doesn’t know.”

“And the other guy, the guy that died in the river, what was his name?”

“He doesn’t know. He never met him before.”

“But they were sleeping in the same room.”

“He says they weren’t.”

“We saw them come out of the same room.”

“He says he doesn’t remember.”

“Are you in the Afghan Army?”

“No. He is just a poor farmer.”

“Why did he have a gun? Where did he get the gun?”
“It wasn't his gun. He doesn't own a gun. The gun was in the room where he slept. He heard gunfire. He thought the base was under attack. He was afraid.”

This guy was killing me. The worst liar in the history of terrorism.

“Who was the other man, the one that got away at the base?”

“He is asking what other man.”

I punched the wall above his head. Gloves protected my knuckles and my fist sunk a half inch into the dirt wall. Dust and chunks of dirt rained down on his head.

I spoke slowly. “Who the fuck was the other man that ran out of the room he was in and aimed his gun at me and my men and got away?”

“He says he doesn't know, but that he was a bad man. He spoke of bad things, killing Americans. He was bad.”

No fucking shit.

I squatted down next to the man. He was crying. Big tears soaking his black beard. Snot starting to drip into his mustache.

“I know who you are. I know what you were planning on doing.” I whispered, and Shir spoke softly into his other ear. “This is your last chance. Any cooperation you give us now will help you where you are going. You are going to Bagram, nothing is going to stop that. There, they have professionals to talk with you, and I don't know exactly what they will do. And after that, you will go to Guantanamo Bay for the rest of your life with the other terrorists, in isolation, never to see your friends or family again. Give us information and we can make it easier on you, we can tell the men in Bagram that you helped us.”

Tears continued to fall, but he remained silent.
I needed a break.

“Shir, lock him up.” I didn’t wait for a response, I left the building.

The team was in the motor pool, cleaning weapons and restocking ammunition. There was little conversation.

“What did that little shit say?” asked Teddy.

“That he’s innocent,” I replied.

“Fucking bullshit!”

“We’ll get the info out of him. Either here or in BAF.”

Teddy shook his head. “We never get any info from BAF. If we don’t beat it out of him here, we aren’t getting anything.”

“We’re not beating the shit out of anyone, Teddy.”

“I was talking to Gonzo in Asadabad. They—.”

“No, Teddy. We’re not doing that. It’s what separates us from them.”

“Boss.” I didn’t know how long Shir had been there.

“Not now, Shir.”

“There’s a man at the gate, his name is Achmed Shah. He says you have his brother. He says he’s innocent.”

No one in this country is innocent, there are no good guys here. One time I tried to explain that to a journalist, and she asked me, “What about you?” And I replied, “I’m a good guy, but I’m American.” Not my most politically correct moment.

“Boss, he says he knows stuff. He can help you find the bad guys. He wants you to promise to release his brother if he tells you.”

“Where’s the brother now?”
“He’s in the cell,” said Shir. “I have Achmed Shah in the questioning building.”

I turned to the team. “Finish up. Reset the trucks. Be ready. If I get a lead on who set that bomb off, we’re leaving.”

“Let’s go then,” I told Shir and followed him back toward the building.

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“Boss, he says that Haji Noor told him that he spoke with some bad guys in Jalalabad and they were going to plan something.”

Mark had warned me this is how it went. They spoke in code. Never any specifics. It was always some guy said something was going to happen somewhere on someday.

“Shir, I don’t give a rat’s ass about that. I want to know about his brother. He’s part of a bombing cell. Who else is in the cell? Where did he learn to make IEDs?

“Boss, he claims he works for the US government as a special agent for some guy that he met in prison.”

“Why was he in prison?”

“Oh, he wasn’t in prison, he misspoke. A villager from his town was in prison, and Achmed Shah was visiting him, and then he met this other guy that was in the prison who said that he worked for the coalition forces.”

“What does this have to do with his brother?”

“He says his brother is innocent, that you should let him go free.”

“That’s not happening. I’m about to arrest his ass too, just for wasting my time.”
“He says you broke trust with him by not releasing his brother.”

“Tell him he continues to break trust with me by not telling me the complete truth, by not telling me the whole story, by not telling me the names of the people doing bad things.”

“He says something happened a few days ago.”

“What happened?” I was started to get mad again, this guy was wasting my time.

“Actually, boss he says it happened a few weeks ago.”

For Christ’s Sake! “What did?”

“He says a guy approached him and told him things because they were best friends.”

“What was his name?”

“He can’t tell us – he doesn’t know it.”

“Are you kidding me, he doesn’t know his best friend’s name?” I was yelling now, and Achmed Shah was getting agitated, wiping his face.

What the hell was that? I stared at his hand. There were six fingers on his right hand.

“Now he says it was his brother-in-law. And that he asked him to set up road bombs.”

“What? Who? The best friend or the brother in law?” I couldn’t stop staring at the hand. Mark interviewed a guy, something about six fingers.

“Boss, he says his best friend doesn’t always tell him everything.”
“Shir, tell him to stop lying. Offer him one chance to come clean on everything he knows and is involved in, the truth and nothing but the truth, and I may be able to release him because I will be able to prove that he is cooperating with us.”

“He says he only tells you the truth.”

“You,” I pointed at the Afghan and concentrated on speaking slowly for Shir’s translation. “You have a misconception of what is going on here. We don’t have to prove ourselves to you,” I paused, emphasizing the next word. “You have to prove yourself to us. I don’t have to catch you red-handed with bombs in your house or a stick of dynamite in your pocket. You must prove you are working with me. You must prove that you are being truthful to me. You need to think about which side you are on, think about your future, the future of your family, and, ultimately, the future of your country. Think about how you want to live the rest of your life and think about how your family wants to live. Do you want peace? Do you want your children to go to school? Do you want freedom? I offer this. America offers this.

The Afghan stared at me for a moment after Shir finished his translation. Then he and Shir spoke for a few minutes. Shir began to get excited, almost yelling.

“What’s going on Shir?”

“He says he knows about a traitor on this base.”

Shir had another quick conversation with the man, but I heard the name spoken three times, using different inflections.

I repeated the name. “Keith.”

Both men looked at me.

“Yes,” Shir said. “Keith.”
Chapter 40

March 13, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

“What’s up Mason,” asked Miller. She frequented the compound so much, Miller had got her a pass. She walked straight into his office.

“I don’t have much time, but I need to report fraud and possible treason,” Camila told him. “Are you the right guy to talk with.”

Miller put down the Red Bull he was holding. “Right office, but strong statements, especially if you don’t have evidence.”

Camila put the journal on the table. “I have this journal that my father wrote before he was killed. Inside, he writes about your friend Keith Steiner, and tells about illegal things that he did, to include colluding with the enemy to target American units with IEDs.”

Miller raised an eyebrow and turned the journal toward him, flipping through the first few pages. “We’ll have to look at this and validate the information.” He looked up. “You know, info that’s ten years old is probably hard to verify. I’m just preparing you for the worse.”

“I know, but—I just can’t let Keith get away with this.”

“I always thought there was something shady about that guy.” Miller closed the journal. “I’ll do my best, but don’t hold your breath. These things take time.”

“Will I get this back?” Camila pointed at the book.
“Eventually. We need to look at this to see if you have a case. The journal probably won’t be enough, we’ll have to see if anyone is still alive from when the events happened and interview them.”

“I understand.” She had known it wouldn’t be easy.

“And we’ll need you to fill out some paperwork.”

“How long will that take? I’m moving forward to Jalalabad this afternoon.”

An hour later, Camila was walking toward the exit. She looked at her watch.

Five hours before takeoff.

Miller didn’t inspire confidence. But, she wasn’t going to let Keith get away with treason. And if nothing came of it, she’d take matters into her own hands. Though she wasn’t sure what that meant. Her dad had wanted Keith brought to justice, the least she could do was finish it.

She suddenly realized she had passed the exit to the compound and was heading for the CIA building. She didn’t even slow down. She’d already made her decision. She was going to confront Keith now, face to face.
Chapter 41

May 24, 2006

29 Days and a wake up

It was hard for me to believe. The source said Keith. An American traitor. A Green Beret piece of shit for God’s sake. What kind of man would do that to his friends, to the men that served with him, bled and died beside him. The Taliban, Al-Qaida, at least I can understand fighting for an ideal. But selling out your comrades in arms, I can’t think of anything lower.

The man sang like a bird after that.

Calls made from the Jalalabad base over the last year, before my team arrived. Information passed to the insurgents to intercept American convoys. Working hand in hand with Baber Pacha. Ambushes. IEDs. Dead American soldiers. Treason. An American traitor. A dead American traitor, if I had anything to say about it.

“Ryan?” Stone saw me walking to my room. I ignored him. He followed.

I jammed clothes into a day bag, started donning my kit.

“Ryan. What’s going on?” He stood at the door. Then, he grabbed my shoulder.

“Where are you going?”

I shrugged his hand off. “That fucking asshole is a traitor.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Keith.” I continued to put on equipment.

“Who’s Keith? Hey, slow down. Talk to me.”
I stopped. “Fucking Keith!” I yelled at him. “The guy from the last team, who made deals trading our food, selling cable. Now, an Afghan comes to me and knows his name, and says he gave information to the Taliban that compromised missions and killed American soldiers.”

“Oh, well, we need to report it. We’ll get him arrested.”

“I’m going to kill him.” I tried to push by him, but he stood his ground.

“Wait, Ryan. We have to report it up the chain.”

He didn’t raise his hands to me, he just stood in the doorway, our heads close.

“Ryan, just help me write up the report. I’ll get one of the guys to check the flight schedule. You won’t be able to leave unless there’s a flight anyway. Let’s go to Ops, write a report together, get you a flight, make a plan.”

I paused, listening to him speak. I took a deep breath. “Okay.”

I followed him to the ops center, images of a dead Keith dancing through my brain.

Maybe not kill, but seriously hurt. Debilitate, that was a good word.

Captain Stone had talked me through the report, and I grew calmer.

“So, a six-fingered Afghan man, who you have never met, claiming to be the brother of a bomber, that we just arrested, told you that Keith was a traitor. Is that about right?” he asked me when we got to the operations room.

“Yes.”

“And you don’t see anything wrong with that?”

“Well, we’ve already established that Keith is an asshole with no moral compass. This is just icing on the cake. How else can you explain all the American casualties in
Jalalabad. Not many with the Special Forces, he was protecting his team obviously, but the regular Army and Marine units were getting hit hard in Jalalabad."

"And you have no other explanation for this? Special Forces are better trained? Better informed? Working with Afghan counterparts? None of this could affect the statistics?"

"Why are you defending this guy?"

"I'm not. Why are you willing to believe the worst of him?"

I thought about what he said, and Stone was quiet as he typed up the report.

"Anyway," he added. "What makes you think he’s up in BAF? He left with his team six months ago."

"I was going to catch a flight back to North Carolina."

"You were what—?"

"I was going to go back to Fort Bragg, go to his house, shoot him in the knees, and beat him to death."

"I see. You thought this whole thing through did you?"

I shrugged. "It made sense about ten minutes ago."

Stone finished the report.

"So, do you want to hear what I think you should do?"

