

HEARTS & MINDS

by

Greg Stevens  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing

Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Department Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Fall Semester 2016  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Hearts & Minds

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

Greg Stevens  
Master of Arts  
George Mason University, 2011

Director: Courtney Brkic, Professor  
Department of Creative Writing

Fall Semester 2016  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2016 Greg Stevens  
All Rights Reserved

## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my loving wife, Linda, and our beautiful daughter Evangeline, who both taught me that each new chapter can in fact be more rewarding than the last.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my loving wife, Linda, who spent countless late nights reviewing my work. My daughter, Evangeline, who brought me endless inspiration every day of her life. Professor Courtney Brkic, for her instruction and advice during the thesis process. For Professors Susan Shreve and Helon Ngalabak, who instructed me during my first and last courses during this program. And finally, thanks to Professor Bill Miller, for saying yes to an aspiring student-writer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vi
GRADUATION.....	1
MEMORIES.....	13
THE SOLDIER.....	28
THE WOMAN.....	42
WHITE TRASH.....	56
THE LONG ROAD.....	64
SHAY.....	79
THE FUNERAL.....	94
THE BODY.....	109
THIRTY SECONDS.....	116

## **ABSTRACT**

HEARTS & MINDS

Greg Stevens, M.F.A.

George Mason University, 2016

Thesis Director: Dr. Courtney Brkic

This thesis is a fictional collection of short stories entitled Hearts & Minds. These short stories are threaded together into a single thesis using a centralized theme revolving around military conflict. However, Hearts & Minds explores additional impacts that go well beyond military confrontation, delving into a wide range of sub-themes including Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), depression, courage, challenges of civilian re-integration, as well as the impacts on family members left behind when soldiers deploy to war. It is my goal that after reading this thesis, those unfamiliar with military culture will have an enlightened perspective into the trials and tribulations of the American soldier.

## GRADUATION

Elizabeth winced as the thorn punctured her thumb, a small droplet of blood instantly bubbling to the surface. *Damn rose bushes!* She dropped the pruning shears to examine the wound, pleased it wasn't a gusher. Elizabeth watched for several seconds as the small dot of blood grew slightly in size before stopping. Satisfied, she wiped it away, grabbed the shears, and resumed the task of trimming.

She had once read in a magazine people found gardening relaxing; time out in the sun, fresh air, a blissful reprieve from the daily grind of life where everything else just seemed to fall away. But she'd spent enough time with all of these flowers to realize that was just another bunch of marketing bullshit.

*I feel like an old lady. This surely isn't something for women under forty? But how many women my age are divorced empty-nesters with nothing more exciting in their lives. She thought suddenly of Jenny, feeling even more lonely. I wonder how she likes Portland?*

Elizabeth was still thinking of her daughter when the truck started up the drive. It was a long drive, nearly two hundred yards of winding gravel that curved its way behind the small fishing pond before snaking its way back up the hill towards the house. She first noticed the truck as it rounded the pond, trying to recognize the driver of the vaguely



familiar vehicle. But her eyesight was no longer perfect, the latest in a growing trend of casualties as Elizabeth approached forty.

It wasn't until the truck came to a halt and the driver stepped out that she finally recognized him. "Robbie," Elizabeth exclaimed delightedly. "What are you doing here?" She had only seen him a handful of times after Jenny had left for college last fall.

"Oh, not much. Just passing through. How you doing, Ms J?"

Elizabeth stepped out of the flower bed and approached him, stopping just short. "I'd give you a hug but...well...I'm kind of a mess." Her arms were caked with mud up to her elbows and she was dripping sweat.

"You look just fine to me, Ms J," Robbie replied.

Elizabeth blushed deeply. She'd known Robbie for a couple years, ever since she'd divorced Mark and moved Jenny and herself back to Pendleton, Oregon. Back to Elizabeth's hometown, close to Jenny's grandparents. Jenny had been sixteen, and it'd been a particularly rough move for a teenager starting a new high school, especially after Jenny's grandparents were killed in an auto accident on an abnormally icy wintery evening. *That year had been a real shit-show!* Divorce. Move. Angry teen. Death of parents. Mental health counselor for daughter. Excessive drinking for self. Rebellious teen with aptitude for promiscuity. Even more excessive drinking for self.

But then Robbie had entered the picture. Jenny had met him at school and the two quickly became inseparable. Not in a sexual way or anything. Just two friends who couldn't stand to be apart for more than a two or three days at the most. In Robbie, Jenny had found a sounding-board and voice of reason, and her promiscuity and anti-social

behavior subsided. Elizabeth welcomed their connection, and she became used to the sight of Robbie around the house.

Since Jenny had left for college, Robbie had only stopped by a couple of times to say hi, and he hadn't been by since Christmas, a quick visit when Jenny had come back home for holiday break. As he stood before her now, Elizabeth realized just how much she had missed him. How much she missed company in general.

Robbie looked different now. Older. Unshaven. Even a little bit rugged. It was amazing how quickly boys transitioned to men. One day they were smooth faced and awkward, the next filled-in and self-confident. She marveled at his newfound height, at the broadness of his shoulders. *They change so fast!*

"So what are you doing here," she asked.

"I actually came by to see you. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing well," Elizabeth replied. "So is Jenny. She's really enjoying college. Asked me to say hi to you the next time I saw you. She wanted to know your plans after you graduate next month?"

"I got plans," Robbie said with a small smirk, feigning as if he was going to withhold some deep secret.

"And?"

Finally, Robbie let loose his secret in a rush. "I'm going to enlist in the Army."

"The Army?"

“It seemed like my best option. I’m not really ready for college. And I couldn’t afford it even if I was. This way at least I can save up some money for it while I figure out what I want to do.”

Elizabeth eyed Robbie carefully, almost skeptically. “I never took you for the army type.”

Robbie arched one of his eyebrows, slightly taken aback. “Yeah. I never took you for the gardening type. But I guess strange things have been known to happen.” Elizabeth looked down at herself, as if noticing for the first time that she was covered head-to-toe in mud and sweat. She burst into laughter, soliciting a chuckle from Robbie. “You look like you got into a fight with the flowers, and the flowers won. Can you use some help?”

“You don’t want to help me with this mess,” she replied sheepishly. “Besides, what would you know about planting flowers?” The words almost came out as a challenge.

Robbie accepted. He began rolling up his sleeves. “I’m not as young as I used to be, Ms J. I know a lot more than you think.”

“Fine. Just don’t manhandle the petals,” she teased as she motioned towards the dozen assorted annuals she’d purchased earlier before handing him a small hand-sized shovel. “All right. Show me what you got.”

Robbie smiled as he took the hand-held. Elizabeth watched as he dropped to his knees, thrust the gardening tool into the damp earth and withdrew, twisting the instrument so the scooped dirt fell beside the freshly plowed hole before repeating the process. She watched him for several seconds; thrust, withdraw, twist, repeat. Satisfied

with the young man's form and that he would be delicate enough with her flowers, she moved to an adjacent area and resumed her trimming.

They spent the bulk of the morning in the garden, Robbie following Elizabeth's guidance as he insisted he was quickly becoming the world's greatest gardener. He regularly complained, albeit jokingly, that at the rate they were going the flowers wouldn't be planted before winter. "If only the other guys could see me now," he'd joked at one point.

But it was clear to Elizabeth that Robbie was actually enjoying himself. She was certainly enjoying herself. She no longer had many visitors these days, not since Mark had left and Jenny had went off to college. It was nice to talk with Robbie, and Elizabeth quickly realized how lonely she'd become.

They talked about all kinds of things, random things. The time Robbie had twisted his ankle when he'd slipped off the diving board. The time Amy McMurphy had accidentally scored the winning basket...for the other team, and of course Jenny's reaction; it had taken her nearly two months to forgive her teammates' botched rebound attempt. They talked about Robbie's upcoming graduation, about what his plans were for the summer. They talked about the future. About Robbie's decision to join the army.

When asked if he was afraid, he'd replied. "No, not really. You're more likely to die in a car wreck than in combat." Elizabeth considered the errant response, unsure whether it was boyish for its ignorance and manly for its bravado.

They continued like this for most of the morning, bantering back and forth like old schoolmates while the sun began to crest overhead and the temperature soar. Nearly

all of the flowers had been planted, and the flower bed was now filled with a mixture of purple stargazers, yellow and white lillies, and small annuals of assorted colors and sizes. Elizabeth looked on in admiration. It was now the most beautiful area of her home, a home that had begun showing the wear and fatigue of old age since Mark had left.

She turned to Robbie, to express her gratitude and thank him for a job well done. She was surprised to find him shirtless, patting down the soil around the last of the stargazers he'd planted. She watched him for a few moments as he remained engrossed with the soil, his triceps snapping taught as his arms repeatedly pressed the metal hoe firmly against the ground, tightly packing the soil that encased the delicate flower. *I remember when he was just a boy. He doesn't look like a boy any more.* Robbie had bulked up over the past few years, that perfect stage of youth where you could eat almost anything and still put on several pounds of muscle without worrying about getting fat. Robbie's once youthful frame now resembled a man's body. A soldier's body. Elizabeth remembered back in her youth; she'd always been attracted to men of similar body type. *Time moves so fast. Where does it go?*

By the time she realized she was staring, Robbie had finished and was looking back at her. He wore a small smirk. "What are you looking at, Ms J?" he asked teasingly.

Elizabeth flushed bright red. "W-What? I'm not looking at anything."

"Okay."

"I wasn't," she replied matter-of-factly. "Now, would you go grab that hose over there so we can give these things some water? We wouldn't want all this hard work to be for nothing."

Robbie walked over towards the house and grabbed the end of a rubber garden hose that was attached to a corner spigot. The hose was wound in a tight ball, tangled awkwardly with several kinks throughout. Elizabeth watched as he struggled to untangle the hose as he pulled it closer to the flower bed. But the harder he pulled, the worse it seemed to kink and tangle.

“What are you doing?” laughed Elizabeth as she looked on. It was as if Robbie had never had to untangle a hose before.

“What am I doing? What are you doing? You’re the one that got this thing all knotted up. It’s got so many kinks in it that nothing’s going to come out.”

“You’ve got to be smarter than the hose,” joked Elizabeth as she stepped forward. “Here, let me help you with that.” Instead of using her arms to jerk it tighter, she used her hands to weave the hose back through the tangle of knots. Once through the first tangle, she gently unfolded the hose so she could then work out the next knot. Robbie looked on admiringly. Ms J seemed to know what she was doing.

Between the two of them they were eventually able to completely untangle the hose and straighten it to its full length, pulling it taut until the tip rested within the flower bed. Elizabeth screwed on an attachment to the end of the hose that could be spun to regular the flow of water and manipulate the pulse of water. She handed Robbie the attachment before striding over towards the house. She turned the spigot and heard the sound of the water as it flowed into the hose.

“Hey, nothing’s happening,” said Robbie.

“You’ve got to press the handle for release.”

“I’ve already done that.”

Elizabeth shook her head as she walked back towards Robbie. “You’ve got to hold the handle down.”

“I already did that.”

“Let me see it,” said Elizabeth as she reached for the attachment. “Must a woman do everything?” she joked.

Robbie pulled back the attachment. Another challenge accepted. “I can do it.”

“Just give it here,” snapped Elizabeth as she grabbed hold of the hose.

And just like that, they became like two children wrestling over a toy, Robbie trying to pull it out of reach and prove he could do it while Elizabeth tried to tug it from his grasp.

“You got it on the wrong setting,” laughed Elizabeth.

“Stop grabbing it. You’re just making it worse.”

Elizabeth finally got her arm in between Robbie’s grasp and was able to twist the attachment. The backed up water burst forth in a rush. It washed over Robbie, drenching him instantly. By the time he was able to get the attachment back in the off position, he was soaked from head to toe. His hair was matted and water dripped from his jeans.

Elizabeth stood back with a hand over her mouth, trying desperately to keep the laughter back. Finally, she gave up. “That’s what you get for not listening to me.”

Robbie was not amused. “You think that’s funny?”

“A little bit.” Her laughter was now uncontrollable.

“Yeah, well.” Robbie twisted the attachment to the on position and blasted Elizabeth with a full stream of water. She shrieked, trying desperately to block the water with her hands as she tried to grab the hose from his. By the time Robbie turned it off, both he and Elizabeth were soaked and their legs were covered in mud. Water dripped from their hair and they stood in a puddle at the side of the flower bed.

At first Elizabeth was furious. But then a small grin began to form. Soon the grin gave way to a smile. Here she stood; wet, cold, totally sidetracked from the task at hand. She felt ridiculous. She felt a little embarrassed. She felt like a kid again. Then her smile gave way to a fit of laughter. Soon Robbie was laughing as well.

Elizabeth noticed Robbie glance down once or twice, quick glances meant to be unnoticeable. But she did notice, and soon became suddenly aware of the effect the water had had on her t-shirt. Her shirt was medium-blue, so it wasn't transparent. But it now clung tightly to her breasts, highlighting their size and shape and the bra underneath. She pretended not to notice. *Let him look. It's not as if anything inappropriate is happening.* It felt good to feel like a kid again.

Once their laughing fit had abated, Elizabeth got back to work. She retrieved the hose and finished watering all of the plants before coiling it back up and laying it aside.

“Now what” asked Robbie?

“Now,” Elizabeth paused for a moment. “I’m going to go change into some dry clothes.”

“What about me?”

“What about you? I would suggest you go home and get yourself cleaned up.”



“Like this,” he motioned towards his legs for dramatic effect. “Thanks to you, I’m half covered in mud. I can’t get into my truck like this.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment. Robbie cherished his truck more than almost anything else. He had ever since he’d bought it last year. “Fine. Come on then. You can use the guest shower while I wash your jeans. I might have some of Mark’s clothes that you can have.”

A few minutes later Elizabeth tossed Robbie’s muddy jeans, along with her own soaked clothes, into the washer. She heard the guest shower upstairs turn on as she went out into the basement to retrieve some of Mark’s old belongings. She found the set of boxes in the back corner, where she’d left it the day he’d moved out.

He’d left the week before Thanksgiving, the year before last. *Thanksgiving! Who does something like that?* He’d been in such a hurry that he’d left a bunch of things behind; some old clothes; a few books, mostly sports biographies; a couple framed photos that he’d kept in his man-cave; a box of tools. He left a host of random items behind that meant nothing to him. *Just like he’d left his wife and daughter. Moved on to something better...younger.*

Elizabeth didn’t know why she’d kept his things this long. Maybe a part of her hoped he’d come back. Maybe a part of her hoped he wouldn’t. Maybe she just wanted to be reminded that he was gone. Elizabeth didn’t know at this point. She’d stopped thinking about the broader meaning of things since Mark had split. Now she thought in terms of tasks; get Jenny to school, make dinner, clean the house, make sure Jenny graduates, get the groceries, plant the flowers, find Robbie pants.

*Pants!* She had almost forgotten what she'd come down here for. She grabbed an old pair of jeans that she thought might fit before closing up the box and heading upstairs. When she came to the guestroom door, she paused. From inside, she could still hear the shower running. The guest bathroom was one of those new designs, located within the bedroom and separated by an adjoining door. She knocked on the door loudly, but got no reply. She cracked the bedroom door open. "Robbie," she shouted above the water. "I think I was able to find you something that might work. I'll lay it on the bed for you."

"Thank you, Elizabeth" he answered from the shower.

She opened the door and stepped into the room. It had been a long-time since she had been in this room. Longer than she'd realized. It had been years since a guest had stayed over, and the furniture in the room was covered in a thin layer of dust. She ran her finger along the edge of the wood nightstand, noticing the specks on her fingertip and the streak left behind on the table. *It hasn't been touched in years!* She laid the pants on the bed and turned to walk out when she noticed the bathroom door.

It stood halfway ajar. Robbie had failed to close it completely. From her vantage point, Elizabeth had a direct view into the shower, where Robbie was rubbing his hair with shampoo. She stopped involuntarily as he scrubbed his hair, watching as the suds trailed down his body. A steady stream of white ran down the sides of his face, over the front of his shoulders and chest. The suds bunched together just below his chest, cascading down over his abdomen, then further down below. He had an admirable physique, much more muscular than she would have imagined. He was lean around the

waist, thick through the arms and legs. His body was smooth and sparse of hair, which only seemed to accentuate certain things.

Elizabeth turned away.

She thought of the last time she had seen a naked man. It had been Mark, of course. And she certainly hadn't marveled at his body. During the years preceding their divorce, Mark's once lean body had begun the unwelcome process of redistributing mass from his muscles to his belly. The hair on his head had begun to thin, while the hair on his back had begun to thicken. Toward the end Mark had become most unseemly, a far cry from the boy she'd fallen in love with during her youth. Mark certainly hadn't done his part to mitigate the effects of aging as Elizabeth had. She had done everything in her power to best retain her youthful appearance, and she'd been very effective at doing so. *Yet he's the one who left me. For something newer. For something younger.*

She looked back towards the shower. Robbie was now facing away, rinsing the last of the shampoo from his hair. He was unaware that Elizabeth stood just outside the door, staring at him. *What am I doing? He'd be so embarrassed if he knew I'd seen him?* She stepped forward quietly as she reached out a hand to pull the door closed.

*He'll realize if I don't close the door. I'll just close the door and he won't notice a thing.*

Elizabeth's hand enclosed around the doorknob, intent on pulling the door closed. But as her fingers closed around the hard metal fastening, her hand hesitated, then stopped altogether. Her fingers remained motionless, the door stuck halfway between open and closed.

## MEMORIES

A distant explosion echoed from the west. But Sergeant Bradley Williams was not overly concerned because it was still far away and such sounds had become common.

His eyes scanned the side streets near Kabul's International Airport for signs of danger. But the only signs were those of torn business advertisements posted on the sides of collapsed buildings, the sign's messages encoded in a language Sergeant Williams neither understood nor wanted to. He had been told that Kabul had once been the business capital for the entire region. That must have been a long time ago.

Everywhere he looked, the city looks utterly desolate. The entire area was covered with a permanent layer of dust, a unique mixture of natural desert sediment and human fecal matter. Generations of constant artillery shelling had laid waste to all plant life in the region. Grass, trees, bushes, all gone. Now, nothing grew, and nature couldn't break down the waste. And since a modern treatment facility was not feasible, the local population simply ignored the dust. The locals ignored a lot.

A small gust of wind rose up, sending a dust cloud scattering up into the air. Williams coughed, wondering whose dust he had inhaled this time.

Beyond the dirt cloud, out near the runway, the skeletal remains of vintage planes laid in their final resting places, unmoved for decades and covered with permanent layers of the fine, grainy dust. They stood in stark contrast to the shiny Turkish Airlines 737 that gleamed next to one of the international airport's two operational gates, fueled and ready to go at the earliest opportunity. Aircraft never stayed on the ground long here.

Explosions and gunfire had erupted around the airport all morning, but Williams had remained unfazed. He had become immune to the sounds of combat over the past eleven months. Some of his men, newly arrived to the field, had not yet acquired that gift.

"Yo Sarge, how long we gonna wait out here for these guys to show up?" asked Private Maurice Douglass, a jittery, large, bald-headed black Southerner newly arrived in theatre. He'd been jumpy since his arrival two weeks ago. 'You seen any fighting?' he'd asked the first time he had met Sergeant Williams. It had been a truly stupid question. They don't send you somewhere unless there's fighting.

"Hey Sarge, how long?" asked Private Douglass once again.

"Don't ask me. I'm just the driver."

"Yeah, well, I don't like this. It's no good. We been at this airport for nearly two hours already and still haven't seen any sign of our pickup. We're sitting ducks out here."

The gunfire wasn't *that* close, still a good half-mile off by Williams' estimation. It was Douglass' first mission outside the so-called "protective wire" of the Green Zone, and it showed. But he'd settle down.

