

DON'T ASK

BY B. K. DELL



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Patriot Books

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This novel is dedicated to my beautiful wife Eleasha, the precious gift that God chose for me.

This novel is also dedicated to all the men and women who have ever served in the United States Armed Forces. Your commitment, bravery, and sacrifice have helped make America the greatest country in the world. God Bless you!

Author's Notes:

This novel does not contain any swear words. I am proud to make that statement and admit it was not an easy task considering that the main characters are Marines! However, I have included the worst epithet against homosexuals – known as the other F-word – a total of three times. Due to the seriousness of the topic, I decided that to leave it out would whitewash the reality and detract from the sincerity of the novel.

The Eleasha Postscript is an additional postscript I add to each of my novels specifically for my loving wife and her kind heart. It is a happy ending – if not Pollyannaish and absurd – tailored specifically for her, though I hope everyone will enjoy it.

~B.K. Dell

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

"I never asked you to be a hero, Caleb." Stacy reached for Caleb's hand, but Caleb pulled away. "To me, you are already a hero. You're a hero just because of the way you smile. You're a hero to me just the way you are." Stacy spoke these heartrending words with more sincerity than Caleb had ever heard.

But Caleb knew it was an act. The words were meant to serve as an apology for Stacy's mere presence in California.

"What are you doing here?" Caleb asked with a coldness that indicated the apology was not accepted.

Stacy's eyes were pleading and desperate, "I don't want you to go."

"You're too late. I took the oath in Texas."

"No one trusts an oath taken in Texas!" Stacy was trying to be charming.

"I do." Caleb was not buying it.

"They're going to be so awful to you," Stacy moaned, frustrated by the fact that no scheme could penetrate Caleb's stoic demeanor.

"That's just what men do," Caleb said dismissively.

"Not all men. Not real men."

"We are talking about real men," snapped Caleb. "We're talking about the best men in the world."

Stacy's lips pursed into a sanctimonious smirk and Caleb turned his face away. He watched a bus at the other end of the parking lot as it pulled up to the front of the San Diego USO. Above the windshield, the bus had an unassuming sign that read "United States Marine Corps." Something about just seeing those words sparked memories in Caleb that he had always tried to keep repressed.

Stacy noticed how distant Caleb had suddenly become and correctly guessed that, under the circumstances, Caleb's thoughts had turned to his father. "What are you thinking about?" Stacy asked anyway.

Caleb turned his eyes away from the sign, shook his head somberly, and said, "Don't ask."

"Well, I guess you already know what to expect," Stacy said derisively.

"I don't think any of us know what to expect from *this*," mumbled Caleb. Stacy knew him well enough to detect the fear that he tried to hide in his voice.

There was an empty silence between the two of them, but it was broken when they heard the sounds of the bus engine shutting down. Soon that bus would take Caleb away.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Stacy grabbed his wrist with both hands. Dropping down to both knees, like a child's tantrum in a department store, Stacy became a shackle of dead weight attached to Caleb's arm. As he tried ineffectively to struggle from Stacy's grip, he looked at the glass face of the USO building, curious to see if any of the men inside might be watching such a mortifying episode. The reflection of the low clouds over the horizon behind him was all he could see.

"Do you have any idea what kind of scene you are making?" Caleb grumbled.

"I don't care. I love you. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

"My country needs me."

"I need you."

Caleb decided he'd had enough of this drama and hoisted Stacy up off the ground. He wrenched his own hand free and said, "I have to do this."

"Why?"

Caleb looked at Stacy and smiled, sad and sweet. This was a conversation they'd already had. "How can I get you to understand? This isn't a choice. It's part of who I am. I have always been a Marine. I know that now."

Stacy gave the same smirk from before. It was the same condescending reaction that Stacy gave every time Caleb praised the military.

Over Caleb's shoulder, Stacy noticed the sea of anxious reporters forming at the far end of the parking lot. They, like mold, seemed to have materialized out of nothing. Stacy wasn't

certain whether the dark cloud above them had been there before they showed up, or not.

Caleb hadn't yet noticed the reporters; his eyes were glued to Stacy's face. He knew that the next thirteen weeks were going to be a non-stop series of moments that he just had to merely survive. The first of such moments had been his and Stacy's tearful goodbye in Texas. Now Stacy had shown up in California to put him through it all over again.

The press shuffled through the parking lot aimlessly and seemed to be waiting for something. They had been called to get a story, but couldn't identify their subjects. Their faces were all like children playing a game, waiting for a voice to guide them, "Warmer...warmer...You're getting hot...hotter..." Caleb still had not noticed this camera wielding mob, but he did notice a peculiar mix of guilt and pride in Stacy's eyes.

"Don't be mad at me," Stacy told him. Stacy's voice was breathy and earnest. It was the first genuine emotion that Caleb had heard so far, only he didn't understand what Stacy meant. The reporters drew closer and began to focus in on Stacy who, knowing they were watching, pulled Caleb in for an awkward kiss. This told the reporters everything they needed to know. No longer confused, they advanced like well trained mercenaries. A single flash, like lightning from an approaching storm, like the first shot of a long and protracted war, turned Caleb's head toward the incoming enemy formation. It took only the length of that flash for Caleb to figure out what was happening, what Stacy had meant, and that the kiss was a betrayal.

"What did you do, Stacy?" he asked as the maelstrom of flashes increased in intensity and the voices of the reporters were becoming audible.

"I'm sorry," Stacy said softly and quickly, fearing that this was the last verbal exchange they could make that would not be picked up by the mob's hungry microphones. "I know that you were not doing this for attention. I know you said you were not doing this for the cause, but that is not your decision to make. The cause does not belong to you. The cause is bigger than you." Stacy tried desperately to give his most charming smile. He nudged Caleb and added, "C'mon, just once, don't you want to stick it to those bigots?"

Caleb narrowed his eyes in revulsion. He turned and watched the photographers spread out to catch a better shot of him, while the advancing reporters fought for elbow room in a tight circle around him. He wished he could find someplace to hide. "What have you done?" he whispered, morose.

They assailed him with a din of questions, each lobbed in like mortar fire. They asked, "What made you decide to enlist?" and, "Has someone put you up to this?" He thought he actually heard one reporter ask, "Do you have a death wish?"

Finally, he heard a question about which he had something to say, "How does it feel to be America's first openly gay Marine?"

"I am not a Marine, yet," said Caleb.

"What would you like to accomplish for your cause?" another reporter asked.

Caleb thought about this for a second. Different approaches on how to answer such a question hit him as quickly as the flash bulbs. He said, "For my cause, I would like to kill as many Taliban members as possible."

This answer produced a noticeable pause from the stunned reporters, a small hiccup in their aggressive professionalism. A bemused reporter asked, "How does that help homosexuals?"

"Well, I think we'd be safer from terrorism, don't you?"

The pace of the camera flashes slowed like the heart monitor of a patient slipping away. The weight of the microphones seemed to increase as the arms carrying them lowered in heavy disappointment. Caleb could see that an excitement had left their faces. "What statement are you making by joining?" another reporter asked.

"None," Caleb said simply.

"Are you worried about boot camp?"

"I'm going to war," Caleb said pointedly, "boot camp is the least of my problems."

"How do you think you will be received?"

"I think they are going to try to kill me," Caleb laughed, but only at the ridiculousness of the question.

To his surprise, the entire gaggle of press laughed too. "I meant your fellow Marines," the reporter corrected.

"So did I!" Caleb said hastily.

It wasn't true; Caleb actually had thought it was a question about the terrorists. It was his dark sense of humor that had placed the quick joke so readily at his disposal. *What better than to joke about his fear?* he thought. However, the reporters' gleeful reactions made him instantly regret having said it. Their obsequious laughter bothered him. Caleb didn't want to play the role into which they were trying so desperately to cast him.

"Listen," Caleb was quick to add, "I am no better than any man who is serving or has ever served his country. In fact, they are far better than me. There is not a man in uniform who I don't intend to learn something from. And I want to learn two things: how to better help the war effort and how not to die!" He looked over the sad faces and insisted, "I am no different than any man here; wasn't that once what the cause was about – to not be seen as different? I don't want to be looked at as just a gay man. I want to be looked at as a Marine. And if you don't mind, I have a bus to catch."

As the crowd of reporters started to clear a path for Caleb, he saw some young men walking out of the USO center. Because of how shockingly young they looked, it took Caleb a second to realize they were new recruits, future Marines, like he was. They were beginning to board the bus and Caleb feared that the unexpected media ambush had made him late. The recruits kept their distance from the press – as did the Marine personnel – but as Caleb began to make his way to the bus, he could feel them all staring intensely at him. At that moment, he longed for the days of being completely invisible.

With every step Caleb took, Stacy stayed glued to his side. Caleb felt certain Stacy was playing the dutiful boyfriend only for the sake of the cameras, so he veered his stride away from him as they walked. Noticing Caleb's retreating body language, Stacy moved even closer into his personal space, which – like a magnet with the same charge – caused Caleb to veer farther away. Finally, knowing the eyes of the recruits were on them and, via news cameras, the eyes of the whole world, Stacy abruptly reached out to hold Caleb's hand. To Caleb, it felt like the hand of a stranger. It felt like an unexpected and inappropriate advance from a co-worker or neighbor. The repercussions of angrily pulling his hand away in front of

everyone filled Caleb's mind and he steeled his will against the urge to do so. The last thing he needed was that footage looped and analyzed by the talking heads on cable news, or it going viral on YouTube.

Most of the photographers were positioned to get a wide shot of Caleb and Stacy's affection with the Marine bus as a backdrop. The reporters had all fallen back to stay out of the shot. Only one reporter, from a small local paper out of Ramona, California, shadowed their advance a few yards to their right. Caleb stopped short on the way to the bus with the intention of giving Stacy a truncated, half-hearted goodbye. Sensing this, Stacy grabbed him and kissed him hard on the lips. Caleb winced like he had just bitten into a lemon and he resisted the compulsion to wipe his lips on his own sleeve.

Stacy laced his fingers behind Caleb's back. Caleb was pulling away as far as he could without causing a scene and without actually beating Stacy off of him. Holding Caleb close this way, Stacy took one second to peruse the motley group of recruits. Caleb could see the lines of his eyebrows tighten as what had been Stacy's general dislike for the military quickly ripened into raw hatred. One man in particular caught Stacy's eye and he disgustedly turned back to Caleb, "Do me a favor and watch out for *that* one."

Caleb wanted to put Stacy's duplicity with the press out of his mind. In his last chance to see Stacy in a long time, he tried to remember what he had once loved about him. In this spirit, Caleb gave Stacy the benefit of the doubt and convinced himself that Stacy really was concerned for his wellbeing.

"Which one?" he innocently asked.

"That ugly redneck with the big gaudy cross around his neck."

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Caleb made it to the bus, most of the other men had already boarded. The recruiter, tight lipped, marked Caleb's name off the roll call that he had missed. The recruiter did not need to ask his name; he knew who Caleb was. And Caleb did not have to guess what the recruiter's expression meant. He had seen the same expression on bullies in school, a look that said, "The teacher may be watching us now, but school gets out at three o'clock." Caleb walked by with his head down.

As he walked down the aisle of the bus, every eye was on him. His sheer nervousness caused him to trip over his own two feet, but luckily he was able to convert the stumble into a cool gangsta' limp. Caleb felt that this recovery was quite masterful, considering the situation. He gave himself extra points for not looking back at the ground behind him like most people do when they trip.

Caleb was anxious to not be the only man standing, but every time he approached an open spot, the man sitting on that bench would slide over toward the aisle, hampering any chance for Caleb to sit down. Finally, he found one seat that no one tried to block. He made a motion to lower himself next to the man in that seat, but stopped when he noticed what the man looked like. The man wore faded blue jeans and a worn out plaid shirt. His hair was a mess, in a style of disarray that may have been intentional, and was the exact color of brown that made it always look dirty. He had a big silver cross hanging around his neck. *This must be the redneck*, Caleb thought. Remembering Stacy's words, he turned back to the aisle and kept walking. The last row of the bus had a full bench open and Caleb took it.

To Caleb's relief, he wasn't the last one to board. There were some stragglers who stepped onto the bus after Caleb sat down. Caleb heard the last man call out his name for the roll call, "Terrence Brown, sir," before he leaped up the stairs and rushed down the aisle. Terrence was halfway to the back of the bus when he noticed that the only seat still open was the one next to Caleb. Terrence took one look at Caleb and paused. Caleb smiled and gave a meek little wave. His expression was begging for acceptance, like the oldest dog at an over-crowded pound.

Terrence recognized him from the scene in the parking lot. He turned to check his options again and could hear a few of the recruits snickering about his predicament. Finally, he turned to the man on the outside of the bench in front of him and muttered, "Scoot over," then slid half his buttocks onto the edge of the bus bench, now containing three grown men.

The old bus door slamming shut sounded like a bone breaking, and the force at Caleb's back as the bus lurched forward felt strangely foreboding. The colors of the bus – as well as the people on it – were muted, with threadbare flannel and coarse denim. Caleb got the feeling that if he slapped any surface, a puff of dust would be released into the air and dance in the sun rays. The window made a rattling sound right next to Caleb's ear. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Caleb noticed every head on the bus taking turns swiveling around to look at him. Every time Caleb caught someone staring at him, the person would look away. Every time that one man would lean in and whisper something to another, Caleb would assume it was a comment about him. Every time someone laughed, Caleb assumed that a joke had just been made at his expense.

Caleb had already created mocking names in his head for most of the men: Chili Bowl, Ponytail, Mullet, and of course Fundamentalist – the redneck. When he noticed what his wandering mind had done, he immediately reproached himself. *You've been hanging around Stacy for too long*, Caleb thought. He had come here to serve with these men, bleed with them, and perhaps die with them. *I do not and will not hate them, even if they are so anxious to hate me.*

Only one man continued to stare straight at him even after Caleb stared back. Buzz Cut. Caleb's eyes held his, but Buzz Cut refused to look away. He was thick-necked with bold features. His hair was shaved so close to his head that he wouldn't need to see the barber when they reached the MCRD. His eyes were brown, his eyebrows were thick and dark, and his jaw was square. He wore a faded blue tank-top that displayed his bulging muscles. On his left arm was a tattoo of the American flag. *He's the type of guy Stacy would hate to talk to but love to look at*, thought Caleb. *Just another corn-fed boy from the South.* Buzz

Cut looked like he was born to be a Marine. *He probably came out of the womb with that flag tattoo already on his arm.*

Caleb held his glance, studying him, hoping he would politely turn away and wondering why he hadn't yet. The man's stone face offered no answers. The bus rolled on. Caleb resisted every impulse to turn away. He held Buzz Cut's hateful stare for what seemed like an eternity. *He's just trying to intimidate me, but I've got to let him know that I can't be intimidated.* Just then, the bus hit a large pothole that sent Caleb's entire body a foot into the air. The same jolt barely moved Buzz Cut's much larger body an inch. *Okay, so I can be intimidated after all.*

Suddenly, a man in uniform and an aura of authority stepped into the aisle at the front of the bus. With a voice that could command fear and respect from the most hardnosed criminal, he hollered, "Heads down!" Caleb and Buzz Cut immediately broke eye contact and ducked their heads down.

The new recruits were forced to ride the whole way with their heads tucked uncomfortably between their knees, like a duck and cover drill. Caleb knew that at least the ride would not be long; the Marine Corps Recruit Depot was only five minutes from the USO center by the airport. Caleb thought wrong. The driver drove for another hour, needlessly, just to let them know how things were done in boot camp. No opportunity would be missed to mess with their heads.

If being frozen in an uncomfortable position during such a transitional stage of their lives was meant to be agonizing, for Caleb it worked. Even with the physical pain shooting down his neck and back serving as a distraction, Caleb could not keep his mind away from negative thoughts. He was trying not to let anything Stacy had said affect him, but he couldn't help remembering all the things he had heard about boot camp and all the movies he had seen. Stacy brought home a different one each night, hoping to dissuade Caleb from joining. Scenes from *Full Metal Jacket* ran through his head – *can a drill instructor really punch recruits? Would I have to choke myself with his hand?* – and Code Red from *A Few Good Men* – *was that real or just in the movies?* Then Caleb had heard of something called a blanket party. He was pretty sure that one was real. That is where the other men rush up behind a recruit, throw a blanket over his

head, and beat him mercilessly. In some instances the man underneath the blanket has ended up dead, or just paralyzed for the rest of his life. *Could people be so vicious?* Caleb wondered, *The men I just described as the best men in the world?*

While Caleb tried to get his brain to think of something else, the memory returned – like it often did – of the day that he came out of the closet. He gritted his teeth and struggled to free his mind from that trap. Finally, in some strange compromise with his own demons, his thoughts settled on the first day he had to suit up for Gym Class – which illustrated just how ineffective he was at this type of negotiation.