"No."

We shared a look.

"Just kidding."

"I think you should fly up to BAF, bring Shir Shah. Interview with CID, you and Shir give sworn statements about the interview which will start an investigation into
Keith. Escort the prisoners and talk to the Intel guys about him. And while you're up there, go to Chris’ ramp ceremony."

I nodded slowly. It was a good idea.

“Visit with Mark at the hospital. Clear your head. And then come back ready to go back to work and we'll plan our next move.”

Captain Stone was a smart guy.

Two hours later, I was flying over the night desert towards BAF.

I stared out the small round window of the plane, watching mysterious lights move on the ground.

Still, there was a piece of my mind, the reptilian part no doubt, that was planning how I could get back to Bragg for a couple hours.
“Captain Mason, what brings you to our humble abode?” asked Keith.

Humble? The agency building was the only building inside the Fusion Center that had another ring of wire and more guards at the entrance. When she had approached, they examined her identification and called for authorization to admit her.

Inside, there was a secretary. A secretary! Sitting behind a desk made from real wood, not that particle board most of the military desks were made from. The secretary had brought her immediately into Keith’s office. He greeted her standing up, shaking her hand as if he was honestly glad to see her.

“What did you do to my father?”

He disengaged his hand from hers. “I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about. Why don’t you have a seat and let’s discuss what’s on your mind.”

“I know you were the last person to see him alive. And I know about all the illegal shit—”.

Keith raised his hand to silence her, which in turn pissed her off. He closed the office door and motioned to the chair in front of his desk. She shook her head, and he shrugged and walked to stand behind his own desk.

“My dad knew all about your shady deals in Jalalabad, he came here and confronted you about it, then you did something to him didn’t you?”

“I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know you fought.”
“Because he was nuts!”

“Don’t say that. You don’t get to say that.”

Keith reached for something on his desk.

Her pistol was suddenly pointing at him. She didn’t even remember deciding to draw, but she was holding it in both hands, safety off, sights aligned with his head, trigger finger taking up the slack.

Keith slowly raised his hands. “Hey now, let’s take a deep breath.”

“You don’t get to say my dad is crazy after all the shit you did.”

Her breath was slow. Her hands didn’t shake. She remembered Mark telling her at the range when she was fourteen, “Never point a weapon at something you aren’t afraid to destroy.” She was prepared to destroy this piece of shit. Of that, she was certain.

“What did you guys fight about?” she asked and was amazed at the calmness in her voice.

“Look, he was saying all kinds of crazy th—”. She pulled the hammer back with her thumb and Keith swallowed. “He came in here angry as hell, shouting all kinds of things. Now some of them were true, but some I had no idea what he was talking about.”

“Enlighten me. Tell me which you think were true and which weren’t.”

“Okay, Okay. Can you put the gun away?”

“I don’t think so. Let’s get something straight, Keith. I think you’re a piece of shit, and I don’t trust you.”

“Can I at least put my hands down.”
“No.”

“How about you take your hand off the trigger at least.”

She released the tension on the trigger and slid her finger along the side of the barrel.


“Dad didn’t.”

“If he told you that, he’s a liar.”

Her finger went back on the trigger.

“Hear me out okay. You’ll understand soon enough. You’ll lead your team, and you need to take care of your guys. The military, it doesn’t set you up for success. The equipment you’re provided, it’s great for training, but it’s not enough where we fight. There’s going to be all these other expenses. Bribes. Buying Afghan weapons and clothes so we can fit in when we’re trying to mix with crowds. Food when we’re two hundred miles from nowhere. How do you think all that gets paid for? Are you making per diem here? Hell no, you’re getting three lousy bucks a day.”

“Go on.”

“So, yeah, I had some schemes going on. I’ll admit to that. But then your dad started calling me a traitor. Started talking about treason. And for the life of me, I have no idea what he was talking about.”

_Sure, you don’t_, she thought.

Keith moved to lower his hands, then stopped and glanced at her.

“I want to show you something, it’s on my desk.”

She paused. “One hand only.”
He slowly picked up a folder.

“Baber Pacha.”

“I heard your brief.”

“Yeah, but this asshole.” He shook the folder at her. “He killed your dad. I’ve been trying to get him for ten years. It’s why I got out and joined the agency, so I could work full time tracking him.”

“Why do you care? You didn’t even know my dad.”

“You still don’t get it, Mason. We’re a brotherhood, well, sisterhood, now that you’re here. He was a Green Beret. Baber has killed other Green Berets too. He doesn’t get away with that. He doesn’t get to live.”

She almost believed him. He sounded sincere. But what about her father’s source? Could he have been wrong? Could Stone have been right to doubt the information?

She lowered the pistol.

“So, you’ve been trying to get revenge all these years.”

“We look after our own, Mason. Even if we don’t always agree.”

She holstered the pistol. Keith dropped the folder on the desk and came around the desk toward her.

“So, are we on the same team now?” he asked.

“Sure,” Camila replied. Then she punched him straight in the nose, torqueing her whole body behind it. Keith stumbled backward into the desk, grabbing his bloody face. “I just want you to know that, as a Mason, I don’t agree with you. But if you’re going to help me get my father’s killer, we’re on the same side.”
Camila came back to the barracks with an hour to spare.

Mark glanced up from his book. “You good?”

She lay on her bunk. “Yeah, I’m good. Just some unfinished business.”

“Is it finished now?”

“For now.”

She’d take Keith’s help, but carefully. Treat him like a source. Never trust him one hundred percent. Always assume he had his own agenda.

She thought about what he’d said, about taking care of the team and having to ride a gray line to do it. She filed that away as a topic to talk with Mark later in private.

She closed her eyes. Her fist hurt, but it was a good hurt.

In the meantime, she’d let Miller do his work, and once she was in Jalalabad she’d try and find the six-fingered man.
Interlude 4

Interview with Keith Steiner

July 1, 2018

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan

Obviously, this situation was bad. Miller was CID. That meant this wasn’t just a questioning. He was going before a court at some point, probably sooner than later.

“I’d like to speak to a lawyer,” Keith said.

“Do you think you need a lawyer?”

“I don’t know, do I?”

“Your lawyer is on the way. Just a few more questions. If you don’t want to answer that’s up to you.” Miller looked at his notebook. “In his journal, Master Sergeant Mason claims that you sold military equipment and food. He describes how you skimmed money off the salaries of Afghan workers,” said Miller.

Keith shrugged. “Ryan didn’t like me for some reason, I thought I made that clear. Just because he said it, doesn’t make it true.”

“He says you sold information to the Taliban causing American soldiers to be killed and wounded.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Miller picked up the notebook. “Mason describes a conversation he had with an intelligence source who mentioned you by name, said you were giving information to Baber Pacha.”

“That’s ridiculous.”
“How would an Afghan man know your full name?” Miller slammed the notebook back on the table. “You know what I think? I think it might explain all your successes over the last couple years. A little *Quid Pro Quo* action. Baber Pacha gives you some low hanging fruit for targets, enough so you look good, and you protect his larger operations. And skim some money to boot.”

Keith shook his head. “You’ve been watching too many movies.” He laughed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You really have no idea what’s going on do you?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“I’ve been hunting Pacha for over ten years. Who do you think provided the intelligence for Captain Mason’s last mission?”

“What mission?”

“The one Captain Mason and her team conducted.”

“Oh sure, that was all you.”

“Ask Mason. She’ll tell you all about Baber Pacha. I gave her everything she needed to take him down.”

Miller went to the steel grey door and knocked.

“Ask her, goddamnit!”

Keith heard the deadbolt being pulled, then the door cracked open. He couldn’t make out the whispers. Miller faced Keith again.

“You got no proof,” said Keith. “It’s just a misunderstanding. Look, Ryan didn’t even know me. He’s basing this all on information from Afghans. All Afghans are liars, it’s in their genes. Just talk to Captain Mason. She’ll clear this all up.”
The door shut and Miller leaned against it, arms crossed. “Keith, I got to be honest. Since you keep telling me to ask Captain Mason I gather you consider her an ally. I wouldn’t count Captain Mason as your friend. She’s the one that gave us the journal.” He paused. “We’re going to take a break. But I want to leave you with this. We’ve spoken with your old teammates, and most of them have no qualms about rolling over on you to escape jail time. So, think about that. Also, Captain Mason was wounded on the raid last week, a raid that you just admitted being a part of. It’s doubtful she’ll be talking with us anytime soon. Oh, and surprise, surprise. The Lion King wasn’t there.”

“The Lion King?”

“Baber Pacha. It’s Arabic. Translates loosely to Lion King.”
Father said, leaning forward. "Stories don't always have happy endings."
This stopped [her]. Because they didn't, did they? That's one thing the monster had
definitely taught [her]. Stories were wild, wild animals and went off in directions you
couldn't expect."
— Patrick Ness

"Most fathers don't threaten to disembowel their daughter's boyfriends."
"That's not true. And anyway, that's not what I actually said. It was much worse."
— Richelle Mead
Chapter 43
May 14, 2018
Jalalabad

Jalalabad wasn’t how Camila imagined.

Disappointed wasn’t the right word. Maybe challenging. She knew it was selfish of her, but she wanted it to be more challenging.

Where she had expected an Alamo - a small fort in the middle of nowhere surrounded my dirt walls and fields and the occasional house. Instead she found herself in a Fort Knox surrounded by a thriving city.

Mark gave her the tour and explained the changes since he had served with her father.

“So, the walls are thicker and higher. Those watch towers on the walls weren’t there either. Someone let our vehicle platforms go to hell, there’s no way we’re going to get our vehicle guns up there to defend the camp. Stupid.” They walked the perimeter in their full kit: body armor, twelve full mags, first aid kit, holstered pistol, slung rifle. They hadn’t even spoken about it. The team had landed, unloaded everything with forklifts and moved the large, metal pallets that contained all their equipment to their compound, and then Mark and Camila had looked at each other and started walking the perimeter.

Camila shielded her eyes against the sun. She estimated about two more hours of daylight. Then, she looked over the wall at the small farms and shacks that spread out before the compound’s dirt walls, merging in with brick and concrete houses farther out. Vestiges of civilization as far as the eye could see.
“They used to be closer, the houses I mean. The government must have paid them to move so the base could have some killing ground in case of an attack. But the city that you see there, it wasn’t that close back then. Jbad has got a lot bigger.”

Men walked around without a sense of urgency. Women worked the fields. Children carried water or firewood. Were they friend or foe? And could she change their minds?

“The buildings look the same,” continued Mark. “The gym has some new equipment.” They were walking toward the operations room when Mark stopped in front of a painted wall with photos on it. “And there weren’t so many names on this wall when we left.”

Camila counted twenty photos on the memorial wall, including her father.

“I didn’t know they put his name on the wall,” said Mark. “Probably because this was where the team was assigned when he died.”

“What do you mean?” asked Camila.

“I mean, he wasn’t killed out here. He was killed just outside BAF.”

“What are you talking about? He wasn’t killed by an IED near Jalalabad?”

“No. You didn’t know? I mean, I guess we never really discussed the details.”

“Tell me now.”