"It doesn't matter what you like, Private. We have our orders. Pick up the ambassador and drive him straight to the embassy."

"Yeah, well, I don't like being stuck out here."

"So write a complaint." Williams leaned back against the Humvee, returning his attention toward Kabul's flat, demolished landscape. From his current position he could see for miles in every direction, clear to the surrounding snow-capped mountains that ringed this ancient desert city. Shoddy construction and generations of artillery shelling

generally limited Kabul's skyline to no more than two or three stories, which made for some spectacular panoramas, particularly in those early morning moments when the first rays of sun emerged from behind the peaks. For just an extra couple hundred bucks a year, an Afghan could live in a third floor penthouse and wake up to some beautiful sunrises. But the key was making it to the next day so they could see at least one more.

The young private skulked towards the other side of the vehicle before turning his attention back to the surrounding roads. The streets were empty this time of the morning, the first rays of light just beginning to wash over Kabul. The city seemed peaceful. Nothing passed but the occasional car and a couple of men on warped squeaky bicycles, both careful to avoid the two parked Humvees and the four heavily armed troops that sat in the small airport parking area.

Williams looked up at the large rusty green sign in front of the terminal. One of the only signs written in English, the large white letters spelled out Kabul International Airport. But the facility looked more like an abandoned bus depot, the runway protected by a tiny, partially crumbled chain-link fence. The parking lot, entire chunks of pavement missing from decades of warfare, was pocked with large unfilled dirt holes where parking spaces should have been.

A stray dog entered Williams' periphery, scrounging for food in the far corner of the lot. Its hipbones jutted out awkwardly from the back, ribs visible with each movement. Williams watched as the dog hunted for scraps, one of its hind legs dragging limply behind as it moved. One of Williams' men opened the door of a Humvee, drawing the dogs' attention. It eyed the soldiers warily, before putting its head down in search of

further sustenance. Its coat, falling out in places, showed a combination of dull grey and brown. Williams considered shooting the sickly animal. But what good would it do?

There would be dozens more to take its place.

Williams refocused on the surrounding area. Everything was colored with those same shades of brown and grey. The brown pockmarked buildings, most riddled with bullet holes, stood precariously upon unsteady foundations. The bearded men in the streets, many dressed in grey overcoats and pants, looked virtually identical. Even the sky, perpetually obscured by an unnatural cloud of carbon dioxide that loitered in the valley, shined with a dark hazy brown. Everything was tinged with those same depressing grey-brownish hues.

Williams longed for color somewhere...anywhere. A little bit of color to remind him of home. But what good was color here?

The seconds stretched into minutes. And the minutes into hours. Williams watched his men wilt under the rising heat. Finally, Williams took action. "Sergeant Andrews, get on the radio with HQ and get us a status update." They'd been here nearly half a day already, with no sign of the Ambassador's flight; half a day that the insurgents could locate the troops' position and attack. Dozens of locals had passed during the morning, and most were probably harmless. But it only took one.

Sergeant Andrews stepped up into the nearest personnel carrier and grabbed the radio, closing the door as he called headquarters. Private Douglass and Corporal Hernandez waited nervously, scanning the perimeter for threats. Williams instinctively knew they both wanted to return to the womb of the Green Zone. Back to rubbery steaks,

generic cola, a warped pool table and shitty karaoke. It's amazing what one finds comforting when all comfort is gone.

Private Douglass looked particularly nervous. His hands continued to fidget with his rifle, his fingers coiling anxiously around the weapons' inert body. His oversized bald head swiveled in every direction as he noted potential signs of danger behind every corner or alleyway. Douglass was a rookie, but he'd get used to the way of things.

The door of the personnel carrier opened abruptly, Sergeant Andrews hopping down as he made his way back to the others. "Bad news, Sarge. HQ says the ambassador's plane was delayed a total of nine hours before takeoff this morning, which means he's not scheduled to land for another four."

"And we're just finding out about this now?" snapped Douglass.

"It happens" interjected Williams calmly, suppressing his own outrage for the sake of his troops. "So what are our orders?"

"The commander still wants us to make the pickup," answered Andrews. "But they said it's your call whether we stay in place or go back to base and return later this afternoon."

The Sergeant stood silently, weighing his options. Douglass and Hernandez eyed him warily, their preference etched on expectant faces.

"I vote we go back," offered Hernandez impatiently, unwilling to bear the awkward silence or await a decision any longer.

Williams started to argue, to explain the risks of unnecessary exposure on the streets and the importance of limiting travel outside the wire, when the sound of small



arms fire again rang out again, this time just a few blocks from the north. Douglass jumped, spinning as he pulled rifle to shoulder and aimed at the nearest available target, a local civilian woman walking along the edge of the parking lot. Her innocent eyes glanced up questioningly above her veil though she muttered not a sound.

"Easy there, Douglass" said Sergeant Williams as he placed his hand atop Douglass' weapon, gently pushing the barrel down, the woman disappearing behind the remains of a crumbled retaining wall. "There's no danger to be found there."

"Sorry Sarge. Those shots sounded pretty close."

The gunfire was still nearly a half mile from the men's current position, but Douglass shook as if in the center of a firefight. Hernandez didn't look much better, either. Williams looked at the two men, both wide-eyed and jumpy, ready to shoot anything that moved. They were a friendly-fire incident waiting to happen. "All right, fuck it. We're going back. We'll re-group, re-supply, and return with a couple of extra men at the designated rendezvous time. No sense sitting out here on our asses."

The four men were back on the streets of Kabul within minutes, Private Douglass and Sergeant Williams in the lead vehicle, followed closely by Sergeant Andrews and Corporal Hernandez. Douglass remained jittery in the passenger seat as he and Williams sped down the crowded streets, his eyes scanning each passing vehicle eagerly. His hands coiled around his gun tightly, his trigger finger waiting to strike. Newbies often got like this during their first missions, seeing danger behind every fruit stand along the road, a bomb in the basket of every bicycle that passed, an explosive rolled up under the turban of every elderly man. Unfortunately, such caution was occasionally justified. But rookies

always seemed to go overboard, to treat every innocent local as an imminent security threat. Sergeant Williams had seen this affliction time and time again during his tour, but never had he witnessed symptoms this severe.

Private Douglass still fingered his rifle's trigger, its barrel pointed towards the floorboards between his legs, when Williams struck up a conversation. Talking was the number two method of stress relief, according to the Army Field Manual. "Hey Mo, I heard you were from down south. Memphis, wasn't it?"

Douglass hesitated before answering. "That's right, Sarge. I'm a long way from home."

"Yeah, I know. We all are. Tell me something, though. Is Memphis barbeque really as good as everyone says?"

A small involuntary smile escaped onto Douglass' lips, and a slight sparkle cut through his beady eyes. "It's even better than they say, Sarge. Words can't describe true southern barbeque. In Memphis we like it dry, all rubbed up with spices. None of that wet, sloppy shit." Williams' laughed as he turned down a side dirt street to avoid a donkey and cart that had blocked traffic ahead. It was important to keep moving when driving through Kabul, taking alternate routes when practical. Stationary objects were targets, and targets were easily killed.

Williams turned his attention back to his conversation. He hadn't spent much time in the Deep South, other than a trip to Orlando as part of a family vacation to Disneyworld when he was a child. The vacation stuck in his mind because he'd gotten sick from too much ice cream and lemonade; a deadly combination even at the best of

times but particularly traumatic when riding the infamous *Tower of Terror*. Even now, nearly twenty years later, he still couldn't stomach lemonade.

Thoughts of Orlando still in his head, Williams came to an intersection with a major street – major because it was partly paved – where he turned right, back towards the Green Zone. Paved roads, though rare in Kabul, were ideal; you could drive faster and it was more difficult to bury explosives under them. Once they were back on an open road and he had verified that Sergeant Andrews and Corporal Hernandez still trailed, he refocused on Douglass. "So tell me, how'd you end up in the army?"

"I don't know. Same as everyone else, I guess. My career back home wasn't going nowhere, so I thought I'd go to college. Shit's expensive, though. Couldn't afford it. And that's when I ran across the army recruiter. He told me about the GI Bill. And that was that. Now I'm stuck."

"I bet you didn't expect to end up here."

"Hell no! The recruiter pamphlet had an article with pictures about a radio operator sitting somewhere over in Europe."

Williams laughed, causing Private Douglass to chuckle as well. "If it makes you feel any better, Mo, that radio operator was probably transferred out here as well."

"It doesn't," answered Douglass, a cold edge returning to his voice as he stared outside.

Williams had joined up after Samantha got pregnant. Begin a career that would make her proud of her husband and allow him to support their child, he had figured. He'd

been just like all of the other naïve recruits. Duty. Honor. Mission. “Would you look at this fucking hellhole,” he whispered under his breath without even realizing.

“You say something, Sarge?” asked Douglass.

“No. I didn’t say anything.”

A sudden jarring motion brought him back from the past, the front wheel of the Humvee slamming into a large pothole as it motored down the cramped road. It was now midday, the city fully awake and its inhabitants going about their daily routines. The roads had become increasingly congested. The locals beheld the speeding coalition vehicles with mixed emotions. Some offered friendly waves. Some simply averted their eyes. Others offered a variety of mysterious hand gestures, most of which didn’t look particularly friendly.

“Body up ahead on the right, Sarge!” shouted Douglass excitedly, pointing towards a lifeless body. The corpse lay alongside the sidewalk, and by its size appeared to be that of an adolescent child, its limbs bent at awkward angles.

Williams took a hard left, swerving across a lane of traffic to take a small side street as he checked back to ensure that Andrews and Hernandez followed. Cars honked in outrage as the coalition vehicles cut them off.

“What are you doing, Sarge? Shouldn’t we go check on it or something?”

“Fuck no!” snapped Williams hastily, before forcing a more even-keeled tone. “Look, rule number one is you don’t take unnecessary risks. That body could be full of explosives, just waiting for some ignorant soldier to check on it. As soon as they do...boom.”

“So we’re just gonna leave it?” Private Douglas asked in horror.

“Nothing else we can do. It’s an Afghan body. Let the Afghans deal with it.”

A long silence followed, each man focusing on the road ahead. Sergeant Williams looked down, noticing Douglass' hands had re-coiled themselves around his rifle.

Williams felt a pang of regret.

"So Mo, you mentioned that you had a career before the army. What was that?"

Douglass turned. "When I said career, I guess I should have said hobby." The young man paused. "I kinda always wanted to be a country singer."

"A country singer?"

"Yeah, country is huge in the south."

"I guess I never pegged you for the country type."

“Why? Cause I’m black?”

“No. Because I think you’d look like shit in a cowboy hat.” Williams laughed at his own joke as he looked over at Douglass, who simply shook his head.

"Well, we're talking about the Deep South. We hold our traditions above everything else, and country is one of Memphis' finest. Plus, you might not know this, but all different kinds of modern music are influenced by country: rock, R&B, rap, the list goes on."

There was a stalled car up ahead in the left lane, so Williams took the first right. Got to keep moving. Don’t get yourself boxed in. Just keep moving towards the Green Zone. Stalled cars were common on the streets of Kabul and, like abandoned corpses, made great explosive covers.

"Do you still have family back in Memphis?"

"My mother and father are still in Memphis. Along with my younger sister."

Douglass laughed, thinking back on something nearly forgotten. "Man, I tell you, that girl can sing."

"Country?"

"Oh, hell no! She hates country. Ashley prefers R&B."

"Oh, I see." Williams didn't really understand the first thing about music, but he knew that he needed to keep Douglass talking. "You got a girl back home?" Williams continued without missing a step in the conversation.

"Got a fiancé" answered Douglass proudly. "Finest woman you'll ever see."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely. We were planning to get married, but that got delayed when I got orders over here. We're still together though. We promised to Skype each other every day."

"God bless technology," answered Williams, thinking about how things used to be before the proliferation of Skype and email.

Williams often reflected on the past. His past. Would Samantha have stayed if she hadn't lost the pregnancy? Would he have made a decent father? What would it be like to return to *his* own family, to be greeted at the airport after a year overseas by someone other than just his parents?

He was lost in reflection as he turned down a narrow dirt street lined with dumpy two-story apartment buildings. He nearly failed to see the jammed traffic directly ahead

as he slammed the brakes, the Humvee screeching to a halt, the oversized vehicle stopping mere inches behind the snarled traffic. "Eyes up, Douglass! Can you see up ahead?"

"I can't see shit from my side, Sarge."

Williams immediately threw the vehicle into reverse, Sergeant Andrews and Corporal Hernandez doing the same in the rear Humvee. Got to keep moving! But the steady inflow of traffic continued to fill in the tiny street behind the soldiers. And within seconds, both vehicles were mired in traffic, surrounded by hundreds of locals. Sergeant Williams laid on the horn, trying to force the Humvee back through the traffic; behind him, Sergeants Andrews did the same.

They managed about two feet of progress before Sergeant Andrews backed into a local truck filled with produce, spilling some dust-covered cabbages and bringing his retreat to an immediate halt as the truck driver began waving his fists and cursing at the Americans.

Sergeant Williams, now blocked in place by Sergeant Andrews' Humvee, placed his own vehicle in park and immediately reached for the radio, calling back to base with their position and seeing if he could call in some eyes in the sky. "Convoy Six to HQ, over!"

After a few seconds the radio crackled in response. "We copy, Convoy Six. This is HQ, over."

"We're stuck in traffic. Looks like we might be here awhile. Any chance we can get some air cover."

“Copy that. What is your current position?”

“We’re on the outskirts of sector two. Half a click west from the old stadium.” He didn’t need to provide any additional clarification regarding the stadium. It was a local landmark, a former olympic stadium that the taliban had converted to a public execution grounds, where non-believers were decapitated and adulterers were stoned to death. Rumor had it the executions drew more applause than the games ever did.

“That’s a copy. We got you on GPS. Calling in air cover now...”

The radio conversation continued for several minutes as the traffic around Sergeant Williams and his men continued to intensify. Traffic was at a complete standstill as hundreds of locals mulled along the busy sidewalks. Still, the veteran soldier continued to coordinate with HQ, waiting on the air support that would soon arrive. So intent was his conversation that he never noticed the heavily laden motorcycle approach from behind along the busy narrow sidewalk, the two-wheeled vehicle slithering its way through the throngs of pedestrians that lined the side of the street, its driver bringing the bike to a final resting place next to the passenger side window where a wide-eyed, bald-headed soldier peered out anxiously. Nor did Williams notice as the motorcyclist mouthed a final prayer to Allah. It wasn’t until after the driver reached down and pressed the small red button on the side of the bike that Williams noticed anything.

The blast sent the personnel carrier sideways as reddish-orange fire consumed the vehicle. The steel-reinforced Humvee shielded Douglass and Williams from the full force of the explosion. But even the steel proved insufficient, its structure failing as cracks



appeared under the force of the detonation, the fire reaching its deadly tentacles up from under the passenger seat. Private Douglass didn't even have time to scream.

The flames then reached their forked tongues across towards Williams, the soldier feeling a sharp burning sensation across his lower body as loose pieces of mangled steel ripped through his unprotected legs.

The explosion lasted only a fraction of a second, a single moment in time. The detonation, the heat, the flames, even the exploding shrapnel all seemingly part of the same single grand action. But they were not. Instead, they were many distinct and separate actions, separated by fragments of time, each fragment full of a litany of micro fragments. And somewhere within the micro fragments, somewhere between Douglass' death and the approach of the flames, a flood of memories flooded through Sergeant Williams' mind.

He did not remember his family's vacation to Orlando, or that he hated lemonade. He did not remember his first crush, a young fair-haired eighth-grader he'd never worked up the courage to kiss. He did not remember Samantha, or the visions of the child they'd never had. He did not remember the summer after high-school, a lazy period of barbeques, ballgames, and chasing girls. He did not remember enlisting in the army, or the pride of his parents when he became the latest Williams to carry on the family's long military legacy. He did not even remember his first deployment to Afghanistan. Nor his second. Nor his third.

Instead, what Sergeant Bradley Williams did remember was that Private Maurice Douglass was from Memphis. He remembered that Maurice Douglass was a country

singer, and that the bald-headed southern man liked barbeque. Williams remembered Maurice Douglass's little sister, realizing that her big brother would never hear her sing again. He remembered that Private Maurice Douglass had a fiancé, an unnamed beauty who would soon receive word that her betrothed had passed.

Then that micro fragment of time passed, along with all memories of Private Maurice Douglass.

The flames encircled Williams' legs before reaching upward. He had time for one final thought, a momentary feeling of regret for a decision gone wrong. Then it was all over, even with the dust from the explosion still unsettled.

The detonation rattled the area for several blocks in each direction, killing dozens of faceless pedestrians in its wake. And somewhere off in the distance, in another part of the city, a soldier heard the faint echoes of the explosion, not overly concerned because it was still far away and such sounds had become common.

## THE SOLDIER

Captain Johnson sat behind a small desk, a detailed map of Iraq spread out before him. The desk looked out of place in Captain Johnson's simple tent; an unnecessary extravagance within the small brown canvas shelter he now called home. A large stack of papers was piled on the desk's top corner, one of which Johnson picked up.

"At ease, Sergeant," replied Johnson as he signed the paper, setting it back down amidst the other documents. "Do you know why I called you here today?"

"No sir," lied Walker.

"We lost seven men yesterday. Which means today I have to write seven letters to their family explaining how grateful our nation is for their sacrifice." Johnson paused.

"Have you ever had to write one of these?"

"No sir."

"It's one of the most difficult things I do. The chaplains may deliver the message in person, but the letter remains long after they're gone." Captain Johnson lifted the letter for emphasis. "The families tend to hang on to these forever."

"Sir, I don't understand?"

"Yesterday you disobeyed a direct order, an order that I issued specifically to you. You failed to carry out your duty. And now I'm writing to Sergeant Hightower's wife."

"Sir, I'm not responsible for Hightower."

The veins in Johnson's forehead bulged, another rare emotional display. "You have urban warfare training. You've been stationed here longer and you have more experience clearing buildings. Hightower didn't know shit."

Walker recalled his first of several deployments, nearly a full decade earlier, when the inexperienced soldier would have blindly followed any order given just as Hightower had done. But experience had bred caution and a renewed sense of self preservation. With each grievous injury witnessed, with each friend sent home in a bag, Walker had begun to realize how lucky he was to still be alive. He knew that if he stayed here long enough, the odds would catch up. He'd seen it too many times.

“Sir, with all due respect, we should have fallen back to proper defensive positions as soon as the battle started.”

Johnson's face flushed. “Do you realize how disastrous that would have been? If we'd fallen back we would have suffered at least half a dozen additional casualties? Jennings, Williams, Porter...they were all cut off up ahead of us.”

Sergeant Walker no longer shared his commander's devotion to duty. He hadn't survived over five years of combat just to get snuffed in another of Captain Johnson's fruitless displays of bravado.

“Sergeant Walker, I asked you here today because I wanted to inform you that I'm considering you for court-martial.” Johnson paused. “I thought you should hear it directly from me first.”

Walker's mouth fell agape. He'd given up nearly a decade of his life to the army, and he was about to be rewarded with what? Dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of pay, a permanently marred service record.

“Do you understand what I just said?” asked Captain Johnson. “Do you have anything you want to say on your behalf?”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“I think we crossed that bridge a while ago.”

“You’re completely fucking me over.” Walker waited for Captain Johnson to lose it. But his commander sat quietly, listening. “I’m not responsible for Hightower. You claim I have some sort of obligation, but my obligation ended two and a half years ago. I committed to the military for four years. Four! But it’s been eight and they still won’t release me. Stop loss, my ass! I’ve sacrificed for my country, and I served my four years with honor. But my time’s up. It’s been up for a while. I don’t want to play soldier anymore.”

“I know that life in the military isn’t always fair or just,” Johnson replied. “I know that sacrifices are made. But when times get tough you need to rely on the soldiers next to you. What about your commitment to them?”