It was the first day of fifth grade and Caleb's PE coach was under some insane delusion that it would be fun to start the year with a capture the flag obstacle course. The coach chose four team captains who got to take their turns picking teams. As usual, Caleb was the last one picked. This only compounded the embarrassment he was already suffering. While suiting up, he discovered that the style must have changed to long shorts for boys – as opposed to very short shorts – without anyone bothering to let him know. His shorts were white with faded green trim and there was just barely enough of them to cover his rear end. He would have looked like he played for the '81 Boston Celtics had he not been so short and scrawny.

Caleb's only task in this competition was to wait until he was tagged, climb all the way up the rope and grab the flag. The other team's climber was tagged and started up his rope while Caleb was still waiting for his teammate. As Caleb watched the other boy climb, he wondered how he would make up the time. He used this problem as encouragement, giving himself what he considered to be a pretty awesome pep talk in his head. By the time he was tagged, the first team's climber was already half way up his rope but Caleb wasn't discouraged. He grabbed the highest spot that his hands could reach, wrapped both legs around the rope – bare due to his ridiculously short shorts – and pulled as hard as he could. Caleb's body hovered for a second in the air, then slowly slid down until his butt was on the ground. Standing up quickly, he jumped high into the air, gripped the rope, then slid straight back down to the floor again.

All three other teams had captured their flags and moved on to the next obstacle, leaving Caleb's team in last place. A few from his team were being supportive, but most were acting like typical ten year old boys. It probably would have hurt his feelings if he heard some of the things they were saying, but as he tried again and again, the only thing he could hear was his own heartbeat. Caleb's face was bright red with exertion and the veins on his neck were all popping out. He hung suspended on the rope, frantically pushing with his feet, creating rope burn on his inner thighs, until once again he slid right back down to the ground. When he paused to catch his breath, his heart slowed enough to let a peculiar noise enter his ears. At first Caleb ignored it, but then he made the mistake of looking around the gym that had previously disappeared during his concentration. Every student in the class had gathered around to watch him struggle, and every single one of them was laughing – a chorus of mocking laughter.

His eyes filled with tears and he began to throw a tantrum. He stood up and stomped his foot on the ground. Without the luxury of something to throw, he attempted to swing punches and kicks at the hanging rope. A stream of profanities came out of his mouth as he continued to punch and kick the rope, which was about as futile as trying to hit a butterfly in flight. When the coach grabbed him to calm him down, Caleb continued to fight, so the coach lifted poor Caleb up off his feet and carried him to the principal's office, kicking and yelling the whole way.

The memory made Caleb laugh. *It probably won't be quite like that*, he told himself.

Caleb stopped laughing, however, when he remembered the rest of the story. That was the day that defined in Caleb's young mind everything there was to know about his father. Caleb's father was an oil well fireman, but Caleb never really knew much about what his father did between the time he left home and the time he came back. Unfortunately, the same wasn't true for his father; Caleb's father heard about everything that ever happened to young Caleb during the day, utilizing the advantage that comes with parenting in a small town.

The most lasting images Caleb had of his father were of him half covered in oil and grime after a day of fighting fires. Caleb

learned to tell how stressful his father's day had been by the amount of grime on his face, clothes, and hands when he came home. Caleb knew to avoid all contact on the stressful days. More stress meant more drinking and more drinking meant more rage. A knot in his stomach tightened every time he heard the garage door open and his father's car pull in. He trembled, just waiting for the first glimpse of his father's face.

Never had the sound of the garage door been as chilling to Caleb as it was the day of his failed rope climb. Caleb knew his father had already heard. He waited in the kitchen, hoping at least that his face would be clean. The first thing his father did when he walked through the door was give Caleb a tired look of pure disgust. He said only two words, "You quit."

Caleb could still see that disappointed look on his father's oil splattered face.

* * *

There were thirty-six men on the bus as it pulled into the MCRD and all of them had watched the same movies as Caleb. They knew what was in store for them when they stepped off that bus and they were expecting the worst.

Staff Sergeant Folsom watched the men carefully as they staggered off the bus stiff legged and anxious. Terrence Brown had not just a stagger, but a full blown limp. Balancing his body on the edge of the seat for over an hour had left his right buttock completely numb. A young drill instructor named Sergeant Page yelled fiercely at the men. His voice was loud, but it had a weak nasal sound to it. The recruits could not believe how baby-faced he looked. He started aggressively barking orders at them the second they stepped foot off the bus, but he kept turning his head back to SSgt Folsom, confused by Folsom's inaction. It was obvious to the men there that Sgt Page was still a little green and SSgt Folsom was the one in charge.

All the recruits were ordered to line up on the yellow footprints painted on the pavement and stand at attention with their eyes forward and their mouths shut. SSgt Folsom shook his head in weary dissatisfaction as he walked back and forth in front of the men. He did not seem intimidating at all. In fact, as he kept sighing quietly, he seemed tired. Finally he said, "Which

one of you..." When he paused, every man there was finishing his sentence in their heads: *pansies, nancies, pantywaists, girl-scouts, sissies...* "...recruits...is Caleb Hertz?"

"Here, sir," Caleb's voice quivered and it provoked a laugh. The laugh was cut short by the smallest snap of SSgt Folsom's head.

As Caleb saw SSgt Folsom draw near in his peripheral, he swallowed hard and tried desperately to keep his eyes forward. To his surprise, SSgt Folsom did not get right in his face, nose to nose. Instead, he looked at Caleb from a slight distance and tilted his head slowly as if studying an oil painting. His face was drawn down in a frown, a real frown, far from the intimidation and theatrics for which Caleb had spent the last hour preparing himself. Caleb knew he wasn't supposed to look at him, but he could not help it. His eyes uncontrollably locked on SSgt Folsom's face. The face looked like it wanted to kill him. SSgt Folsom did not yell, "Eyes front!" as was expected, but allowed Caleb to look at him for a few seconds to absorb his hatred. "Okay then," he said mildly, then turned and started muttering the articles that were, "the absolute laws you will live by." SSgt Folsom had gone over articles of the UCMJ countless times during the span of his career, and he had always barked them out with his powerful, gruff voice. But this time was different. He spoke with a voice so apathetic that no one would have imagined it belonged in a Marine boot camp. His muscles were tight and his waistline slim, but his indolent eyes and lethargic deportment gave the impression that he had spent the last six months on an all fast food diet.

Perhaps this is my form of protest, he thought. Perhaps this is my personal version of a strike. The job he once loved seemed exasperating now. The calling he once pledged his life to seemed tainted. He felt like he had no control. There was a voice in his head that said, *If those lawmakers want to be in control so badly, maybe they should come down here and train these men themselves.*

After what seemed like an eternity of instructions and endless paperwork, it was time for the notorious haircuts. This is a rite of passage for recruits, and most were nervous as they waited for their turn in a chair. The barbers worked quickly.

Their hands moved with the efficiency gained from repeating routine motions incalculable times. Some traumatized recruits watched the floor as every lock of their hair landed gently in the forming mounds. Some of the men watched the mirror with dismay as the image of themselves transformed before their eyes. After a few short minutes, they stumbled helplessly from their chair and appeared somewhat disoriented. All of them rubbed their heads incessantly. As Caleb watched the others from the end of the line, he discovered an amazing phenomenon – all the names that he had given to the other recruits no longer worked. His eyes tried to search for the specific person he labeled as *Mullet*, or *Ponytail*, but he couldn't figure out which ones were which. The only two that he could still identify were Fundamentalist, because he still wore his cross, and Buzz Cut because of his bulging muscles – plus his hair did not change.

Most of the men congregating on the other side of the room did not resemble the men who blocked Caleb from sitting next to them on the bus. This excited Caleb. No one among them, thanks to Stacy and the press, had stuck out as much as Caleb had. And this was his chance for them to forget who *he* was on the bus. He looked at the man behind him in line. He and Caleb were the same height; both of them had a round face, unexceptional features, and the same skin tone. Caleb knew that his crystal blue eyes were a little rare, but the other man happened to have blue eyes, too. In fact, the most obvious difference between the two was the other man had blond hair and Caleb's hair was dark. How different would they really look without hair? This was Caleb's chance to really blend in for once in his life.

When it was finally his turn, Caleb sat down in the chair and his fine hair immediately began to float to the ground without protest. Some hairs fell in clumps like stones, but others fell in wisps, somersaulting through the air. He watched his own reflection as the barber made his way around Caleb's head. But unlike the others, there was a slight smirk on Caleb's lips that he couldn't manage to control. The tingling scrapes of the cutters produced a pleasurable pain. The barber was removing his hair just as easily as removing a cap that he had been wearing. Then Caleb saw something that made his stomach lurch. The removal of his dark hair had left visible the massive scar on his scalp. It

ran from the tip of his ear, traced a large wandering arc across half of his skull and ended near the top of his spine. There was no direction Caleb could turn his head to hide it. Caleb had forgotten that hair would not grow from the scar tissue, he had nearly forgotten about the scar completely. The scar was as ugly as the dark period of his past that it commemorated, a period that had remained well hidden. Until now.

Caleb angled his head as he walked toward the group, but it did no good. He used the ritual of rubbing his scalp to hide the scar the best he could, as long as he could, but also to hide his eyes. They were stinging with disappointment and he was afraid that he would top off the first impression he was leaving on these men by starting to cry. Every eye was on him again, examining the rift drawn by his hideous scar, the only distinguishable characteristic on any man present. Caleb felt like he had been marked by nature scientists who wished to come back and observe him later. He imagined a note in their spiraled logs that read, "Scar = Gay."

Next, they were lead to a series of semi-private booths, ordered to take off their clothes, put their possessions in a box, and label that box. SSgt Folsom's instructions were listless, like an old schoolmarm reciting instructions on how to properly fill in the bubbles of a standardized test. It was after midnight by the time all the recruits were issued uniforms, field gear, and toiletries. The men separated into their platoons and were assigned squad bays. This was the first time Caleb stopped to notice that – just his luck – *Fundamentalist* had been assigned to his platoon.

Upon entering the squad bay, each man was assigned a rack. They were provided linens and one thin blanket, the color of which could best be described as *olive drab*. SSgt Folsom promptly showed them how to make their racks by the numbers, counting off each movement that the recruits were to make. The count was slow enough that they could easily keep up. Most of the men began to feel excessively lighthearted; all their panic over the boot camp they had seen in the movies was for naught. They were now picturing a far easier time than they had previously feared. But not Caleb. Caleb tried to shake the feeling of dark dread that SSgt Folsom had given him, and tried to

remind himself of all the reasons he walked into that recruitment office in the first place.

During the mechanical process of folding down sheets and tucking in the corners of their blankets, no one noticed that SSgt Folsom had slipped out. When some recruits realized he was gone, a few of them asked, “Where did he go?” and, “What should we do now?” Some just shrugged, while others lay on their racks and began to fall asleep. Caleb laid his head back and rubbed his eyes. He was trying to get the image of SSgt Folsom studying him out of his mind.

When SSgt Folsom crept back into the room as silently as he had left, no one noticed him. He studied the men with a mixture of disgust and compassion. Their bodies were draped slovenly over their racks, like they were at a marijuana party in a college dorm. All recruits were like this – boys essentially. It was always his job to make them into men. It was the training that SSgt Folsom gave them that would later save their lives. He was realizing that it was a calling for which he could never go on strike, no matter how many obstacles some bureaucrat put in his way, or how tightly he had to hold his nose. His chest rose and fell as he released his last quiet sigh.

“A-ten-Hut!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. Due to his prior display of languor, a few of the men did not move very quickly, some unfortunate recruits had fallen half asleep and were disoriented as they tried to get to the proper place and stance. Others were either just slow or sloppy; or they forgot one or more of the seven steps to standing at attention. SSgt Folsom wasted no time correcting them.

One by one he would get nose to nose, look them straight in the eyes, and yell at the top of his lungs, “What is your problem, recruit? Do you think you are on vacation, recruit? Is that the proper stance for attention, recruit? Why are you looking at me, recruit? If my boot doesn’t fit between your feet then they are not at forty-five degrees, recruit. Why am I looking at your knuckles, recruit? What about ‘palms facing inward’ don’t you understand? Is your thumb in line with your seam, recruit? If you’ve locked your knees, recruit, you’re gonna’ end up flat on the ground. Why is your chin out, recruit? Are you itching to get

it punched? Why are your elbows out, recruit? We don't do the chicken dance in the United States Marine Corps!"

The men felt like they had been duped. Here was the man they expected to see when walking off the bus. This was like an encore concert performance, so delayed that some people were already in the aisles with their keys out headed for their cars.

When the men were all finally standing at proper attention, SSgt Folsom put them at ease and then began to explain the correct Marine way to do each of what he called the "daily dozen" – all the exercises a Marine needs to know for their daily physical training, and consequently, for incentive training. They had names such as side-straddle hops, mountain climber, trunk twisters, and squat benders. "Through pain you retain," SSgt Folsom informed them. As he demonstrated each one, he did not pause his speech, but rather kept talking at a steady pace as no one exercise took any effort for him at all. At first he would illustrate and the recruits would mimic. Then, when he felt the recruits had each exercise down pretty well, he began to call out the name of one exercise after another, in quick procession, expecting each recruit to move easily from one to the next. The men scrambled frantically in every which way. The whole thing looked more like bad performance art than it did exercise.

The first person who fell behind was Jackson Brooks, known to Caleb as *Fundamentalist*.

"What is your problem, Churchie? You think that Jesus is going to walk through that hatch and save you from *me*?"

"Sir, no, sir," Jackson said as he tried to speed up.

"Jesus may have your soul, recruit, but everything else belongs to me." As the rest of the platoon suffered through mounting pain, SSgt Folsom called out, "If not for this God-boy, you all would be done by now."

As the night continued, the recruits seemed to take turns getting singled out. One by one they were reported to be the cause of the entire platoon having to start over. No one could keep up. "This is my home. Do not throw up on the decks in my home. If you need to throw up, throw up into your own shirt," SSgt Folsom hollered at the group as if seeing the future. Moments later men began throwing up from physical pain and exhaustion.

Caleb had been far behind from the beginning, even before Jackson was called out for just that. Every man in the platoon had since been chewed out, but not Caleb. Caleb was struggling through a pathetic pushup with his eyes toward the ground. He was too exhausted and confused to realize that everyone else, by the drill instructor's order, had now moved on to steam engines. Caleb saw the tips of SSgt Folsom's polished boots on the deck in front of him. The boots stopped and turned until they were inches from his nose. Caleb knew he was not cutting it and braced himself for the worst.

"Keep your rear down, son; that's a girl's pushup," SSgt Folsom said simply and continued walking.

By the end of the night, every man's muscles felt like worthless noodles, they barely had the strength to stand, and each felt a horrible sense of humiliation and vulnerability. They were all at the mercy of one man. After lights out, Caleb stared up at a ceiling that he could not see. He rubbed his shaved head with his hand. He could feel the smooth areas where the prickly stubble was interrupted by scar tissue. Caleb was trying to fight the urge to cry. He followed the path of the scar with the tip of his finger. *Chicks dig scars*. The words echoed through his head. Slowly he broke down. The men could hear the faint sniffles that Caleb tried to stifle. Just a few short sounds were enough to let the whole room know that someone was crying, and they all could guess who.

"Boo-Hoo," Caleb heard whispered, followed by mocking fake cries.

He heard someone sneer, "What's he crying for? It's not like he had to work as hard as us."

One anonymous voice called out the single word, "Faggot."