“Well, he flew up to BAF to report Keith. And then he found out Keith was still on post and he lost it, found out where he lived, and went and beat the shit out of him.”

“I knew that part, but I thought he flew back to Jbad.”

Mark shook his head. “No, he got hit, about an hour outside BAF.”

“Why the hell did he do that?”
Mark shrugged. “Who knows.”

“I can’t believe I’m just finding out all these details now.”

“Cammy, when would have been a good time to tell you? Think about it. And what would have changed had you known?”

She knew he was right, but she still wondered what else she didn’t know.

*****

“Alright, we got our first mission.”

Mark and Camila were drinking coffee in the ops center.

The team had settled into the base over the last three weeks: stowing their gear and learning the daily duties that kept the base running: paying workers, maintaining vehicles, repairing buildings. But they were getting antsy. Camila felt it too. Something her father had mentioned in his journal. The team was ready to test their skills.

“A weapon depot? Is that worth risking our lives for?” asked Camila after examining the documents Mark gave her.

“Cammy, it’s not just about the depot. We need to get out into the community, let them see our faces, talk to them. Really, we’re killing two birds with one stone.”

“I just thought we’d be taking down bad guys.”

“Times have changed. The Afghan forces get the bad guys. We train and advise. Unless they are HVTs, High Value Targets. But Delta usually gets those.”

“Just seems like busy work is all.”
“This will also give us a chance to check out our Afghan partners. When you send the mission up for approval, tell them it’s a training mission to observe our partners capabilities.”

Approval for the mission was quick and in two days they were staged for movement. She walked the line with Mark, joking with the guys and making slight corrections. The team was ready, but the Afghan Army unit was a mess. They left an hour after they had planned as the Afghans filled water and gas cans and loaded additional ammunition into the back of their trucks.

“Some things never change,” said Mark.

“Should we practice launching?”

Mark laughed, and Camila relaxed, not realizing until that moment how tense she was.

“It’s hard to change their way of doing things, which is basically conducting operations by the seat of their pants.”

“So, we do nothing to fix this.”

“Of course, we try and make them better, and we check the lines every time we launch, and maybe they get better, and maybe they don’t. Then we switch out with the next team, and then it starts all over. It’s the never-ending story of Afghanistan.”

“Sounds like a waste of time.”

“What’s the alternative? Do nothing and let the Taliban take the country back over?”

“Well, no.”
They reached the end of the convoy and turned to walk back. “Look, I admit it’s not ideal, but the U.S. has kind of backed itself into a corner. Damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

They double checked the changes they had requested.

“I guess. So, I probably won’t take any bad guys down.”

“Probably not.”

“That sucks.”

“It is what it is.” They had arrived at her vehicle. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Mark spoke into his team radio, “Turn off your cell phones and let’s move out.” He waited for his truck to pass and swung himself into the passenger seat.

The team arrived at the village around noon. One moment they were driving through a wasteland of sand and rocks, then they came over a ridge and a lush valley appeared before them. Fruit trees created a tunnel above the road with their branches, providing refreshing shade and a mixture of pleasant odors. Some of the Afghan Army vehicles accelerated to set up security on the far side of the village, and Camila saw others stop behind her as the near side security.

Mark’s voice came over the radio. “Keep your eyes open. It looks like a slice of heaven, but we’re in Afghanistan.”

The four team vehicles stopped in front of the mayor’s office, where they met the Afghan Army commander that had accompanied them and four more of his vehicles. The commander had a thick mustache, a well-kept black beard that was going gray, and
wore a light brown pakol on this head. He had a U.S. donated camouflage uniform, as did all his men.

“Security is set in,” reported the commander with a salute to Mark.

“Thanks, sir.”

A heavy man in white loose Afghan clothing came out of the building, followed by a group of other men similarly garbed. One of the team’s terps came up from behind, but Camila tried her Dari before he could reach them.

“Peace be with you.”

“And with you,” replied the fat man.

“I am Captain Mason.”

“And I am Haji Mullah. I am the mayor of Ghensa Village. Please, come in, drink chai and we will talk.”

“I am honored to do so. However, we are here because we have heard that you have many weapons stored in your village.”

The mayor paused. “We do have weapons, but we use them for the protection of the village.”

“It is the policy of Afghanistan that only police and army soldiers shall carry weapons, and that all civilians must turn in their weapons to the Afghan military.”

The mayor’s smile was gone now.

“Come, please, come in and we will drink chai and talk.”

She looked back at Mark. “He doesn’t seem pleased that we are here to take his weapons,” she told him.

“They never are,” replied Mark.
They followed their host through a green door. On the floor was a colorful mat, a tea pot and cups already set with small bowls of pistachios. The Americans sat cross-legged on the mat and another man served each of them tea. Camila noticed the team’s terp sitting next to the mayor talking softly and nodding.

“Hey Habib,” she asked in English. “What’s he talking about?”

“Mam, he says the weapons are just for protecting his village. To fight bad men and the Taliban.”

Camila switched to Dari. “We understand your concerns. But Afghanistan has police and an army now. They can protect you.”

“We have no Army units in our village. We need to be able to protect ourselves,” said the mayor, then sipped his tea.

“We will take your weapons,” said the Afghan Commander. “It is our orders.”

After that, there was no more talking, only the sound of cracking pistachio shells. After they finished the tea, Camila stood up.

“Please sir,” she said. “Show us your weapons.”

The mayor got slowly to his feet and signaled for them to follow.

They walked through the green door again and a block down the street. People from the village had begun to cluster outside. Camila noticed that now most of the men in the street were bearded and had slung AK-47 rifles.

“Weird, huh?” Marked was standing beside her.

“Lots of armed men. That’s not normal, is it?” Camila asked.

“Nope. And a suspicious lack of children in the street.”

“Tell the team to keep their eyes open.”
“Already did,” said Mark.

They were still following the mayor down the street, but Camila noticed that some of her team had returned to the trucks, and she saw Teddy get behind a machine gun.

“Why don’t you call Serpent, tell them to send some air firepower if there is any available?”

“Roger that.” Mark peeled off back to the trucks.

As she walked, she began to count strange men with rifles. She almost ran into the Mayor as he stopped suddenly before two eight-foot-tall gate doors. The Mayor spoke briefly with the two guards, and they pulled the gates open, swinging outward.

Inside was a huge storage area, maybe half as big as a football stadium. They were going to need more trucks.

She saw single shot rifles, big Russian machine guns, RPGs, and stacks of bayonets. Nothing new or American. This had to be left over from the Russian invasion. At the back were of ammunition: rifle, mortar, grenades.

Suddenly, she heard a sound like thunder overhead. She glanced out the door and saw two planes with French markings banking in the distance. Camila saw the men with the guns duck instinctively. The power of planes and helicopters had been hammered home. The country of Afghanistan had been pounded for decades by the Red Army and U.S. forces, and they knew that the only answer to air power was to run and hide.

She watched the men as they gathered in small groups, talking among themselves. She spoke into the team radio. “Two more times, let’s see if they stick around after that.”
She grabbed Habib’s shoulder. “Make some calls, we’re going to need at least twenty trucks up here to haul this stuff.”

Two hours later, munitions were loaded and the trucks moving toward Jalalabad. And the men with guns disappeared.

Camila never saw the mayor smile again.
Chapter 44

Day 4380

I heard the metal plate scrape against the hard clay floor and opened one eye to verify that my daily ration of dirty rice had arrived. I crawled on my knees, dragging myself forward to the door. Leaving the plate where it landed, I scooped small portions into my mouth using my fingers. An outsider, someone who could travel beyond this dirt cell and see the sun, smell the ocean, that person might be charmed by the off-white color of the meal. Dirty white, dirty rice. But I called it dirty because of the sour dirt clods I chewed while eating and also the tiny rock splinters that I spit out so I didn’t break another tooth.

“Boss,” came a voice through the wall of the cell. “What did you get?”

“Well Shir, what we got here is one juicy hamburger, with some french fries.”

“Hamburgers don’t have pork in them, do they? I forgot.”

“No way, 100 percent beef. You remember the hamburgers back at the base, don’t you? They were frozen, and we had to defrost them, but they weren’t all that bad. And this one has Heinz ketchup on it.”

“I remember ketchup. It was sweet, and red."

I began to lick the plate, slow circles starting from the outside. I knew when I had gotten all the salty grease because the taste changed to bitter metal.

“What day is it, boss?” asked Shir.

It was our daily thing. Wake up. Eat dirty rice. Calculate the days. Walk around the cell for exercise. Sleep. Wake. Walk. Sleep. Wake. Walk. Sleep. Start all over. Sometimes the routine was broken by the beatings, but they were less frequent now.
I used the edge of the plate to make a thin line on the dirt wall. The head of the hangman. The circle was the hardest. Everything else was straight lines, but the hangman’s head took the longest, and it ended up looking like a diamond. Then I counted. I didn’t know if we got fed three times a day, once a day, or once a week. There was no natural light in the cell, no windows to the outside world. Hell, I wouldn’t have minded a call to prayer, but not even that was available. So, I counted meals. And assumed we got one a day.

In the beginning, I had wasted my limited wall space. Only, back then, it didn’t seem so limited, because back then there was still that hope for rescue. I had wasted almost a whole wall drawing line after line, then crossing through four lines with the fifth line and starting again. Three hundred and sixty-five days and a whole wall wasted. Granted, it wasn’t a big wall. The room was barely large enough for me to lie on the ground and not touch either wall with my head or toes.

After rescue seemed unlikely, and I kept living despite the beatings, I had to consider saving what space I had. I dedicated seven mealtimes to creating my current calendar of hangmen. Each line in the stick drawing represented a day and the completed drawing signified twenty-five days. Twenty hangmen equaled five hundred days. Eight rows of twenty was four thousand, plus the first year of lines and diagonals on the wasted wall, equaled 4,365 days. Then, add in fifteen lines on a hangman, that equaled 4,380.

“What's that in Shir years?”

Or weeks. Or double days. Or one third days.
I did a mental calculation, it took a full minute or longer I’m sure, but Shir was patient.

“Twelve Shir years, on the dot.”

Sometimes, if I was feeling really depressed, I divided by three which gave me 1,338. That didn’t sound so long. But when I was feeling strong, which was less and less now, but when I felt strong and considered the idea of rescue, I would multiply by seven, one meal per week. Because, well, that had to be a record.

I think the math kept me sane.
“Is this stuff safe?” She stood in line behind some of the team and most of the Afghan soldiers, carrying load after load of mortar rounds. They were dirty and rusty and the epitome of not safe looking.

“Well, I wouldn’t drop it, but pretty safe,” said Bryan, taking the five rounds from her arms.

The Afghan Army had a compound out in the desert for storing all the munitions. Even though it was dark by the time they got back, Camila and Mark had insisted they drop the contraband off first. The idea of storing all those explosives in the team’s compound for the night made Camila’s hair stand up.

Like lines of ants, Camila and the men moved back in forth, stacking the munitions in the far corner of the compound underneath a tarp. Bryan supervised the storing, counting each munition, dividing them into usable and unusable.

Camila looked at his list. The amounts would be sent in Camila’s daily report, then probably into some statistic database.