“My time’s up.”

Johnson shook his head. “Some of my closest friends serve in the military. And I would want to know that someone was looking out for them the same as I’m looking out for my own troops. I cannot allow such an egregious lapse in order such as yours to occur within this unit.”

“Sir, you are one hard-assed son-of-a-bitch.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Commanders are supposed to be hard-asses during times of war. If we become soft, people die.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a hard-ass, sir. In times of war, people still die.” Johnson’s eyes narrowed and Sergeant Walker knew his words, shot like a deadly arrow, had pierced through his commanders’ armor and found their mark.

“I’m reassigning you to administrative duty,” replied Captain Johnson. “You’re not to travel outside the base with the unit until further notice. Dismissed.”

“Yes sir,” responded Walker as he rendered a salute before spinning on his heels and departing the tent, not even waiting to notice his commander return the salute.

Wes was often proud to be a soldier. But tonight was not one of those times. He looked around the small computer tent. The plain tent, consisting of just four small computer terminals, normally crowded with soldiers waiting in line to connect with loved ones back home, stood empty. Most soldiers were asleep in their bunks.

Wes liked coming to the tent this late at night. It did cut into his sleep, but he liked the solitude. He liked not having to worry about others eavesdropping in on his conversations. He entered the common password and dialed. It took several seconds before a young man’s face appeared on the screen. “Hey Michael. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Wesley,” responded Michael. “But I must say, you look simply *dreadful*. What happened?”

“Do you think I’ve become heartless?” asked Wes.

Michael fidgeted uncomfortably on the screen. “No, of course not! Why would you ask that?”

“I threatened to court-martial that soldier I told you about.”

“And?”

“And he looked at me like I was from a different planet. It’s like the possibility had never crossed his mind. Like such a decision was totally outside the bounds.”

“I’m sure you had your reasons.”

“You don’t understand. The guy’s been deployed four times, two against his will. The guy’s just trying to make it out of here safely so he can go back home.”

“You’re not the one that forced him to stay. That was an Army decision.”

“He should have been sent home with a hero’s welcome. Instead, I’m threatening to crush him. I’m just having a little trouble with it.”

“Wesley, I’m sorry I can’t help you with this, but it’s all going to work out. If you ask me...” Michael’s face vanished as the connection was lost. The lights flickered twice before the entire room fell into darkness.

“Dammit,” snapped Wes, pounding the table in frustration. The electricity on this part of the base was always failing, but it seemed to always occur whenever Wes was trying to connect. Of course, most other soldiers probably thought the same. Back home, electricity was an expectation. Here, a luxury. Wes vowed to never take a light switch for granted, or a hot shower, or air conditioning; all of those little things that most had come to expect.

The power to the computer tent would likely not be restored until morning so Wes left and made his way towards his bunk for some much needed rest. I’ll try again next week, he thought.

By the time he reached his tent, his only remaining thought was of collapsing onto his lumpy cot for a few hours peaceful rest. Instead, he opened the front flap to find his

tent in total disarray. The inside looked like a tornado had torn through it. The papers on his desk had been flung throughout the room, his personal effects strewn about. Even the lock of his personal storage locker had been broken, the door left wide open.

Wes lunged for the locker, instinctively knowing that his personal journal had been taken.

An exhausted Captain Johnson helped his troops load the supplies for their upcoming patrol. He hadn't slept the previous night, not after discovering the theft of his journal. His head ached. The lack of sleep slowed his movements, particularly once he had strapped on his steel body armor. His sluggishness was apparent.

"Yo Cap, you all right?" asked Sergeant Taylor, a grizzled veteran soldier who had recently been reassigned to Captain Johnson's unit.

"Me? Yeah....I'll be fine."

Sergeant Taylor simply nodded, continuing his preparations. Like Sergeant Taylor, every other troop within the unit moved with the efficiency and precision associated with experienced soldiers; they cleaned and loaded their weapons, fit their body armor, verified the accuracy of their Blue Force Tracking devices, and finalized checkout of all communications gear. Captain Johnson's troops had survived multiple missions together and they always exemplified the highest standards. But today, Captain Johnson was not up to those same standards. Standards which, ironically, he himself had instilled.



Johnson continued his own preparations, examining several transport vehicles while ensuring they contained adequate medical supplies. They were scheduled to depart the base within twenty minutes and fighting, though not expected, was always possible.

Johnson was proceeding through his final checklists when he noticed Sergeant Walker gearing up. Johnson approached the young Sergeant, pulling him into a side room before closing the door behind them.

"What are you doing? I thought I made it clear that you were staying behind until further notice."

"I can't do that, sir. I don't want the other guys thinking me a coward."

"This isn't a discussion, Sergeant," snapped Johnson, struggling to keep his voice from being heard outside. "If I order you to stay behind then you're damn sure gonna stay behind."

"Listen" whispered Walker matter-of-factly. "I'm not staying behind while the other men go out, simple as that. And I'm not going to simply stand by and let you court-martial me, either."

"Not your fucking choice!" snarled Johnson. "You're a subpar soldier who's not up to standards. You're not going out with us."

"I'm not the only one not up to standards."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I know about you...and Michael."

Johnson tensed involuntarily. "You?"

"I've suspected for a while. So have some of the others..."

“You the one that broke into my room?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m not a thief. I just got a little desperate.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking? My journal doesn’t say whatever it is you’re trying to suggest.”

“Maybe?” conceded Jeremy. “But it says enough. And we both know the truth. Are you willing to lie to protect your career?”

Captain Johnson stared at his Sergeant in disbelief. He thought about trying to play it off. The journal didn’t contain any *specifics*. But Johnson knew the truth.

“It’s settled then,” stated Walker matter-of-factly as he made his way to rejoin the unit. As he reached the door, he looked back towards his commander. “Looks like we’re both substandard soldiers now.” Without another word, Sergeant Walker opened the door and departed, leaving his commander behind.

The convoy rolled through the unpaved streets of Baghdad, carefully avoiding the massive potholes that littered the roadways. Walker sat in the lead vehicle alongside Captain Johnson, just behind Corporal White and Sergeant Burns, who drove the five-ton steel reinforced vehicle. Four other coalition vehicles followed behind.

A cold silence enshrouded Walker’s group, giving way to the high roar of the engine and the occasional sound of squeaking brakes as the vehicle maneuvered within the snarled traffic of Baghdad. Walker stared out the window, watching the local Iraqis go about their business. He had no idea what that business was. They seemed to wander the desert streets aimlessly, most of them jobless, poor, and with few prospects for the

future. Still, they were a pragmatic people who always found ways to survive. Sergeant Walker appreciated that.

He glanced at his Captain, the once infallible commander. Outwardly, the Captain appeared normal, like the same iron fixture he had always been. But Walker imagined the turmoil raging within. And so went the next hour, Sergeant Burns driving the three other soldiers through the streets in silence, Sergeant Walker stealing glances at Captain Johnson for cracks in the commanders' demeanor, visible fissures that failed to materialize. Looking at Johnson, it was as if nothing had happened.

Then something happened.

The world jolted as flames exploded from the vehicle's underbelly, followed by a concussion wave that slammed Walker's head against the steel-reinforced doorframe with such force that his helmet cracked. His inner body lurched. He felt pain, as if every inch of his body – inside and out – had been kicked from all directions simultaneously. He felt an immediate urge to vomit, but his body failed even that. Instead he choked, gasping for air that his burning lungs struggled to take in. Walker's vision narrowed, his sight blurred, and his ears hummed with a gnawing ringing sound that blocked out everything else.

The pain amplified to its crescendo in only a couple of seconds, but it was agony enough to fill a lifetime. Then the pain gave way to a cold numbness, a welcome respite that enabled a vague sense of awareness. *Have to move*, thought Walker. His body, though still intact, was sluggish, its movements small and limited. His skin burned, nerve endings tingling painfully. *What a strange feeling!* He was unable to grasp his

weapon, though it lay not even a foot from his hand. Instead, Sergeant Walker slumped back against the seat, vaguely aware of the fighting that erupted all around him.

Bullets flew overhead, deadly projectiles slamming into nearby objects and comrades. He could feel the residual rumble from the explosions outside, like an abstract earthquake that shook sporadically from every direction. He felt the slow trickle of blood down his leg, the blood seeping from the grievous cracks of his scorched skin. His nose picked up the odorous stink of burning flesh. Was it someone else's? All of his senses seemed to work intermittently, but in slow motion, with the exception of his hearing, which barely worked at all. He heard nothing save the ringing in his ears.

He saw a body in the front seat, its limbs bent at awkward angles. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his fellow soldiers shooting. Likely men come up from the rear vehicles. His training fought to assume control, and he subconsciously reached for his rifle. *Have to get in the fight.* But his equilibrium was off, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. His arm fell limply atop the rifle, knocking the weapon to the floor as his grip on reality distorted further. Time blurred as bullets continued to fly overhead.

He was vaguely aware of the door opening, arms reaching through the smoke to grab him. Like a limp sack of potatoes, he was tossed over a broad shoulder and shuttled to the side of the road. Ears still ringing, he saw the vehicle he had been pulled from explode in a mushroom of fire.

He was unceremoniously dropped to the ground behind some sort of wall, his savior standing over Walker's prone body as the man returned fire from behind their improvised cover. Walker was shocked to realize that it was Captain Johnson who had

pulled him to safety. Walker couldn't decipher how long the fighting lasted, but it seemed to rage forever. Captain Johnson seemed bigger standing over him, almost godlike, as if nothing could hurt him.

But suddenly a lone bullet caught Captain Johnson in the neck, his red lifeblood spurting out of the heinous wound. Johnson grasped the wound, a look of horror passing over his eyes just before crumbling to the ground, landing atop the still prone Sergeant Walker, who made a feeble attempt to catch his Captain. The young Sergeant felt the Captain's warm blood spill across his own hands. It had all happened so suddenly.

Then Sergeant Jeremy Walker's world went black.

Walker woke two days later, tentatively opening his eyes. His eyes adjusted slowly, the bright white sterile coloring suggesting that he was in some sort of hospital. It was quiet, peaceful even, a far cry from his last memories of combat. A lone nurse noticed him, offering a smile as she checked his vitals.

“Good morning” she said.

“Where...where am I?”

“You were transferred to the field hospital two days ago. You suffered some pretty serious injuries – head trauma, mostly – but it looks like you’re going to be okay. The doctor will be in shortly.”

“The doctor?” His head ached, and he noticed his legs were bandaged, a couple of the virginal white clothes soiled with small crimson stains that had seeped through from the inside. “My legs? Are they going to be okay?”

The nurse nodded. “You required two surgeries, but it looks like they’re going to be fine...a couple of fractures and some scarring. You’re one of the lucky ones.” She handed him a small capsule filled with a couple pills.

He took them and swallowed. Then, satisfied that he was still in one piece, fell back asleep.

He awoke several hours later to the smiling face of Corporal White, a dopey looking soldier from the Midwest who had been with the unit just a couple months. White was bruised and battered, a bandage covering some kind of wound on his right cheek. He sat in a wheelchair, a cast wrapped around each leg. He looked as if he had emerged straight from hell, which made his smile appear all the more ridiculous.

“Yo Sarge, it’s great to see you! I couldn’t believe it when I heard you were here. I didn’t realize anyone else from our vehicle made it.”

Walker was at a loss. “I thought you were dead.”

“Me? No sir. Captain Johnson, he...” White’s voice caught a little. “Captain Johnson pulled us both out. First me, then you.”

“Captain Johnson?” The blurry pictures in Walker’s head coalesced into a mosaic of explosions, fighting, and blood. He closed his eyes. “What happened to him?”

Corporal White looked down, his smile evaporating. “He, um...didn’t make it. Neither did Burns.”

“Who else made it out?”

“Me and you were the only injured. But Ruiz, Montgomery, Sanders, and Marquette made it out untouched.”

“Nobody else?” Less than half. It was supposed to have been a routine patrol.

The two soldiers fell into an awkward silence. Moments later the nurse entered, pushing a cart through the door. “Matthew White, what did I tell you about disturbing the Sergeant?” The nurse glanced towards Sergeant Walker. “He’s been asking about you every hour on the hour since he heard you were here.”

“He just came in to say hi. It’s all right, really.”

“Well, you’ll have to cut this visit short, Corporal. The Sergeant needs his rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He reached out, patting Jeremy lightly on the arm. “You take care, Sarge. We’ll talk more once you’re feeling better.” White wheeled himself from the room.

After checking Jeremy’s vital signs, the nurse pulled over the cart, which was covered with several closed green army canvas bags. “You’ll be staying with us for at least a couple of weeks while your legs stabilize before we send you stateside,” she began nonchalantly. “Your unit sent over a few of your personal effects. They just arrived this morning.” She sat a couple of canvas army bags filled with his belongings on a nearby table before leaving.

Walker sat alone, contemplating the chain of events that had brought him here. He’d broke up with Diane just after high school. He had foregone college and enlisted. He’d pushed for infantry out of basic. Countless choices throughout his life, an endless web of interconnected paths that all led to him lying in this bed, bandages wrapped tightly around his leg. He couldn’t focus on any one incident. They all just sort of blurred and led here.

He reached for the nearest bag, rummaging through it until he found the specific item, a small green notebook in which he'd never written a word. He held it gingerly.

He had actually opened the diary just once, briefly. Just long enough to identify an incriminating reference in case he needed to confront his captain. The reference in question had been about a guy named Michael. Although short and vague, the reference had been a sufficient bluff. Walker turned back to that entry now, but it was the words on the page opposite on which he now focused.

*"...Any soldier who tells you they were never afraid is a liar. We've all felt it. I've hesitated, hoping someone else would step up. And my hesitations led to others being wounded...one even killed.*

*It's a hard thing knowing you're responsible for the death of another. The mental health counselors tell me it's all just part of combat. Irrational transference, they call it. But I know better. I wouldn't feel this guilty if it wasn't justified. Right?*

*I've come to accept it. You can't change the past. So I move forward. But next time, I promise I won't hesitate..."*

Walker closed the journal and set it down upon his lap. He sat silently, but no answers came. And in the end he was left with a single overarching image. An image of Michael sitting alone back in the States, waiting for a condolence letter that would never come.



## THE WOMAN

She showed up again shortly after sunrise, limping up to the checkpoint just as she had done every day over the previous five weeks. I watched her as she waited quietly, the Corporal scrutinizing her ID card as others inspected her belongings, combing through her meager items like one of those TSA agent back in the states; not like one of those TSA retards that can't get a job anywhere else, but one of the guys who really cares about what he's doing, who truly believes he is the only mother-fucker standing between us and Bin Laden. But this was Afghanistan, so their diligence actually made sense. It only took one of these hajji fucks to penetrate the perimeter then...BANG! We'd be stuck spending the next several hours on lockdown while security scoured the areas for bodies and missing limbs.

The guards rifled through her shit like she was some kind of murderous bitch. She had to be pissed. Who wouldn't? But her face didn't betray a hint of anger. Actually, it didn't portray anything at all. Just another in a sea of dead faces that seemed to inhabit this god-forsaken land. She couldn't be more than forty, maybe forty-five at most, but it appeared that life had already taken its full toll.

Why would any local want to work at this base, anyways? Why subject themselves to this level of scrutiny? It had to grate on a person, coming to a foreign-occupying army and begging for a job. But the woman showed up dutifully every day at 0700. Not a minute late, not a minute early. Always at the exact same time, and always with the same dented grey thermos.

Security was wary of that thermos, making her open it behind the detonation barrier before bringing it forward. But every day was the same, the thermos filled with nothing more than a local brewed stew, its aroma flowing forth from the confines of its metallic casings. And every day the guards eventually let her through.

She nodded to me as she entered the base, handing me the thermos without so much as a smile. “Thank you very much,” I offered in my most gracious tone. I had long since given up trying to deny the daily offering. The first time she had presented the thermos, several weeks ago, I had spent nearly an hour arguing with her about it. *Thank you, but it’s not necessary. You’re being too kind. You should eat this for yourself. I’m not allowed to accept food from you.* I even told her that I enjoyed the food at the chow hall. The fucking chow hall! That’s how desperate I was to get rid of her and that blasted thermos.

But it didn’t work. She met every one of my arguments with unrecognizable rebuttals of her own, none of which I understood at all because I didn’t speak a lick of Pashtun and my unit’s translator had recently been reassigned. It made quite the scene, the lead Sergeant in charge of security arguing with a local woman about a thermos full of soup for the better part of an hour. In the end I took the soup and sent her on her way towards the laundry area so she could begin her shift.

I dumped the soup into the ground shortly after she had disappeared into the building. I wasn’t about to eat anything given by one of the hajji’s. The Rules of Engagement were clear on that.

She'd picked up the empty thermos at the end of her first day, and I had thought the whole matter a thing of the past. But the next day she arrived at 0700 with that same thermos. I only spent twenty five minutes arguing with her that day. Ten minutes the day after that. After a week had gone by, I stopped arguing altogether, simply accepting the thermos and pouring its contents on the ground after she had passed so I didn't cause offense.

Today's ritual was no different. She handed me the thermos, which I accepted with a muttered "Thank you." She simply nodded, trudging her way towards the laundry facility where she worked. I decided that I wouldn't dump the thermos today. Offense, or no offense, at the end of the day I was going to hand her back the full thermos. Maybe then she would stop all of this nonsense.

This entire situation was kind of fucking stupid, anyways. We had all kinds of security procedures in place, yet we were encouraged – no, mandated – to hire locals to perform some of the basic shit work. It was a security cluster-fuck waiting to happen. But we'd been told that the hiring helped improve our standing with the locals. Got to win the hearts and minds and all that other shit. But in reality, we all knew it was about saving money. Pay a contractor from one of the Big-Three firms five hundred grand a year to do laundry or pay a local eight dollars a day. Winning the hearts and minds...please.

"Yo Sarge, why do you think she does that every time she comes through the gate?" asked Corporal Williams, a young wide-eyed troop recently arrived from the Chicago area. Rumor had it he was a twenty year old virgin. I hadn't realized Chicago still had any of those.

“I don’t know. She’s probably trying to bribe us?”

“Bribe us? For what?”

“More wages. Better hours. I don’t fuckin’ know. But that’s how it works over here. These locals are always trying to bribe someone. You should understand, you being from Chicago and all.”

“Don’t be such a dick, Emerson,” chimed in Sergeant Chuck Matthews. I hadn’t even noticed him standing there. Matthews definitely wasn’t a virgin. He was from Idaho, and all he ever talked about was hunting and fucking, which had opened him up for all kinds of jokes over the past few months. “Maybe we should find out what she wants. I mean, if you just allow her to keep making you soup every day without offering anything in return, she’s eventually going to get pissed.”

“Great idea, genius. But you forgot we don’t have an interpreter.”

“Sure we do. The new guy. He just came over from Area A this morning. We don’t have him permanently, but we get him part time every Monday and Wednesday.”

“You fuckin’ with me?”

“Of course not. No one fucks with the soup man,” snickered Matthews, a clear reference to the nickname I’d recently inherited. I hated the name, and Matthews knew it.

“Today’s Wednesday, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, so.”

“So go get him,” I snapped. “We’ve got all these locals coming through the front gates and we can’t even talk with them.”

I sent Williams and Matthews to fetch the interpreter. Once they left I went back to monitoring the gate. Over the next fifteen minutes, a handful of locals were processed through. Not a lot, but enough to make me nervous. I recognized most of them from a distance, particularly once they started waving their green contractor badges in front of them as if saying Don't Shoot! The locals had been trained well on Rule #1; No badge, No enter.

It had been nearly seven months since the last suicide bombing had occurred at the front gate, and I could still see the blast marks that marred the concrete entrance barriers; it reminded me of one of those old fashioned cattle chutes, only this one was lined with three feet of solid concrete on each side. The stupid fucking bomber had snuffed himself for next to nothing, the only major damage being that we had had to replace a couple of sections of the blast wall. Personally, I'd trade a few slabs of thick concrete for a dead hajji any day of the week.