* * *

A solitary lamp warmed the corner of the couch where Cheryl Hobbs sat crocheting. There was not another light on in the whole house. She had been working feverishly in that spot since before the sun set, stopping only once to grab her trusted "headlight" from her bag. She had purchased a small LED light attached to a headband at the local hardware store which came in handy when she worked in low light or with dark colors. Her

thick black hair was parted down the middle and the headband held it tight to her head. If anyone saw her at that moment, they would have sworn she looked like a member of some native tribe, except for her blue eyes. They were surrounded by fine wrinkles now, but when she was a young beauty her vivid eyes drove all the boys in Lake Durham crazy. It was from his mother that Caleb inherited his unique combination of dark hair and crystal blue eyes.

Cheryl was working on a baby onesie that she knew would never be worn. A blister was starting to form on her finger and her stomach was growling, but she refused to break for even a second. She had been working non-stop ever since she hung up the phone with Caleb earlier. He had called her from Dallas to say goodbye. She wanted to make the drive over to see him off, but Caleb wouldn't have it. "It's no big deal," he kept repeating.

But it was a big deal to her.

She counted the stitches. It was the counting that helped take her mind off things, as well as the repetition of motions. Making the same stitch over and over was a strange type of therapy. If she lost count, she would have to start the whole row over.

As an added distraction, the television was on for background noise. A group of young men and women in paper hats were hugging and crying. Cheryl Hobbs thought that she might have been watching a reality show where they swapped fast food employees from restaurants in small towns with restaurants in big cities, but she wasn't sure. She wasn't really watching; she just hated how quiet the house seemed to get these days. When she heard the news was starting, she couldn't believe that it was already nine o'clock.

"Then we'll introduce you to one of America's newest Marines, Caleb Hertz." Cheryl's head snapped up. The lamp on her head illuminated the wood grain of the entertainment center beneath the image of Caleb's face on TV. The crawler at the bottom of the screen read simply "Gay Marine?" Cheryl heard the voice of an unseen reporter, followed by Caleb:

"Are you worried about boot camp?"

"I don't want to be looked at as just a gay man."

"Next at nine," said the anchor.

She didn't move. Her hands lowered, but her crochet hook did not move from its position in the middle of the row. Her mouth hung open and her eyes became tired and heavy. *He said it was no big deal*, she pleaded with her television, *No, no, no, he said it was no big deal*.

The stream of commercials seemed never-ending. Cheryl Hobbs became irritated by their irrelevance. She just wanted to hear what they were prepared to tell the nation about her son.

Finally they returned to the news. Mitch McCarty was the man behind the news desk and the camera lights revealed that he was wearing too much make-up. The woman's name was Veronica Cisneros, which was surprising to Cheryl who didn't think she looked very Hispanic. Both of them smiled broadly and the man appeared to have too many teeth.

"Our next story is about one of Texas's newest heroes – a cocker spaniel? A Fort Worth resident says that while Daisy, her cocker, was chewing on her cell phone, the pet accidentally hit the emergency speed dial," the man said.

Why are you telling me this?! Cheryl was shouting in her head. *Who cares! Who could possibly care about this?!*

"Police and fire officials came to the door to find there was no emergency, but were able to smell a gas leak that the elderly resident had been unaware of," said Veronica Cisneros.

"Good boy!" said Mitch McCarty.

Cheryl held her head in her hands. She felt like it might pop.

"Coming up next, we meet a different kind of hero," Veronica Cisneros said.

"Very different indeed," said Mitch McCarty. "Caleb Hertz is fighting to make a difference..." McCarty hesitated the way one does before delivering a punch line, "as a US Marine?"

The crawler this time read, "Out of the closet and into the fire." And again, they played the same edited clip:

"Are you worried about boot camp?"

"I don't want to be looked at as just a gay man."

A commercial for a new type of mop came on and Cheryl Hobbs felt like she could scream. She flipped through the other channels but she could not find anything about her son. Her phone rang and she did not bother to check the caller ID. She answered it and said, "I know, I'm watching." It was one of the

girls from her crochet group. "I'll call you back," Cheryl told her and abruptly hung up. Another call came in the instant she hung the first one up. She reached to turn the ringer off, then pried the LED light off her head. A strand of hair fell into her face tickling her nose and she frantically brushed it aside. She kept flipping until she found her original channel. A frustrated woman was struggling to wring the water out of an old-fashion mop, ultimately throwing up her hands.

After four more commercials, they played the interview with Caleb, slightly edited. Cheryl watched anxiously.

"Are you worried about boot camp?"

"I'm going to war; boot camp is the least of my problems."

"How do you think you will be received?"

"I think they are going to try to kill me,"

"I meant your fellow Marines."

"So did I!"

"Texas resident, Caleb Hertz, is America's first openly gay Marine. Caleb grew up in the small town of Lake Durham, Texas, and according to his boyfriend, Stacy Oliver, has always been a staunch fighter for gay rights."

The screen cut to a shot of Stacy, recorded after Caleb's bus had left, "Caleb believes that a gay person should have the right to do anything a straight person can do, even if that means joining a xenophobic and benighted military."

Cheryl Hobbs growled.

As the news anchor spoke, they broadcasted a close up of Caleb talking with no sound, and a cut of him and Stacy holding hands. They concluded with Caleb's statement, "I am no different than any man here. I don't want to be looked at as just a gay man."

"He was talking about *you*, not them. *You* are treating him like just a gay man!" Cheryl yelled at the TV.

They immediately cut to the shot of Stacy kissing him full on the mouth, the USO and Marine Corps bus behind them. Then they moved on to the next story.

Cheryl ran her fingers through her hair. She tried to steady her breathing. *My dear Caleb. I know you hated that. My precious Caleb!* She looked down at her crochet. She noticed

that she had made a mistake three rows back, so she pulled the yarn to unravel it. In frantic motions she pulled the yarn from something *made* into something *not made*. Her movements were like a magician doing a never-ending handkerchief routine. *They made it seem like he was only going to boot camp*, she cursed to herself. *They didn't bother mentioning that he'll be fighting for our country, risking his life for our freedom.* She unraveled to the point where the error had been made, but could not stop her destruction. She kept pulling and pulling until she had unraveled the entire evening's worth of work. In less than two minutes she undid everything that had taken her six hours to create. All that was left was a big clump of tangled, chaotic yarn.

"My Caleb. I am so sorry," she said out loud, looking at her hands, but seeing nothing. "My sweet Caleb, I have never once been able to protect you."

CHAPTER THREE

The area where Caleb's platoon did their marching was called the parade deck. It was a vast expanse of gravel asphalt, the kind of asphalt where anyone who fell would likely stand up with a palm-full of bloody cuts and scrapes on the hand that broke his fall. SSgt Folsom called out cadence as the men marched. He yelled, "By the right flank...March," and the whole formation, like a school of fish, turned right and continued marching. He yelled, "By the left flank...March," and without missing a beat they all turned left. His voice was strong and loud. It amazed Caleb how powerful and authoritative it sounded.

Caleb was always nervous around men who were too loud and obstreperous. He was always nervous around men who stood and walked too tall, men who were his exact opposite.

Most people lack the ability to truly love that which they are not. Greatness has a way of inciting respect, but *true* greatness only hatred. When confronted with the truly great, most men's egos will look frantically for any chink in such a shining suit of armor. Men must, for the sake of their egos, diligently seek out weakness in other men. True greatness is such a threat to all that behold it, that the beholder must find some consolation prize – real or fabricated – to convince his pride that the strength, beauty, wisdom, knowledge, talent, or ability that he just witnessed with his own eyes was actually somehow less than it seemed. An oyster does this when a sharp grain of sand irritates its soft flesh; it glosses it over into something smooth, something less menacing with no edge and no bite.

Caleb was the exception.

Caleb could honor greatness like no one else could, particularly the very type of greatness he lacked – straight iron posture, long confident gait, relaxed ease of motion; the kind of man who will look you in the eye; the kind of man who is known by his handshake; the kind of man who joins the Marines; the kind of man that Caleb wondered if he could ever be. Caleb could never act himself around men like this. He always seemed to act fidgety. He always seemed to act *gay*. He did his best impression of a masculine and assertive man, and could sometimes even get the words out, but there was a look behind

his eyes, something that betrayed he had a secret. It meant his pain could not be hidden. It meant that he carried, day in and day out, a shame so deep in him that it contaminated even the way he walked, the way he stood, and the way he formed his words.

And so this particular grain of sand continued to sting him: envy for those who could hit that perfect pitch of rugged masculinity, envy for the kind of man his father always wanted for a son. This deficit in his life even spurred his unlikely relationship with Stacy; Stacy despised that kind of man. Stacy was never the type of man that Caleb wanted, but Caleb was the type of man that Stacy wanted. Caleb found someone who could love who he actually was, not who he wanted to be. Caleb never felt like he was good enough for anyone, except Stacy.

Good enough for Stacy, at least.

These were his thoughts when the rest of his platoon turned right and he turned left. Before he could stop himself, he collided with Buzz Cut as if he were Larry running into Curly. Immediately after the two collided, SSgt Folsom appeared magically hurling insults – *Moe*, except Moe was on steroids and wearing a Smokey Bear hat.

SSgt Folsom, to Caleb's surprise, was cursing at Buzz Cut, not at Caleb.

"Recruit Tucker! What in God's name do you think you are doing? You are not supposed to be out of file, recruit! Do you enjoy messing up my formation? Do you enjoy doing pushups, recruit?"

"Sir, no, sir!" Trey Tucker responded simply, without passing blame.

"I need your louse-infested body on my quarterdeck right now!" The drill instructors had something that they called IT, short for incentive training. It was also called quarterdecking because it was usually done on the quarterdeck, but the recruits learned quickly that the quarterdeck was wherever the DI's said it was. SSgt Folsom pulled poor Trey Tucker over to a remote spot still on the parade deck.

This was the third interruption from marching that they had so far that day. Each time it had clearly been Caleb who caused it and each time SSgt Folsom deliberately chose someone else to blame.

Sgt Page continued to drill the recruits while SSgt Folsom was letting Trey Tucker have it. "Pushups, now!" yelled SSgt Folsom.

"Sir, pushups, aye sir," Trey confirmed. He placed both hands on the sharp gravel. It was so sharp it caused him more pain than the pushups. Caleb's eyes were perfectly straight forward but he had to listen to SSgt Folsom count off the cadence to Trey's pushups. With a voice full of anguish he could hear Trey count off the repetitions. The wear on Trey's muscles caused an excruciating burn in his shoulders, chest and arms. The loose gravel pressed deep pock marks into the palms of his hands.

"Side lunges, now!" called SSgt Folsom.

Trey instantly began doing side lunges. He made the mistake of not verbally confirming it. SSgt Folsom made him pay for that mistake. "Start over! Pushups, now!"

"Sir, pushups, aye sir," called Trey Tucker.

Caleb had to listen helplessly.

"Side lunges, now!"

"Sir, side lunges, aye sir."

"Leg lifts, now!"

"Sir, leg lifts, aye sir."

It went on for fifteen more minutes.

It riddled Caleb with guilt. With each repetition that Trey called out, Caleb's mind raced to figure out how he could pay better attention. When SSgt Folsom brought Trey back into formation, Caleb swore to himself that he would not mess up again.

He knew he was not supposed to do it, but his conscience was bothering him too much – the second that he thought SSgt Folsom wasn't looking, he mouthed the word, "sorry" to Trey Tucker.

SSgt Folsom spotted him and instantly started yelling, "Recruit Tucker! Did I catch you mouthing something? Get your nasty hands down on my quarterdeck, right now! Right now!"

CHAPTER FOUR

His name was a complete sentence. Caleb Hertz. Caleb's only mistake was being born; the punishment he received was life.

Lake Durham was the name of Caleb's hometown, as well as the lake that Lake Durham surrounded. Small town Texas was a young boy's paradise, provided that the young boy was straight. Caleb spent his youth idyllically, with the naked metal bed of his father's pickup truck burning his bare calves; beside campfires under the stars; jumping off docks and tire swings into the lake; with so much dirt between his toes that his mamma would make him clean off with the garden hose before he was allowed to come into the house. Caleb spent his youth with Wesley Fletcher.

Wesley was his nearest neighbor. He lived in a large country house with a wraparound porch about a fifteen minute walk down Maple road, but Caleb and Wesley always ran it. They ran everywhere. From the moment they stepped out of the school house, to the moment they magically appeared just in time for dinner – Wesley at Caleb's house or Caleb at Wesley's house – they were inseparable.

Summers seemed to last forever for eight-year-old boys. Wesley's brown hair would turn bright blond for four months and his freckles would come out. A capricious wind blew a wisp of hair vibrating against his forehead as he looked at Caleb and asked, "Have you ever been to Paris?" The two of them had been swimming all day and were now spread out shirtless in the dirt on the shore, happy and comfortable because no one ever told them that the dirt was dirty. They felt as clean as a new day, soaking up the Texas sun.

"No," said Caleb.

"My daddy went to Paris when he joined the military, Parris Island."

"I've never left Texas."

"You haven't? Why not?"

Caleb shrugged. "Don't want to. I never want to leave Texas."

"Never?"

“Never.”

“What do you want to do?”

Caleb shrugged again. “I want to be great.”

“Great at what?”

“I don’t know. I just want to live an important life. I want to be extraordinary.”

“Then why live in a normal town?”

This frustrated Caleb, but he was too young to understand why. He didn’t like the word “normal” used as a pejorative and he didn’t like it used about his town. He watched a leaf blowing in the breeze as he searched his young mind for the proper response. With a bit of defiance, he said, “It’s not normal.”

“I want to live on an island,” Wesley said as he watched the clouds.

Caleb was silent for a moment then added, “Yeah, me too.”

Every time that Wesley got something, Caleb would suddenly want one. When Caleb was ten, Wesley came by the house to show off his motorbike. Caleb instantly wanted one, too.

“It’s too dangerous,” pleaded his mother.

“It’s just a dirt bike,” reasoned his father.

“What’s wrong with his bicycle?”

“Chicks don’t dig bicycles, chicks dig dirt bikes.”

“He will get hurt.”

“Chicks dig scars,” his father said.

Later that summer, Caleb laid his dirt bike down in the gravel. When half of the skin was torn from his right leg, his father’s only response was, “Chicks dig scars.”

When Wesley joined the junior high school football team, Caleb wanted to join, too.

“He’s too little,” protested his mother.

“He’ll be fine.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“It’s *football*,” his father stated, as if that one word contained all the information needed to dispel her irrational thoughts. In case she still didn’t understand, he added, “This is Texas.”

Caleb played with the energy and commitment of a kid twice his size, just with no strength or skill of any kind. “Jeez,” the coach said to the team’s equipment manager, “let’s hope no one

tells that Hertz boy that he's a shrimp; we might be able to use him on the team after all."

Two months into the school year, Caleb had suffered more injuries than all the other players on the team put together. As much as she watched him suffer, the school nurse began to refer to him as *Job*. "I don't know," said the equipment manager, "maybe it is time that we tell Caleb he's a shrimp before he gets himself killed." When Caleb reported to the nurse for the fourth time in one week, she had completely run out of gauze. She was very concerned so she complained to the coach. When the coach did nothing, she complained to the principal. The principal went to Caleb's father and Caleb's father reasoned, "This is Texas," and the issue was dropped.

It was the first real game of the year and the Lake Durham Junior High Muskrats were matched up with the Falcons from Eaton County. The Muskrats were down by six when Caleb got a hold of the ball. On the field, Caleb acted as if no impulse of self-preservation had ever existed in his brain. He was simply born without it. Unfortunately, he was also born without any coordination or timing. He saw a larger boy headed straight toward him and his first thought was not to run the other way, but rather if the school nurse would be on call for a Saturday game. It could have possibly been the most skillful thing that he'd ever done on the football field when he changed his trajectory just enough for one of his team's blockers to slip by him and intercept the giant who was only seconds away from clobbering him. It took Caleb what felt like two or three seconds to realize that he was still on his feet and still running toward the end zone. *How did that happen?* Caleb must have had some of his father's genes in him after all. Suddenly the field looked wide open; the future looked wide open. The sun was shining brighter. Caleb could be anything that he wanted to be. He could do anything that he wanted to do. Caleb Hertz was going to be the next Emmitt Smith, or Troy Aikman, or any of those other names that Caleb had heard his father talk about over Thanksgiving and Christmas.