“So, we just leave everything here?” asked Camila.

Mark unloaded his armful as he answered her. “They belong to the Afghan Army’s now. We’ll come back later in the week and destroy the unusable rounds.”

Camila lowered her voice. “And what if the Afghan soldiers steal them?”

“They can't steal them. It belongs to the Afghan Army.”

Mark and Camila walked back to the truck.
“Only ten more truckloads,” said Mark.

Two hours later, they pulled into the compound, sixteen hours after they’d left that morning. Then they spent another two hours conducting maintenance on the vehicles and the weapons, checking the ammunition and equipment on the trucks, and ensuring the water and gas cans were full. The team joked and told stories and Camila basked in the team spirit she felt.

Afterward, the rest of the team was released to their own entertainment. Camila and Mark grabbed dinner to go and went to the Operations Center to write reports.

“What’s wrong?” Mark asked.

She shrugged. “Just not what I thought it would be like, especially after reading dad’s journal.”

“Fair enough. A lot has changed since then.”

“When the U.S. first arrived in 2001, and for the first seven or eight years after that, Afghanistan didn’t have much of an Army or Police force. The international coalition forces stepped up and tried to fill the gap as best they could. We arrested bad guys, resolved family disputes, tried to bring peace to the country. It was hard. We tried to be culturally sensitive. And we were successful at first.”

“I sense a but.”

Mark smiled. “Buuut, the U.S. wasn’t interested in staying in Afghanistan forever, which meant we had to train their police and military to do the same jobs we were doing. And once they were trained, they had to assume the job. First, they disbanded our mercenaries, that we trusted. They were good guys. Then, they assigned Afghan Army units to work with U.S. units on the ground. The Afghans were meant to take the lead
on attacks against the Taliban forces and arresting insurgents. So now we just advise. We still gather the intelligence, mostly because the Afghan civilians don’t fully trust the Afghan police and army forces, but we are supposed to take a back seat to the operations.”

“Sounds like we’re being minimized.”

“Actually, we’re doing exactly what we were created to do. We’re creating security forces and mentoring those forces. It’s something that only Green Berets can do.”

“But when you were here with Dad—?”

“It was a different time. Of course, we’re always ready to conduct combat operations. We need to know it in order to teach it. But the objective has always been to work our way out of the job, allow the Afghan forces to take over their own security, protect their own people and borders.”

“It’s just, I don’t feel—I’m not sure what the right word is. I think my dad would say ‘tested’. I don’t feel tested.”

Mark laughed. “I’m sure Ryan would say exactly that. Don’t worry about it, you’ll be tested soon enough. And there are different kinds of tests. But I’m confident you’ll do well.”

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“So, who are these sources of information?” asked Camila.
“You know I can’t tell you who they are, it’s the nature of the beast,” came Keith’s voice over the secure phone. “Only I know who they are, for their protection. But they’re solid, don’t you worry.”

It was hard to doubt Keith’s enthusiasm, but Camila worried. Keith called her weekly with updates. And every time she prodded him for information about his sources. And every time, he countered.

“Can you at least tell me if they’re local? I mean, we may be getting more accurate information here then you in BAF.”

“I got a couple, and what they are telling me is all lining up. The info is being corroborated. He’s close to the border, between you and the border. I’ll have more soon. Be ready.”

Keith always ended the conversations with ‘be ready’.

And though her father’s enemy was giving her weekly updates, it was almost impossible to get ahold of CID. It’s like Miller didn’t exist. Every time she called he was out, and Camila was getting frustrated.

“What did Keith have to say this time?” asked Mark when she hung up. They were planning a mobile medical mission with the Afghan Army.

“Same bullshit. That’s he’s close. Be ready.”

“I know I don’t have to warn you, but I wouldn’t trust him as far as you could throw him.”

“I don’t. But if he can help us get dad’s killer, and the guy that took your fingers, I’ll listen to him.”

*But I’ll never trust him*, she thought.

340
Chapter 46

Day 4400

I saw the machine gun one hundred times a day.

Every day, or at least what I thought was a day. Maybe it’s better to say between every meal. I walked back and forth in my cell, ten steps each way, sets of twenty, five times a day. I passed my cell door one hundred times. The door was heavy wood. The hinges weren’t strong enough for the weight of the door, and the bottom of the door cut a hole in the mud floor every time it was dragged open. There was a small window with metal bars at about eye level which permitted me to look out of my cell every time I passed it. So, I saw the machine gun one hundred times a day.

It was on the floor of the hallway, faced directly at my door. An Afghan always sat behind it. I don’t know how he planned on shooting the gun from that position, most machine guns you fire laying down behind the gun, but there wasn’t enough room. I guess he was going to stand up and shoot from the hip. Very Afghan of him.

There were two gunners that switched throughout the day. Always the same two men.

On my second day, I spoke to the gunner on duty. I called him Chin Scar. He had a nasty white scar on his chin where his beard didn’t grow.

“What’s your name?” Not my best pick up line, I’ll admit.

“Shut up,” he told me.

“My name is Ryan.” Make a connection with your captors, force them to see you as a person. I remembered the words of my instructors during my training.
Chin Scar spoke into his radio. He didn’t respond to any of my questions after that, but two minutes later four men came down the hallway. One fumbled with some keys, then yanked open my cell door. I stepped back surprised. The other three rushed in. Two grabbed my arms and held me against the back wall. The last man started hitting me, blows raining without pause on my face, my stomach, my groin. I don’t know how long it lasted, but when they released my arms I fell to the dirt floor, my arms not even breaking my fall. Dirt sticking to my bleeding face. I coughed as I breathed in the dust of the floor and rolled over.

Three men filed out, the last one kicking me in the ribs before turning to leave and slam the door.

Chin Scar spoke loud enough for me to hear.

“Shut up.”
“Dad didn’t believe in this, Mark,” said Camila, dropping her armor on the floor of the operations room.

“What do you mean?”

“Dad didn’t go on missions like this – meeting village elders. He didn’t go on missions unless they were worth risking the lives of his team. He wrote that in his journal, a lot. And that’s all we do now: weapon caches and mobile medical clinics and meet old men.”

“Your dad wasn’t right about everything. Anyway, times have—”

“I know, I know. Times have changed. The mission has changed. That doesn’t make it worth risking the team.”

“I don’t think you’re looking at it the right way,” said Mark. He took his armor off and set it on a chair. “When I was here with your dad, we rolled solo. We went out the gate and we had the team guys and some Afghan mercenaries. That’s all we could trust. Then, sometimes, we’d have the Afghan Army or police with us, whom we didn’t trust and who weren’t as well trained as they are now.”

“I don’t trust those guys now.” She collapsed into a chair.

“Neither do I. But listen to what I’m saying. We have to mentor these guys so they can take up the torch and protect their own country. If we do that successfully, we win. All the Americans go home. No more Americans die in Afghanistan. It’s the only way we win.”

“I still don’t like it.”
Mark sat across the table from her. “You just want a firefight.”

Camila twisted her neck back and forth fast until a cracking sound was heard. “I do, and I don’t.”

“I understand. The guys are feeling the same way. But you can’t force a firefight, because when it comes you don’t want that guilt on your shoulders.”

“All this stuff we’re doing, it just seems like a waste of time. Like we’re biding our time, waiting for the real thing.”

“All this stuff we’re doing is necessary for the Afghan Army to gain rapport with the local population. Remember, the soldiers aren’t from this area, so the people don’t know them. They are more likely to trust us than the soldiers because of all the atrocities committed in the past. Having the locals see the Soldiers with us will help the trust to begin.”

Camila sighed. “I know you’re right, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

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“I got a grid, I’m sending UAVs to do a reconnaissance as we speak,” said Keith. Camila tried to listen without emotion, but she felt her heart beating faster.

“Who’s your source, Keith?” Camila asked.

“Quit asking. But this is good stuff. I’m sure he’s there, I’m just double checking with UAVs to give the rest of the agency a warm and fuzzy.”

She traced the grid lines until she found the spot. Why did the thought of confronting the man responsible for her father’s death affect her so much? Wouldn’t it
be enough for him to be taken down by anyone? No. This filled a hole inside her.

Mason avenging Mason. Keeping it in the family. That meant something. And it would have meant something to dad.

“I swear to God, Keith, if you send me on a wild goose chase and any of my guys get hurt, you’ll think my dad was just giving you love taps.”

“Big talk, sweetheart. But it’s not like that, this is the real thing. I want this guy just as bad as you do. And whether you like me or not, we’re still part of the same bro—sisterhood. Or whatever we are now.”

“Team?”

“Yeah, the A-Team. Be ready.” Then she heard the dial tone.

She stared at the spot on the map. They had some planning to do.
I dreamed of her often, when I could sleep.

That was the positive twist on the beatings. My training taught me to always look for the positive, the easy win. Sometimes, when they beat me real bad, I was unconscious for a long time; and I dreamed of Camila.

I tried to picture her life. Her awkward teenage years that I missed, probably wearing braces, maybe a few pimples, glasses. Her swan years. Her mother may have been a bitch, but she was nothing if not beautiful. And Camila always took after her mom. At sixteen or seventeen she was probably a heartbreaker. No doubt following in her mother’s footsteps, especially without my influence, she became a cheerleader, but hopefully not a mean one like in the movies. Maybe she did another sport as well, volleyball or track. Then, she graduated, maybe valedictorian or at least second place, whatever that’s called, secondictorian. Next pre-med in a great school. She was always smart, and she’d get a free ride anywhere she wanted to go with my GI Bill.

Twelve years in this shit hole. She would be finished with college now, hopefully halfway to getting her M.D. Soon to be Doctor Mason. I used to tell her stories of the medical procedures I did in the war: amputations, removing bullets, treating intestinal diseases. I hoped that rubbed off on her. I’d even be happy if she was a nurse.

It was hard to imagine what she looked like though, without seeing my wife’s face. But she would have her own look, somewhere between her mother and me. Kids change so much during that age, you miss so much in just six months, a year. I might not even recognize her.
The last time Camila smiled at me was on our way to Disney.

Three weeks back from the war, and the war had come back to me at a gas station on the outskirts of Orlando. The station was clean in a run-down sort of way, and the attendant took her time. I had stopped for gas, we had left North Carolina early and it was barely dawn. At the counter with a bottled water and a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, I just wanted to pay for my gas and get to the hotel and relax with my family. Our SUV was parked by the gas pumps, my wife’s brown hair on the window as she slept, Camila unseen on the backseat, cocooned in blankets and pillows.

The sounds came to me suddenly. It’s like that when you’re tuned into war: unnecessary reflexes fine-tuned, senses augmented. It takes a few months to wear off. Strange sounds required action: explosions, yelling, metallic clicks, whispers, clues to intent. Like trying to decipher a foreign language, I heard some words, didn’t recognize them all, but their initial intent was unquestionable. Then everything came into focus. The intent and words were one. I turned toward the inside of the station.

One man stood confronted by three others at the entrance to a bathroom, a one-room facility with an open door.

“What’s your problem, man?” He was medium build, dressed in a white tank top, his arms completely covered in tattoos.