I was watching the last of the locals – I think his name was Najir – being processed for final entry when Matthews returned with the terp. “Hello, sir” offered the interpreter as he held out his hand. “My name is Muhammed.”

“Ny name's Sergeant Emerson. First name Steve,” I replied. “I'm the NCOIC here for security. I understand you're newly arrived here and we've only got you on Monday's and Wednesday's.”

“Yes sir.”

“What else they got you assigned to that trumps external security of the base?”

Muhammed fidgeted, and I sensed that he knew I was angry. Matthews stepped in and answered on behalf of the interpreter. “We’ve only got two terps on base, and the Colonel’s tapped them both for COIN missions. We’re lucky we got this guy for even two days a week.”

It made sense, but I was still pissed. That old saying ‘You don’t fight the war with the army you want, you fight it with the army you’ve got’ flashed into my head. Fucking bureaucrats were going to get us all killed.

The terp stayed with us the rest of the day. He was okay with his duties. Truth is, most of the locals knew what to do. Many had been working the base for several months now and they knew the routine. We also paid them about fifteen times their local wages so they knew not to fuck around.

Still, it helped having the terp. Not only did he greet the local help as they arrived, but he helped explain the random additional security procedures that were exercised. Making the locals wait outside the gate to see if they got nervous, having them step inside the security cell with the dogs; any of that shit could cause a scene when we couldn’t let them know why we were doing it. But Muhammed helped work that shit out, explained that it was for everyone’s safety, including theirs.

We went through so much grief for this hearts and minds bullshit. And none of it seemed to make a damn bit of difference anyhow.

The day passed slowly and without incident. I despised boring days like this where nothing happened, watching the sun creep overhead as if the day would never end, my deployment seeming to extend indefinitely. But the exciting days were even worse,

carrying back the dead or wounded, wondering who would be next. I guess either way I was fucked.

But eventually the day approached its close, the bright orange hues of the sun darkening as it slumped behind the jagged rocky mountain range to the east. I would have stopped to admire the sunset if I hadn't known I was going to have to repeat this shit-show again come morning.

As if cued by the sun's descent, the woman emerged from the laundry facility, ambling her way towards the gate, where her thermos, still filled with today's contents, rested on a table alongside several other items that had been checked in by those entering the gate. As she made her way toward the table to retrieve the thermos, I signaled for Muhammed.

The woman did not seem surprised by our approach, and she looked up before grabbing the thermos. "Tell her that although we appreciate the gift, she doesn't need to bring the soup."

Muhammed began muttering in Pashtun, his words incomprehensible to me. The woman responded, which sparked a lengthy back and forth, none of which I understood. Sergeant Matthews saw the commotion and made his way over. Several other soldiers and local contractors listened to the escalating exchange as they passed by.

"What is she saying?" I finally asked.

"She says she has to," Muhammed answered flatly.

I made a mental note to find a new interpreter at the soonest possible opportunity.

“Look, tell her it’s not necessary. Ask her why she thinks she needs to bring us gifts?”

Again, the indecipherable back and forth, which became even more lengthy and animated this time. A single tear began to form in the woman’s right eye, but through determination she kept it from falling. Nobody else seemed to notice.

Finally, I cut her off. “What is she saying?”

Muhammed hesitated, as if searching for the right words. “She says that she had two sons. Wonderful sons who knew how to read and write. They were both born shortly before the Taliban, yet still they learned to read and write. She had made sure of it. She took great pride in them.”

“What does this have to do with soup?” asked Matthews with half interest.

More indecipherable exchange. Additional tears formed in her eyes.

“She says the planes came this past spring. Her sons’ room was hit. Both were killed, along with her husband. She works at the base because there is nothing else for her.”

I had to look away. Fucking flyboys! That’s what happens when you fight from afar. I could still feel her eyes on me as she continued talking, undeterred, Muhammed relaying her words. “She says that being a mother is the most important thing for a woman. The only thing. Once experienced, nothing else compares. She used to make soup for her sons, but they were taken from her. So she makes soup for you. Because there is no one else left to make it for. ”



I looked up and saw tears streaming down her face. I searching for something to say, some kind of compassionate response. But there was nothing to say. Wiping her eyes, she left abruptly, our conversation finished. I watched her leave, watched her disappear through the concrete barriers as I stood motionless. I watched as she crested the hill that led to her village, her tiny form disappearing over the horizon. Turning back, I realized that she'd forgotten the thermos.

After several minutes Matthews finally broke the silence. "So I guess it wasn't bribery."

I turned to regard my Sergeant and noticed there were tears in his eyes as well.

I knew something was wrong the very next morning when my watch read 0702 and she wasn't there. By 0730, my body was filled with nervous energy. I'd pressed her too hard. I'd opened wounds that couldn't be resealed. She couldn't come back to us. Not after I had forced her secret out into the open. Not after I'd exposed her.

By 1000 I knew it was over. She was never going to step foot on this base again. It was my fault.

It was nearly noon when I got word from Sergeant Matthews. "Security in Area C found a body just outside the perimeter."

"And?"

"And it's one of the local support staff. They've requested you." I knew before he said anything.

It wasn't uncommon for the insurgents to deposit a corpse outside the perimeter – usually along a main road – as a deterrent to others. Such was the reality for many. Murder or hunger. It was quite the fucking conundrum.

By the time I arrived EOD was finishing their initial scrub of the area. They gave the all-clear on the immediate vicinity – and the body itself - but warned to be on the lookout for anything that might give any indication of explosive material nearby. That little caveat didn't inspire a lot of confidence in their all-clear assessment, but I didn't want to lose face in front of any of them. Bunch of crazy fucks. They'd never let a Sergeant live it down if he pussied out in front of them.

So the Lieutenant from Area B and I approached. Immediately I recognized the woman, not trivial given the state of her corpse. Her body was leaned back against a large boulder next to the road. She was naked. Her legs had been sawed off at the knees and at the hip joints, each of the four pieces carefully laid on the ground in front of her so that from a distance it looked as if she was sitting on the ground with her legs extended, only the gaps in the joints and the bloody tips giving evidence to the desecration done.

Her arms had been pulled from her shoulder sockets, her elbows broken at the joints. Her body resembled a puppet on a string. But no string. Her eyes were opened and her mouth formed a large O, as if in mid-scream. She undoubtedly died in agony, and her killers made sure everyone knew. Across her naked chest, a wooden sign had been nailed directly into her breasts. I couldn't read it, but I knew what it said. Traitor, American whore, or some other derogatory insult. It didn't really matter.

“You recognize this person?” asked the LT. “I heard she worked in Area A.”

I vomited on the ground, small chunks of half-digested sausage, waffles and eggs splattering the LT's shoes. I wiped my sleeve across my mouth, clearing off the moisture that hung from my mouth, as I waited for the LT to lay into me, to call me a pussy. But he never did.

"Who was she?" was all he asked.

"I don't know her name," I answered before falling silent. I didn't know what else to say. "She made soup."

"Soup?"

"Yeah, soup" I whispered.

A look of pity came across the LT's face, and I looked away in shame. He continued to watch me for several seconds, a growing look of concern on his face. I felt myself wilting under his gaze. "All right," he finally said. "I'll take it from here."

I simply nodded.

"But you're to report to the clinic this afternoon. I want you to talk with the counselor. That's an order, understood?"

I nodded.

The LT grabbed me by the shoulder, looked directly into my eyes. "You're gonna be all right, Sergeant?"

"Yes sir."

Later that night I found myself alone in the tiny cramped office near the main gate to Area A. I couldn't bring myself to return to the barracks; the other soldiers would definitely ask me about my meeting with the wizard. I had held back, hadn't told her shit.

My meeting had been worthless; less than worthless actually, since I was bound to lose face with some of the guys for having had to meet with her in the first place. A lot of the others had seen things just as bad and hadn't broken down to the point they were sent in to see the mental counselor. I'd seen worse myself. Far worse.

But this had been different. Or had it just been more of the same, the final straw, so to speak?

I looked around the small office. It was quiet this time of night. It had actually been a relatively quiet day, even with the dismembered body and the bomb scare. I scoured the office for some overdue report, or outstanding personnel paperwork, anything that would give me an excuse to stay in the office a little bit longer. But all documents were up to date, all paperwork filed. I was not needed in the office.

I conducted one last check, looking for anything, when I spotted the thermos. It sat on the far counter near the mini-fridge, the same place it had sat every day since the woman had begun bringing it in. I walked over to it, eyeing the small container carefully. Curious, I opened the thermos and sniffed its contents, letting metal lid fall to the floor. I bent my nose down towards the open container, inhaling deeply. Now a full day old, the cold soup had minimal smell.

I tried to look into the thermos, to determine what type of soup she had made. Lamb? Vegetable? Barley? Chicken? But the contents of the thermos were shrouded in darkness, its contents a complete mystery. Unable to smell, unable to see, I began to grow curious. It bothered me that I didn't know more about the soup. The woman had brought me soup every day for the last several weeks, and this was her last. Yet I knew nothing.

My curiosity gradually gave way to a growing sense of angst, the angst eventually morphing into compulsion. I had to know about the soup. Nothing else was relevant. Nothing else mattered. Only the soup. The soup was paramount.

I placed the thermos to my lips, hesitating slightly as I reconsidered my actions, actions that could get me court-martialed. It was against base directive to drink or consume anything brought in from unofficial sources.

‘Even if it isn’t poisoned you’ll likely get a severe case of the shits’ the Chief had told us during indoc. ‘And we don’t want you damaging official government property.’

But I had to know! I tipped my head back until I was able to taste the thermos’ sweet contents, letting the liquid slowly trickle down my throat. But the soup tasted bitter, rancid even. Not surprising given it was cold and now over a day old. I was going to get sick from it, and I knew I needed to stop. But my hands held the thermos in place, tilted it up even, its contents spilling down into my throat. I choked down the soup as fast as I could swallow, but it came in a rush, spilling out over my mouth, dribbling down onto my uniform.

I had a vision of the Chief counting my infractions. Consuming contraband! Soiled uniform! Prior to today, I couldn’t recall my last major infraction.

The soup filled the back of my throat until I couldn’t breathe. Still, I kept swallowing. I couldn’t get enough of the foul tasting liquid. My head began to lighten from lack of breath, and I thought I would pass out until the flow of the soup finally lessened, then slowed to a small trickle, then stopped altogether. Unsatisfied, I lowered the thermos from my lips, glanced down at the brown stain that covered my uniform.

I let the thermos slip from my grasp. It clanged on the office floor loudly. I watched as it rolled in a small circular pattern, eventually coming to rest against the side of my foot. Even after tasting the soup I was unsure of the flavor. The taste had been bland in my mouth, the mixture devoid of texture. I had expected so much more. I had wanted to know about this soup. I had *needed* to know about the soup.

But I never would. It would always remain a mystery.

I reached down for the thermos, picking it up while I searched for the lid, which I retrieved from the floor over by the desk. I began to screw the lid back onto the thermos, but as I tightened it caught and slipped loose. I tried again, but again the lid caught. Growing increasingly frustrated, I tried several more times. And soon my frustration turned to anger. Over and over I tried, but the lid kept slipping. And always in the same spot, after one and a half turns. Finally, I gave up, setting the lid aside as I examined the thermos. The top of the thermos had cracked, and the corkscrew metallic threading that wound around the rim of the thermos was chipped in several areas.

Examining the thermos more closely, I realized it was futile. The thermos was cracked beyond repair. Broken forever, beyond use. Never again would it contain hot homemade soup. Never again would it provide nourishment for young sons. Or foreign soldiers. Nor anybody else, for that matter. I made my way to the door, instinctively wiping the tears from my eyes that I hadn't even realized had formed. As I walked out of the office I tossed the thermos into the garbage where it landed with a loud clanging sound.

Broken. Like every other thing in this god-forsaken land.

## WHITE TRASH

They came in every night, but Fridays were always the worst. It was always the same, a competition of asininity where everyone was sure to lose. And I'd been the primary judge for the past nine years; the past twenty-five if you included my time before taking the waitressing job at Sally Anne's.

I don't even know why I took the job in the first place, let alone why I stayed all those years. I had plenty of options. No college degree or nothing like that. No boyfriend prospects besides the casual lay by one of the old high-school ball players who still worked in town. But I had my high-school diploma, and that counted for something. Counted for a whole lot in my family. Seven generations in this town and the Walters clan still hadn't managed to right the ship. Nothing but a bunch of drunks, skunks and deadbeats. I was one of the brighter ones, one of the three cousins – out of twenty-two - who had graduated from high school, and one of the only ones with a steady paycheck.

I'd taken it as a temporary thing, of course. Make some money and move out of this shithole of a town. I'd always loved the idea of moving to Atlanta. But that was before dad came down with emphysema, before mom caught the cancer. That's what wealthy people don't understand. With my brother in prison and my older sister caught on the candy, the burden of ma and pop fell squarely upon my undeveloped shoulders. And no matter how many tables I turned at Sally's nor how many extra overtime shifts I covered there simply was never enough. The growing hole in my checking account was only eclipsed by the hole in my father's lungs.

So every week for the past nine years I'd suffered through Sally's. I'd looked for better jobs along the way, but good luck finding a small town job that can beat cash tips. So every week I'd overdo my makeup, slip on my black skirt and pull on my white Sally's T-Shirt that wore a size too small. Then I'd fake like I was excited to be serving all the Army boys that looked to Sally's as their personal reprieve.

Army guys are real bastards. All cooped up on base with not even close to enough women, heads filled with all kinds of heroic propaganda from watching Fox News, and an inherent longing for adventure. But to make matters even worse, they rotate from base to base with the expectation that all the locals are there just to serve their every whim. As if the town was built around the damn base. As if my ancestors hadn't been in the swamps near Hinesville for seven generations, long before this damn base had ever been built. If life had any sense of fairness these jerkoffs would have been serving me.

But life wasn't fair. So I spent the years having my ass patted by drunk twenty something's who thought that's what waitresses were for. I became a world expert in rebuffing pick-up lines and piss-poor jokes, perfecting the hidden talent of telling someone – without words – that they were a complete dipshit. And I did it without completely sabotaging my tips; it's all about the cold smile, the subtle snort, the casual eye roll. In the process of dealing with all these drunks I also became one of Southern Georgia's leading contenders for recipient of most broken promises. I heard them all over the years. *I promise to treat you right if you just go out with me. I'm gonna marry you someday. When I leave here, I'm going to take you with me.* I even fell for a couple of



those during my first year...until their wives found out. Turned out the wifey's didn't want another woman coming along for the journey.

So my skin became thicker, my smile more seldom, my laugh less pronounced. My tips suffered, of course. But what did it matter. Ma and Pop were going to die regardless of whether I made fifty or seventy-five bucks a night. Another six to nine months and they'd both be gone; the doctor had just informed me a couple weeks ago.

Then I'd be free to quit Sally's and move away.

Alone.

"Excuse me, Miss," said a young man with a close-cropped haircut as he reached out and touched me gently on the arm.

"What?" I snapped, sending the man back a half step.

"Um, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I was hoping to order a beer."

"Sorry, what can I get you?"

"Doesn't matter. Surprise me with something good." He paused momentarily.

"Everything okay? You kind of spaced off there for a bit."

"Just a lot on my mind."

I waited for the inevitable. *You got me on your mind? Thinking about me naked?* But he simply said, "No worries. A lot of us got a lot on our mind."

I retrieved his beer from the bar, returning a couple of minutes later. "So what'd you pick out?" he asked.

"It's called Whoop-Ass. It's a local favorite."

He took a small drink and looked like he was going to throw up or something.

“That’s a pretty strong beer!”

“Yeah, it tastes like shit. But most of the guys from the base like it because it’s the strongest we got.”

“It tastes like somebody dumped gasoline into a can of ass!” He pushed the beer to the side. “Can I order a Miller Lite instead?”

“You can, but are you sure you want to get caught drinking a lite beer. If any of the other guys from the base notice they’ll think you’re some kind of pussy.”

“I didn’t think women were supposed to use that word.”

“I didn’t think Army guys were supposed to drink lite beer.”

“I’m not really an Army guy.”

“Really?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m in the army. I just don’t consider myself an Army guy.”

“Then why did you join?”

“Because I’m stupid and I made a mistake.”

“Seriously, why did you join?”

“College. Wanted to go, couldn’t afford it. Sometimes life just isn’t fair.”

“Sure isn’t.”

All night I kept waiting for him to make his move. They always did. But at the end of the night he left with little more than a ‘Good-bye, nice to meet you’. For two weeks I kept expecting to see him in Sally’s again. For two weeks I was disappointed.

Then one day, out of the blue, he showed up. “Hi Julia.”

“I wasn’t sure I was ever gonna see you again,” I told him.

“Yeah. Things got pretty crazy on the base. We got orders for a short-notice deployment.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but they got cancelled at the last minute.”

“You must be relieved.”

“Definitely. Some of the other guys on base are pissed. They actually want to go over there.”

“Most Army guys do.”

“They’re freakin’ nuts, then.”

“They’d probably say the same about you.”

“I don’t care what they say. I’m just in this for my GI Bill.”

“Very noble of you.”

“Noble enough.”

“So can I get you a beer?”

“Not a Whoop-Ass! That stuff was nasty.”

“I remember. You prefer low-carb, girly beer.”

“Ouch!”

“Don’t be so touchy. I’m just watching out for your figure. That’s all.”

“Since when did you start watching out for my figure?”

“When you didn’t treat me like some white-trash waitress, that’s when.” The words left my mouth before I could pull them back. I flushed slightly and lowered my eyes instinctively.

“Hey,” he said as he reached up under my chin, raising my eyes until they were level with his. “I know I’ve only been here a couple of times, but the only person that seems more out of place in this dump than me...is you.”

I hadn’t had sex in nearly seven months, and I woke up the next morning with a slight case of bruising. Some guys you merely wait to finish. Others you actually join. A select few you go as long as you can, press them till they’re too tired to leave once it’s over, or unwilling to even if they can muster the energy. Robert was one of those kind of guys.

He didn’t treat me like just a waitress from Sally’s. He began buying me roses once a month, randomly alternating between red, yellow and white, insistent that a girl of my beauty deserved to be surrounded by beauty. I felt guilty because I knew he couldn’t afford them on a soldier’s salary, but I loved them nonetheless.

For my birthday he bought me a boxed set of Peter Rabbit stories because he knew that they were my favorite stories as a child, stories that ma had read to me when she wasn’t too skunked. He even learned all about Hilltop, promising that one day he would take me to England where he would show me Peter’s actual home. I spent months imagining what Hilltop would look like, its manicured gardens and foothills; plenty of rabbits, ducks, and squirrels racing through nature just like in the stories of old. I imagined it the most beautiful place in the whole world.

My mother had passed by the time Robert and I were married. My father shortly thereafter, about a month after we returned from our honeymoon. We didn't have any money, so we spent our honeymoon in Atlanta. Robert called it a recon mission for when he got out of the Army and we could move there. But we didn't do much reconnaissance. We pretty much did just three things; ate at fancy restaurants, drank by the pool, and well...you know. Truth is it doesn't really matter where you spend your honeymoon. As long as you're in love you can be in North Dakota and you can have a great time.

I had just entered my third trimester on the morning he left for deployment and we both knew that he would miss the birth. He'd told me to quit my job at Sally's, but I didn't know what else to do with myself so I kept the job. With no parents, a brother still in prison, and a drug-addled sister I hadn't seen in several years, I didn't have a lot of options when it came to staying busy. Plus I knew we could use the money.