All of a sudden, he saw three large boys materialize between him and the end zone. Caleb knew his instincts on the field were obtuse, but he could have sworn that these three ogres had just

sprouted up from out of the grass. Each one of them stood so tall that they blocked Caleb's view of the sun – that bright sun of limitless opportunity. In a fleeting split second of sanity, Caleb considered veering to his right. *They would run me out of bounds, but the yards would still count or something, right?* But Caleb was seldom sane on the field. It wasn't an act of courage when he ran straight ahead into all three of them at the same time; it was a total disregard for reality. Caleb took on odds that he could never overcome, as if the inevitability of failure never occurred to him, or just didn't concern him all that much. "Caleb never quits," his teammates all knew by now, "Caleb sees nothing but the end zone." But it wasn't true. Caleb couldn't care less about the end zone. His main goal was never about scoring and never about completing the play.

Caleb beamed with pride as his father rounded the foot of his hospital bed. He had a broken collar bone, broken humerus, and a dislocated shoulder. Caleb's mother cried fretfully by the side of his bed, but neither of the men seemed to notice her. His dad felt more than pride; he felt vindicated. He felt like he had really succeeded as a father. He placed a hand on Caleb and said, "You are my greatest accomplishment."

"I didn't quit, Dad."

"I know, Caleb."

Caleb could feel the warmth of his father's hand, and of his love, even through his cast. It was the best day of his life.

The summer before Caleb and Wesley were to start their first year of high school, Wesley got his first hickey. Caleb's eyes were wide as Wesley drew his shirt collar down far enough for Caleb to see it. Wesley had his first girlfriend and every time Wesley got something, Caleb wanted one too. "I heard that Joann likes you," Wesley said. Joann was Wesley's new girlfriend's best friend. The next step was when Wesley's girlfriend said to Joann, "I heard that Caleb likes you," and the deal was sealed. In a life full of long summers, this was to be the longest one yet. Their lives were changing. Rope swings and motorbikes no longer held the appeal they once had.

Adolescent boys in Lake Durham had to face living in a body that was changing in a setting that stayed monotonously the same. There was no place for hormonal young people to go, and

nothing for them to do – the town could have benefited from a bowling alley. Instead, they turned to the classic free entertainment. The same girls that the boys had seen all their lives suddenly looked so different. The girls they had climbed trees with, raced bikes with, and pushed into the mud, now seemed strangely unfamiliar and the roles would never be the same again.

On a blanket by the wooded lake, Caleb held Joann in his arms. She was fragrant and mysterious. Caleb was overcome by a fascination with her beauty, one he had yet to understand. His heart overflowed with affection for her, like young hearts sometimes do, and like a babbling fool he told her that he loved her.

It was on that blanket, in the last days of summer, in that same spot where they had always met, that Caleb came face to face with an undeniable and insurmountable obstacle – a rope that he could *never* climb. The stars seemed dim and the fire was growing cold. From out of that cold, Caleb's mind broke free; thoughts came flowing out of his heart and out of his mouth without thinking. Feelings, long ignored, were becoming words for the first time. He told her of every pain, every shame. He told her every secret – even the secret that he had been keeping from himself. "This isn't a choice," he said. "It's part of who I am. I have always been gay. I know that now." He started to cry.

Joann was hurt. She was angry. There was no compassion in her heart for his tears. She had no concern about his sexual orientation. He was just the boy who rejected her, who embarrassed her, the boy who sentenced her to the lifelong title of *the girl who turned Caleb gay*. She did not give him the chance to see any of this in her face. She couldn't endure another second. As Caleb continued to confess and analyze every emotion of his errant heart, Joann turned abruptly and ran away. He called after her and started to run, but he remembered that he could not leave a fire unattended. As he walked back to the fire, he knew what it all had meant. He knew what his loose lips had just done. He kicked enough dirt onto the fire to extinguish it, then watched as the last remaining embers burned out. He didn't know what to do next. He was cold, surrounded by the dark and lonesome woods.

He ran down the road to see Wesley. When he knocked on the door, Wesley's mom said he was on the phone. Caleb could guess who he was talking to. Wesley appeared in the doorway behind his mother. "Oh, here he is," she said surprised. She invited Caleb in, but he shook his head. Wesley went out to join Caleb on the front porch and closed the door behind them.

Once alone, Wesley unleashed his anger. "Why did you tell Joann that?" he snapped.

"Because it's true."

"No, it isn't."

"It's true." Caleb stressed both syllables. His tone was pleading.

Wesley's face looked searching; he was remembering their lives together. He was remembering how close, physically close, they had always been. He felt enormously betrayed and bitter. "You're a jerk," Wesley said with the ferocity of a boy who had just lost his best friend, or as he saw himself in that moment, a boy who had his best friend torn from him. "I will never forgive you." Wesley went in and slammed the door.

Caleb had no choice left but to return to his own home and to the father who always found out about everything.

That would end up being the worst day of Caleb's life.

CHAPTER FIVE

At the end of the second week came their first inspection. The rumors were that no one ever passes the first inspection. The drill instructor stops searching the second he finds the smallest thing wrong.

"A long search is merely postponing the inevitable, and also builds too much tension," Trey Tucker said.

"Then why try at all?" asked Jackson.

"Because no one wants it to be *their* stuff that is in violation."

Each man stood at attention at the foot of his rack. SSgt Folsom checked every rack, every foot locker, every rifle, every uniform, every shoe. Any time the men saw him turn his shoulder to investigate something, they would turn slightly to try and see what he saw. As soon as his shoulders would turn back, they would snap back to attention. When he got to Caleb's foot locker, he pulled out a pair of socks that had been folded incorrectly. Everyone saw it and braced themselves for his wrath. Instead, he placed them back where he found them and moved on to the next recruit. Terrence relaxed because he realized that he had made the same mistake. He simply concluded that it was not a big violation after all. Nevertheless, Terrence still hoped that SSgt Folsom would find something else from someone else before he got to him. But he didn't. The barracks were eerily quiet when SSgt Folsom pulled out Terrence's unsatisfactorily folded socks.

SSgt Folsom lost it! He went ballistic. It seemed from the way that he raged, that the simple mistake had been a deep personal insult that had cut to his very soul. He tossed all the racks, and blankets went flying. One by one, he emptied the contents of all the recruits' footlockers into the same pile, leaving the recruits to sort them out. But when he reached Caleb's footlocker, the only one so far left unmolested, he just turned and walked out.

Most of the men relaxed. The mess SSgt Folsom had made was irritating, but they had visions of doing more pushups and could not figure out why they had been spared.

“He’s coming back,” Jackson said flatly, like he was stating the obvious. “That’s why he messed everything up, so he can come back in and inspect it again.”

“When?” someone asked, feeling helpless.

“Soon,” Jackson said with urgency.

Immediately, every man in the platoon rushed to fix everything as quickly as they possibly could. No one knew how much time they had, but if they knew SSgt Folsom, it would not be enough. Caleb fixed the socks SSgt Folsom failed to gig him on, then shifted in his area, ill at ease; he did not want any attention brought to the fact that his belongings were the only ones left un-ransacked. He walked over to Terrence who was rummaging through a pile of items on the deck. Caleb picked a few things up to try to help him find his belongings, but Terrence angrily snatched everything straight back out of Caleb’s hands. *Fine*, Caleb thought and searched the room for someone who *could* use his help. Trey had returned his rack right side up from where SSgt Folsom had tipped it over, but had not yet noticed that the corner had come undone. When Caleb reached over to help tuck it in correctly, Trey stepped toward him and menacingly grabbed his wrist. He crushed it with a grip so strong that Caleb wondered for a second if Trey was secretly a robot.

“No fairy is ever going to lay a finger on my rack,” he said and threw Caleb’s hand back. Caleb averted his eyes. He didn’t know why, but as he turned around, he checked to see if Jackson had seen. Jackson was looking straight at him. Caleb turned away, sulked back to his rack and waited quietly.

It wasn’t long before SSgt Folsom came back, just as Jackson had predicted. This time he was unable to find anything wrong, so he walked over to Trey’s rack and pulled out a corner of his bed sheet. He said, “Recruit, is your name Tucker?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Then how come you can’t tuck?”

The entire platoon had to live through a nightmare round of physical training.

When the platoon finally got a chance to sleep that night, Jackson lay in bed confused about the whole point of it. “So what if the socks aren’t folded right?” he asked.

* * *

Caleb washed his hands as quickly as he could. There were surprisingly few recruits in the head and Caleb was thankful for that. He had a feeling of dread each time he went in there. It reminded him of the junior high school restrooms where he had encountered more than his fair share of bullies. It was the secluded spot away from teachers where boys would congregate, just waiting for a fly to fall into their web. Caleb always seemed to be that fly. He tried to shake the memories of unsuspectingly rounding the corner just to lock eyes with them – young boys standing with their arms folded, macho airs put on for the sake of each other. He would quickly head to the stall and lock the door. Sometimes he would stay in there for the rest of the period.

The stalls at the MCRD didn't have doors. There was no small space in which Caleb could hide.

On his way out, he saw Jackson Brooks walk in. Caleb's chest tightened. He tried to look right at him and to not show any fear. As the two men passed each other, Caleb intentionally straightened his shoulder, knocking Jackson's shoulder back.

"Hey," Jackson called back to him, but Caleb refused to turn around as he walked steadily out the door.

When Caleb returned to the squad bay, he was stunned to find it empty; rows and rows of racks empty, without a single recruit in sight. His gut instantly knew there was something off and it wasn't going to be pretty. In the very next instant, he felt a man rush him from behind. He turned his head quickly to offer up some defense, but he was too late. He saw a flash of olive drab, then darkness. In less than a second he could hear the boots approaching of what must have been nearly the entire platoon. He felt a cord being tied around his waist, followed by a firm blow to his abdomen. Caleb folded over. He wanted to scream from pain, but fought desperately to deny them the satisfaction. He could feel one man pulling on the cord around his waist. The man wanted to pull Caleb out the door, but the rest of the group seemed perfectly content to pulverize him right where he stood. Blows began to fall rapidly against his gut. Caleb tried to fight back but his arms were tangled in his blanket prison. Again the man pulled hard on the cord and was forced to speak, against his best efforts not to, when body language failed to get his point

across. The man attempted to persuade the rest of the mob in as few words possible; he said simply, "Before he gets back."

Caleb did not recognize the voice and did not have time to speculate on to whom the word *he* referred. Caleb understood that their desire was to get him out of the squad bay and he was determined to delay that as much as possible. He lowered his center of gravity but it was futile; in the next instant he was lifted off his feet and into the air as if he didn't weigh a single pound. He heard the door slam hard against the wall as they all tried to clamor through it at the same time. That was the last indication of where his body was in relation to anything familiar to him. That was the last moment in which he could clearly identify which way was up.

He felt a hard collision. It was like a slab of hard concrete had just fallen from the sky and landed on his shoulder and the side of his head. He would not have believed it was the ground falling up at him. The rumble from the others' steps sounded strangely like a pack of elephants. The crushing blows from the hard-soled combat boots impacted his ribs. He was also being struck by things he could not identify – a variety of heavy objects that had been shoved into the ends of empty pillow cases. The men were smart enough to avoid hitting or kicking his face, in hopes to avoid leaving any visible scars as evidence, but the force in which they were kicking him put them in danger of having to explain a body full of broken ribs, or worse, a recruit with a broken spine.

Caleb was learning that the rumors he had heard about blanket parties were true. He was learning what happened when you mixed mob mentality with unadulterated testosterone. Fueled by broken pasts, shattered egos, and marred self-esteems, they pounded Caleb with the force of every injustice, public embarrassment or simple heartache that they themselves had ever had to endure. Together, they stepped into an area of such cruelty and inhumanity that they would have never dared tread alone.

Caleb began to lose consciousness as the beating persisted. His mind tried to escape the intense pain and he slipped into something close to a dream.

Caleb was chopping wood in back of the house where he grew up, but he was no longer a child. He was tall and strong, and he swung his ax with the force and precision of a fit, athletic adult. His father stepped outside the back door and paused to watch him. Caleb could see his father's form out of the corner of his eye, but did not turn to acknowledge him. He placed a piece of wood on the block, raised his ax high into the air, and swung it down extra hard. Both halves of the wood went flying. He wasn't trying to show malice; he wanted to impress his father with his strength. Caleb didn't want to do it, but he could no longer resist looking over at his father and the two men made eye contact. His father's face lacked any discernible emotion.

Caleb placed another piece on the block and was about to raise his ax again when his father spoke. He asked, "So you are a homosexual, huh?"

"No, Father, I am a Marine."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm a Marine, Dad. I graduated from basic training. I earned the Eagle, Globe and Anchor; I am a Marine."

"You are a Marine?" His father's face changed drastically – no longer unimpressed. He stared at Caleb, astonished. Caleb recognized his expression; it was the look he had only ever seen his father give to his old war buddies.

His father walked over and held out his hand. Caleb wasn't sure what he was asking for, so he handed him the ax. His father tossed the ax to the ground, away from their feet. Then he stepped into Caleb's space and wrapped him in a bear hug. Tears of joys stung Caleb's eyes.

When he finally let go, Caleb looked up at the blurred image of his father and said, "Yes, Dad, I am a Marine. But I'm still gay."

His father nodded pensively and said, “I guess there is only one question to answer: Does being a Marine say more about who a man really is than being a homosexual does?”

Caleb felt a blow to the back of his head. It was followed by more hard strikes to his body. And then even more. Finally, it was over. The torture inside his brain had prevented him from hearing the men walk away. All he could hear now was the hard, deep gasps of his lungs trying desperately to fill with air. Then, as his breathing slowly regulated, he realized he was surrounded by silence. *Is this a trick?* He imagined a line of enlisted men circled around him, all looking down on him as he helplessly squirmed. He was humiliated. He could feel their gaze on him, imprisoned by their hatred. He kept as still as he possibly could. The hard ground pressed stiffly against every strained joint and every bruised bone. Five more minutes passed, Caleb marinating in bitterness. Caleb concluded that he was, in fact, alone.

He rolled over to pass the torment of the brutal ground on to a different part of his wounded body. As he did this, his left shoulder screamed out in agony. The pain was so encompassing it caused his whole body to convulse and he coughed up vomit and blood inside the blanket that was still tied around his waist. As his body fell back still again, he heard a nearby footstep a split second before he felt another boot land a hard blow to his ribcage. He cried out in pain. It practically lifted Caleb off the ground. This time he heard a single set of footsteps running away.

It was a safe bet that he was actually alone finally, but he didn't want to take the risk. He stayed perfectly still, petrified from fear. His face lay pressed against his own vomit and the smell filled the entire blanket. He wished someone would come save him, pull him up and take him back to his rack, but no one did. Anyone who cared must have been unaware of where he was, but it was likely no one cared.

As he lay there broken, he contemplated what to do next. There was nowhere that he could go except back into the squad bay that was filled with his attackers. Finally, with much effort, every movement met with pain, he was able to wiggle free from

the blanket. As he stood up on both feet and gave his eyes time to focus, the barracks seemed miles away. Step by painful step he slowly made his way back.

Caleb staggered into the squad bay and every person in the room pretended to be asleep. When he reached his rack, he saw that his blanket was missing. He crawled in and went to sleep without it. Fearing that he had a concussion, his last thoughts as darkness crept into his vision were wondering whether he was falling into sleep or slipping into death.

CHAPTER SIX

The pain hurt deep inside every one of Caleb's bones. His body had become one solid bruise, but only in the places his BDU's covered. On the parade deck performing close order drill, Caleb had a hard time keeping his mind off the pain. He had made up his mind that pain could not actually stop him. Pain was only a distraction. It did not physically prevent any single motion. It could not prevent him from marching in correct form and it could not prevent him from reaching his ultimate goal – becoming a Marine. No matter how his body resisted, no matter how it screamed in pain, Caleb performed every task that SSgt Folsom counted off.

The sheer agony of pushing past his broken body's demands was causing Caleb to sweat uncontrollably. The beads of sweat pooling on his brow and running down the sides of his face felt to Caleb like some form of water torture he had heard about as a boy, but never understood. Finally, the rifle he was holding escaped right out of his slippery hands. It bounced twice doing an entire flip and hit the ground. Everyone couldn't help but think that even though it was just drill today, one day that rifle would be loaded. That was a potentially fatal weapon flopping wildly on the ground. Around Caleb, no Marine would ever be safe.

"Hertz!" SSgt Folsom called out after halting the platoon.