The others appeared slightly uncomfortable. They looked to be family men, dressed in jeans, overweight. One with glasses replied in a calm tone, “Look, you were in there for a long time. We wanted to make sure you were alright.”
“Do I look alright? What are you, gay?” The tattooed man was slightly shorter, but he moved to within an inch of the man with the glasses, spraying spittle from his mouth.

The others, one black and one white, moved forward in defense of their comrade, thrown together in battle by circumstances. The black man raised his open hands, “We don’t want any trouble, and I’m sure you don’t either. Everyone is fine, let’s just forget about it, okay?”

“What, you guys going to jump me? Three on one, is that the way you want to play it? I got something for you.” The little man turned suddenly and strode purposely toward me, toward the door. “I got something in my trunk that will fix this trouble.”

With those words, I read his intent. In Afghanistan it would have been enough to take him down. Intent kills.

I saw myself tripping the man hard, then pouncing on his back and pushing him to the floor. Then, kneeling on him, twisting one arm behind his back. I heard him scream in pain as I reached for my plastic flex cuffs. But I didn’t have any.

For an instant, it was all real, then my eyes cleared as he walked past me and pushed open the door.

Not my business. Don’t get involved. We’re going to Disney. Hey Sergeant Mason, you just came back from serving your country in Afghanistan where you killed bad men for a living, what are you going to do now? I’m going to Disney.

I looked at the attendant and calmly said, “Call the police.” She didn’t move.

“Now!” I said louder.
In Afghanistan, it would have been over, I would have already acted, it would be done and I’d be writing a report about it. I would be within my rights. I would have followed the rules of engagement passed down from my chain of command. But here, back in America, what were my rules of engagement?

The men by the bathroom didn’t use the facilities, they talked among themselves. I dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter and walked toward the exit as the tattooed man returned with a blue backpack, kicking the door open with his foot. I saw a green Chevy truck parked in front of the gas station door, engine running. In Afghanistan I would have known exactly what to do. There would have been no hesitation, no doubts. My soldiers had been killed by men like this. Men of purpose.

I saw myself grabbing the man’s throat and driving my right heel into the man’s calf, causing him to collapse backwards. I saw his head bouncing off the tile floor and blood spreading toward the Slurpee machine. Keying my radio – but I didn’t have a radio.

I stood at the door as he passed. A suspected threat should be met with deadly force. But I hadn’t seen a weapon. What were my rules?

The tattooed man confronted the group. “You want some of this?” he screamed at them, the backpack dangling from his left hand. The three men by the bathroom didn’t move, but seemed to grow smaller.

I picked up an axe that was stacked by the front door. It was on sale.

The tattooed man’s hand disappeared into the backpack.

In my world, there were sheep and there were wolves.

And then there were sheepdogs.
Chapter 49

June 25, 2018

“This mission is going to be different guys. We have to assume they are going to be ready to throw down. Getting in quietly would be ideal,” Mark told the team.

They sat around the table in the operations room. No joking. All serious.

“That rules out the trucks,” Teddy said. Camila noticed he had given up spitting for chewing gum. It didn’t make it any easier to understand his deep southern accent though. He should have retired, but he volunteered to be on Mason’s team, to serve with Ryan Mason’s daughter. She had almost forgiven him for the bad treatment in the Qualification course.

“Any chance we’ll get helos to support an infil?” asked Brian. He’d made sacrifices for her by becoming part of the West Point cadre. His family hadn’t come with him during his three-year tour at the school, but he felt he owed Ryan Mason, enough to protect Camila from whatever dangers the team saw her facing at America’s premier leadership school.

Camila shook her head. “Doubt it. We probably won’t even get gunships to support our travel. Keith has a dependable source, and we’re going to have to react off the intel.”

“Tell me why we’re trusting this asshole?” Teddy asked.

“Look guys,” Mark said. “I’ll admit that it isn’t ideal. And I agree with all of you, Keith wouldn’t be my first choice to trust with information. But he’s been involved in the Afghanistan intelligence game for over a decade. That must be worth something. He’s
probably been through a dozen lie detector tests. And Pacha killed his team members too. My gut says he’s on the level and the Captain agrees.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Any more questions about the source? I need all of you to have your head in the game.” Mark looked around the room. “If not, let’s figure out how to get to the compound undetected.”

Camila looked at the map. “We could use the river,” she said.

Everyone brought their attention back to the map.

“We could infil by water. It would be quiet, and the grid Keith gave us was within five hundred meters of the river. Then we could hump it in, set up an overwatch.”

“That might work,” Mark said.

Camila pointed at the river. “Infil here, five kicks upriver. Leave the vehicles there, guarded by Afghan Army. Send a four-man assault/ recon team. Get eyes on the objective, observe for twenty-four hours. The rest of the convoy comes in from the West over the bridge and the overwatch engages with RPGs as a distraction.”

She looked up at the team.

“What do you think, guys?”

“And I think you need a sniper team with the RPGs,” said Teddy.

Mark stood up. “Good start, we’ll tweak it in the rehearsals. I’ll put out a packing list and timeline are on the white board in one hour. Load your backpacks and get the trucks ready. We’ll start the rehearsals first thing in the morning.”

The men filed out until Mark and Camila were all that was left.

“Happy now?” asked Mark.
“What do you mean?”

“Important mission. Capturing a man responsible for taking American lives. You should be happy, right?”

“I wouldn’t call what I’m feeling joy. Maybe anxious.”

“Why?”

“Well, everything before this was beyond our control. We conducted non-kinetic, non-combat missions and we trained for ambushes and IEDs, but that was out of our hands. Now, we’re choosing to do this mission against Baber Pacha, and we’re choosing how. And if anyone on the team gets hurt or dies, the responsibility is mine.”

“Ours.”

“Ours then, but it’s heavier, the responsibility I mean. We’re choosing to do this. And I’m not sure for the right reasons.”

“Baber Pacha kills Americans and innocent civilians,” said Mark. “He is the evil that we were meant to stop. The fact that he gave me this,” Mark held up his hand. “And that he was probably responsible for your father’s death, that’s just icing on the cake. More importantly, none of the team would disagree.”

“I know, but that doesn’t make me feel less responsible.”

“And it shouldn’t, but hopefully it makes you more careful.” Mark stood up again. “Now go get packed, and tomorrow we’ll rehearse.”

*****
Camila was third in the file, approaching the wall at a quick walk, rifle held at the ready, watching for the enemy. The first man reached the compound and started applying adhesive explosives. Camila and the second man pulled right and left security respectively. The fourth man, faced back the way they came.

She heard the machine guns engaging targets on the other side of the wall, but she blocked the sounds out, concentrating on her task at hand. Security. Entry. Attack. Teddy was in overwatch to warn her of safety violations. Bryan was controlling the machine gun fire, so if they stayed in their designated areas, they would be safe. She trusted them. Not that she had a choice, but the truth was, she did.

“The wall is clear,” came Teddy’s voice over the radio. Five hundred meters away on the hill behind her, she pictured him lying behind his scope, making adjustments on his sniper rifle, ready to rain death on any enemy that popped his head up.

The first man tapped each of the four-man assault team, signaling the explosives were ready, then Camila with the explosives expert moved right and the other two to the left, pacing off ten meters and taking a knee.

“Three, Two, One,” came the first man’s voice over the radio, followed by an explosion of dust and rock. As one, the four stood and assaulted through the hole in zipper formation, one man from the right followed by one from the left, until all four were through. They found themselves in a small room inside a mud building. Dust still hung in the air as the four assaulters split right and left again, hugging the walls, shooting two rounds into cardboard targets as they became visible. Four targets down

“Shit, I hit a prisoner,” said Reese when the dust settled a few seconds later.
“Leave him, he’s not the priority,” said Camila. “Clear the room, push forward. We have to take the rest of the rooms.”

Hostages? That was a good twist she hadn’t considered. Probably Mark’s idea. What were the chances?

The assault team moved through the building, identifying four more unarmed prisoners and killing six more enemy. They consolidated the prisoners in the first room, simulating immobilizing their hands with plastic flex cuffs and hooding their heads by throwing the cuffs and hood on the cardboard figures. The team split up into two teams, one guarding the main door into the building, the other searching the rooms again and taking photos of the dead enemy. Then they assembled in the first room they had entered.

“Coming out,” Camila announced on the radio.

“Come out,” came Teddy’s voice.

Then they moved toward the sniper’s hill.

That was a mess, thought Camila. But that’s what rehearsals were for. They had a long way to go, but they would continue until they got it right.

*****

“Rehearsals in combat zones are different than normal rehearsals,” Mark said.

After a day in the sun, rehearsing actions at the compound, they made it back to the base for dinner. Camila felt dehydrated.
“In the U.S., you can build a realistic objective that mirrors the compound you intend to raid. There are no security concerns, it’s almost pristine. In BAF, there are areas and ranges designated safe for training. But in Jalalabad, we have to find an area that resembles the mission objective, then secure the area, which takes personnel away from the actual rehearsal. And we have to pay attention to everything around us just in case there’s a real attack, which takes away from us doing a good evaluation of our rehearsal. I guess in some ways, combat zone rehearsals are the best since the danger was so real. But it’s hard work to synchronize everything and everyone safely.”

“Why are we practicing attacking the compound from the hill? I thought the convoy would take it.”

“Contingencies. Never know. Doesn’t hurt to practice the unlikely.”

Camila drank water from a bottle. “I think that went well.”

“That was the easy part. Rehearsing the river infil plan is going to be complicated. And the most complicated part of the whole plan is going to be the logistics, positioning of terps and Americans so everyone can talk with each other and so we have an American with every piece making sure it goes right or at least informing everyone else that something is wrong.”

Mark motioned to the map. “Your team will be the most exposed, moving down the river. That’s true of the rehearsals we do tomorrow and the actual mission. I imagine the hardest part will be finding Afghans that can swim.”

Camila hadn’t considered that. Could the Afghans swim? She was leading four Americans for a contingency assault team, a two-man American sniper team with
Teddy, and another two man Afghan RPG team. She guessed Mark had minimized the Afghan participation on purpose, depending on her West Point language skills.

The next day, Mark and Camila identified two Afghans who floundered in the water better than the rest. Swimming wasn’t as important as comfort in the water, with all the gear no one was really swimming, they were floating. One of the terps found some kiddy flotation devices and the team painted them black and gave them to the lucky chosen Afghans.

“Alright, today’s rehearsals are just to get the loads right,” said Mark. “The rucks float normally, but not weighed down with armor and ammo. We have to make them float with bags of air and get the balance. Once we get the loads right, we’ll practice shooting using the rucks as your stable platform.”

“Looks cold,” said Camila.

“Oh yeah, it comes straight from the mountain.”

Great, she thought. “Should we wait for approval before we get wet?”

“We got approval this morning,” said Mark.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew you were tired. You have the most exhausting part of this mission, and we spent all day in the sun last night. I wanted to let you sleep in.”

It was a go. Camila tried to resist smiling.

“Anyway, you’re getting wet today, so let’s continue rehearsing. Once we get you comfortable moving and shooting in the river, we need to time you guys going down the river, so we can synchronize the rest of the moving parts. The convoy will parallel you guys, back you up if you run into any trouble, then at your landing area, we’ll
continue to the next village and meet with elders. Do the village lunch thing so everything looks normal. Then what?”