He skyped me nearly every day to check on me, before and after the pregnancy. And I watched through the screen as the man I loved aged before my very eyes. His face grew haggard, his eyes narrowed, and lines appeared across his face about twenty years too early. It was like watching him succumb to a predatory virus with no cure. He always tried to hide it, of course. A smile here, a joke there, always telling me how great the guys were and how safe he felt. He didn't want to worry me, he wanted to shoulder the burden himself.

"That's the kind of man he was," I tell her.

We're standing on the hot concrete, the sun setting in the west as shadows from the buildings behind creep up on me like some unseen stalker coming to claim his latest victim. We're not the first people to stand in this spot. Nor will we be the last.

I hear a fussing sound coming from the small bundle in my arms, and I look down at Christine, her tiny sparkling blue eyes staring up at me intently. Her chubby round face mirrors Robert's features; nose, eyes, smile, all the same. Everybody always told me so. I can't help but stare into Christine's beautiful eyes. I don't even notice the others standing around us. It's just me and Christine, waiting for Robert to come off the large military transport plane that had pulled to a stop on the tarmac just moments earlier.

Finally, the back of the plane lowers and I see movement. Slow and steady, the uniformed soldiers move with the precision of a routine they've done many times. Too many times. Tears stream down my face as the box containing Bobby is unloaded off the back of the plane, the large American flag resting atop the cherry-colored casket.

"Daddy's home," I whisper to Christine. She understands nothing. She probably never will.

## THE LONG ROAD

Sergeant Brad Williams sat in the chair of his hospital room, looking down at the hardened plastic casing that encircled his mangled lower right leg. The top of the device stopped just below the knee and from this angle resembled an abnormally long ski boot; complete with plastic side buckles that locked everything into place once the mangled remains of his leg was inserted.

He noticed the darkening skin, the inflamed tissue, and the black bulbous veins that peeked out above the boot. If he stared long enough, he could almost trick himself into imagining the trauma receding. But he knew the truth. With each passing day the blackness, the dead and decomposing tissue, spread up the leg a little bit further.

He reached for the crutches that lay against the wall next to his chair, pulling himself to his feet. He accidentally smacked his booted leg hard against the base of the chair, waiting expectantly a sharp pain to radiate through his leg. Instead, he felt nothing.

Disappointed, Brad limped out of his room towards his next appointment.

“How are you doing this afternoon?” Doctor Everett was a slender middle-aged woman with wrinkles surrounding her eyes and too much grey in her hair for a woman of her age. Brad had just met her, another doctor in a long line of many. For the past two weeks he had met with Doctor Andrews, a young mild-mannered man who had performed two surgeries since Brad’s arrival in Germany. Now that his case had been elevated, it felt like he was starting all over.

“I’ve been better,” Williams answered. He sat directly in front of Doctor Everett’s desk. It looked nice from a distance, but up close was obviously cheap. An artificial plant

stood in the corner, a thick layer of dust covering its plastic leaves. *These people expect me to take them seriously and they don't even dust their fucking plants. One day I'm a recon marine on the front. The next, I'm a gimp being passed between doctors like an unwanted trading card, choking on dusty air because these people don't even bother to wipe down their fucking fake plants.*

“I imagine you have. It's never easy to go through something like this.” Doctor Everett paused, reading through a set of papers on her desk. “I see from your file that you've been here at Landstuhl just over two weeks?”

“Sounds about right.”

“And two surgeries already since your arrival?”

“Yep.”

“And neither of them took?”

“Nope.”

“Your file says you have had some lapses in memory. Do you remember anything from the explosion?”

“I already told the other doctors everything that I remember. Honestly, I don't remember much. We were on patrol in Kabul. We got stuck in some traffic. Next thing I know, I'm waking up in a field hospital.”

“And do you recall your time at the field hospital?”

“Not much. They kept me drugged up most of the time. Seems they did what they could for my legs; patched up my left fairly well, but my right took the brunt of the



blast...obviously.” Without realizing he reached down towards the boot, resting his hand towards the top of the plastic device.

Doctor Everett kept skimming through the file. “How are the headaches?”

“Stopped shortly after I was transferred.”

“That’s good.” Doctor Everett made a quick note in the file, before flipping to the next page. “There’s a note in here from a Doctor Gervais in Iraq, it references paranoia.”

Sergeant Williams fidgeted in his chair. “Just after the attack. I had a couple of rough days.”

“Are you still seeing things?”

“Only in my dreaMs”

“I see,” said Doctor Everett as she scribbled a final note in Williams’ file. She closed the folder and set it aside. “Do you know why you’re here today?”

“Let me guess. Doctor Andrews has an influx of new patients and you’re picking me up to help balance the workload.” The rotator flight from Kabul to Ramstein came in every couple of days, filled with fresh patients that required immediate care. The doctors had the ultimate job security.

“I’m the senior Doctor on staff, and I’m responsible for making certain medical determinations.” Doctor Everett hesitated, choosing her next words carefully. “I’ve reviewed your medical history and I’ve scheduled your next surgery two weeks from Thursday...”

“Hopefully third times the charm, right?” answered Brad with a forced grin. Doctor Everett didn’t smile.

“You will no longer be seeing Doctor Andrews. This next surgery will be with Doctor Carter.”

Brad felt a tightening in his chest and his stomach nearly emptied onto Doctor Everett’s oversized desk. When he finally composed himself he was staring at Doctor Everett. She sat stoically, as if expecting this exact reaction, like she had witnessed it countless times before.

“There’s got to be another way. It’s only been a couple of weeks. Surely, we haven’t exhausted all other options.”

“Sergeant Williams..”

“Maybe if we just give it a little more time. I’m a tough son-of-a-bitch. Everyone says so.”

“Sergeant Williams..”

“No, I’m telling you, I’ve gone through a lot and I come out on top every single time; the push through Basra, the friendly fire incident in Qandahar, even the ambush in Baqubah. We were outnumbered five to one in Baqubah, lost twelve of my men. Only three made it out, and I was one of them. Carried the second man out over my shoulder because he’d been hit.”

“Brad!” interrupted Doctor Everett, pulling the Sergeant from his thoughts. “This isn’t about being tough. The first two surgeries didn’t work, and an infection has set in. Another surgery will simply subject your body to unnecessary trauma.” She gave him a few moments. “We should probably discuss how all of this is going to work.”

“You can discuss all you want,” said Williams as he grabbed his crutches, pulling himself awkwardly to his feet. “We’re not doing this!” He limped towards the door.

“Sergeant Williams, I understand this is difficult, but if you just come back we can talk through this...”

She was still talking as Williams opened the door and stepped into the hallway. He let the door slam behind him as he hobbled down the hall, his booted right leg scraping the linoleum floor as it dragged limply beneath him.

“Keep pedaling,” urged Nurse Johnson. “You’ve got to keep your heart rate up.”

Sitting awkwardly atop the stationary bike, the hardened casing around his lower right leg and foot strapped securely to the plastic pedal, Brad pushed harder. He imagined how silly he must look. It had been nearly a week since the appointment with Doctor Everett, and he’d been on the bike every day since. His prognosis had remained unchanged.

Brad glanced around the rehabilitation room, state-of-the-art equipment lining all four walls. The near corner was filled with the steady hum of treadmills, and a soft pounding sound as a one-legged soldier struggled to keep up with the revolving belt, his prosthetic leg smacking clumsily against the rubber surface even though the speed was set to minimum. Along the right wall stood several specialized strength-training machines, a young man struggling with the vertical press machine. From a distance he appeared in good health, except for the bandage around his shoulder and his struggles to press the mere 20 pounds over his head. At the far end of the room sat the resistance

equipment, each piece designed to facilitate the latest cutting-edge techniques; cross-fit simulation, pilates, even an automated yoga machine to assist with balance and flexibility.

*Bribery, he thought. Thank you for your service to your country, now here's a shiny piece of equipment for you to play on in exchange for not going postal or ending up under a bridge.*

Brad's childhood hamster, Jethro, had spent hours each night running on something similar. The little rodent had run as hard as he could every night, but had never made it anywhere. Then one evening Williams had found him in a pool of his own blood, his left leg missing as a result of having gnawed it off after the wheel had broken. Jethro died a few days later. Williams never got another pet.

"You're lucky to be able to have access to this equipment," said Nurse Johnson. "And look on the bright side, you don't even have to pay a membership."

"Yeah, I guess so." But he couldn't help thinking of Jethro.

Brad was relieved when she excused herself to check on Sergeant Stimpson, a veteran Marine who had lost a foot in Iraq to a roadside bomb. Stimpson had started limping on one of the far stair climbers, his prosthetic foot pounding loudly with each clunky step. "He was lucky," Nurse Johnson had said about him just a few days earlier. "The two other soldiers riding in his Humvee were both killed."

Brad disagreed with the Nurse's assessment. She didn't understand. None of them did. Sometimes it was better to simply die alongside your fellow soldiers than to return home alone, back to a life of horrific nightmares and anxiety disorders? Back to a life of

running away from the screaming ghosts of fallen comrades? It's even harder for someone like Stimpson; a son-of-a-bitch like him can't run as fast with only one foot.

A loud crashing sound grabbed Brad's attention. One of the new PLGs – prosthetic leg guys – had tripped over his crutches and stumbled into a nearby exercise rack, tipping over the entire set of equipment. The PLG lay sprawled across the ground, tangled up in a mess of brightly colored strength-training bands; yellow, red, blue, green. Several large inflatable balls had also fallen from the rack and rolled loosely across the floor. Some of the other patients stopped their routines to help retrieve the loose objects. It was a ridiculous sight, watching a bunch of invalids chasing beachballs through a state-of-the-art rehabilitation room. It would have made him laugh if the scene hadn't been so fucking depressing.

He hadn't noticed how long it had been since he'd stopped pedaling. He sat quietly atop the bike, watching a particularly young soldier with only one arm try to pick up an oversized bluish ball. The young kid - he couldn't have been a day over twenty - kept trying to scoot the ball into his legs and then roll it up against his body so he could slip his one arm underneath. But every time he made the attempt to slide his arm under he would lose control of the ball, which would fall to the ground and take a couple of bounces before rolling away. The kid would then chase after the ball before repeating the seemingly futile process. Brad watched the kid fail three times before a trainer came by to assist.

"No, I can do it myself," said the kid. He began to roll the ball up his leg, careful to keep his good arm pressing tightly against the ball until it reached hip level. Then with

one quick motion, he slipped his arm awkwardly under the large round object. The ball wavered, fell and took several quick bounces atop the tile floor before rolling away. The young man dutifully chased after it.

*What an absolute cluster-fuck this place is!*

Brad turned away, when an old man standing silently in the far corner of the room caught his attention. The strange man had a large eye patch over his right eye, and his head was bald with a deep scar running down the right side. Much of his scalp had been severely burned, the mangled flesh old and worn, much like the man himself, who made no attempts to hide multiple disfigurements. Not that he could. His left arm and right leg were missing, and his clothes had been perfectly tailored to his misshapen body. His brown slacks had had the right leg removed and sewn shut at the upper thigh while the left arm of his gray button-down had been similarly removed. The man leaned comfortably on a single crutch tucked under his left arm as he watched the soldiers in the rehabilitation room.

*What a sorry son-of-a-bitch.*

“Sergeant Williams,” admonished Nurse Johnson from out of nowhere. “What did I tell you about keeping your heart rate up? You’ve got to keep pedaling.” Brad could tell by the flush of her face that she was slightly angry.

“It doesn’t seem to be helping. Besides, the bike’s making my leg hurt.”

“It isn’t hurting anything. That’s why we built you the customized cast. You can pedal without damaging your lower leg, which will push circulation to your knee.”

“What does it matter, anyways?” snapped Brad.

“We already discussed this. Your leg needs circulation. It will help with the surgery and with your recovery.”

“They’re going to chop off my leg in two days! Then none of this is going to fucking matter,” he shouted. “I’m sick of this shit. I’m sick of this place. I’m sick of you!”

Nurse Johnson’s eyes filled with disappointment. “I’ve only tried to assist you since you got here. But if you don’t want my help, then do whatever you want. I don’t have time for quitters.” She turned and left, making her way back towards Stimpson. Brad sat silently.

He felt the many stares from the other people in the room, and a deeper sense of embarrassment set in. Brad looked to the far corner of the room, expecting to see the misshapen old man. But the man was gone.

The next morning Sergeant Williams opened his eyes and found the old man with the eye patch staring down over him.

“What the hell!” shouted Brad as he sat up and backed towards the far edge of the bed.

“Afternoon,” greeted the man in a raspy voice. He had one of those smokers’ voices, the kind that sounded like the inner lining of the throat had partially rotted. When Brad didn’t respond, he added “This is typically when you say ‘Good afternoon to you, too.’”

Williams continued to stare blankly. “I think you have the wrong room.”

“Room 211. Pending lower leg amputation. Prickly son-of-a-bitch with excess pity syndrome. Nope, I’m pretty sure I got the right room.”

“Who are you? And what are you doing here?”

The man stood a little straighter, the single crutch tucked tightly beneath his one remaining arm. “My name is Gunnery Sergeant Stanley Wilson, 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Battalion. And I’ve come because I have a question for you.”

“And that is?”

“When are you gonna stop acting like a little bitch and get your shit together?” he nearly screamed. “You’re making the Corps look bad!”

“Excuse me!”

“You heard me. All your mopin’ and whinin’ and yellin’ is bringing everyone down. You need to shut that shit down right immediately.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but they’re going to cut off my leg tomorrow.”

“It is my business!” shouted Gunny as he limped next to the bed, leaning heavily on the worn crutch. “And I don’t give a dusty fuck about you losin’ your leg. You really want to compare injuries with me, boy?”

Sergeant Williams looked down at his hands. “No. I just want to deal with this my own way.”

“There is no *your way*,” shouted Gunny as he leaned in, the eye patch mere inches from Brad’s face. “There’s the Corps’ way, and the wrong way! And you sure as fuck are not dealin’ with this the Corps’ way!”

“What do you want from me?”



“I want you to go through your surgery like a man with your head held high! I want you to go through your therapy and rehabilitation sessions givin’ a hundred and ten percent like all the others! I want you to accept your situation like a Marine!”

“I don’t want to accept my situation.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want! Marines follow orders!”

*There’s just no getting through to this guy.* “Do you know what the best part of my day is? It’s when I first wake up. There’s a brief moment before I’m fully conscious when I don’t realize that my leg is shattered. Then I wake up and reality sets in, and I wait for the day to end so I can relive that same first moment the next day. Depressing, don’t you think, just waiting for each day to end?”

Gunny paused before responding, his tone surprisingly gentle. “I understand more than most. But there’s a lot of men who would trade positions with you in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, like you?”

“Not me. I’m one of the lucky ones.”

“Lucky? Seems like you got the short end of the stick.”

“That’s just cause you’re blind as a bat. Trust me, a lot of guys in this hospital would pay a million bucks to trade positions with me.”

“Really?” Williams waited for the punchline that never came.

“I’m like a modern day version of the million-dollar man. You don’t think someone on the paraplegic floor would give me a hundred grand for my one good leg? Or that soldier down the hall who’s missing both arms wouldn’t give a couple hundred grand if he could have just one good arm like mine so he could hug his little boy?” Wilson

reached up, tracing the scar on his head with his index finger as he smiled. “Hell, I’ve also got a titanium plate under here that’s got to be worth a few thousand just by itself.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but your math skills kind of suck. You’re still about a half million short.”

“My cock still works like a champ,” stated Gunny matter-of-factly. “That might as well put me over the ten million mark.”

Brad erupted in laughter. It was the first time he’d laughed since his arrival. But Gunny wasn’t smiling, and Brad was slightly embarrassed when he realized none of Gunny’s comments had been meant as a joke.

“Look,” continued Gunny. “All I’m trying to tell you is that you still have the possibility of fathering children, hugging a wife, or doing a bunch of other things that a lot of guys around here only dream of.” He hobbled towards the door, his single crutch scuffing against the linoleum floor.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried to tell myself all of this, already? But I just can’t accept the idea of being a cripple the rest of my life.”

Gunny stopped, turning slightly. “If you can’t accept that, then a cripple is all you’re ever gonna be.”

Gunny’s blunt words stung. Brad, embarrassed, looked down at the bandages wrapped around his mutilated leg. When he looked up, the old man was gone.

Sergeant Williams sat on the edge of his bed in his white hospital gown waiting patiently for Nurse Johnson. He looked down at his right leg, staring at a small gap in the

bandages through which he could see a tiny sliver of his skin. The tissue had colored a dark shade of black.

The last time his leg had been examined Doctor Everett had informed him that everything below the top of the shin was dead. Every vein, every cell, every nerve simply rotting on the shattered bone. “Impossible,” he had tried to argue. “It still hurts sometimes.”

“Phantom pain,” she’d explained. “It’s a relatively common medical phenomenon in these situations. It will likely continue for a few weeks even after the surgery until your body adjusts to the loss of your leg and your nerves lose their natural memory. But sometimes the pain can be permanent.”

It was a terrible concept. He imagined the pain, like a parasite, twisting its way throughout his body, embedding itself deep into his tissue and bones until it became a permanent part of him.

Brad repositioned himself so he was lying against the wall, his legs straight out on the bed, the right leg still heavily wrapped. He carefully loosened the bandages, unwrapping them so he could look upon his limb for the last time. A foul stench emerged as he pulled away the cloth, which had adhered to the skin in several places; he didn’t feel anything as he pulled off the fabric. His flesh was hideously scarred, the blackened tissue cracked in several places, a greenish liquid oozing from various fissures recently formed. The entire right side was shredded with holes, some of the tiny pieces of shrapnel still peppered deep within. The middle of his shin was bent at an impossible angle, a tiny piece of the fractured bone protruding through the skin. He had noticed the strange angle

of his broken leg when they had removed the cast a few hours earlier, but nobody had worried about trying to reset the bone. In a few more hours it wouldn't matter, anyways.

Nurse Johnson entered, wheeling in a large wheelchair that she positioned next to the bed. "Are you ready?"

"I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be."

"Fair enough." She reached into her nursing uniform and pulled out a large black marker. "We always write a large X across the limb to be..." She hesitated, unable to finish.

"Amputated," offered Williams

She nodded, bending down towards the leg.

"Wait," said Williams unexpectedly. His thoughts were scattered, his emotions even more so. But his earlier conversation with Gunny kept replaying itself in his mind. Over and over he kept hearing the old man's words.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he replied as he reached out for the marker. "But I think this is something that I need to do myself."

Nurse Johnson looked surprised. "You sure?"

"Yes."

She handed over the marker. "I'll give you a couple minutes," she said as she left the room.

Brad sat quietly, marker in hand, as he stared down at his mangled leg. He looked back and forth between the leg and the marker, and he was surprised when he realized

that his hand was shaking. His fingers threatened to recoil from the marker, like it was painful to the touch, like it was the dreaded saw itself. But then he looked back at his leg; at the cracked skin, the large punctured holes and twisted bone. Brad uncapped the large black marker and proceeded to draw a huge X across his right shin. The letter was faint, and he had to trace over it several times before it stood out against the darkened skin.

After several attempts, the large black X stood out clearly on his leg. Not that it was necessary. The doctor would have to be a complete moron to not realize which leg to remove. But Brad was proud to see the X on his leg. He wasn't sure why? But for the first time since his arrival he didn't think about the surgery. Nor did he think about what life would be like with only one leg. Instead, he imagined what Gunny would think if he could see him now.

"I'm ready," Sergeant Williams called out as Nurse Johnson re-entered the room.

## SHAY

All they wanted was to fondle her tits or sniff her cooch, which said a lot about Brittany's current state of affairs. She wouldn't be here if she had just finished college. Then again, after four years of student loans and this weak-ass economy, Cheetah's may have been as inevitable as death and taxes. It was a job, just like any other, but with less clothing. And it paid well, for those who lasted more than a couple of months.

The first few months had been the worst; constant reminders of paths not chosen, of the way things might have been. But after the first few months those distractions dulled, and it became easier to rely on the routine; first song in full dress, second song topless, third song fully nude; spend the next two hours going table to table, down a couple of strong drinks, repeat.