Since he had already blown it, Caleb took this opportunity to wipe the sweat from his face. SSgt Folsom scowled at him the second he did. He yelled, "Platoon, back to squad bay for square away time. Caleb Hertz, report to my house!"

Caleb had so far received special treatment from SSgt Folsom, but he didn't trust him. He suspected that it might have just been a way to get the other men to hate Caleb more. As Caleb stood waiting outside SSgt Folsom's office, he feared the worst. He had heard the rumors around the squad bay about special visits to the drill instructor's house. He had heard about the *invisible chair*, where you had to pretend to sit with your back to the wall on a chair that wasn't there and hold that position. Then there was something called *the rack*. He did not even know what that was, but he knew that it wasn't referring to

his bunk in this usage. Then there were the endless pushups, a kick that SSgt Folsom seemed to have been on lately.

Caleb imagined a scene where all the drill instructors were sipping Tanqueray and tonic, smoking cigars beside a roaring fire, discussing how their personal tastes in incentive physical training have evolved as they've grown older. Someone will mention that his style changed with the seasons. Another will say that his preference is unpredictable from one moment to the next, "That way I keep it spicy." SSgt Folsom will confess to the kicky little pushup phase he is going through. "In the Marine Corps, two pushups is one pushup," he was fond of saying.

SSgt Folsom was already behind his desk when Caleb reached his door, and without looking up ordered Caleb to enter. Caleb knew that, after the beating he had received, his body would not have the physical strength to endure any punishment. His mind desperately ran over his options. He could beg. He could cry. None of these seemed like a good idea. He tried to figure out how he could make himself pass out – the old *dead weight* form of non-violent resistance. Caleb had heard that Mahatma Gandhi freed all of India's indigo farmers just by going limp, but Caleb's history was a bit rusty. When his straight friends had joined the service before, he always told them, "If you ever change your mind, you can get thrown out by just making a pass at your drill instructor," but unfortunately for Caleb in that moment, those days were over. He knew that times had changed. Caleb was now the last person in the whole Marine Corps who could get himself kicked out.

"At ease," SSgt Folsom said as Caleb walked in. Caleb was anything but at ease. SSgt Folsom pretended to be distracted by some papers on his desk and Caleb got the feeling he forgot Caleb was there. Finally he asked, "Do you have anything that you would like to report to me, recruit?"

"Sir, no, sir." Caleb's body jerked as he coughed twice into his hand before controlling it. SSgt Folsom turned to scowl at him for the interruption as Caleb quickly returned his right hand to its proper position behind his back and looked straight ahead. He tried not to show any change of expression as he considered the new taste in his mouth. He moved his left finger to examine

his right hand. It felt slick and warm. Just as he had suspected, he had coughed up a stain of blood.

“Don’t lie to me, son. You looked like crap out there. You’re weak. You’re distracted. You have no explanation for that?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“So the rumor that I heard about a blanket party isn’t true?”

Caleb froze. He didn’t know what SSgt Folsom was trying to pull. *Is he looking out for me, or is this some type of mind game? How did SSgt Folsom know about the blanket party? Did he know beforehand and not stop it?* Caleb wondered if SSgt Folsom’s concern now was because he felt guilty for letting it happen.

“Sir, this recruit knows nothing about that, sir,” he said. Caleb’s body coughed again. He drew his lips tight together in order to not invite SSgt Folsom’s scorn and not display any blood. He could taste another spot of blood on his tongue and quickly swallowed it.

“So, you weren’t the victim of any...hazing?”

Caleb was struck by the underwhelming nature of the word hazing, a word that had popped up routinely throughout his life, but was never quite adequate enough. The answer ran through his mind, *Sir, perhaps it was one of the other gay recruits, sir*, but he decided against it. He said, “Sir, no, sir.”

“Listen, son, this is serious business. If you think you are somehow duty bound to protect your fellow recruits, you’re not. If you are worried about retaliation, you have to work with me so I can protect you.”

“Sir, this recruit knows nothing about that, sir,” he repeated.

“Can you explain how it is that I found a US Marine Corps blanket on the far side of the parade deck, and how your rack is the only one missing such a blanket?”

Caleb hesitated, “Sir, perhaps this recruit was sleepwalking, sir.”

“Recruit, you mean to tell me that you got out of your rack, walked out of the hatch and across the parade deck while sleeping?”

“Sir, this recruit would like to offer his apologies for waking up and forgetting his blanket upon returning to bed, sir.”

“Uh huh. We aren’t going to have anymore instances of this sleepwalking are we?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“You’re never going to open up your rifle on your platoon in your sleep, or pull the pin out of a grenade while sleeping are you?”

“Sir, no sir.”

“Dismissed,” SSgt Folsom told him, but before he got to the door he added, “Recruit?”

“Sir, yes, sir?”

SSgt Folsom looked as though he was battling an internal struggle. He said, “Forget it, recruit.”

* * *

When Caleb entered the squad bay, every eye was on him. He was getting used to being the one stared at. He preferred it to the feeling he got after the blanket party when no eye was on him. Taking a look at his rack, Caleb realized SSgt Folsom had never mentioned the fate of his blanket – when, or if, he would ever get it back.

“A-ten-Hut!” SSgt Folsom busted in with another surprise inspection. All the men quickly ran through the content of their foot lockers in their heads, trying to remember if they had everything squared away. SSgt Folsom’s movements were fast. You could tell that he had no desire to draw things out this time. His mannerisms resembled that of a drug dog, frantically sniffing every square inch, but only looking for one thing.

He wasn’t finding it. Everything in the whole squad bay was perfect. The men began to wonder if he would just mess something up and blame them for it like he did last time. The final thing that he came to was Caleb’s rack. “Where is your blanket, Hertz?”

“Sir, I have no idea, sir.”

“Well, what happened to it?” SSgt Folsom acted as if their prior conversation never happened.

“Sir, I lost it sleepwalking, sir.”

SSgt Folsom turned to Trey Tucker, “Is that true, Recruit Tucker?”

“Sir, Recruit Hertz wouldn’t lie, sir.”

“You miserable puke, I did not ask you about Hertz’s character, I asked you about Hertz’s blanket. Is it true that he lost it while sleepwalking, recruit?” By this point he was really loud, yelling right in Trey’s face.

Trey’s eye twitched. He said, “Sir, yes it is true, sir.”

SSgt Folsom smiled, he turned away from Trey and barked, “Twenty pushups for failing inspection!”

A strange phenomenon occurs in boot camp, a group of men learn to somehow collectively sigh, without a single one of them making a sound. They knew that if he called for twenty pushups it really meant forty. Every man in the unit dropped to the ground, to assume the position for pushups.

“Now just what do you heterosexuals think you are doing? Get off the deck! Get off the deck!” SSgt Folsom yelled *get off the deck* so loud that everyone jumped to their feet, including Caleb. With that, SSgt Folsom went insane. He ran over to where Caleb was standing, his face was red and his nostrils flared. As he yelled, spit flew from his mouth. “What are you doing off the deck, homosexual? I said all heterosexuals off the deck. You’re not a heterosexual are you, Hertz?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“You’re one of them homosexuals, aren’t you?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Then get your homosexual face on the ground and give me twenty pushups!” Caleb snapped down and began his pushups. “Recruit Tucker, count off his cadence so I can continue to yell at him.”

“One, two, three...” Trey began to count off the steps to do a Marine pushup.

At the end of the second pushup Caleb called out, “One.”

“One? That was not one pushup, homosexual! How dare you claim to have done one pushup! What are you thinking?”

“Sir, to a Marine two pushups is one pushup, sir,” Caleb made the case.

“Yes, but to a homosexual Marine, *four* pushups is one pushup! Now keep going.”

SSgt Folsom lowered himself down so that he could yell in Caleb’s face even as he did the pushups. “Recruit, do you find me attractive?”

“Sir, this recruit prefers not to answer, sir.”

“Why is that, recruit?”

“Sir, because if this recruit says *no*, then you will hurt him and ask, ‘What, I’m not good enough for you?’” Caleb talked through heavy pants as he continued doing the pushups. “But, if this recruit says *yes*, then you will hurt him and ask, ‘What, you want to sleep with me or something?’”

SSgt Folsom knocked Caleb’s hand out from under him, causing him to fall painfully on his elbow. “What? Do you think I am some sort of drill instructor stereotype?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“So, then you do find me attractive?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

Someone in the bay made the mistake of laughing. It was Terrence Brown. SSgt Folsom instantly snapped up. “Who laughed?” he shouted as he quickly paced down the squad bay. “Who laughed?”

Terrence was brave. “Sir, this recruit laughed, sir.”

SSgt Folsom immediately honed in on Terrence and yelled, “Who were you laughing at recruit, me or the homosexual?”

“Sir, the homosexual, sir.”

“You think that it’s fun to laugh at homosexuals?” SSgt Folsom’s responses came lightning quick like it was a drill that he had mastered.

“Sir, no, sir.”

“Why not, because you two are make-out buddies?”

“Sir, no sir.”

“Well, your laugh just cost the homosexual ten more pushups.” Terrence knew that meant forty more, but his face showed no emotion. SSgt Folsom laughed and walked back over to Caleb. He asked, “Recruit, what made you decide to join the United States Marine Corps?”

“Sir, this recruit wants to be great, sir.”

“Great how?”

“Sir, strong... brave... honorable...” Each word came at the peak of a pushup, as if he were pushing toward the word and toward the goal. He did not sandwich each word with “Sir.” The platoon watched to see if SSgt Folsom would bust him on it and what more he would actually do to Caleb.

SSgt Folsom interrupted him. He said mockingly, “So you want to be just like *me*?”

There was a long pause. The entire platoon feared that Caleb might have the audacity to not answer. Finally he said in a voice sincere and firm, which contained no hint of mockery, “Sir, yes, sir. Just like you, sir.”

SSgt Folsom turned his head. The tone of Caleb’s voice caused SSgt Folsom to believe that he meant it. He wanted to hide the fact that this time he had no immediate response. He let out a long moan to indicate he was frustrated with the whole undignified mess. He stepped in close so that Caleb could catch sight of his ominous boots.

As Caleb rounded the halfway mark, his left shoulder, injured from the blanket party, began to feel like it was being torn from its socket. When he reached twenty he fell back to the deck and coughed up more blood. By twenty-five there was a small pool of blood beneath him. Drops of blood hung from the tip of his nose and his lips.

Trey continued to count the cadence. SSgt Folsom stood watching, stone-faced. Caleb watched the bloodstain beneath him draw closer then farther, larger then smaller. When he reached thirty, having done one-hundred and twenty pushups, his arms gave out and he fell flat into his own mess of blood and sweat.

SSgt Folsom left without saying a word. As soon as the door closed behind him, all the men relaxed from their position of attention. Jackson ran quickly over to Caleb to help him. He grabbed a towel and made an effort to clean Caleb up and get him into bed. Once in bed, Caleb tugged the towel away from Jackson and mumbled something that sounded drunk, “muh he bud ryan uh sluhlevate yeh guild.”

Jackson could only make out the last three words, “...alleviate your guilt.”

* * *

Caleb’s whole platoon was running along a trail on the side of a rocky ridge. Sweat drenched their shirts from the center of their chests, backs, and armpits before it trickled down to their pants.

Jackson could sense someone coming up next to him on the inside of the trail. He turned and found Caleb staring right at him. Jackson could not interpret the look on his face, so he gave his best impersonation of a drill instructor and asked, "You eyeballing me, recruit?"

Caleb didn't laugh. His stride was irregular and Jackson could see the inner turmoil escaping through Caleb's hard face. Caleb was trying to resist the urge to thrust his body into Jackson and drag both of them down the side of the cliff. Jackson sped up to pull away from him, but Caleb ran closer and there was just a thin edge left for Jackson's feet to fall.

"Is there a problem, Hertz?"

Caleb still said nothing, apparently waiting to speak until his internal struggle was resolved. Finally his face relaxed and he said, half panting, with all the breath he could muster, "Next time have the guts to face me."

"What?"

"I know it was you, coward."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not an idiot; I can spot a homophobe when I see one."

It was only then that Jackson realized what he meant. Before Jackson could answer, Caleb took off running faster and moved himself to the front of the pack. Jackson stared after him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Dear Stacy,” was all that he had written so far. Caleb stared at the blank piece of stationery he bought at the PX. The only paper available to them had illustrations of smiling Marines doing different forms of physical training. Caleb could not imagine how he could possibly sum up everything he had such a desperate need to say. He had spent too much time in an environment where his every action was mercilessly judged. He longed to once again feel accepted. He had forgotten what it felt like. He imagined growing old with Stacy, then one day finding all his war letters lovingly preserved in a tin box in the back of their closet. He shed one tear and wrote, “I love you so much.”

Quickly he wiped his face before anyone else saw. Realizing that he was running out of time, a sudden rush of words coursed through his heart:

You were right about everything. Everyone. There are only two types of people: homosexuals and homophobes. I was wrong about Marines. They are boorish and crude. They represent all the worst qualities in men, concentrated in a blinding focus. These men aren't heroes, but schoolyard bullies. They fear what I am so much that their every action is a thinly veiled attempt to prove that they are heterosexual. They must constantly try to act the most masculine, most brutal, most emotionally calloused, and furthest away from being a freak like me.

The drill instructor here is the worst bully of them all. I am trying to decipher whether he actually believes his own lies about training us or has come to terms with the fact that he just likes making young men (especially gay young men) suffer.

Caleb wrote with passion. The words flowed effortlessly from his pen, but when it came time to sign his name to it, he

paused. He hated to see these words on paper. He hated that they had just come from him. He hated to think that the best parts of him – his unwavering trust in the decency of others – might be a casualty in this war. He quickly crumbled the note and stood up to throw it away.

Stacy is wrong. Caleb had to believe in his heart that Stacy was wrong.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Caleb Hertz believed in fate – a word he used often without ever really defining what he meant. So when at fourteen years old he spotted a 1987 Ford Ranger pickup pulling a horse trailer with an empty compartment, *it was fate*. The driver was filling his tank at a Texaco station four miles outside Lake Durham. Caleb snuck into the trailer as the driver stepped inside to pay, and rode across Texas crouched down in the back. The smell was miserable. Caleb tried to relax his eyes to prevent them from focusing on his surroundings – dried horse urine and stray needles of hay. Caleb tried to relax his mind from focusing on the comparable position of his life in general. Was he that same little boy who had pledged to do something great with his life? Would this horse trailer take him to an exciting new beginning, or would it take him to someplace *normal*?

The next time the driver stopped to refuel, Caleb bailed out of the back and found himself gazing at the Dallas skyline.

That night he saw a homeless man under an overpass along I-35 E, four exits from downtown, near the industrial district. Caleb walked to the next overpass to find himself a place where he could sleep without any company. For the next two nights he did the same thing. The weather was warm and dry, but Caleb had no money for food. When the hunger pains finally grew too intense, he asked a man outside McDonald's if he had any change. Seeing Caleb's dirty young face, he took pity on him and gave him enough to buy a value meal. When he handed Caleb the money, the man noticed that the palm outstretched to receive it was covered in scabs and dried blood.

Caleb was about to be a paying customer, so when he stepped into the wonderfully air-conditioned McDonalds, he went straight to the restroom to clean up a bit. He couldn't do much about his odor, but his face was clean when he got to the counter to order. It was the most delicious Big Mac he had ever tasted in his life.

From that day on, Caleb learned to stand at the corner of an access road and ask motorists for change. He acquired enough handouts to pay for fresh food each day, and discovered that dumpsters were a good place to find things other people did not

appreciate. He found a jacket that was two sizes too big, a broken wooden spoon that he thought could be used for protection, and a discarded copy of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. But his best find of all was the fanny pack in which he carried everything except the jacket. It even had some room left for the only souvenir he'd kept from his former home, a small red flag.

After a full day's worth of begging he found that he had plenty of money left over. The weather grew colder and Caleb had managed to save up a few hundred dollars which he planned to use to get himself off the streets for good.

The large jacket looked ridiculous on him and it emphasized his youth. He looked like he was a small child playing dress up in his father's clothes. It was handy, however, for him to use as a blanket at night. His poor blood circulation caused him to shiver even before winter was fully upon him.

Caleb slowly gravitated to the heart of downtown where people leaving services on Sunday were easy targets and a weekly treat for Caleb, until one of the pastors walked up to him and started asking questions. "You look awfully young to be out on the streets."