Camila took her cue. “Then we exit the river, walk to the overwatch position and observe the compound for twenty-four hours, try and determine who Pacha is. We take telescopic photos, send them back to Keith and his source verifies who is Pacha. Then, you guys cross the river, set up support, attack the front side of the compound and we bust through the back and take Pacha.

“Preferably alive.”

“But not necessarily.”
Chapter 50

Day 4403

It took me three days to recover enough that I thought I could take another beating. My side had stopped hurting. I guess my ribs were just bruised. During that time, I watched my captors. I had no way to tell how long their rotations were, but they were always the same two men. I knew I needed to gain some rapport with one or both, I had to keep trying. I decided to break the ice with my other guardian this time, Four Eyes. He was probably the only Afghan I’d seen with glasses.

And because it had worked so well the first time, I tried my same pick up line again. “What’s your name?”

He didn’t look up and said nothing.

“Hi. My name is Ryan.” I considered the thought that he might not speak English. In my defense, I don’t think I was ever thinking clearly since the day I was captured. I never actually got rid of the ringing in my ears from the IED.

Dari? Pashtu? The man looked young, short black beard, hair slightly long and unkempt. Like a high school teenager that needed a haircut. Dark skin. Pashtu, I think.

“Salaam. Zama num Ryan de.”

His head jerked up and he locked eyes with mine. Pashtu, good guess. He had the look of a tribesman. And maybe it’s racist, but he didn’t have the look of an educated man. Except for maybe educated by the Taliban.

“Staa num tsa dhe?” What’s your name buddy?
I pointed to myself. “Ryan.” Cause let’s be real, my pronunciation probably sucked. Then, I pointed at him. “Num?”

He glanced down the hallway, then back to me. There was a frown on his face, and I sensed an internal struggle. “Abdul.” He said quickly, then glanced down the hall again.

“Khoob. Angresi?” Good. Do you speak English?

“Na.” Of course not.

“Tashakur.” Thank you.

I nodded to him, then sat down against the cell wall. That was enough for now. A name to make it personal. I needed to construct my next sentences carefully. I had opened communication, which was good. But now I had to use this to my advantage. I had to make myself human. If there was ever a rescue attempt, and I was going to survive, I had to build a relationship with this guy strong enough to put a moment of doubt in his mind, so that he would pause for a second, maybe two, before firing into my cell and blowing me to smithereens.

Because I had no doubts what his orders were.
Chapter 51

June 30, 2018

She gasped for breath. The rehearsals never took away the first shock of the ice cold water. She never got used to it, but her body went numb after about five minutes. Camila rode her backpack, one arm braided into the back straps underneath the water, laying on her stomach and pushing the pack under the water. It was relaxing, but strenuous at the same time. Every time she thought she had the hang of it, her pack would hit a rock or brush the bottom of the river and the sudden jerk would jar her off her tentative perch, causing her to kick her fins to regain control of the pack.

The river moved calmly through the darkness. In another month, the snow and ice from the Hindu Kush Mountains would melt and the water level would rise, and the current would speed up. But for now, they drifted serenely along the surface. She kicked softly to face upstream, counting the floating shapes in the starry illumination. Starting from the rear, Teddy and his sniper buddy. In front of them, two Afghans looking like wet cats on their packs. Then the terp. Then came Reese, Mansfield, and Alvarez right behind her, her three assaulters.

“Radio check,” she whispered into her mic.

“Sierra One.”

“Sierra Two.”

Sniper team up. She saw Teddy kick forward and touch the two Afghans one at a time, clasping hands with each one to show they were okay and awake.

“Afghan team is up,” came Teddy’s voice.

“Alpha One.”
“Alpha two.”

Then a silence.

She watched as Mansfield finned forward and kicked Alvarez in the head, causing him to spin in the water like a leaf. Alvarez jerked, then sputtered. She heard some harsh whispering.

“Alpha three, up.”

“Let’s stay awake guys,” she commented.

They’d only been in the river for an hour. She couldn’t see the vehicles, but she trusted that Mark was just out of eyesight, ready to come to her rescue at the slightest hint of trouble. She hid her head under a poncho and quickly illuminated her GPS watch, doing calculations in her head. Their landing point was coming up.

“Be ready,” she spoke into the radio, cursing herself for quoting Keith. She saw a turn and kicked toward the shore. “Landing.”

The next two assaulters followed her to shore and she helped pull their packs on the riverbank next to hers, then they moved forward fifty meters to pull security. Camila stood waist-deep in the river helping the rest of the team out, counting heads in her mind. Eight, plus her, nine. Seemed like a small force to take down a compound of bad guys.

The men co-located their packs near the river, then fanned out one hundred eighty degrees, the snipers pulling security across the river with mounted night scopes. They lay on the moist sand in their wet clothes for twenty minutes. Look, listen, smell, feel for the enemy. She barely detected any movement or sound from her men during that time. She expected no less from her team, but even the Afghans followed suit.
“Okay team,” Camila whispered over the radio. “Priorities of work.”

Nothing more needed to be said. As one, the team formed pairs. One continued to pull security, the other changed into dry clothes and drank water, then they traded places. Camila moved to the center without a partner and watched the perimeter as she quickly donned dry clothes herself. When she was finished, she changed channels on the radio and keyed the mic, “This is Assault Leader, First Down, over.” Codeword for assault force landed.

“Roger,” came Mark’s reply. It was quick, he’d probably never been more than five feet from the radio. “Second down, out.” Mark’s team was enroute to the village to eat roast goat and rice with tea.

And that was it. No more communication required. Radio silence. Everyone had jobs to do.

She put night vision goggles over her eyes and turned them on. The area lit up with a green haze and she could see all her men arrayed around her. They had finished changing and all of them were faced away from her, except one figure from the riverbank who moved towards her.

Camila changed the radio back to her team frequency. “Recon team going forward,” she spoke softly. “If we make contact with the enemy, we will maneuver back to you and call support for backup. If you make contact with the enemy, stand fast until we return to you and call support for backup. If we don’t come back after two hours, abort mission and swim to the far side of the river and call support for backup. If everything goes to shit, we meet at the rally point and call support for backup. Any questions?”
Only silence followed.

Camila looked at Teddy who knelt by her side, his night vision goggles bobbing on his head as he nodded to her. She stood, turned, and moved away from the river. Teddy followed.

*****

“All clear, couple guys on watch, but no movement,” Teddy whispered as she crawled up behind him.

The hill they had seen on the maps and the satellite imagery had moved. It was still usable for the mission, but it took a few extra minutes to find, about two hundred meters east of the original position, either because the maps were old as hell, the satellite photos sucked, or their actual navigation skills were rusty, Camila wasn’t sure. They decided to set up Teddy where he could watch the compound and Camila returned to the river and brought the rest of the group forward, setting them up on the back side of the hill out of sight. Then she had brought Teddy’s spotter to his position.

“I have clear lines of sight to all the buildings here, it’s a good position,” he told her.

“Good,” Camila whispered back.

“Almost too good. They might know it’s a weakness and send patrols up here.”

Crap, she thought. “Should we move?”

“No, but everyone needs to stay frosty.” Teddy spit on the ground beside him. “I picked a bad time to stop dipping, again.”
“Started again, huh?”

“Nah, instant coffee. Figure it’s better than dip.”

“Probably not.”

She saw him make a face through her night vision goggles.

“Probably not,” he agreed.

“First prayer is in two hours. We’ll start getting their routines down then. And some photos to send up.”

She examined the compound through her night vision goggles, about eight hundred meters in front of her, and mentally prepared for the assault she would soon lead.

“How will you die?” Mark’s words echoed in her mind. That’s the last thing he told her before she left for West Point. “That’s what your dad used to ask the team before we went on a mission. Everything you do in the army, and that includes your time in West Point, should be either conducting war or preparing to conduct war. So, before every task, before every mission, think of what could stop or kill you and mitigate it. Make a plan. Make an alternate plan. Make a go-to-hell plan.”

She watched the compound, assessing weak entry points and guessing at functional areas. The next twenty-four hours would confirm a lot of these assumptions, but the gaps in their knowledge would have to be filled with best guesses. She made her initial plan. She knew it would change. A plan never made it past first contact, but you still made them.

She touched Teddy on the shoulder. “I’m leaving.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”
“Roger. Stay in touch.”

Back with the rest of the team, Camila called Mark on the radio. “Third Down,” Camila said into the radio.

“Roger. We are in the infield.” Mark’s team was back at base.

“Roger. Out.”

She reached for the Satellite radio Alvarez had set up and keyed the mic.

“Serpent, this is Hammerhead Six, radio check, over.”

“Hammerhead Six, this is Serpent. Good copy. Stand by for new instructions, over.”

What the fuck?

“Standing by, over.”

She imagined the liaison running to get someone, the someone who was going to give her new instructions, whatever that meant.

“Hammerhead Six, your new instructions are to stand fast in current position, keep eyes on the objective. Task Force Cable is assigned as the new assault force, you will support them from overwatch with target observation and sniper support. Acknowledge, over.”

No way. No way were they taking this mission from us.

“Serpent, we are prepared to take the objective ourselves, over.”

“Hammerhead Six, you are now in support. Call on Sat Phone for more details. Serpent out.”

She tore off her helmet and headphones.

Unbelievable. Even here, in the field of combat, she couldn’t escape the bullshit.
Chapter 52

Day 4418

I spit out rock chips. I carved a leg on a hangman. I walked twenty laps.

“How many days, boss?”

“4,418, Shir”

“Shir years?”

“Twelve years. And like a month and half. End of June, beginning of July maybe. It’s getting hotter.”

I hadn’t always been able to speak with Shir. He came two years after my captivity, according to the hangmen. I heard them bring him, though I didn’t know it was Shir at the time. He couldn’t talk with me at first. When I tried, they beat me. Finally, after about another year, they finally let us exchange some words. Over ten years, the sum total of our words could probably be found in a children’s picture book. He had been held in another compound before he was brought here. He was beat often. Even here, he seemed to be more outside his cell then in his cell.

Now, the machine gunners allowed us to speak a little. We never overdid it. Just a little at a time.

Sometimes we would talk about that day, our last day of freedom. But in chapters, like a book.

“Remember when we flew to BAF?”

“Sure boss. My first time in a helicopter. Did I ever thank you for that?”

“I don’t think you need to thank me. If it weren’t for that, you wouldn’t be here.”
“Destiny.”

“Density.”

“Allah’s will.”

“Allah’s will.”

“Don’t curse boss.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“How do you say *hakuna matata* in Dari?”

“What are you talking about boss?”

“Lion King, your namesake. In the movie. *Hakuna matata.*”

“Oh. The same. Or, I think, inshalla is the same.”

I thought about that for a while before answering. “I think I like *hakuna matata*.”

“Me too, boss.”

“I’m going to sleep now.”

“Good night, boss.”

“Good night, Simba.”

Then, on another day, not always the next day because sometimes Shir wasn’t there, but eventually, we’d speak again on another day, and we’d continue where we left off.