She polished off the last of her vodka & redbull, setting the empty glass down on the bar as she felt the euphoria from the energy drink mix with the mind-numbing effects of the vodka. So alive, like a zombie on speed, capable of almost anything that didn't matter. Totally untouchable.

But it came at a price.

Brittany reached down to the stack of bills folded around her ankle garter. Her wad was precariously thin. She'd already paid for four of her own drinks. A full four hours into her shift with a couple dozen ones, a single Abe Lincoln and two twenties to show for it.

Most of the girls relied on customers to pay for their drinks. But that required sitting down with them and sometimes it just wasn't worth the conversation. But she had

to find someone, so she scanned the room, searching for a sucker who wouldn't ask for sex or try to finger her under the table. The trick was to avoid those who sat in the dark corners of the club. And the tables immediately around any of the stages, of course; nothing good ever came out of sniffers row.

So she focused her attention in the middle of the club, her eyes spotting an out of place, clean-cut kid with a close-cropped haircut sitting by himself. He shyly averted his eyes when the girl on stage reached the third song, only to sneak occasional glances when he thought no one was watching.

*He'll do nicely. Just smile wide and laugh at all of his jokes, no matter how stupid. Act interested, and don't let him catch you counting down the minutes on your watch.*

Brittany made her way across the club and dropped down in the seat next to him. "Buy me a drink? Thanks." Before the boy could protest she had flagged down the nearest waitress and ordered her usual. The boy ordered himself a glass of water.

"So, shouldn't you at least tell me your name first?" asked the boy.

Brittany eyed him critically. "I'm Shay." *Never the real name, especially after what happened to Sara last year.* Dancers had stage names for a reason.

"Jeremy," offered the boy even though Brittany never asked. She simply nodded, looking anxiously for the waitress to return.

Brittany licked her parched lips. Finally, the stupid blonde twit returned with Shay's order. "That'll be fifteen dollars," the waitress told Jeremy, not even bothering to try to charge Shay. He handed her a twenty, and looked like he expected change. *Yep,*

*he's definitely out of his element.* The waitress left without even offering a thank you...or change.

Shay took a long drink, raising her glass in toast after she swallowed. "Thank you."

"No problem."

"So, what are you doing here?"

It was a simple question, yet somehow it caught Jeremy by surprise. His buddy Matt had begged him to come in to the Cheetah for a visit. Matt had taken a job as manager shortly after they'd returned from Afghanistan together and he'd said he wanted to see Jeremy. Deep down Jeremy suspected that Matt just wanted to show off the fact that he was surrounded by naked women every night. Matt had managed to do well with his transition back, had firmly put the past behind him. Jeremy envied him...desperately. "I guess deep down I'm just another pervert," replied Jeremy, waiting for Shay to laugh.

She didn't. "No you're not. I mean, you might very well be a weirdo, but not like the hard-core deviants that come up in this place every night."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I deal with perverts every night. I know what they look like, what they act like, and what they smell like. And that's not you. One look at you and it's obvious that you don't belong here."

"Honestly, I don't know where I belong anymore?" Shay eyed the boy carefully, a genuine look of concern on her face.

"What division were you in?"



“How did you know?” asked a stunned Jeremy.

“The haircut, the clean-cut look, the tattoo on your forearm,” Shay pulled up his sleeve, further unveiling the skull tattoo that had been imprinted on the inside of his right forearm. “My brother used to be in the Army.”

“Really? When did he get out?”

“He didn’t.” Shay answered flatly before taking another deep drink.

Jeremy sat quietly, unsure what to say. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, the loud music – some kind of 80s hair metal - washing over them as smoke and fog filled the air. They were interrupted when a drunk patron stumbled up to their table. “Hey Sugarbush, how ‘bouts a dance?”

“Fuck off,” replied Shay.

“I’m a payin’ customer. An’ I wanna dance.”

“And I said FUCK OFF! Go get one of those other skanks to dance for your sorry ass.”

The drunk flinched as if he’d been slapped across the face. Unsure what else to say, he stumbled back towards his table where his group of equally drunken friends sat.

“You are a horrible stripper,” said Jeremy.

“Come again.”

“You have terrible social skills for someone in the services industry.”

“Services industry. Is that what you call this?” Shay laughed aloud before taking another drink. “First of all, I’m not a stripper. We’re called entertainers.” Jeremy eyed her skeptically, as Shay shrugged. “It’s a PC thing. It’s supposed to make us seem classier or

something. Second of all, that guy is a total groper. He comes in all the time. And I don't want to deal with that kind of shit tonight."

"Why not?"

Shay took another drink. "Tonight's just not my night, I guess."

"Don't you need to make money?"

"Yeah. I just wish there was an easier way to make it."

"So, why are you here? It's obvious you hate dancing. So why did you decide to become a strip...I mean, entertainer if you hate it so much?"

"Why do any of us do anything? Because there are no other options left."

"So let me guess. You moved to Los Angeles from a small town in hopes of starting a career in acting, only to find the business too difficult to break into. So, as a last resort you turned to exotic dancing. Temporarily of course, but by the time you realized that, you were a slave to the money and it was too late."

Shay broke into hysterical laughter. Jeremy liked seeing her laugh. "You're a fool! You've watched one too many after-school specials."

"I figured it was as good a guess as any."

"Moron," she muttered as her laughter finally subsided, her serious exterior reemerging once again, her expression darker than the surrounding club. "You got the small town part right, I'll give you that. I grew up in a tiny one-stoplight town in Texas. It had to be the most boring place on earth. My older brother and I couldn't wait to leave. We both took the first opportunity out. He accepted an Army ROTC scholarship at UT. I

enrolled in UCLA.” Her voice trailed off as she took another drink, emptying the glass before setting it upon the table.

Jeremy signaled the waitress for another round. The drinks showed up a few minutes later, and Jeremy emptied out nearly half the contents of his wallet to pay for them.

“UCLA?”

Brittany had loved school. She’d always enjoyed learning. And she had found college to be wonderful. Every day she met and interacted with new people, she was exposed to new ideas and she had diverse experiences. Things she was never exposed to in Texas, where her overprotective parents seemed to shield her from everything. *What a difference a few years makes. How did everything go so wrong?* But she already knew the answer.

“My first year went okay,” she explained. “But the start of my sophomore year is when I got word of my brother.” She paused, unsure why she was confiding her secrets to this complete stranger. But it felt good to talk. It had been so long. “My grades went into the toilet, so I took some time off. By the time I was ready to go back, the school had moved on without me, or at least the financial aid department had. And you know what living expenses are like in LA. So it was either this or go back home with my tail between my legs.”

“So you’re doing this to earn money for school?”

“Sure,” Shay answered, although it didn’t sound convincing. “Maybe?”

“So when was the last time you saw your brother?”

“Over two and a half years ago, before he left for his third tour to Iraq.”

“Three tours. That’s pretty rough.”

“Yeah. I always thought so. But he didn’t seem to mind. He absolutely loved the army. I don’t know why. It certainly didn’t love him back.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My brother was gay.” She was shocked when she realized the words had come out. *I’m like a leaking sieve tonight.*

“So why are you telling me all this? I mean, you don’t even know me.”

“I don’t know. It’s not like you can out my brother or anything. Besides, you look like you’ve got plenty of your own issues to worry about.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Fuck it.” She raised her glass in toast.

“Fuck it” Jeremy answered tapping his beer against her glass.

Shay pounded her drink in one gulp before standing up.

“You leaving now?” asked Jeremy.

“I’m up on Main Stage in two sets. I’ve got to try to make some money tonight.”

And without another word Shay walked back behind stage.

“AND NEXT UP ON MAIN STAGE, WE HAVE A REAL FEAST FOR YOUR VIEWING PLEASURE. AN ASPIRING LAW STUDENT WHO WILL HELP YOU PASS YOUR BAR EXAM. PLEASE GIVE A WARM WELCOME FOR THE DELECTABLE, TANTALIZINGLY SEDUCTIVE....SHAY!”

*The DJ's a fucking idiot!* She'd told him several times not to use that stupid intro. Everyone knew it was bullshit. And it only made her feel like more of a failure. It would be better if he was more realistic, but college dropout with propensity for alcohol abuse and intimacy issues just didn't have the same ring to it.

"We're selling a fantasy to our patrons," the DJ had argued.

*Fuck him.*

The music began blaring, a techno version of Warrant's Cherry Pie. Shay sighed despite herself. His tip was definitely going down tonight. *Fucking idiot!*

Shay let the music wash over her, waiting a few seconds as the music numbed her senses and dimmed her mind. Then, oblivious to the world around her, she stepped out onto mainstage, under the bright pulsating lights of the Cheetah Club.

The spotlights shined down directly into her eyes, and she was as blind as a newborn kitten. A few cheers erupted from the crowd, but were soon drowned out by the music raining down from the speakers overhead. Not that she was complaining; trying to ignore the hooting men seated in sniffers row was difficult enough even on a good night. A strobe light flashed overhead, and even her own movements seemed jerky and uneven, her body seemingly nothing more than a puppet on a string.

A nondescript man stepped up to the front of the stage, a dollar in his right hand. She sauntered over, kneeling down so he could place the dollar within her ankle garter. His hand blinked in and out of existence in time with the strobe as he slipped in the dollar, his fingers not so subtly stroking her calf along the way. She hated it when they touched her. It was so degrading. Before the tears could form, she pushed the thought

from her mind, instead wondering how much of her life had been spent under a strobe. She'd been in this life for so long that she no longer even noticed the pulsing lights, just another bunch of disjointed images.

The song suddenly ended – a surprisingly fast three minutes - so Shay made her way towards the back of the stage, where she stripped off her dress. She felt a slight breeze across her nipples, but registered nothing else as she turned back towards the applause of the crowd. The strobe light had stopped, and there was now a line of men at the front of the stage. She tried to count them. *How much are a pair of tits worth?* The men always slowly migrated towards the stage during the second song. But they usually came out of the woodwork during the third.

She made her way down towards the front of the stage, running her hands gently over her chest as she squatted down in front of the mob of men. A couple of them looked on eagerly, like dogs waiting for a bone. One by one she collected their dollars. By the time the song ended she had collected enough money for a bottle of Grey Goose. Not bad.

The third song - a country song - started up. *What the fuck! His tip just went down even further.* Shay removed her bottoms to several cheers and catcalls. But she pushed them from her mind, wondering what her brother would think. His baby sister naked in front of a room full of perverts. What did this say about her? Did it even matter? Was there anything to say anymore?

She missed him. He'd always been there for her. To help teach her. To help mentor her. To just...help her. But she hadn't always been there for him. She'd never

even had a clue about his gayness until he told her. *Gayness, is that even a word?* She had been too young to have known. But still, the guilt lingered like a tumor, always just below the surface.

*He should have been able to talk to me. No wonder he didn't find out until college.* Wesley had tried to tell mom and dad during Christmas break of his junior year of college, he had wanted to introduce them to Michael. But they had been such dicks, had dismissed him as nothing more than a sinner. They had been so cruel! He'd never visited home again.

She'd flown to Washington a couple of times to see him, always between his deployments. Michael had been nice, and she had marveled that Wesley had been able to find a long-term partner in college. He'd done well for himself. Brittany had assumed the same would happen for her when she went to college.

Wesley had always thought of his little sister as an angel. If only he could see her now. Without realizing it, she pulled an old man's face deep into her cleavage, jiggling her chest across his cheeks. As she pulled away she couldn't help but notice tiny slivers of the man's saliva on the inner curvature of her breasts. She hated letting them motorboat, but it had become expected at the Cheetah Club. It was a hard earned two dollars. *Is that all I'm really worth?*

*I could have been so much more. Maybe a veterinarian. I used to love animals. I'd even helped deliver our neighbors calf one time. They'd said I was a natural, saved both the mother and the baby. And I was always great at biology. Maybe I could go back to school. Maybe it's not too late? Maybe?*

She had fanciful notions like this from time to time, that she was destined to be something more than X-rated entertainment for lewd men. The notions most often came during that sweet spot between being slightly buzzed and totally wasted. But the next morning she'd always wake up to a severe hangover and the acute reality that she wasn't destined for anything.

A commotion on the far side of the club caught pulled her attention. Two of the club's bouncers charged through the crowd, making their way towards Jeremy's table. She turned, strategically pointing her bare ass towards the crowd while discretely checking out the commotion at the side of the stage. Jeremy had the guy from earlier – the one who'd interrupted and asked for the dance – in a tight headlock. Two of the guys' friends were charging at Jeremy, one with a bottle in his hand. They were intercepted by the bouncers before they reached Jeremy, and soon a complete brawl ensued, drawing the attention of the customers. *Fuck! There goes my money for this song.*

She continued dancing to the music just like she always did when there was a fight during her set, shaking her ass and juggling her tits to no one in particular. Her energy evaporated, yet she kept dancing. *The show must go on.* Only the deepest of perverts paid any attention, the guys who came in every night and hid in the shadows, saying nothing and tipping no one. *What a waste of time!*

She did make a couple extra dollars before the song ended and she retired from the stage. She grabbed her gown and underwear on the way off, suppressing a yawn as she read the clock. 3:42am. Still another two hours. Maybe it would be best to lie down back stage until closing.



It was nearly six in the morning by the time all of the customers had left and the girls had gotten changed into their street clothes. They were all lined up in front of the cashier's cage, eagerly waiting to exchange the Cheetah dollars they'd earned for real dollars, minus the ten percent conversion fee that went to the house, of course. *What a fucking racket.*

Brittany wasn't in line. She had done only two or three dances all evening and she'd been paid in real cash for each. So she sat alone on the back steps of the stage, the hood of her faded blue sweatshirt pulled over her head so her eyes were masked in shadow, her arms wrapped around knees that were pulled tightly into her chest. She waited for the girls to exchange their money, for the bouncers to clear the parking lot of any stray customers or potential stalkers, for the half drunk bottle of Smirnoff that awaited her at home, and the soft embrace of the sleeping pills she would need in order to fall asleep again tonight.

A couple of the new girls approached her to ask how her night had gone, took one look into her eyes, then abruptly turned back. The experienced girls, familiar with Brittany's end-of-shift moods, gave wide birth, pretending she wasn't there at all. So Brittany sat alone, in an almost comatose state, barely registering the figure that stepped in front of her.

"Everything all right?" asked Jeremy, causing Brittany to look up, her dark eyes peering out at him from within the hooded confines of her sweatshirt. He was shocked by her demeanor which, although grim and edged earlier in the night, now reflected a darkness so deep that it surpassed even his own.

“What the fuck you still doing here? Customers aren’t supposed to be here after closing?” Even her voice was cold, dead.

“Yeah, I know. I’m a friend of Matt’s. He told me to stay in the club until after closing. Just in case those guys were still outside looking for trouble.”

Matt was the Saturday night manager at the Cheetah. He was all right, an ex-marine type who had been to Afghanistan twice. He seemed a little off sometimes, but was competent enough. Plus he didn’t treat the girls like complete whores, so Brittany was able to tolerate him more than most.

“Sure,” she mumbled, only half-listening. Glancing up, she recognized a strangely familiar look in his eyes. *Not quite like mine, but...interesting.* She hadn’t noticed his eyes before. But now there was no more lights, no more makeup, no thundering music, no fancy gown. The mask was gone, the illusion over. *For both of us.*

“So...” he offered, as if getting ready to continue a conversation that should never have started. But he didn’t continue. He took one last look into her eyes before turning to walk away.

“You can fuck me if you want to.”

“Excuse me,” answered Jeremy as he turned back.

“I said, you can fuck me. If you want to.” It was no big deal, like offering a cigarette to a stranger. “But we have to do it in your place. I don’t want a stranger in my apartment.”

“Of course not. That would be awkward,” Jeremy answered sarcastically.

Brittany ignored him. “I have one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to leave me bruised,” she answered before pausing. “Nothing too much. Or too visible. I’m on shift tomorrow night, and marks can cost me. But I want to be bruised and sore after I leave your place tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because if I give you sex I want to feel something in return.”

Jeremy looked down at her. She looked tiny, dressed in her faded oversized sweatshirt with the hood pulled up, like she was trying to hide from the rest of the world. It was obvious that she thought that nobody understood her. But Jeremy did.

He used to cut small lines into his legs with his pocketknife. It had started in Afghanistan. He’d seen eleven corpses during his first seven days in country. Dozens during his second week. By the third week he’d stopped counting. It was a couple weeks later when the cutting first started. Jeremy didn’t do it for the blood, he’d seen enough of that to last a lifetime. He had tried to explain it to the First Shirt when someone had noticed the scars on his arms and brought it up to the Commander’s attention. But of course the Sergeant hadn’t understood, had instead just admonished Jeremy about damaging government property. Nobody understood. Cutting was a strange mistress. Jeremy hadn’t even been able to explain it to his mental health counselor since he’d been back.

“So you in or out?” asked Brittany, indifference evident in her voice. They stood in silence for several moments.

Jeremy thought about this troubled girl. He thought about the cutting scars on his legs. He thought about his recent exchanges with the counselor. He seemingly considered everything except intercourse. Finally, he answered. "Sure, why not? But I have a condition of my own."

"What?"

"I want to feel something too."

## THE FUNERAL

Julia hesitated as she placed the rental car, a small midnight blue Ford Focus, into park and killed the ignition. She had only been to Oregon twice in her life, once to visit Robbie's family just after they had been married and the second just a few days ago when she returned for the upcoming funeral.

Last Wednesday, Mark and Lisa Samuelson had been overjoyed to see their first and only granddaughter, Christina. Julia had not felt as welcome. In fact, Julia had never felt more out of place in her life, even worse than when she and Robbie had spent a half-day touring multi-million dollar mansions in the Atlanta Suburbs, feigning their role as legitimate buyers.

But this was different, thought Julia. This was her family, or at least had been her family before Robbie had been taken from her seventeen days, four hours – Julia glanced down at her watch - and thirteen minutes go. She was burying her husband today. Here, of all places, Julia thought others would have gone out of their way to make her feel welcome.

Nothing to be done about it, she thought, as she got out of the car and hefted Christine from the back seat into her arms, making her way towards the small group of people gathered at the hill in the center of the cemetery.

Mark was the first to greet them. "How's my favorite granddaughter doing?" he said, focusing all of his attention towards Christine. He offered the child a kiss on the cheek, which she shyly accepted, before turning his attention towards Julia. "Julia, it's

good to see you again,” he said quietly. “I wish it could be under more favorable circumstances.”

“Yes, it’s good to see you again,” offered Lisa, offering a slight head nod from afar.

“It’s good to see you both as well” replied Julia. All three nodded in unison, waiting in an awkward silence that seemed to have no end in sight

“Sure is a beautiful day,” blurted Mark awkwardly.

“Mark! That seems like a very untoward thing to say,” chastised Lisa.

“What, I’m just making an observation. It is a beautiful day, a very beautiful day for...” He stopped when he saw the tears forming in the corners of his wife’s eyes, tears forcibly suppressed as quickly as they had been formed.

“May I hold that lovely grandchild for a moment?” asked Lisa suddenly, reaching for Christine before waiting for an answer.

Julia gently passed Christine to her grandmother, but Christine started squirming and began to fuss, the fussing quickly turning into a small wail.

“Here, I think she might be hungry,” lied Julia as she reached out to retrieve her child. Christine was fully fed, cleaned, and rested. But babies tend to feed off the environments around them. Discomfort breeds discomfort. “I’ll make her a quick bottle then catch up with you.”

Julia watched as her in-laws started for the top of the hill where the others were gathering. Christina nestled calmly into her mother’s arms, so Julia didn’t bother with a bottle. Instead, she watched as others arrived, all dressed in black, somber looks on each

of their faces. Overhead, the sky was blue and a gentle wind blew through the air. Julia tilted her face back, basking in the warm sun and the cool breeze. For just a moment Julia forgot where she was, imagining herself back in the south, back before she had lost her husband. It was indeed a beautiful day for such a saddened event.