"I'm eighteen," Caleb was quick to lie.

"Eighteen is young," said the pastor.

Caleb shrugged. He considered turning his back on the pastor and rudely hurrying away. He did not want to surrender what he was discovering to be a prime piece of homeless real estate, but he feared that the pastor would inquire too much into his age.

"What's that you got there?"

Caleb was holding a piece of paper and pencil. The pastor recognized it as one of the sheets the church kept behind every pew for new visitors. The pencil was short and yellow, the kind the church left out for people to fill in the sheets.

"Nothing," Caleb snapped. Figuring that the pastor must have known he had stolen them from the church, he tried hiding them as he turned to walk away.

"It's okay. I just want to see." His voice was kind. Harmless. "I just want to take a look."

Caleb stopped and looked over his shoulder. He turned around and took two steps back toward the pastor. Meekly, he surrendered the paper. When the pastor turned it over, he saw that Caleb had done a pencil sketch on the back.

"This is remarkable," exclaimed the pastor.

The drawing was obviously the work of a skilled hand. It was the type of skill that indicated Caleb must have once had a clean, dry place to practice and practice, drawing until late at night by electric light in comfort and peace. It was a talent that could never be learned nor sharpened on the streets. The drawing was of the face of the old church building.

The pastor felt a surprise wave of emotion and said, "I want to buy this from you."

"No," said Caleb, just because he was stubborn.

The pastor looked at his state, at his fanny pack, not big enough to store the drawing without folding it, and said, "It's safer with me."

Caleb nodded, "One hundred dollars."

The pastor laughed. "You don't understand the art business. There is a reason why artists are starving...or homeless. I'll give you ten."

Caleb had not expected him to haggle. He just thought the pastor wanted to help him and found a way to do it without hurting Caleb's pride. He knew that he didn't really care about the drawing. "Twenty," said Caleb.

The pastor reached into his pocket and brought out his wallet. When he opened it, Caleb could see that there was far more than twenty dollars inside. The pastor pulled out only a five and a ten. "Fifteen dollars and we have a deal." He extended the bills.

Caleb quickly snatched the money from his hand and swapped it with his sketch. He looked down at his feet, trying to conceal how happy the pastor had made him. There had been people who'd handed him a twenty before; there was even one woman who gave him a fifty; but this fifteen dollars was worth more to him than every dime he had ever begged for put together. Caleb believed that the pastor really wanted to buy his drawing. He really wanted to spend fifteen dollars on it. It wasn't charity; Caleb *made* that money.

“I could find you a place to stay tonight.”

“Don’t want it.”

“I didn’t think so,” the pastor said. He asked, “When was the last time you slept in a bed?”

“What good is a bed?”

“Our beds are safe and warm. You would have nothing to fear.”

Caleb wanted to sleep in a bed, but he couldn’t trust the pastor. He felt like he had some sort of agenda. Caleb frowned condescendingly. He said, “But, I don’t fear anything,” and walked away.

The next Sunday he saw the pastor again. He smiled as he walked over to Caleb. He was carrying a medium sized 11”x14” drawing pad, an ebony pencil, and a sharpener. “I got you something.”

“What for?”

“You don’t want it?” the pastor asked coyly.

Caleb didn’t respond. He examined the tools being presented to him.

“I figured you could use it to make signs like ‘Will draw for food’ or ‘Support the local arts, buy me a hamburger.’”

Caleb didn’t smile. “Very funny,” he said and grabbed the tools.

Caleb removed the broken spoon from his fanny pack in order to clear room for his new pencil and sharpener. The pad he kept under his arm at all times when he wasn’t using it. The oversized jacket made it hard to keep the pad tucked securely under his arm when the wind blew and sometimes he would have to run and chase it down. He chased it like it was his most prized possession, which – after the red flag – it was.

Over the next couple of years, Caleb grew accustomed to being homeless. He had stopped considering homelessness as a temporary condition; to him it became a way of life. Caleb had given up on the idea of ever being happy in life, but on nights that weren’t too cold, Caleb’s emotions would approach something close to contentment. The art pad had filled up quickly. He finished reading his Stephen Hawking book for the fourth time and was starting to understand it. His body had grown into the jacket, but at sixteen, he was still a minor. Caleb

also started noticing more and more police cruisers in his area, so he headed south.

The south end of downtown Dallas was darker. The roads were narrower and there were more homeless. Most of them pretended not to see Caleb and he pretended not to see them. While searching for a safe place to sleep, Caleb had wandered farther from the heart of the city than he had ever been before. Down the length of an alley, he saw that someone had started a fire in a garbage can and several homeless men had gathered around it. Caleb turned the other way.

"Got any spare change, pardner?" he heard a voice from the shadows.

"I'm homeless, you idiot," Caleb shouted bitterly and started to walk faster.

"That don't mean you ain't got no money. What's in the fanny pack?" Caleb did not turn around, but he could hear that the man was following him. He grabbed the strap of his fanny pack with his left hand and clutched his drawing pad with his right. Caleb turned his head to see the man. He was tall with broad shoulders. Standing next to Caleb he would look like an adult standing next to a child. He wore a woman's fur coat, or what was left of it after years of wear and tear on the rough Dallas streets. Caleb wondered how there could have been a woman large enough to require a coat the size of the man following him. He walked at a steady pace, but refused to run, lest he portray fear. The man behind him also refused to run, lest he inspire fear. So went an urban foot race where both runners had the same top speed. It seemed like such a pointless endeavor to Caleb. *I'm just going to keep walking until you are no longer behind me*, he thought. That was before two other men stepped into the alley right in front of him. Caleb slowed down. The man behind him was able to bridge the distance and suddenly the three men were within an arm's length from him on all sides.

The man in front of him forcefully grabbed his art pad. He investigated it with a couple of quick flips. He saw drawings of old buildings and churches, the figures of homeless men crouched in alleys, and one portrait of Caleb's father remarkably drawn only from memory. Judging it to be worthless, the man

threw it face down with a laugh. It landed in a stream of dirty rainwater coming out of a drainpipe searching for a gutter.

All three men were bigger, older, and more hardened by life. Caleb wished he still had his broken spoon.

“Give us the pack,” one of them ordered. With putrid emptiness in their eyes, they circled in tighter around young Caleb.

Caleb Hertz never quits. He remembered the words of his astonished teammates on the football field. *Caleb sees nothing but the end zone.* He saw the end zone past the large men, at the end of the narrow alley, but no conceivable way to get there. He crouched forward, making his center of gravity lower, and plowed his head and both shoulders in-between the men’s dirty homeless coats, attempting to squeeze through. The men seemed to muster no more response than a surprised chuckle as they grabbed him by both arms and lifted him up. He squirmed in angry defiance. His feet kicked out in every direction, making contact with various body parts of the men holding him. Irritated by his thrashing, one of the homeless men removed a hand from Caleb’s arm, drew it back and hit him hard in the gut. The struggling instantly stopped and Caleb was silent for a second before he began to throw up from the pain.

As soon as they heard the vomit percolating in Caleb’s throat, both men let go. He threw up first by their feet and then rushed his way over to the side of the alley and fell to both knees. He could hear the sound of them laughing behind him, but he noticed that they were not anxious to come grab him right away. He quickly reached into his fanny pack and pulled out, not the money – almost a thousand dollars – but the small red flag. As he was still hunched over, he quickly shoved the flag between the drain pipe and the wall.

He thought that he might have a chance to slip by them at that point, but before he could even turn to see a clear way out, he felt a man on each side hoist him up by the arms again. He struggled frantically to get free, but could not break their grip. The third man was still behind Caleb, so he grabbed Caleb by the hair and drew his head back. “Give us the pack, boy,” he ordered loudly near his ear, then shoved Caleb’s head forward.

“Make me,” Caleb said defiantly, then instantly felt the hard blow of a boot stomp down on the center of his spine. He could feel the crunch of the individual disks of his spine as they were yearning to separate from each other. He would have sworn that his spine was broken. The force of the blow, however, had dislodged him from the grips of the men holding him. His body hit the ground with a slight splashing sound. From where he looked up, he could now see the path. A clear path to the end zone! Without knowing or caring about the extent of his injuries, Caleb stood up to run full speed. If his spine was broken he would soon find out. He lunged forward with the full conviction of a man fighting for his life, but his movement was snared before it began. One of the men had a hold of his jacket. It restrained him at both his armpits. They spun him around and told him again, “Just give us the pack, you fool.”

“It’s mine,” he said indignantly. He tried his best under such duress to sound unflappable, but in that moment his voice had an unmistakable quality. It was a quality not usually exhibited in Caleb’s voice, but sometimes came out if he was nervous or frightened – it sounded *gay*.

The man in the woman’s coat struck his young face with a weathered and calloused fist. Caleb convulsed under the pain, then spit up a long stream of blood. The man who had just struck him stepped quickly out of Caleb’s line of sight. When he stepped back in front of Caleb, he had a discarded Miller Genuine Draft bottle in his hands. He said, “One more chance, faggot.”

With that word, Caleb unleashed the resentment that he had been holding since he left home, tucked away in his brain right next to the last sight of his father. At the top of his lungs he started shouting, “Idiot! You don’t know who I am inside! You don’t know what I’m capable of! You don’t know what I could have done with my life! You stupid idiot!” He wasn’t talking to the homeless man.

With two men holding his arms, Caleb had little room to move. He wrenched his neck to one side, but could not avoid the blow. As the bottle shattered on his head, Caleb was in the middle of saying, “You could have been proud of me one day.”

The glass cut into his scalp above his ear, across half of his skull, and all the way to the top of his spine. He lost consciousness.

When Caleb woke up, he was being loaded into an ambulance. His fanny pack and his art pad were nowhere in sight. All his money was gone. The EMT closed the ambulance doors and found a spot to sit beside Caleb. He had a dark goatee with sprinkled patches of gray and graying hair on his temples. His eyes and his smile, however, did not give the impression that he was old enough to have any gray yet. Caleb did not know if it was procedure for EMTs to do this, but the man placed his hand gently on Caleb's chest. He said soothingly, "Everything's going to be alright."

The next time Caleb saw the man with the salt-and-pepper goatee, Caleb was leaving the hospital. The man had been waiting just outside the exit, a couple of yards past a crowd of smokers. He was smoking also and Caleb had no idea he had been waiting for him. Caleb, not thinking the man had any reason to recognize him, kept his head down as he passed.

"I almost didn't recognize you with your head wrapped up like that," the man said after Caleb was just a few feet past him.

"I look like an Arab," Caleb smiled meekly as he stopped and turned around.

The man shrugged. "Looking like an Arab never killed anybody. My name's Dane by the way."

"I'm Caleb."

"You have nowhere to go, do you?"

"I have everywhere to go."

"You have no place to sleep."

"I have everywhere to sleep," Caleb motioned from one street corner to the next.

"I meant like a bed?"

"What good is a bed?"

"I have a bed." Dane's tone took Caleb by surprise. This was the first time he had stopped to really look at the man. His smiling eyes did look young, but were surrounded completely by fine wrinkles. He was obviously far older than Caleb, in his late thirties, possibly early forties, but his mannerism and expressions were young, maybe even hip. His lips were full and when he

smiled, his top lip drew up to the very top of his gums. He had whiter teeth than Caleb had ever seen on a man.

Just like the pastor, Caleb knew that Dane had an agenda; the difference was that Caleb understood what Dane's agenda was. Dane said, "My bed is safe. My bed is warm. In my bed you'll have nothing to fear."

Only it wasn't true.

Within the first month of staying with Dane, Caleb started to really look up to him. He graduated from SMU with a degree in philosophy, and had shelves and shelves of books along every wall of his home. He introduced Caleb to thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Karl Popper, and to new ways of thinking about things like freewill and the existence of God. Caleb impressed him with his front to back knowledge of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity as well as random facts about black holes. Caleb began to wonder why an older man who was so sophisticated had chosen a mere child like him.

Then came the evening in which Caleb discovered that the gentle, good-hearted EMT was only around when Dane was sober. After a twelve hour shift Dane would hit the bottle hard, and Caleb soon unraveled the mystery of why this grown man was attracted to him. It was not just Caleb's youth; it was the fact that Caleb had no one to look after him and nowhere else to go, no one to see the bruises and no one to listen to his side of the story.

Until he met Stacy.

Stacy worked at a coffee shop three blocks from Dane's house. Caleb used to walk over there with an art pad while Dane was at work. The first time Caleb came in with bruises on his forearm in the shape of a thumb and four fingers, Stacy asked about it. Caleb explained that he had been working with chalk pastels and put dark red marks on his own skin when he went to massage his muscle. "It must have been a sad sketch," said Stacy, not believing him.

"Why do you say that?" Caleb asked.

"That color. It's the exact color of a dying rose."

"That's what it was actually," Caleb claimed, "a dying rose."

"That sounds tragic. Are you sure it wasn't a self-portrait?"

After a while, Caleb stopped trying to hide the increasing number of bruises that would appear on his body. Caleb was obviously crying out for help and Stacy was there to answer. Stacy insisted that Caleb leave Dane and come live with him. And one day when Dane came home after a long shift, Caleb was gone. There was no evidence left in the house that Caleb had ever been there at all.

Stacy never meant any harm. It was Stacy who encouraged Caleb to get his GED. It was Stacy who taught him to drive. Where Dane's outbreaks were violent, Stacy's were rather comical. When Stacy would cook food for the two of them, Caleb had to worry about doing so much as adding salt. "What? My cooking's not good enough for you?" Stacy would snap. Once it even went as far as Stacy locking himself in the bathroom all night crying. Six hours later, Caleb discovered that it was because he had mentioned he didn't really like squash when Stacy put a bowl of it on the dinner table, but Stacy clearly remembered him eating it at a restaurant the month before.

Caleb learned to handle these outbreaks, even the ones that were very hurtful, by imagining Stacy was doing a comedy sketch about an angry gay guy. Some of Stacy's lines became very funny when Caleb pretended that they were intended to be so. Stacy would say in his garish tone, "Just because it's your birthday doesn't mean you can't pick a movie that we'd both enjoy," or, "If you don't like romantic comedies, it's probably because the plotlines are too complicated for you." Caleb would have to try to keep a straight face while in his head pretending it was only satire.

One day while in a fitness equipment store, Stacy accused Caleb of ogling the shirtless man in one of the advertisements. This sent Stacy on a long flamboyant tirade. Stacy could do a perfect Stacy impression. Caleb made a mistake when, at the height of Stacy's tizzy, he let out a small but audible laugh. *Oops*. Stacy turned to leave instantly. He was forced to drop everything that he had intended to buy right inside of the anti-theft scanners because he was too furious to complete his purchase or return the items to the shelf. In the parking lot, Stacy jumped into his car and locked Caleb out. Caleb sighed and

patiently knocked on the window. “C’mon, I know you are not going to leave me here,” Caleb said just before Stacy put the car in reverse and left Caleb there. Caleb watched the car for the length of the entire large parking lot, expecting to see him turn around at the last minute. He didn’t.

Caleb stood dumbfounded in the parking lot and could not help but do something that he usually tried to avoid – he thought about his life. He wondered how he got to where he was, what it all meant, what was the point, and what he actually wanted from life. Caleb believed it was fate when a car pulled up not far from where he was standing. The man in the car got out and headed for the Marine recruiting office. He was in uniform. His shirt sleeves were pressed and starched. There were two long, impossibly perfect creases running down both of his pant legs. His shoes were shined like mirrors. His stride exuded confidence and his eyes looked like a clear Texas sky. In contrast, Caleb’s shoulders were hanging low and his movements were slow. His face carried a melancholy bewilderment that resulted from years of refusing to claim his life as his own. The two were the same height, but when the Marine stepped closer he cast a shadow over Caleb that one would expect from a giant. As the man passed, Caleb turned his face away as if he was suddenly distracted by something on the asphalt that he just had to look at. The Marine, however, looked straight at Caleb, gave a casual nod, and said, “Good morning.” When the Marine disappeared through the glass doors, into the clouds, Caleb had completely forgotten about Stacy’s tantrum. He had even forgotten that he was stranded with no ride. He was focused on a mystery: What causes a man to walk that tall? He realized right then and there that within the answer to that mystery was all the meaning he was seeking in his life as well.