“Do you think Mark lost his whole hand?”

“I think he’s fine boss. He looked to be in good spirits when he left on the helicopter.”

“He did, didn’t he. And after that, do you remember when we found Keith?”
“I wasn’t there, remember. You ran off after that guy told you he was at the camp.”

“What an asshole.”

“He was like that with everyone, especially the Afghans.”

“I still remember beating his ass. That felt good.”

“I didn’t see, I found you walking in front of the gym.”

“And then you got that call.”

“Yeah, from the source in Kabul. He said he knew about Keith too.”

“That was lucky, huh? That source was in Kabul when we were in BAF? And he knew about Keith?”

“Lucky, boss.”

“What an asshole.

“Yes, boss.”

“I’m tired, I think I’ll sleep.”

“Good night, boss.”

“Good night, Simba.”
Chapter 53

June 30, 2018

“I understand, but I don’t think you understand what I’m trying to tell you,” said Camila softly into the satellite phone. “My team has been rehearsing for two weeks, we know this mission like the back of our hands, we’re ready to execute.”

“We understand Captain Mason,” said Lieutenant Colonel Simpson. “And we appreciate all the time and energy you’ve spent on planning, which is why you will stay in your current position to be the eyes of the assault force. Call off the rest of your forces, we’ll use them only as backup.”

“But—”

“Captain Mason, how many times do I have to tell you this. You are not the primary unit for high value targets. We’re sending in the experts. Stand down.”

Camila was quiet.

“Acknowledge, Captain Mason.”

“Message received,” she replied. “Give me the details so we can support.”

“They will infil by helos. Your overwatch team will continue to provide intel on the objective. Send all photos and updated info back to the liaison. We’re finalizing the plan now, you’ll receive more details this evening.

“Helos will give the enemy time to react.”

“Captain Mason, this is not their first rodeo. The team knows what they’re doing. Stand by for further details.”

“Roger sir. Standing by.” And she hung up the phone.

This is so much bullshit, Camila thought.
She called Mark and explained the situation. If possible, he was more pissed than she was.

“I’m going to make some calls,” said Mark. “This isn’t over. Fucking bullshit.”

“Good luck. Until then, I’ll be doing recon for the new assault guys.”

She crawled back to Teddy’s sniper position right as dawn was breaking.

“How is it you’re not upset about this?” she asked him.

He spit into the puddle of coffee grinds next to him. “I still get to shoot the bastard, I’m the sniper.”

There was that, she thought.

Teddy and Greg switched out every two hours behind the sniper rifle, the other writing detailed notes. Camila ran the radio and dutifully sent up hourly logs to Serpent with power point sketches of the compound and photos of the compound occupants.

The Task Force was going to fuck this up, she was confident. A helo in this valley could be heard twenty miles away. Either the bad guys were going to be long gone or dug in, waiting and Americans would die.

She wondered who had made this decision. Lieutenant Colonel Simpson? Where was Colonel Atkins? He seemed to have common sense, he had to see the lunacy of sending in another team and sending them in with helos. Did Stone know?

When she had been told to stand by, they hadn’t given her a timeline. The team was halfway through their batteries and food. The originally plan was to only watch for 24 hours, but she wasn’t sure Serpent cared.

They had identified what might be the chief’s building. It was closest to their hide sight and if they had assaulted, it would have been the building they would have blown
through. All the bad guys prayed multiple times a day which gave Teddy and Greg great opportunities for photos. Only three went into the chief building: Four Eyes, Chin Scar, and Lone Ranger, so called because he was always wearing a scarf over his face. Except for those three, the rest of the men in the compound clustered around a clay bread oven in the center of the camp during meal times, where they grilled meat over an open fire and something in a pot, probably rice. Then, when the meal was prepared, one of the men would carry four plates to the building at the back.

Lone Ranger only came out to pray. The other two came out about every four hours.

“Right on schedule,” Teddy told Camila. “That’s the fourth time that Chin Scar and Four Eyes switched places. They’re definitely guarding something.”

“What do you think they will do when they hear helos?” Camila asked.

Teddy squinted through the scope. “Well, so we got Baldy out there who appears to be running the camp, but I don’t think he’s the leader, maybe second in charge. Lone Ranger spoke briefly to Baldy this morning after prayer, and again at third prayer, so he’s probably the boss. I imagine Baldy will organize some security around the perimeter of the compound, but they might just as easily load up trucks and make a break for it.”

The satellite phone lit with Mark’s number. She didn’t answer but crawled back to the security perimeter and returned his call.

“It’s Simpson,” said Mark. “Atkins had to return to the U.S. on emergency leave, so Simpson is running the show. It sucks, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“Damn it, Mark.”
“I know, but we’re riding support on this. They’re coming in tonight. Details will come on the radio later.”

Camila reviewed her knowledge of the objective. She was still the contingency force, she still needed to know the plan and the make alternate plans in case of problems.

There were twenty-three enemies on the compound, maybe twenty-four because though four plates went into the main building, only three men ever showed themselves. They had sent up pictures of everyone except the Lone Ranger, but a source at Bagram had identified the Lone Ranger’s scarf as the one that Baber Pacha used.

Camila was calm now. At least Baber Pacha would be finally brought to justice. She tried to convince herself that it didn’t really matter who took him down.

The plan came in a PowerPoint slideshow explaining the timeline and how her team would support. Mark would cross the river using the bridge nearest Jalalabad as the helos flew overhead. Camila’s team would maintain their position, identify runners, and provide supporting sniper fire as needed. The gunships would prep the area as the assault force landed and assaulted the west gate. Mark’s team would pull up as the helos left to conduct cleanup operations and site exploitation, taking fingerprints and DNA of the dead. It was simple. Simple and predictable.
Chapter 54

Day 4420

“Shir, why did that guy in Kabul called us?”

No answer. Maybe he had been dragged out while I was sleeping.

I did my laps around the cell in silence, remembering.

I had been mad after leaving Keith’s room, the adrenaline was still pumping through me. Then, Shir had found me.

“Boss, a guy just called me. He says he has more info about Keith.”

“Good, we’ll talk to him when we get back to Jalalabad.”

“No, he’s here, in Kabul, visiting family.”

I remember being worried. Worried that Keith would still get away. Worried that the proof I had wouldn’t be enough. So worried, I was desperate. So desperate, I made that decision.

“Let’s go.” I signed a hummer out of the motor pool, and the soldier didn’t bat an eye giving it to me. And we drove out the gate.

For an hour we drove away from Bagram towards the capital city, Shir giving me directions, my mind on other things, my body driving on instinct.

Then, an explosion of color and sound. Red and yellow and black.

Unconsciousness.

When I woke, I was a mess. Ringing in my ears, blood. I could barely move. A man came to see me every day, a doctor I think. I healed. I made scratches in the wall. Counted meals. I never left my cell again.
Sometimes, when I think about that day, I blame myself. Sometimes, it’s no
one’s fault. And sometimes, I blame Shir, but he’s never there to defend himself.
Camila heard the helos coming from the west, the blades whirring in the early morning before dawn.

The enemy worked well. There was order and serenity in their preparations. The feeling that these men had made their peace with God.

Baldy yelled a few commands and the men grabbed weapons and ammo and formed a security perimeter sitting on roofs and balancing on walls. Lone Ranger came out too, said a few words and then RPGs appeared from hiding places along the perimeter.

“Holy crap, there must be at least fifty,” Teddy said.

She was watching through her night vision goggles, and Camila thought there was even more than that. Then, Baldy started checking the perimeter, handing objects to each man. She still couldn’t see the helos.

“What are those?” asked Camila.

“I think they’re night vision goggles. Jesus Christ, these guys are ready to go.”

Camila ran back to the rest of the group and started calling on the radio.

“Serpent, Serpent, this is Hammerhead Six, over.”

It seemed like forever before she got a reply, a liaison that was waking up on midnight shift.

“Hammerhead Six, this is Serpent, over.”

“Serpent, the objective has RPGs and night vision, abort mission. Repeat, they have RPGs and night vision, abort mission.”
She didn’t wait for an answer but grabbed her assault force.

“Get your gear on, we’re going down to the compound.” She grabbed the team radio and started donning her armor.

She saw the helos coming along the river.

“Teddy, start taking out the RPGs,” Camila said in the radio.

She led the team to Teddy and saw him shoot a round into the compound.

“We’re heading to the compound for backup,” she told him.

He charged another round. “Roger that.”

The helos hung close to the ground, then lifted almost right over her position before dunking over the hill and heading for the compound.

She led the assault team at a full sprint. The original plan had been to sneak up to the wall, but she doubted anyone would notice them now with three helos incoming.

The gunships strafed the compound spitting bullets from whirring miniguns at thousands of rounds a minute. Camila stopped on a ridge in awe, watching the desolation. Then she saw the rockets rising, like a phoenix from the ashes, at least five per helo, almost synchronized, beautiful and horrifying. Three hit, and the two gunships crashed down on the far side, one blowing secondary explosions before it touched the earth.

Camila was moving again. They would be too late. Four hundred meters was a lot of time in kit. Six or seven minutes at least. Too long.
Chapter 56

I woke to the sounds of yelling from outside. I pulled myself to a standing position using the wall, then went to the door.

Abdul’s radio crackled. He changed out the ammunition in the machine gun and charged it. He stood up, carrying the weapon in his arms, barrel aimed at my cell door.

“What's happening, Abdul?”

“Shut up.”

A rescue attempt? I’d been thinking about the machine gun for twelve years, how I could avoid the first shots long enough to allow someone to rescue me alive. If I lay flat on the ground, maybe he would shoot high. If they actually opened the door, I could rush the gunner, maybe before he clicked the gun off safe.

Abdul took a few steps in the direction of the outside door, out of eyesight of my cell

I sat down again. I needed to practice. I’d only have one chance. From a sitting position, I pushed off the wall and tripped getting to my feet, falling back to the ground in front of the door. I coughed. I was weaker than I thought. I lay on the ground breathing heavily. I would have to start standing, or maybe squatting.

“What happened?” asked Abdul. “Where are you?”

I was still on the floor in front of the door.

“I just fell. I'm feeling weak,” I replied.

“Stand up, I can't see you.”

Slowly, I stood, using the door to pull myself up.
If Abdul couldn’t see me through the bars, he might just shoot through the door and at waist level, and then I could fall to the floor and hope he overshot. But if I squatted just under the line of sight of the window, off to the side, and waited for the key to turn, then rushed at the door when it opened, maybe I could knock him down.

And then what? I was pretty sure I didn’t have enough strength to win a fist fight. Abdul was a small wiry man. If anything, it would be an equal fight and I didn’t have the time or energy for that. Knees, elbows to the head. Over and over. Crush his skull. It was the only way.

Then break Shir out.

Then hope no one else comes in before the good guys. No, I should aim the machine gun at the door. But make sure it’s loaded and not clogged up. Open the feed tray, check the ammo, check and make sure there’s no dirt. Should I test fire it? Would they hear it outside in the confusion of the fight? No, I couldn’t risk drawing attention to myself.

“Stay where I can see you,” said Abdul.