“Julia?” interrupted a middle-aged woman clad in black. The woman was older, probably late forties or early fifties. Somewhat attractive for her age, with a slim figure and only a slight amount of facial wrinkles where more would have been expected.

“Yes, I’m Julia. And you are?”

“My name’s Elizabeth. Elizabeth Johnson. I’m an old friend of Bobby’s. I knew him in high school, before he joined the Army.” Something about Elizabeth tugged at Julia’s memory, as if she somehow knew the woman. But, no sooner did the memory coalesce before it drifted apart, like trying to catch smoke in the palm of one’s hand. Still, something about this woman seemed so familiar.

“Robbie was a sweet boy,” continued Elizabeth. It bothered Julia hearing this woman call him Robbie. Only Julia called him by that name. “He was best friends with my daughter during high school. Jenny, come over here and meet Robbie’s wife.”

Julia hadn’t noticed the young woman that had been hanging back. But at Elizabeth’s beckoning, the teary-eyed young woman came bounding up and wrapped her arms tightly around Julia, causing Christina to fidget.

“Oh, I’m so sorry for your loss. He was my closest friend during high school.”

And then, amidst the crushing hug and teary greeting, Julia caught the smoke. She didn't *know* Elizabeth, had never met this woman in her life. But she knew *of* her.

Robbie's crazy adventure, his graduation fling, his Ms Robinson.

Robbie and Julia hadn't kept secrets from each other. They had shared everything. He had even relayed the story of his first, a young sexy mother by the name of Ms Elizabeth Johnson. Julia had always thought the older woman some kind of sexual deviant, even though it was Robbie who had pressed the situation to its eventual climax. Julia had eventually moved beyond the story, chalking it up to a good bottle of wine and a lively round of 'Who-was-your-first', a story not meant to be remembered. But the tale had always lingered in the back of her mind, just below the surface, the idea of her sweet innocent Robbie seduced by a sex-starved MILF. And here she was at his funeral.

As Julia locked eyes with the older woman, the younger woman's eyes filled with disdain for the older, the older woman's eyes emitting judgment back toward the younger.

"Well, I just wanted to meet Robbie's wife and express my heartfelt condolences," offered Elizabeth with a forced smile. She'd said his name again! "But we shouldn't keep you any longer. Come on Jenny."

Jenny tightened her grip on Julia one final time before breaking the embrace. "Remember," she said. "He may be gone from this world, but he is still with us here," she placed her right hand atop her forehead. "And in here," she said as she placed her left hand over her heart.



Julia noticed Elizabeth roll her eyes in response to her own daughter. “Jenny, let’s go” the woman said.

Julia watched as Elizabeth and Jenny made their way up the hill. Mother and daughter, a special bond that couldn’t be broken. Even through all the years of drinking, shouting and fighting Julia had managed to forgive her own mother; it didn’t matter they had a strained relationship, some things just had to be because that was the nature of things. Still, Julia wasn’t sure if she could have forgiven her own mother if she had slept with her best friend. Then Julia was struck by a scandalous thought. What if Jenny never knew about her best friend and mother?

That would certainly serve as a bit of justice, thought Julia, a small part of her relishing in the imagined humiliation of the older seductress as she walked to her place atop the hill.

Once the attendees had gathered, and all was in place, the priest began:

*“We are gathered here today to honor Robert Samuelson, a loving man, husband, father and son.”* I can’t believe he married her, thought Elizabeth. White trash girl if there ever was one. He could have done so much better than her. *“He was a man of honor and integrity, perhaps best demonstrated by his dedication to others as well as his ultimate service to his country.”* Should have never have gone into the Army. I tried to tell him not to join. But he never listened.

*“Robert leaves behind his wife Julia Samuelson, his daughter Christine, and his parents Mark and Lisa Samuelson.”* Christine is certainly pretty cute. Has a lot more of Robbie in her than her mother. Good thing too, if you ask me. Because that Julia is one of

those skinny fat girls. Doesn't take care of herself while she's young and attractive and can get away with it, but it will all catch up to her when she turns thirty-five. She'll blow up like a bag of popcorn in the microwave. Yep, definitely a skinny fat girl. *"And though his body has departed this earthly world, his soul remains forever, an integral part of our lives and a testament to the kind of man that Robert Samuelson truly was."*

"*Oh, why God? Why?*" wailed Jenny unexpectedly as she buries her face in my arms.

Damnit girl, get ahold of yourself. Everybody's staring at us. Even the priest. Can't you hold yourself together for more than five minutes.

"Sorry, everybody. She tends to get a little emotional," I said.

Get ahold of yourself, I want to shout at Jenny. Why do you always have to be such a drama queen? You've barely seen Robbie since he left for the Army nearly seven years ago, and not once since he married that hussy from the south. Besides, you were never that close. It's not like you're the one who fucked him.

*"I had the pleasure of knowing Robert when he was a young man, back when we knew him simply as Robbie. I have many fond memories of young Robbie, but perhaps what stands out most was how active he was within the community, even at such an early age."*

It's hard to believe he's really gone. They're just not supposed to go that young. They're supposed to be invincible. Robbie always thought he was. He was a little arrogant that way. That's probably what brought him to my door that summer after his

graduation. I still can't believe he had the balls to go through with it. I still can't believe I went through with it.

*"The baseball team, the football team, the high school orchestra, student body government; Robbie Samuelson had a thirst for involvement, even as a young man."*

He had a thirst for many things, I chuckle to myself.

*"And no matter what he touched, he seemed to make the community around him a better place while making a lasting impact on those around him, as evidenced by all of you that are here today to pay tribute to Robert."*

I turn my attention toward Julia, staring at the woman holding Robbie's child. I can't believe he actually married her. She's the reason he re-enlisted after his initial commitment was up. 'Got to keep a stable paycheck now that I have a wife and child' he had told his own mother, who had passed the conversation second-hand to me. He always said he'd only joined for the GI Bill. 'Get in and get out quick,' he'd said. But I suspect there had been a lot more to it than that. Robbie always aspired for greatness; which is what baffles me so much about him marrying that simpleton.

*"As many of you know, Robert Samuelson died a hero, in defense of this great nation. Once called, he didn't hesitate from his duty. He simply rose to the defense of those around him."*

I looked over toward Julia. Strangely, she's staring back at me, the Baby Christina still tightly tucked within her arms She looks upset. Well, of course she's upset. Her husband has just died. But still, I don't like her looking at me like that. If only you knew. Yeah, I fucked him first. Taught him everything he knows, long before you trapped him

down in the swamps. And I was one hot little package back in my day. I had him in my prime, when that spark was still in his eye, long before you snuffed it out with your tricks and your mistake of the pill.

Yeah, you wouldn't know that we kept in touch. To the end I was one of his closest confidants. The occasional email, a request for advice. He was so miserable with all of your cheating. Was going to leave you after the first deployment. Do it, I'd encouraged him. Cheaters don't change. But then that little bundle in your arms arrived unexpectedly – at just the right time – and he backed out of the whole thing. Decided to stay and re-up. But I know what you did!

*“Few ever receive the call to defend their nation. Fewer still answer that call. And only a select few are called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. Robert Samuelson did, and we will always remember him for his bravery.”*

I want her to know that I know the truth. She needs to know that Robbie's parents know the truth. She needs to know that this poor little traumatized single-mother bit isn't fooling everybody. It's not fooling me.

*But now, although it strains our soul and pains our hearts, we wish him farewell. And blessed journey to the heavens. Please join me as we pay tribute to the man, the husband, the father, the son. We bid thee farewell, Robert Samuelson.*

“Oh Bobby! Why?” wails Jenny, as Bobby's casket lowers into the ground.

Once the attendees had gathered, and all was in place, the priest began the eulogy:

*“We are gathered here today to honor Robert Samuelson, a loving man, husband, father and son.”* What an understatement! He certainly was a loving man, thought Julia.

He'd almost left me once, after I came clean about Tommy Wilson. I thought that was the end, that I'd fucked everything up. But a few days later he came in with his regular bouquet of flowers, and I knew everything was going to be okay. And you showed up nine months later; I hugged Christina tightly.

*"He was a man of honor and integrity, perhaps best demonstrated by his dedication to others as well as his ultimate service to his country."* Should have never re-enlisted. We should have gone to Atlanta together like we'd planned. But you'd be proud of me, Robbie. I finally made the move. Packed up what few belongings I have left and moved to the city just as we'd always talked about. You'd be so proud!

*"Robert leaves behind his wife Julia Samuelson, his daughter Christine, and his parents Mark and Lisa Samuelson."* And a middle-aged former fling. I can't believe he slept with her. She's old enough to be his mother. And what's up with her attitude. She's acting like she's the widow. *"And though his body has departed this earthly world, his soul remains forever, an integral part of our lives and a testament to the kind of man that Robert Samuelson truly was."*

"*Oh, why God? Why?*" wailed Jenny, causing even the priest to pause.

What a drama queen. You would think she was the one who lost her husband. That she was the single mother trying to start her life over. Jenny's biggest problems are likely figuring out how to lose that extra five pounds around her mid-section or how soon she will be able to pay off her college loans on her secretarial salary. No, she probably doesn't have any student loans. I bet mommy and daddy paid for it all. I bet mommy took care of everything for her. I bet she thinks her mother's a saint.

*“I had the pleasure of knowing Robert when he was a young man, back when we knew him simply as Robbie. I have many fond memories of young Robbie, but perhaps what stands out most was how active he was within the community, even at such an early age.”*

I wonder what little Jenny would think of her perfect mother if she knew she had seduced her best friend in high school? Maybe that would give Jenny a real problem to worry about, rather than making a scene at my husband’s funeral. What right does she have, anyways?

*“The baseball team, the football team, the high school orchestra ensemble, student body government; Robert Samuelson had a thirst for involvement, even as a young man. And no matter what he touched, he seemed to make the community around him a better place while making a lasting impact on those around him, as evidenced by all of you that are here today to pay tribute to Robert.”*

I look over at Elizabeth and her daughter. They’re so close, as if nothing will ever come between them. How infuriating! How unfair. I should let her know that I know. Maybe even let her daughter in on the secret. How dare Elizabeth come to my husband’s funeral anyways?

*“As many of you know, Robert died a hero, in defense of this great nation. Once called, he didn’t hesitate from his duty. He simply rose to the defense of those around him.”*

He'll definitely always be my hero. Oh Bobby, I wish you were still here. Why did you have to go away? You meant everything to me. I don't know how I'm going to make it without you.

*"Few ever receive the call to defend their nation. Fewer still answer that call. And only a select few are called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. Robert Samuelson did, and we will always remember him for his bravery."*

I look up and notice Elizabeth. The older woman is consoling Jenny with one hand, gently stroking her long blonde hair in a soothing fashion. She's staring back at me, a strange judgmental look on her face. I recognize that look, every time I speak to Bobby's mom.

*But now, although it strains our soul and pains our hearts, we wish him farewell. And blessed journey to the heavens. Please join me as we pay tribute to the man, the husband, the father, the son. We bid thee farewell, Robert Samuelson.*

"Oh Bobby! Why?" wails Jenny, as Bobby's casket lowers into the ground.

Most of the attendees had departed, even Robert's own parents after a brief good-bye, and only a couple of stragglers remained to pay their final respects to Robert Samuelson. The funeral ceremony had gone without major incident, other than the constant sobbing and occasional outbursts from Jenny. Many had snuck quick looks toward Julia during the ceremony, casting her the occasional disguised glance or the pitiful forced smile.

But none truly knew her. And while some did pity her, others were simply voyeurs looking to see the reaction of the widow, to see how steady her tears would flow or if she would buckle of the weight of grief.

But in the end Julia betrayed nothing. The dutiful widow, child in tow, determined to pay her respects, her external façade the epitome of stoicism. It wasn't until the ceremony had concluded, the majority of guests having departed, that her façade cracked like an egg against the edge of a skillet and her emotions bubbled forth.

She glared at Elizabeth, who walked towards Julia with purpose, Jenny a half step behind with a doe-eyed look on her face. Julia started towards Elizabeth, eagerness in her own steps.

As both women approached they quickened their pace, like two chargers racing head to head. But just before they collided the two women slowed, then stopped. They squared off. Baby Christina fussed in her mother's arms, looking from left to right as she took measure of the world around her. Next to Elizabeth, Jenny looked on obliviously, her eyes still puffy from her ceaseless display of earlier waterworks.

Julia was the first to let loose her tongue, totally unprepared for the words that escaped her mouth. "Thank you so much for coming," she said sweetly. "It would have meant a lot to Robert."

Elizabeth exhaled visibly, her shoulders losing their rigidity as her entire posture wilted. "I am so sorry for your loss. He was very special to everyone here."

"He was very special to everyone who knew him. I'm going to miss him."



Elizabeth reached out unexpectedly and hugged Julia, careful not to crush the child in her arms. “Any friend of Robert’s is a friend of ours. If there is anything that you need while you’re in town please don’t hesitate to call.”

“We’ll be all right.”

“No, I mean it,” insisted Elizabeth.

“Thank you. Truly, thank you. But we’ll be all right.”

Elizabeth finally broke the embrace. And when she stepped back, there were tears forming in both women’s eyes. “You take care. And don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.” Elizabeth didn’t wait for an answer. She simply turned and made her way down the hill, her confused daughter trailing closely on her beloved mother’s heels.

Julia watched them go before turning back towards Robert’s resting place. She hadn’t even realized that the other guests had gone, leaving her and Baby Christina in complete solitude at the top of the small hill. Christina had fallen asleep, the peacefulness of the cemetery lulling her to a deep slumber. The ground was still slightly damp from yesterday’s morning showers, the newly disturbed earth above Robert’s plot a dark fertile brown.

It was hard to imagine him under all that dirt, sealed away forever. He was gone. Truly gone. Somehow it had all seemed so unreal these past few weeks, like he was still there with them. Maybe it was Julia’s focus on the items at hand; be present for the arrival of his casket, fill out the insurance paperwork, ship the body to Oregon, arrange the funeral. Check the baby, feed the baby, change the baby. A never-ending list of

tedious taskings that never allowed her to stop and consider the bigger picture. But looking at the freshly dug mound of dirt before her, it was now clear.

Julia stood alone in the cemetery well after all of the guests had departed, Christina still asleep in her mother's arms. She thought of Robert, she thought of Elizabeth, of their little secret together and the scandal that little encounter would have created had it been known. But it wasn't known, and it never would be. Not now. Their secret, along with all of the other little intricacies that had been associated with Robert's life, were now buried under the dirt with him.

A soft breeze blew through the air, brushing against Julia's hair. She looked around the cemetery, at the countless gravesites amongst which she stood, the grey headstones leading off into the horizon in every direction. So many! She wondered what else had been buried over the years along with all of those bodies. This cemetery was undoubtedly the final resting place of thousands of secrets, both big and small.

She looked down at Christina, and promised herself that she wouldn't keep secrets from her only daughter, that she would share everything. There would be no secrets.

But as she left the cemetery she recognized the futility of such a promise. Julia already knew she would exaggerate Robert's memory to Christina, projecting the image of a flawless heroic father figure onto their daughter. And Christina would grow up knowing only of her parents' endless love affair with each other, how they gave each other everything, the very concept of the possibility of infidelity absurd. And Christina would be left with the perfect image of her parents, which she would pass on to her own

children, who would describe grandma and grandpa as pillars of virtue and perfection in a world gone awry.

And the cycle would continue, a never ending affinity for the past, where love was truer, life more simple, and the world less complex.

## THE BODY

I noticed my right hand shaking as I followed the old man up the stairs towards the second floor apartments. I'd only been on three calls like this, and each time I'd nearly lost my lunch. The complex wasn't the worst I'd seen, about three-quarters of a step above a true slum. I could tell the apartments had been recently refurbished with cheap crap from one of those oversized homebuilder warehouses. You know, with the fake wood flooring that sells for twenty dollars per seven-foot length. The kind that is fake but which everyone says looks great just because it's new. The kind of cheap upgrades that cover up the cat piss stains and the occasional bullet hole.

I hated places like this, ones that enabled poor people to claim they were living the American dream. I'd already received five calls to places like this one this week alone.

At the top of the stairs the man turned to the right, moving down past a couple of doors until he came to Apartment #313. "Ms Johnson," he called out as he knocked loudly at the door. "Ms Johnson."

"Why don't you use the doorbell?" my partner Mike asked.

"Doesn't work."

Figures.

The man knocked again, more loudly this time. "Ms Johnson, I have a couple of officers here to see you. We need to come in." There was no answer. The man pulled a set of keys from his belt loop, fidgeting with the door handle as he struggled to insert the correct key. "Damn things," he muttered. "I can never seem to find the right one."

After several awkward moments, the manager finally opened the door. “Thank you,” I said. “Please wait outside while we take a look.”

I went in first, Mike close behind. The old man waited outside as instructed, leaving the door ajar. “Ms Johnson, this is Sergeant Emerson from the LAPD. We’re following up on a missing persons report,” I said.

Silence. The apartment was quiet as a tomb, all of the blinds pulled closed to give it that extra dark and musty feel. Mike stepped into the living room area while I poked around in the kitchen. The place was a dump: waterspots, wallstains, cracked tile flooring. The idea of suicide would have entered my mind much earlier if I lived in a place like this.

There was nothing of note in the kitchen, just a few dirty dishes in the sink and an unread People Magazine on the kitchen table.

“I’m gonna check out the bedroom,” called Mike from the hallway.

“Be there in a second,” I called as I opened the fridge. A half-gallon of milk that was three weeks past the expiration date. Never a good sign.

“Hey Stevie,” called Mike. “You need to check this out.”

I closed the refrigerator door and made my way towards the back of the apartment, stopping immediately as I entered the bedroom. I’d seen a lot of stuff in the eighteen months since I’d joined the force. I’d seen even more twisted shit while I had been over in Afghanistan. But this was truly fucking weird.

Ms Johnson – I presumed it was her - was lying atop her bed in a full length blue and silver cocktail dress, her hands clasped firmly across her stomach. Her hair and

makeup had been professionally done; fluffy blonde curls wrapped elegantly around her petite cherub-like face. The bright red lipstick stood in sharp contrast to her blue-tinted skin, like some kind of zombie hooker. A large plastic crown rested atop her head. And she wore a large red sash that ran from her right shoulder down across to her lower left hip. The sash read 'Homecoming Queen', which kind of helped explain the crown. She was the modern day equivalent of Cinderella, or Snow White, or whichever of those Disney chicks wore a crown.

Except Ms Johnson wasn't going out to any ball. Nor was she waking up any time soon. The empty bottle of sleeping pills and the note on the dresser were pretty clear. I stepped up to the body and checked for a pulse, per the official protocol. I knew it was hopeless before I even felt the cold skin. If the bluish tint of her body hadn't been a telltale sign that she'd been dead for a while, the smell certainly would have; it had hit me as soon as I walked into the room, and it got worse as I approached the body. It wasn't the smell of decay that one might expect from decomposing flesh. No, the smell of decay is more subtle. The smell of shit, however, is much more pronounced.

That's what these fucking suicides never understand, or always seem to forget. The average adult human body contains eight pounds of shit at any given time. And a large percentage of that comes out when you die, when your muscles turn to mush just before the rigor mortis sets in. Which is what I find so aggravating about suicides. If you're going to off yourself, at least have the decency to get a good enema before you do. I'd personally looked into several over the past year – just in case - and they didn't sound so bad.

But no, these discourteous fucks plan to make some great statement about their exit from the world. As a cop and former soldier, I'd seen all kinds of suicides; razor-blades in the bathtub, hangings from the ceiling beams, gunshots to the head. And while I'd give Brittany Johnson's princess diaries exit strategy an A for originality, it still had the same common shortcoming as all the others. SHE FORGOT ABOUT HER OWN SHIT!