He reported to that same office later that week.

CHAPTER NINE

Punishing an entire platoon for the mistakes of one man is a military tradition, and sometimes the entire platoon would be punished except for the one who made the mistake. However, since the day that SSgt Folsom called Caleb into his office, it was common for him to punish only Caleb for the mistakes of everyone else. When he had the entire platoon do physical training, he would have Caleb do twice as much. “To a Marine, two pushups is one pushup. To a homosexual Marine, four pushups is one pushup,” SSgt Folsom liked to repeat.

Caleb could not figure out his motivation. His preferential treatment from before almost got him killed, but the way SSgt Folsom was treating him now made Caleb wonder if he preferred death.

One day, as Caleb finished scrubbing the head in his squad bay, SSgt Folsom called him into his office where he was laughing it up with Sergeant Ward, a drill instructor with another platoon.

Caleb stood at attention as the two finished their laughing. Caleb assumed it was about him.

“Recruit, this is Sgt Ward. We had ourselves a little card game last night and it just so happened that I ran out of chips. And you know what I did?”

“Sir, this recruit has no idea, sir.”

“I bet Sgt Ward the use of your personal expertise. I told him all about your rare talent at cleaning the head.” When the head needed to be cleaned with a toothbrush, it was always Caleb who did it.

“Sir, the recruit appreciates the compliment, sir.”

Both drill instructors laughed. Caleb’s eyes remained forward.

“Well, I felt pretty good; I had a full house.”

“Sir, something tells this recruit that you still lost, sir.”

“You bet your sorry butt I did, recruit. To a straight flush.”

“Sir, it sounds like you bet my sorry butt, sir.”

Both men laughed.

“Dismissed, recruit,” said SSgt Folsom. “He’ll be inspecting your work in one hour.”

As Caleb turned to go, something on the corner of SSgt Folsom's desk caught his eye. SSgt Folsom made no attempt to display it to Caleb, and yet no attempt to hide it. Caleb's eyes stopped only for a second. He could not believe what he saw.

Both men laughed again when they saw the expression on Caleb's face. On the corner of SSgt Folsom's desk was a crinkled letter on US Marine Corps stationery that had been flattened. Caleb recognized his own handwriting and knew of only one thing it could be. It was the letter Caleb had written to Stacy, then thrown away.

SSgt Folsom added just before Caleb walked out, "Oh and recruit, don't forget to do the duck walk on your way over there."

While the other men would walk or march, Caleb was often instructed to do the infamous duck walk, where he would waddle in a squatting position with his rear against his ankles and his hands behind his head. Caleb would have to quack like a duck as he did this, which made it particularly embarrassing to have to enter the squad bay of Sgt Ward's platoon with toothbrush in hand, sent to clean their toilets. The rival platoon had already given him the nickname Daffy.

The duck walk was banned from use on military recruits when it was discovered to cause permanent damage to cartilage and tendons. SSgt Folsom did not seem to care.

Days seemed to drag on forever for Caleb. The crumpled letter hung like the Sword of Damocles over his head. He knew that was what SSgt Folsom wanted – to keep him in constant fear of the moment he would have to answer for it. Eventually Caleb forgot about it. SSgt Folsom was going to punish him whether Caleb deserved it or not. If not for the letter, then it would be for something else.

When Terrence's girlfriend made the mistake of sending him contraband – a batch of cookies – SSgt Folsom forced Terrence to stand in front of the entire platoon and eat every last one of them, paced to his count. Terrence was able to finish the entire batch but promptly threw up. "Thank your girlfriend for the delicious cookies," SSgt Folsom said as if delivering a one-liner from an action film.

It was Caleb who had to clean the vomit up.

Anti-hazing laws forbade denying recruits food, but SSgt Folsom made it a habit of calling Caleb out of line in the chow hall to ask him some inane question, which was usually some variation of, “Are you really homosexual?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“You don’t like women at all sexually?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“So, if (fill in the name of the actress that SSgt Folsom was thinking about that day) was standing in front of you naked, you would feel nothing?”

“Sir, I would ask for her autograph, sir.”

In this fashion, he would return Caleb to the back of the line, assured that he would be the last to receive food. Then the second Caleb sat down with his tray, SSgt Folsom would order the entire platoon out of the chow hall and on to some other task – thus, never denying him food, just the time that it takes to eat the food.

Not only would Caleb go to bed hungry, but he never did get his blanket back. During every inspection, SSgt Folsom would quarterdeck him for not having one. Caleb was too stubborn to ask for another one; besides, he knew he wouldn’t get it. The winter turned colder and Caleb wasn’t sure, but he could have sworn that they were running the air-conditioning. Every night Caleb would lie awake shivering. Thanks to his poor blood circulation, the pain from the cold felt like ice picks piercing his skin and piercing his bones. He would roll over to give the exposed part of his body a break from the biting air and a chance to be warmed against the mattress, but this would expose the other side. Caleb tossed and turned, alternating the discomfort all night.

As SSgt Folsom continued to focus his wrath exclusively on Caleb, the practice started to become routine. Both of them pretended they saw nothing out of the ordinary about it. Caleb never breathed a word of complaint – not to SSgt Folsom, not to Sgt Ward, not to any other Drill Instructor, not to the recruits, never even in a letter or phone call home. Caleb fought on with blind, stubborn – and perhaps foolish – determination. Tenacity that he did not know existed in him, coursed through his veins. He pushed his muscles to the point of exploding, but they did

not. He pushed his bones to shatter, but they did not. He provoked his patience to bristle and break, flooding his mind with black hatred, but he hated no one.

Had he been given any time to catch his breath, he might have discovered that he was losing the will to live. Luckily, he pushed on not knowing.

* * *

“How come I feel like you are singling me out?” Stacy’s voice slurred as he began to berate his waiter. Stacy was out to lunch with Martin, a friend of his and Caleb’s. Stacy had been drinking Tequila Sunrises and he was on his fifth one. It was thirty-five minutes after noon and Blake – the befuddled waiter – found himself smack dab in the middle of an unusually hectic lunch rush.

“Excuse me?” Blake asked, confused. There were three empty glasses on Stacy’s table, containing only melting grenadine-colored ice, the empty remains of his Tequila Sunrises that Blake hadn’t had time to remove. The list of what he didn’t have time for was getting longer as he stood impatiently still, waiting for Stacy’s point.

“I had to walk over to the bar to order my last drink. Where were you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. How come you-” His sentence was interrupted when Blake saw another patron jiggle his tea glass. “I am *not* finished!” Stacy yelled. “Don’t you look over there at them; there is nothing you can do for them. It’s high time that you pay a little attention to me. I am one of your customers too, you know. You are helping me now.”

“Okay, what can I help you with?” Blake said with all the courtesy that he could muster.

Stacy froze for a second. He hadn’t intended for the waiter to give in. He had geared up for a fight. Stacy quickly surveyed the table and said, “You can refill my water.” Stacy extended the glass that Blake had originally placed on the table with Stacy’s first bar drink. The ice cubes in the glass had all but completely melted and were swimming around on top. Blake grabbed the

glass and looked at it. The level of the water was less than one inch from the rim.

"Sure thing," Blake said as he walked the water over to the bus-stand. He pressed the *water* button on the soda gun for the shortest amount of time that he possibly could. A quick hiss topped the glass off to the point that some spilled down the sides. Blake walked slowly over to Stacy's table trying not to spill a drop.

Stacy said nothing more to him, so he quickly ran to fill the other table's tea.

The next time Blake came to Stacy's table, he spoke with the same straight-to-the-point urgency that he had used with all his tables for the last hour, "Are you ready for your ticket?" He smiled.

"My ticket? No, honey, I am ready to talk to your manager."

"Fine," Blake said, then grabbed some dishes off another table and headed to the back.

Passing the expo line, Blake saw the manager and called out, "Gary, the gay guy at table sixty-five wants to talk to you. He's ticked."

When the manager approached the table, he asked politely and obsequiously, "How can I help you today?"

"How can you help me? You can fire that waiter, that's what you can do, first of all."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"First of all, I don't like your attitude. Nothing *seems* to be the problem. The problem *is*; it doesn't *seem to be*."

"You were unhappy with your service?"

"Do I look happy?"

"I understand and I want you to know how sorry we are that you had a bad experience today. One of our servers had a death in the family and that has left us shorthanded."

"I don't want to hear it. I don't care about the death in his family. First of all, why should I care about that? You know what, my boyfriend is in *Afghanistan*... risking his life for you. He is risking his life for *you*, okay?"

"I appreciate his service."

"Well, what I would appreciate is some better service around here; that is what I would appreciate. I understand shorthanded,

but what I'm not going to put up with is the fact that every one of these tables got better service than me, that family over there...that couple over there...I sat here and watched him spend much more time with them than with us. I just feel that we were singled out. Your waiter is dead and I understand that, but I just feel like we were singled out because we're gay."

"Sir, I can assure you that is not the case. As much as I hate to say it, I believe that everyone in this restaurant received bad service today."

"And another thing, you need to fire that bartender. Your bartender sucks."

"How about I just pick up your ticket today? Thank you for coming. Please come back and see us again." The manager waited for a response from Stacy, but didn't get one so he cautiously turned and slinked away.

After the lunch shift, the manager called Blake into his office, "Blake, I am very sorry, but we have to let you go."

"You're firing me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Because of that table?" Blake protested, shocked.

"No," the manager quickly answered, "It's not because of the table. It's because of what you said about the table."

Blake's face showed strain. As hard as he tried, he could not remember a single thing he said about the table. "What did I say?"

"You said he was angry and he was gay."

Blake still looked confused. He stopped himself from saying it, but his expression easily translated to, *So what?*

"The company has a zero tolerance policy against language that could be considered offensive."

"Language that could be considered offensive." It was not so much a question as it was mindlessly repeating back the words. Blake's mind had left the conversation; it was remembering all the names he had openly called tables in the privacy of the back kitchen, in earshot of the manager. He said, "But, wait. You didn't have a problem during today's rush when I said, 'Table thirty-three is a disgusting fatty,' or, 'That woman at fourteen is a total bi-'"

"Blake!" The manager stopped him.

“Or just last week,” Blake continued, “you, yourself, were frustrated and remarked, ‘That guy at the bar is a worthless motherf-’”

“Don’t say it,” snapped the manager.

“Or what about our own kitchen manager? When he was late you called him an as-”

“Don’t say it.”

Blake was looking at the floor. He hesitated for a second, then looked up at his manager and proceeded to say all the swear words that he had ever heard in the back kitchen, one after another. The list was so jarring and so vulgar that he thought he saw the manager blush.

Finally the manager stopped him, exclaiming, “That’s just how restaurants go sometimes!”

Blake wanted to ask how this might have been any different, but he knew he wouldn’t get a satisfactory answer. The manger knew full well the double standard. Blake looked him in the eye and said steadily, “We have worked together for over four years.”

The manger sighed. He said, “Listen, Zoe heard you say it. She can cause us too much trouble. I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER TEN

SSgt Folsom led his men off the parade deck's asphalt onto a field of dirt. There were sparse patches of green where grass could still manage to grow by narrowly escaping the boots of countless recruits over countless years. Caleb couldn't be sure, but he imagined that it was about the spot where members of his own platoon had left him wrapped, broken in a blanket.

SSgt Folsom said, "The United States Marine Corps has its very own advanced fighting system. It is designed to hone your mental, physical and character discipline, ultimately culminating into the *warrior ethos*. Every Marine is a rifleman, and now every Marine is a martial artist." As he spoke, the recruits could not help but notice he was holding in his hands a KA-BAR knife. "It's called the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program or MCMAP, affectionately known as Semper Fu. I will be demonstrating its power and effectiveness." SSgt Folsom paused and looked over his men. With a burst of energy, he yanked the KA-BAR from its sheath, producing a menacing sound. He flipped the knife one half turn in the air and caught it by its blade. He extended it out, inviting, "Now which one of you degenerates wants to stab me with a knife?"

The recruits' eyes widened. SSgt Folsom knew – they all knew – the voices in the recruits' heads were answering simultaneously, *I do*, but no one actually said it. They were all wise enough to know that there would be no stabbing today. The second a recruit brought that knife close to SSgt Folsom, he would tie him in a knot like a pretzel. To volunteer would only be inviting pain.

Caleb noticed the belt SSgt Folsom was wearing. It looked very similar to a standard issue belt – it even fit through the belt loops of his pants – except his was black and it had one red stripe. Caleb stepped forward. "Sir, this recruit would like to volunteer, sir."

SSgt Folsom looked appalled. He could not tell if Caleb was acting insolent or just stupid. The muscles on SSgt Folsom's square jaw flexed angrily, but with a shake of his head, he whipped all expression off his face. He sighed and simply said, "Idiot."

SSgt Folsom stepped to Caleb and placed the knife in the palm of his hand. He forcefully wrapped Caleb's fingers around the grip and yanked his hand forward, knife and all, hard enough to pull Caleb off his balance and force him to shuffle his feet. SSgt Folsom let go and pointed to an area of dirt where Caleb was supposed to stand. Caleb promptly stepped to that spot. He was examining the feel of the knife in his hand. It felt solid. Its minimalistic design radiated both power and masculinity. To Caleb it felt *correct*.

"Stab me."

"Sir, how would you like me to stab you, sir?"

SSgt Folsom laughed. "Will my enemy ask me how I would like to be stabbed?"

"Sir, but this recruit is not your enemy, sir."

"Are you sure about that, recruit?"

Caleb breathed deep. He shuffled his feet. Like a slow-motion tennis back hand, he swung the knife at SSgt Folsom. SSgt Folsom swatted the knife away like it was a butterfly, then rushed fiercely toward Caleb and grabbed him by both lapels, nearly lifting him off the ground. He screamed, "Hertz! If you do that again I will kill you! This knife is a deadly weapon! This KA-BAR is a Marine Corps weapon! It was made for killing. That attack did not have enough force to break skin. Don't insult me by waving a knife in my face unless you plan on cutting me open." SSgt Folsom's face was less than an inch from Caleb's. "Now try it again!" SSgt Folsom pushed Caleb backward. Caleb stumbled, but managed to stay on his feet.

Caleb's heart was pounding. He realized something: Despite the awesome power of the weapon, SSgt Folsom did not put it into his hands to empower him, but to ridicule him. The smug way that SSgt Folsom stood untrembling before him, when it was *he*, Caleb, who held the lethal weapon – the whole thing was a mockery and Caleb was its victim.

He stood there trying to figure out his next move. *What does SSgt Folsom want from me?*

"Stab me!" yelled SSgt Folsom.

He wants me to stab him, Caleb said slowly in his mind, still piecing the whole surreal situation together. *Well, I guess...maybe I should stab him.*

“Use that rage. I know you’ve got some rage. Use your hatred for me...and for all those like me...” SSgt Folsom began to provoke him.

Caleb shifted his weight. He was beginning to think he should do it. He was beginning to think that he *could* do it, actually stab him. That is what he wanted from him. That is what everyone in his life ever wanted from him – more rage, more aggression. *Is this what it takes to act like a man?*

“...You know what I mean when I say all those like me...”

Caleb nodded. He knew. His eyes were still staring off, unfocused. He was picturing himself reunited with his father, “Dad, I stabbed the Drill Sergeant! I stabbed him for you, Dad.” Caleb lowered his stance and evaluated the distance between him and SSgt Folsom.

“...I’m talking about all those people who have called you a...”

Before he could finish, Caleb lunged forward with all his might, blade first. All his strength and all his rage were focused sharply at the tip of the knife and that knife was aimed hungrily for SSgt Folsom’s soft intestines.

The next thing that Caleb knew, SSgt Folsom was no longer in front of him, but somehow behind him. SSgt Folsom’s back was turned to Caleb and Caleb’s arm was tucked underneath SSgt Folsom’s armpit. SSgt Folsom was pulling Caleb’s arm upward with both hands into a position that an arm was never intended to go. He felt a hot sharp pain indicating that his elbow was about to break. Caleb attempted to step out of this hold, but when he did, SSgt Folsom swung his stance around and twisted Caleb’s wrist at such an angle that it caused Caleb’s body to lift into the air and come crashing down on his back. The back of his head hit the ground and Caleb saw a flash of white. For a second he felt like he would pass out, but then another shock of pain surged up his arm as SSgt Folsom – who still had a hold of his hand – placed his knee against Caleb’s elbow and rotated his wrist counter-clockwise.