But then the good guys will think I’m the enemy when they come in, if I’m behind a machine gun at the end of a hallway. I might get shot.

*Think, Ryan!*  

Move the machine gun into the cell. I was confident I would recognize Americans storming in. If Americans come in, I would push the machine gun as far away as possible and lay prone on the ground with my hands behind my head. If it was Afghans coming in looking for me or for refuge from the fight, I would spray down the hallway with the machine gun.
The radio crackled again.

I looked at Abdul through the bars. I pictured rushing him as he opened the door one handed, knocking Abdul to the ground still holding the machine gun. Then striking his head again and again, crushing his nose, smashing his eye orbits. Loading the gun. Taking the key from around his neck, unlocking Shir’s cell. Moving the machine gun back into my cell.

I pictured it again.

I closed my eyes and repeated it.

Practice makes perfect.
Chapter 57

July 1, 2018

Camila was in a washed-out stream about one hundred meters from the compound wall.

“What the fuck is happening?” called Mark on the radio.

It had taken her team under five minutes to get here, and the fight on the ground had continued without her. All three helos were burning wrecks on the ground, and Americans still fought from behind the wreckage, but the return fire was getting fainter.

“Mark, where are you?”

“I’m about thirty seconds out with the convoy, but I see a lot of fires in front of me.”

“All the helos are down. I got my assault team in position. Same plan, I need support fire.”

“Shit, we’re coming.”

The thirty seconds passed in slow motion as she watched more rockets leave the compound and impact into the burning helos.

She heard the convoy on her right.

“Calvary’s here,” said Mark.

Camila pushed Alvarez forward and the team began to move deliberately toward the eight-foot mud walls. “Assault moving.”

She heard a small explosion to her right and saw a rocket head to the compound, hitting the mud wall almost dead center and then the night exploded in sound and lights as other RPGs and tracer bullets from machine guns tracked toward the compound.
The initial RPG was the limit of attack. It was the guide post for Mark’s team to keep all their fire from that center part and away from the side of the compound that Camila quickly approached. Burdened like they were, she anticipated one minute to get to the wall. They ran full tilt in a wedge formation.

Suddenly, they were at the wall and Alvarez was setting up charges. It shouldn’t take much to make a hole in the mud. Alvarez turned around touched the shooters so they could separate, two to each side of the explosives. Camila followed the last man and took her place beside him on the ground. Three seconds. She lowered her face into her arms just as the demolitions blew. Sand and rock rained on them.

Camila was up, third in the stack, moving quickly through the gap in the wall.
Chapter 58

I heard men rushing by and dragged myself up the wall, then looked through the bars. Afghans ran carrying rifles, RPGs, and ammunition. I saw Chin Scar take the gun from four eyes and change the ammo in the machine gun for shiny new linked bullets, then get down behind the gun and aim directly at the door. I squatted below the window of the door.

“American, come to the door,” said Chin Scar.

“Shir?”

There was no response. I hadn’t heard him from him in days.

“Come where I can see you,” said Chin Scar.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked

“Shut up, come to the door.”

“Are the Americans coming?”

“Shut up, I say. Where are you?”

I heard him stand up, ammunition jingling. I squatted just to the side of the door.

There was a call on the radio.

“Where are you?”

I heard him flick the safety lever.

The hallway suddenly exploded into dust and rock.
Chapter 59

Camila followed Alvarez, the other two moving the opposite direction down the hallway. She saw a man standing at the end of the hall, raising a PKM machine gun, then two rounds went off in front of her. Alvarez kicked the body in the face as he passed just to make sure. It didn’t move.

At the end of the hallway was a door, and Alvarez stopped with his rifle facing the exit. They seemed to be in a prison, with cell doors lining one side of the building. She backtracked by herself, kicking in each door. First one unlocked and empty. Second one got stuck and took two kicks. She stepped on the dead Afghan. Still nothing. Then kicked the third door, locked.

She heard coughing inside, she didn’t look through the window, kept her head low. Removing a strip of explosives from a pocket on her armor, she applied it to the door where the deadbolt should be and pressed hard to make sure it stuck. Reese approached from the other side and gave her a thumbs up, his side was clear. “Fire in the hole,” she said, then pulled the charge timer and both of them stepped back two paces in opposite directions. Five second charge, small explosion, and the door cracked open. Reese kicked and she entered.

The man lay on the ground. The smell took her by surprise, made her eyes water. Skin and bones in grey, filthy Afghan clothes. He faced away from her, arms spread in the shape of a T.

She heard shooting in the hallway.
“I got one prisoner,” she yelled. Reese squeezed by her as she continued aiming at the prisoner’s head, then he searched the man and put plastic flex cuffs on his hands and pulled him to his feet, putting hood over his face.

“We got bad guys trying to come into the building,” Alvarez yelled down the hallway.

“Hold your position, I’m coming to you,” she answered. “You got him,” she asked Reese.

“Yeah.”

Camila returned to where Alvarez guarded the outside door.

“This is a bad spot,” said Alvarez. “They can just mow us down through the walls.”

Camila keyed her radio. “Teddy, what’s going on outside.”

“They’re out of RPGs, and they’re running out the back, away from Mark’s convoy. I’m taking down stragglers.”

The team would have to consolidate in the compound, wait for backup and Medevac. It was the safest option.

“Reese, stay here with the prisoner. Everyone else on me.”

She keyed the radio again. “Mark, sitrep.”

“All vehicles operational, no casualties. I got two vehicles rendering aid to the helo crews. Sending two more to the compound, not receiving any more fire.”

“Coming out,” Camila said into the radio. Alvarez led the way, going right, she followed going left and heard the explosion, felt the punch to her head, her chest, her
shoulder. Her ears rang. Weapons fired around her. She fell to the ground, aware she couldn’t stop herself. Blackness closed around her.

*****

Camila felt the familiar shuddering of the helicopter. She smelled feces and filth, making her cough. Opening her eyes, she saw Donnie holding an IV. She tried to sit up, but a sudden splitting headache stopped her.

Donnie saw her move. “Easy Captain,” he told her. “You might have a concussion.”

She rubbed her forehead, willing the pain to go away. “What happened?” she asked.

She realized she was flying. MEDEVAC, she thought.

Donnie attached the IV bag to the wall and moved to her.

“Lucky you. Three round burst: head, shoulder, chest. Helmet took one, body armor took one, and one flesh wound to the outer shoulder. You’ll be bruised and feel like shit, but nothing life-threatening.”

She sat up slowly and looked around. Her left shoulder was bandaged and felt sore. She was in a Chinook, a large double-bladed helicopter. There were ten bodies lying on the floor, with five medics applying treatments. “The team?”

“Just you and Alvarez here, he took one in the stomach right before killing your attacker. The rest are the helo assaulters. And him.”
She looked where Donnie pointed, saw the prisoner still hooded and tied and smelling. He lay arm distance from her, and she reached out and patted his shoulder. “You’re going to be all right buddy, we’re almost there.”

She noticed the IV attached to her right arm. “Meds?”

Jim nodded. “Something to relax you, some antibiotics. Help you sleep on the way back. I gotta help in the back.”

Camila lay back down. She pulled up the blanket that lay on her legs, covering her nose. She listened to the wop, wop of the blades, and fell asleep again.
“I’m the investigating officer,” said Miller.

“Investigating what?”

“Keith.”

“And why am I here?” she asked. After the hospital had released her, she wanted to head back to her team, but Miller had summoned her to the Fusion Center.

“Can I go back to my team when we’re finished?”

He paused. “I don’t think so.”

More bullshit, she thought. She was so tired of the bullshit.

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No one thinks you did anything wrong. This isn’t an investigation about you.”

“So, why can’t I go back to my team?”

“We’re getting off track. Let’s start the debrief, and then I think you’ll understand why.”

She tried to get comfortable. The bullet that hit her body armor had broken a rib and it hurt to sit still for too long, hurt more than her shoulder did.

“Where did you get the intelligence on Baber Pacha’s compound?”

“We had some local sources, but most of it came from the agency.”

“Keith.”

“Yes.”

“And how well do you know him?”
“Not well.”

“Why would trust his information if you suspected him of being a traitor.”

It was a good question. Something she had asked herself many times over the last two months.

“Do you think he set us up?”

“We’re looking into the possibility. There’s definitely a possibility.”

Fuck. She should have listened to her father’s journal.

“How many—.” She paused. “How many injured on that operation?”

“Eight dead, fifteen wounded.”

Damn, damn, damn. “I didn’t ask for them to come. We had a plan. My team could have done the attack.”

“Captain Mason, no one is blaming you.”

Except me. “Where’s Keith now?”

“He’s been arrested. A lot of the things mentioned in your father’s journal have proven to be true. Just not his collaboration with the enemy.”

She had let her dad down. Blinded by the goal of vengeance, like an idiot.

“So, what now?”

Miller pushed a folder across the table.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s about your father.”

*****
Camila watched him through the ICU window. Two weeks of food and rest had done wonders. The man she had rescued and the one lying before her did not seem like the same person. Just like the man before her and the man she had known.

“Can I talk to him?” she had asked.

Miller shook his head. “Not yet. He’s—we need to have him talk to some of our mental health professionals.”

“Will he be alright?”

“He’s getting better physically, but he’s suffered some kind of breakdown. Which is to be expected, given what he’s been through.”

“How long before I can see him?”

“We’re not sure, give it a couple days. Were there any other prisoners in the compound?”

“Huh?” She remembered the attack on the compound briefly, like a firefly flickering. “No, only him. Why?”

“He claims someone named Shir was there with him.”

“Shir Shah. That was Dad’s terp. He was killed in the same IED that supposedly killed Dad.”

“But you didn’t see him?”

“There was no one else there.”

Miller nodded. “That’s what the others from your team said, but I just wanted to check.”
Camila watched her lost father. Sunken, clean shaven cheeks. Bright hazel eyes. Still thin as a rod. When she looked at his body, she didn’t recognize him. Even his face was that of a stranger.

The door was open. She heard the familiar voice speaking from the unfamiliar face.

“You know, my daughter is going to be a doctor. The first Mason to finish college, and she’s finishing up med school now.”

“Really Mr. Mason?” asked the nurse. “What school is she in?”

“The University of Texas, of course. The best school in the best state of the union.”

Camila wiped her eyes.
Curriculum Vita

Randall (Randy) Surles was born in Houston, Texas and he lived in Iran, The Netherlands, and Spain before graduating high school in London, England at The American School in London. He then studied engineering at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas for one year before joining the U.S. Army at the age of nineteen.

Randy served over thirty years in the Army, including three years with the 3rd Ranger Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment and over fifteen years as a Green Beret assigned to the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne). During this time, he operated throughout South and Central America, Africa and the Middle East. As of 2016, he was assigned to U.S. Army Africa in Vicenza, Italy where he assists in operations throughout the continent of Africa.

Randy received a bachelor’s degree in U.S. History from Campbell University and began a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with the University of Texas at El Paso in the spring of 2015. He has published stories in the Southeast Missouri State University Press and Rue Scribe and he is the recipient of the Mensa Margot Seitelman Memorial scholarship.

After he retires in November 2018, Randy plans on continuing his writing career.

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