She had clearly gone to great lengths so that the lucky policeman who found her – me – would come across this beautiful young woman so tragically taken from this world at so young an age. I bet she even envisioned that I might shed a tear.

Instead, I found the corpse of a misguided former homecoming queen who'd dropped 2-3 pounds of shit into the back of an expensive dress. After a couple of days, the only thing I would remember about Brittany Johnson would be the smell.

"I think she was a stripper or something," said Mike, temporarily dragging my attention away from the smell. He had stepped over to her closet and was looking at several flashy sequined cocktail dresses. But the telltale sign was the large high-heel platform shoes that lined the bottom of the closet.

I'd seen a lot of those shoes during my day, and always at the strip club. "Yeah, definitely a stripper," I agreed.

"She was pretty hot."

"Dude, that's sick."

"Relax. I'm just referring to the pictures on the nightstand." He pointed next to where I was standing.

I looked down at the picture frames. One of the pictures was of her and two of her girlfriends, a posed shot of the three of them in bikinis that looked like it had been taken on a white-sandy beach somewhere warm. The next photo was likely a family picture; she was young, standing next to what appeared to be a high-school aged brother. Behind them, their parents stood proudly. It was one of those hallmark like pictures, and they all looked happy. Guess that didn't last. A third picture was of Brittany in high school. It captured the moment the homecoming crown was being placed atop her head, the look of teary surprise evident on her face.

But the last picture was the one that caught my eye. I picked it up without realizing it. It was a recent picture. She stood next to a young man, the same boy from the other photo, his arm draped around her. He wore an army uniform, and a closer look proved that the boy was almost assuredly her brother or other relative, so similar were their features. He was older in the picture, and although he was smiling, there was clearly a weight that hung over him, a weight that even the camera captured. And although Brittany was smiling, she looked sad, like her smile was merely a cover, a façade not unlike the cheap upgrades that covered her apartment complex. I don't know why that particular picture unnerved me, but I couldn't take my eyes from it.

“John, what are you doing?” shouted Mike. “Put that down. You know forensics is going to have to come through.”

Of course they would. It was part of protocol. But I didn't care. This was clearly a suicide. They wouldn't find anything. So I ignored Mike as I continued to stare at the picture.



“John, you hear me?” Mike asked. He was now standing next to me.

“Yeah, I hear you.” I returned the picture to the nightstand, careful to put it back in its place. “Seal the place up. I’ll call this in.”

As I stepped out of Apartment #313 I was greeted by the manager. “Everything okay?”

“No.”

I stepped past him without another word, the pictures on the nightstand still forefront in my mind, each a snapshot in time, seemingly unrelated yet related at the same time. I kept going back to those pictures. Who was Brittany Johnson and what happened to her between each of those pictures? What led her to this?

I was in a foul mood when I arrived home that evening. I’d left the military after only one deployment to Afghanistan. Beheadings, shootings, bombings, I’d even come across one of my own local support contractors tortured to death, her mutilated corpse left for me to find like a present under the Christmas tree. I’ll never forget the look of horror imprinted on her deathly face. That had nearly broken me on the spot.

I hadn’t been able to shed that Army uniform fast enough once my enlistment was up. But it didn’t get any better. I simply traded in a tan uniform for a blue one.

Now, every day was the same. I’d spend my entire shift responding to suicides, or robberies, or domestic abuse calls. Eight straight hours of dealing with the worst fuck-ups that LA could throw my way. It was never some cute little girl who lost her cat in a tree.

Nope. An endless pipeline of rapists, drunks, and an assortment of other random felons. So many pieces of shit out there.

I pulled my gun holster from my waist, dropping it on the table without bothering to unload the weapon. I walked over to the bar and pulled out the Black Label, emptying the rest of the bottle into a highball, the whisky nearly flowing over the top of the glass before it trickled to a stop.

I promptly drank a third of the glass before retiring to the couch, falling down into the lumpy cushions before taking another long drink. Temporarily sated, I sat back up, picking up a pamphlet for a local spa that I'd held onto for the past several weeks. I fingered through the pamphlet, looking at the different services offered; an extensive menu of facials, massage and various body cleanses. I flipped to the back, looking at the large smeared circle of black ink around the "Royal Enema Cleanse & Rejuvenation Package". It was ridiculously expensive...two hundred bucks! But in the end it's only money, and what does that matter, anyways?

I took another gulp of the whisky before setting the glass down on the coffee table. There was only half a sip left, and that would be gone within the next minute. And then I'd be back on empty.

## THIRTY SECONDS

“Sully, you all right?” asked Sergeant Rob Samuelson as he pulled off his mask, partially choking on the cloud of freshly spewed dust and sand that swirled through the air.

“Something’s definitely fucked,” shouted Sergeant Ricky Sullivan above the slow grinding of gears and metal. He tugged hard on his right leg, pinned awkwardly between the co-pilot seat and the front-end of the helicopter, which had crumpled under initial impact.

Rob was already on the mobile radio, talking rapidly:

“This is Cobra 4. Repeat Cobra 4. We are down in need of transport. Copy?”

*“Copy that. We have your location at Grid B2. On the way. Copy?”*

“Copy. See you soon.” Rob dropped the receiver into the left leg pocket of his flight suit, confident in the knowledge rescue was en-route.

They had taken small arms fire, flying full speed just above the roofline per the latest directive. “High-speed low-altitude mitigates the threat of rocket fire” the intel officer had explained at last week’s brief.

But it didn’t appear to stop a determined guy with a gun, thought Rob as he unharnessed, jumped out of the smoldering wreckage and made his way to Sergeant Sullivan. The helicopter’s nose had bent back at a sharp angle, pinching into Sully’s leg just above the knee. It didn’t look like it was pinned tight. But of more concern was the trickle of dark red blood that stained the back of Sully’s leg.

“I think it’s broken,” said Sully through gritted teeth.

“Might be. But you’re just gonna have to nut up on this one. We gotta get out of here before the hajji’s arrive.”

“Then quit your yapping.”

Rob positioned his arms around Sully’s wounded leg. “You ready?”

“Yeah, just give me a second to collect my...”

Rob pulled on the wounded leg, sliding it out to the side.

“Aahh...you mother fucker!” screamed Sully against the explosion of pain that radiated up his entire body.

“Do you think you can walk?”

Sully was sweating profusely, in obvious agony, and it took him a few seconds before he could form a semi-coherent response. “Well, I sure as hell can’t stay here.”

Rob looked around for the first time. They had crashed in a suburb of Fallujah, in a small open patch of dirt that resembled a dilapidated town square. They were surrounded by what looked like abandoned houses, but a careful look towards the buildings revealed the peeking eyes of civilians, huddled in their houses away from the military crash site. Rob could sense the enemy as well, closing in from all sides. It wouldn’t be long now.

“All right, buddy, up you go,” shouted Rob as he pulled Sully to his feet.

“AAHHH!” screamed Sully as he partially collapsed, only Rob’s assistance keeping him from crashing to the ground in a heap. “Walkin’s a no-go” spit Sully through clenched teeth.

Rob pulled his pocket knife and cut through the leg of Sully's flight suit, just above the point where the leg had been pinned, pulling the fabric back to have a look. "It's just a flesh wound," Rob mocked. But the joke fell flat. Even without seeing the jagged shard of gleaming white bone that poked through the skin, it was obvious that the femur was shattered and useless.

Rob looked around for a defensible position, his eyes settling on an old rundown house about fifty yards away that looked abandoned. The house would provide cover and buy time. "Looks like I'm going to have to carry you."

Sully shook his head. "Just go. I'll hold them off as long as I can."

"No fucking way! We're both getting out of here. Just need to buy ourselves a couple of minutes until help arrives."

"Which you can do if you're on your own. But not if you're carrying me. Just go. I'll cover you."

"Never gonna happen," said Rob as he reached down for his co-pilot, just as several objects zipped overhead, the loud BAP-BAP-BAP sound echoing off the side of the helicopter as the bullets slammed into the metal behind the two men.

Rob glanced back as several fighters emerged from one of the side streets; the closest, merely a hundred yards away, already had his weapon aimed.

"No time," shouted Rob as he grabbed Sully, flung him overhead in a firemen's carry, and stumbled through the open side of the transport helicopter, ducking behind the metal framing as machinegun fire continued to slam into the downed aircraft. He set

Sully awkwardly down on the ground, the co-pilot gritting his teeth through the pain, close to unconsciousness.

“Should have left while you had the chance,” he mumbled.

Fresh gunfire slammed into the helicopter, and several voices could now be heard outside, the voices seemingly getting closer with every word.

Rob stepped towards the front of the helicopter, returning a few moments later with two machine guns in one hand and a radio in the other. “Can you shoot?” he asked Sully as he placed a gun in his hand.

“Guess we’re gonna find out,” answered Sully determinedly. He propped himself against a side panel within the helicopter, rotated his body carefully before firing a couple of rounds towards the direction of the voices outside. Rob did the same. Increased shouting erupted from the enemy fighters, and a couple of the nearest fighters retreated towards the surrounding buildings.

“Short bursts,” said Rob. “We only have one extra magazine between us.”

“That’s not enough,” replied Sully as a fresh round of enemy fire exploded into the ground just in front of the helicopter, mere feet from their position. There appeared to be more fighters flooding into the area with each passing minute.

“We’re going to be fine. Help’s on the way.”

Rob reached for the mobile from his side pocket, fumbling with the flight suits’ broken zipper before snatching the radio.

“This is Cobra 4. We’re fully engaged. Taking heavy fire. How’s that transport looking?”

*“Copy that Cobra 4. Inbound less than one Mike out.”*

Less than a minute, thought Rob. Keep their heads down and shoot off a couple rounds of suppression and they'd be okay. No problem, he thought.

A fresh round of bullets slammed into the side of the helicopter, this time from a different angle, casting doubt on whether they would last one more minute. The two Americans fired another round of suppression, which was met with more return fire, the loud BAP-BAP-BAP of bullets again slamming into the steel enclosure surrounding the two men. Small holes now lined the airframe, sunlight slipping through. It felt like the men were hiding within a large enclosure of Swiss cheese.

“I'm out,” shouted Sully as he pulled the empty clip from his rifle.

“Me too.” Rob tossed the final clip to Sully, who quickly reloaded his weapon. Rob tossed aside his own rifle, pulling his sidearm, a tiny 9mm that was virtually worthless against the plethora of longer-range machine guns now aimed against them. “Just keep shooting. The cavalry's less than thirty seconds out.”

There were several back-and-forth exchanges of gunfire, Rob and Sully silently counting down the seconds in their own minds. The bastards surrounding them seemed content to fire from afar, not coming closer to the downed aircraft. They thought they had more time. More time to bleed the two Americans of hope and ammunition. Little did these hajji's realize that any second their own lives were about to come to an end.

The two Americans kept looking to the sky, listening for the sounds of the approaching friendly airpower. Listening for the sounds of freedom.

But the only sounds that came were the intermittent blasts of small arms weapons and the occasional shouting of a strange foreign language, likely insults directed towards the two downed Americans.

“I’m out,” shouted Sully in frustration as he tossed his weapon to the helicopter floor, pulling out his own 9mm. “Where the fuck is our backup?”

Rob was already on the radio.

“Cobra 4 to HQ. We’re running low on ammo and time. How’s our rescue looking?”

*“HQ to Cobra 4. Rescue’s already arrived at your location. Reporting area is cleared of hostiles.”*

What the fuck? Two more rounds of fire erupted against the side of the helicopter, this time each coming from different directions. The voices of those shooting could now clearly be heard outside. They had been able to reposition closer. Cleared of hostiles my ass, thought Rob.

“HQ, this is Cobra 4. That’s a negative. We are fully engaged with no friendlies in sight. Copy.”

There was a long awkward pause on the radio. The silence was interrupted by a shout of broken English coming from outside the helicopter, likely only fifty yards away from behind an old abandoned car.

“You surrender now! You come out with high hands, no guns. We no kill you.”

The voice sounded confident, a tinge of arrogance in the words. Rob and Sully exchanged a quick glance. They’d been here long enough to know the truth. Sully fired a



couple of shots from his sidearm. Rob winced, realizing Sully had just tipped their hand to the enemy; no more rifles. It would be over soon now.

A voice sounded from the radio.

*“Cobra 4, this is HQ. We’ve confirmed sector B2 is secure.”*

“Not B2! We requested pickup in G2!”

*“You told us B2. We show no downed aircraft in G2.”*

“Pretty sure we’re down here!”

*“What is your exact lat/long?”*

“Stand by!” This was ridiculous, thought Rob. The world’s most advanced army and here he was, stuck in the middle of a firefight worrying about manual geolocation. He crouched down as he made his way towards the cockpit, conducting a quick survey of the navigation equipment. It was busted, crumpled under the weight of impact. A few pieces of equipment seemed semi-functional, but the blue-force tracker box looked completely F.U.B.A.R., gashed deep on the top right side with no pulse or other sign of life.

Sully fired off another round of shots in response to the latest volley of incoming fire. Rob saw the look on Sully’s face as the weapon clicked awkwardly, the sidearm now exhausted of ammunition as he tossed it to the floor.

“HQ, this is Cobra 4. Confirm that we are in G2. Repeat G2. I don’t have an exact lat/long. Blue trackers is FIGMO.”

There was another extended pause on the radio. *“Copy location G2. We’re Rerouting support. Sending multiple eyes in the sky to conduct manual location. Closest asset approximately ten minutes out.”*

Ten minutes! Rob looked over at Sully, who’d listened to the radio exchange. Rob pulled the clip from the 9mm, counting the bullets within. Ten. One for each minute. And that was assuming they were spotted immediately.

Outside, the heavily fragmented English voice continued. “You out of ammo. You surrender. No kill you.”

The voice was closer to their position, this time from behind a broken down trailer towards the aft of the downed copter.

Rob saw a head peak out from behind the cart, and quickly fired two rounds in its direction, just missing by about two feet. His shots were immediately met with multiple volleys of machine-gun fire, which came in from at least two directions. They appeared to be surrounded. Rob looked down at his sidearm.

Eight.

The machine gun fire stopped abruptly, giving way to shouting from the attackers, this time their shouting directed towards each other. They were planning their next move.

“Last month,” whispered Sully. “Do you remember what we discussed?”

Rob glanced down at his watch. Less than thirty seconds had passed. “Yeah.”

“I was serious, man.”

“I know.”

Their conversation was cut short when one of the enemy fighters emerged from behind a pile of rubble, sprinting towards their position, machine-gun at the ready. So unexpected was the move that he was mere steps away before Rob was able to lift his pistol and fire. Pop! Pop! Pop! The three bullets exploded into the assailants' chest, his body making a loud thud as it fell lifelessly to the ground mere feet from their position.

Five.

Rob barely saw the second attacker, pivoting around just in time to squeeze off two more rounds. Pop! Pop! The first shot missed wildly. The second caught the attacker squarely in the face, shattering his cheek as he too fell motionless to the ground.

Three.

The number was forefront on his mind when another volley of bullets was launched his direction, two of the bullets catching him in the upper thigh, both tearing through clothing and flesh. He screamed in pain, and his entire leg burned.

He grunted and fell, dropping the gun momentarily before picking it up and retreating deeper into the safety of the copter. After several moments of excruciating pain, he looked down. There was blood running from a single exit wound, which meant the other bullet was still embedded within. He looked down at his watch. Less than two minutes had passed since the radio exchange. Again, the voice sounded from outside.

“You wounded. We fix you. No food. No ammo. You surrender. Okay, you be.”

This time the voice sounded more confident, almost condescending. He reached around the edge of the copter and fired one shot towards the voice out of frustration.

Two.

Or maybe it was fired in desperation, he thought to himself. He looked down at his leg, now covered with blood. Across from him, Sully leaned back against the inner wall of the copter, regarding Rob with a look of what appeared to be...acceptance.

“Were you serious last month?” Sully asked.

Rob paused. “I don’t know. Never thought it would come to this.”

“I don’t want to be an internet sensation. I don’t want my family seeing that shit. You made me a promise. I expect you to keep it.”

“I don’t know if I can do it?”

“Don’t give me that shit,” snarled Sully. “We made a pact. And now’s not the time for second-guessing. We both know how this ends. With one of those fucks chanting in Arabic while holding our severed heads up for all the world to see. Now you do what you promised me. And do it right now. If they come at us again we won’t get a second chance.”

“I can’t,” cried Rob as he lowered his head.

“Do it, you fucking pussy!”

“Help’s on the way.”

“You ignorant backstabbing fuck. Do it now or so help me I’ll kill you myself.

“But...”

“You made me a promise. On your daughter’s life, you said. If she means anything at all to you then you’ll keep that promise. Don’t be such a fucking coward. Just grant me the one thing that...”

BANG! The shot echoed from inside the confines of the copter, echoing from one side to the other. Rob hadn't even realized that he'd pointed the gun, hadn't processed that he'd pulled the trigger. It wasn't until the echoing had stopped, that Sully's body had collapsed to the side, his head leaving a trail of smeared blood against the metal framing, that Rob actually realized that he'd killed his best friend.

It had been Sully's final demand. A secret promise kept between friends, a promise that they wouldn't allow themselves to be taken alive; to be mocked, tortured, and ultimately, publicly executed.

Save the final two bullets for us, they had promised each other. And now...

One.

A sudden explosion rocked the area just to the west of the downed copter, shaking the helicopter as large pieces of debris flew through the air. Another large explosion erupted just to the front of the aircraft. There was shouting from outside, and Rob saw a couple of the enemy fighters sprint away from the crash site. The bodies of several less fortunate littered the ground, their corpses mangled and bent at awkward angles.

*“Cobra 4, this is HQ. Was able to reroute local Predator and now have visual over your crash site. Evac is on the way. ETA in less than two minutes. Copy.”*

Rob looked down at his watch. It had only been four minutes since his last transmission with HQ. They had arrived six minutes early. How could the estimate have been that far off? Why hadn't they known before about the Predator drone flying nearby?

He had no answers to his own questions. He had no further explanation. All he had was Sully's lifeless body, its bright crimson blood, still warm and wet, splattered across the inside the helicopter like a scene from a horror movie.

*“Cobra 4, this is HQ. Evac in less than two minutes. Confirm.”*

There would be a military inquiry. An investigation. Forensics. They would know who killed Sully. And they wouldn't care about the excuse. No one left behind, that was the Army creed.

Coward. Murderer. Backstabber. That's how they would label him. That's how he would be forever known. He pictured himself on trial, his picture splayed all over the evening news. He envisioned his picture on the front page of newspapers and magazines. He could already picture the headline: 'Traitor breaks under fire, murders hero friend'. And lastly he imagined the internet coverage; websites, blogs, and social media articles all going viral as his very being was dragged through the virtual mud.

How ironic, he thought, that after all this he would in fact become an internet sensation. He couldn't do it. Not to Julia and their baby. Not to mom and dad.

*“Cobra 4. Do you copy?”*

Oh I copy, he thought. I copy it all. Alive, I'll be a social pariah. But dead, the truth dies with me. The military won't drag the name of one of the fallen through the mud. Hell, they'll probably give me a silver star just to make it all look nice and neat.

Sergeant Rob Samuelson picked up his sidearm, put the barrel directly under his chin and pulled the trigger. The last thing that went through his head – other than the

bullet – was a brief thought of his wife and newborn daughter. He hoped they would remember him as he could have been, even if it was all a lie.

*“Cobra 4. Do you copy?”*

*“Cobra 4. Come in.”*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Greg Stevens graduated from McLaughlin High School in Milton-Freewater OR, in 1995. He received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of St Thomas in 1999 and a Masters of Fine Arts from George Mason University in 2017. He currently resides in Virginia with his wife and daughter.