“This position is what we call control,” SSgt Folsom spoke very slowly while Caleb twitched with pain. “I have total control over the enemy. I have successfully incapacitated him without

causing any lasting damage...that is unless I decide to give him an extra twist.”

Caleb worried that he had already reached that point of lasting damage. He felt like the tendons in his forearm were about to snap completely. *That would leave my wrist as limp as Stacy’s*, Caleb thought.

“When you are ready to begin training with partners, you will be expected to bring your partner to control, then slowly apply pressure until he taps out.” SSgt Folsom slowly applied more pressure, which flooded Caleb’s senses with more pain. Caleb drew his eyes tightly shut and grit his teeth, but otherwise did nothing.

SSgt Folsom sighed and dropped Caleb’s hand. Angrily he said, “Idiot, tapping out looks like this...” SSgt Folsom tapped his own leg quickly twice, enough to produce a sound. Caleb staggered wearily to his feet.

SSgt Folsom turned to the men and asked, “Now, what did the homosexual do wrong?”

“Sir, volunteered, sir,” called out Terrence Brown.

SSgt Folsom did not laugh. He asked, “Does anyone else know what he did wrong?”

No one answered.

“He didn’t resist me nearly enough,” SSgt Folsom told them. “He did not respond the way the enemy would. He did not struggle for his life; he went along with my motions like he only cared about receiving the least amount of pain.” SSgt Folsom shot a menacing look at Caleb. “Your partner can not help you train unless he can act like a real combatant and act like a real heterosexual.”

* * *

Before lights out, SSgt Folsom would line up the recruits in front of their racks and force them to drink two large canteens of water. This was more water than their bodies were used to consuming so rapidly. He would count off the motions for this, just as everything they did was counted off – a count usually too rapid to keep up with. Inevitably, someone would throw up, and it was always Caleb who had to clean it up.

Then, upon the appropriate word from SSgt Folsom, they would lie on their racks above the covers without moving. They were basically expected to stand at attention, only horizontally and in their racks. This is where SSgt Folsom would meander through some irrelevant story about what it was like growing up in the Pacific North West, or gripe about no longer being able to order a rare steak at what once was his favorite restaurant. “Lousy cowards. Everyone is afraid of the blood-sucking lawyers. Dirt bags.” Caleb figured that he probably rambled so much because he knew how badly all of them had to pee, or else he was just lonely. Possibly both.

About an hour after lights out, recruits would gradually get out of bed, deciding that the coast was clear to visit the head. These times were even harder for Caleb because he always waited for the moment that the fewest men were in there, fearing their taunts, or worse. The recruits would linger in the head, not only to use it, but to taste just a few moments of free time. Mail call only allowed for enough time to receive letters from home, never enough time to actually read them, so recruits would often hang onto their letters for days before they had a chance to slip into the head and tear them open. There were no doors on the bathroom stalls, so the recruits would often use the toilets for chairs, sit in two facing stalls, and talk to each other across the aisle. If a third recruit wanted to join the conversation, he would lean on the frame of the missing door.

Tonight, Caleb wanted to write a letter. He waited until he figured most of the recruits were out of the head and back in their racks. He was careless, however, because he forgot to watch for the one man he wanted to encounter the least – Jackson Brooks. When he walked through the door of the head, he discovered that Jackson was just leaving. They found themselves only a few feet apart. Caleb did his best to put on a mean face; he looked Jackson straight in the eyes.

Jackson smirked. He said warmly, “I think it’s horrible the way that you’ve been singled out.”

Caleb didn’t move a muscle. He was trying to figure out what kind of trick Jackson might be playing. He said, “Yeah, right.”

“It’s dehumanizing,” Jackson continued boldly as if he was the one who had to inform Caleb, “to be simplified and dismissed. They don’t want to see you as a human; they want to reduce you to a *label*.”

Maybe it was too much time spent with Stacy, but that specific trigger word had just tripped Caleb’s radical side. He said accusingly, “What do you know about labels? What do you know about being simplified or dismissed? Do you know how many times I’ve been called a-”

“Bible thumper?” Jackson interrupted.

Caleb looked confused, “No, why would I be called a-”

“Fundamentalist whack-job?”

“No,” said Caleb.

“Oh,” Jackson continued, “Well then, how about racist, sexist, chauvinist, misogynist, Islamophobe, xenophobe, close-minded, bigoted, judgmental, or intolerant? Any of those?”

Caleb was starting to understand, but all he did was shake his head slowly.

“Oh and I almost forgot...*homophobe*.” Jackson added, “Yeah, I know a little bit about labels, too.” He continued in the direction he had been walking, careful not to brush shoulders with Caleb, and stepped out.

Caleb splashed some water on his face and looked for a place where he could write. He chose the furthest stall on the end and crouched over his Marine stationery. He was having trouble getting the exchange with Jackson out of his mind and was trying to figure out what his perfect cutting response should have been. Nothing came to him.

He decided to forget it and focus on the task at hand. Caleb wrote:

Dear Stacy,

I am so sorry about the way we left things. I was taken off guard by all the press attention in the parking lot. I was, in my shock, upset with you for not honoring my wishes. But I now realize that you only did it because you were proud of me. I know that you want me to say what we both know – so here it is: Sometimes I

get so caught up in my own life that I have a hard time seeing and appreciating the feelings of those closest to me, those I love the most. I'm sorry.

Yeah, I thought you would like that – me admitting to being wrong. Better keep this letter because it doesn't happen often :)

Caleb actually wrote a colon and a closing parenthesis, just as naturally as if he was texting his mother, despite the fact that this letter was handwritten.

I am sorry that I have not written for this long. BTW, if you have sent me any mail, I have not received it. It's possible that you wrote the address down wrong. Just use the return address on this letter. But, I have to warn you that it is probably more likely that your letters are being confiscated by my drill instructor. I have been receiving letters from my mother, at least, but I fear that he is intercepting yours because he knows you are my boyfriend.

Things here are...

He had too many words all contending to be next. He immediately scratched that line out and wrote:

I miss you. I keep thinking about your comforter – the lavender one – the way it smells after you wash it, how soft it feels. Last night as I was freezing, I dreamt I was snuggled warm underneath it.

Love, Caleb

As Caleb wrote those words he imagined SSgt Folsom calling the entire platoon, if not the entire company, together and reading it aloud to them, but he just did not care.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Caleb's platoon had won phone privileges by outperforming Sgt Ward's men in marksmanship. They had thirty seconds to call as many people as they wanted. It had been ten days since he mailed his first letter to Stacy, and he had yet to receive any from him at all. Caleb was anxious to hear his voice. Just the opportunity to call Stacy made him realize how much he missed him.

When it was his turn, he dialed Stacy's number and tried to calculate how much later it was in Texas. He could hear it ring. It had only been two months since he last saw him, but so much had changed. Caleb felt like he had become a much different person, a better person. But, despite all of his achievements, as he listened to Stacy's phone ring, he felt like he was the same old Caleb he had always been. It kept ringing. *Please don't let the call notes pick up!* Caleb pleaded. Caleb always hated Stacy's call notes.

The first few notes of C+C Music Factory's *Everybody Dance Now* came blasting through the phone. Caleb rolled his eyes and hung up. He didn't even get to the part where Stacy started talking.

Caleb instantly picked the phone up again and called his mother.

"Hello?"

"Mom, it's me. I only have like twenty seconds to talk."

"Caleb! I can't believe it is you. I miss you so much. I know that we have gone this long without talking before, but this feels different. I miss you more than ever. Tell me about everything. How are they treating you?"

"Actually Mom, I just wanted to hear you talk. I need to hear your voice."

There was silence on the other end. The very first thing that she thought to talk about was to vent about all the coverage of him in the press that she was trying to avoid seeing, and perhaps a word about how she never liked Stacy. But she knew that would be wrong. She tried desperately to think of something else to say. "Oh Caleb," she said, then started, "I won a scratch-off last week. It was fifty dollars! Well, that's far less than the

balance on my credit card that is costing me all of that interest, but it's a start. Every little bit helps."

"You didn't use it on the credit card," Caleb laughed.

"No, I got my nails done." His mom laughed. "You know what the lady at the salon said? She said she'd never seen-" the line went dead and the next recruit walked up for his turn.

Caleb looked at the silent phone and said, "I love you, Mom."

* * *

Stacy was feeling light headed. He was drinking Patron. The alcohol had made him lonely so he called Martin. They had been talking for ten minutes when Martin casually dropped the name, Jerald Schaefer – a man he met at a protest rally. Jerald Schaefer was an activist, socialite, and millionaire.

"Oh sure, no one has heard of him in this *one gay town*, but he is practically a god in L.A.," said Martin.

"Sounds like you need to jump all over that."

"Trust me, I want to. It's just-"

"Hold on, someone's calling on my other line." Stacy drew the phone back from his ear.

Unknown Caller

"Forget it. It's probably just some idiot telemarketer. I am so sick to death of all these boot-licking telemarketers. I am so sick of everyone trying to sell me something. It's everywhere you look these days. You can't go anywhere without seeing some garish ad for a stupid pet shampoo. Like I have time to shampoo my cat's hair, you know. I might as well give him a pedicure while I am at it. I know, I could give my cat a perm."

Martin could tell that Stacy was drunk again. Martin had been heart sick all day about the new potential man in his life. He was wondering if Stacy would let the conversation get back to it. He wondered if Stacy just heard him quietly sigh.

"I mean, what is this guy's problem?" Stacy shouted it with so much passion that Martin figured he was probably talking about some guy he saw on the TV or something, probably some guy with buck teeth, or a mullet, or wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

"Which guy?" Martin dutifully asked.

"Jerry, the Jolly Activist. Is he into you or not?"

“That’s just it; I am not sure. He keeps giving me mixed signal-”

“I am so sick of all these ads!” Stacy screamed over dramatically. “I am looking at my mail pile – yeah, I know, I let it pile up – and the whole thing is junk mail. Like I’ve got time to go through a bunch of junk mail.”

Martin sighed more loudly this time. “Well, anyway, he wants me to come out to a party at his beach house this weekend.”

“In California?”

“Yes.”

“Well, of course he is into you!”

“I’m not sure, you see, he wants us both to come.”

“What *are* you talking about?”

“He wants to meet you. He’s heard about Caleb.”

“Oh, my God. Are you serious? Sand, waves and gorgeous guys; we are so there!”

“How is Caleb, by the way? Have you heard from him?” Martin asked tactically, as if to remind Stacy that he has a boyfriend.

“Of course, we send each other letters all the time. Not to mention, we talk on the phone for like an *hour* every night.”

“How are they treating him?”

“How do you think? They’re a bunch of savages,” Stacy said as he stood up wobbly with a glass in one hand and a large stack of junk mail in the other, holding the phone with his shoulder. He walked to the trash can with much effort and tossed in the whole pile, then he made it back to the couch before performing a controlled collapse. Stacy let out a large moan.

“Did you need me to let you go?”

“Honey, I think I am going to pass out right here.” Martin could always tell when Stacy was too drunk because he started calling him *honey*.

“I guess I will talk to you later.”

“California, baby.”

Stacy didn’t know it, but in-between a flyer for a hardware store and Stacy’s electric bill, Caleb’s first letter from boot camp had just been thrown in the trash.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SSgt Folsom brought the men to the same field as before. Everyone knew that they were in for another round of Semper Fu. This lesson would cover techniques in ground fighting. There was a knot tightening in Caleb's stomach and it was starting to rain.

This time SSgt Folsom did not ask for a volunteer, and Caleb was surprised and relieved when he picked a recruit to abuse other than him. SSgt Folsom spoke calmly as he manhandled the ill-fated recruit, "Once you have one arm around his neck, you bring your other arm over to where you can grab your own bicep, and place your other hand behind his head." As SSgt Folsom did this, the recruit with his delicate neck inside SSgt Folsom's muscular forearms had a despondent look on his face. "From here, most people think that they should waste all their energy trying to squeeze with their arms. Don't make that mistake. Your arm strength is limited. From here you will make the most difference if you simply arch your back." As soon as SSgt Folsom did this, there came a frantic tapping from the recruit almost instantly.

The rain began to come down harder, but every man there acted as if he didn't notice.

SSgt Folsom rolled swiftly to his feet. He said, "This is a serious hold. It is not meant to cut off the passage of air to the body. People can live a relatively long time without air. It is meant to cut off the passage of blood to the brain. With no blood circulating to the brain, a person cannot live. With your fellow recruits, you *must* let go as soon as your partner taps out. With the enemy, you must be aware of the logistics – when you have a good hold on your opponent, it takes only three seconds to cut off all blood to the brain. Once that happens, first they will gag, then they will pass out, then they will die. Do you have any questions?"

Everyone stood completely silent and completely still.

"Good, then everybody pair up. Find a partner. You and your partner will take turns putting each other into side headlocks. Using the moves I showed you, you must break out of the

headlocks and put your attacker into the choke hold until he taps out.”

Everyone began to move, but Caleb remained perfectly still. He could hear the other men’s footsteps splashing in the mud as they all picked partners. He knew no one wanted him, and he couldn’t think of a single recruit who he would want to train with. *Maybe Jackson*. His own brain surprised him when he thought it.

Trey had just chosen a partner when SSgt Folsom barked out, “Tucker, you’re with Hertz!”

The knot in Caleb’s chest tightened again. Rain streamed down his face.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Trey called out louder than usual, the only way he had to voice the resentment. When Trey stepped over to Caleb, he had a look of disgust on his face. It was the same look that he had first used to try to stare Caleb down on the bus. Trey repeated SSgt Folsom’s warning from before, “Try to act like a heterosexual.”

Hearing this, SSgt Folsom called out to the platoon. “Yes, remember to act like the enemy. You are not helping to train your partner if you roll over and go limp.”

Trey lowered his brow, looked at Caleb and chuckled. The smirk on his face indicated that he had taken SSgt Folsom’s words to heart. He had no intention of letting Caleb put him into the choke hold. Standing that close to Trey was the first time that Caleb fully understood just how amazingly large he was. Trey lunged out and put Caleb into a head lock. They both dropped to the ground. Caleb was able to create a frame with his arm against Trey’s neck just like SSgt Folsom had shown them, but he could not seem to pry him far enough away. He struggled but he couldn’t break Trey’s grip, despite the fact that SSgt Folsom had stressed that good technique would make up for any disparity of physical strength.

Caleb’s face began to turn red as he continued to squirm. While Caleb struggled as hard as he could, Trey acted rather bored and aloof. Finally, Caleb loosened the headlock just enough for him to roll his body out of the way and flip Trey over. But Trey resisted. Caleb tried and failed. He tried again and failed again. By now their clothes were nearly completely

covered in mud. Finally, with a loud grunt, Caleb lifted Trey off the ground and thrust him face down with a splash and a hard thud. They both heard a surprised groan from one of the recruits. A few men had stopped their own training to watch Caleb and Trey struggle. SSgt Folsom did not discourage the gawkers because he was watching so intently himself.

When Trey heard that people had seen Caleb's first successful move, he became enraged. As Caleb leaned on top of Trey's body and began to wrap his right arm around his neck, Trey bucked him off and threw him to the ground. It wasn't any specific training that allowed Trey to turn Caleb face down and climb on top of him, it was a furious strength. When the other recruits saw Trey's face, it was one solid sheet of black mud with just the white of two angry eyes glinting from behind it. Trey was taking SSgt Folsom's advice and treated this like actual combat. He began to put Caleb into the deadly choke hold, even though it was supposed to be Caleb's turn for the new technique. Caleb realized what Trey was about to do and frantically fought his way out of it. He had enough speed to nearly fight his way back to his feet, but Trey had managed to grab both legs out from under him. Caleb hit the ground face first, splattering mud onto a few recruits. By this point the whole platoon was gathered around watching.

Trey quickly advanced on top of him and tried the headlock again. He was able to get his arm around Caleb's neck, but Caleb frantically pulled it loose. In the end, however, Trey was just too strong for him. Trey established his arms in the correct position and began to squeeze. Due to all the exertion, he had temporarily forgotten the last piece of it. Just as Caleb was about to break Trey's grip, Trey arched his back. To Caleb, it felt like he had a thousand inflatable blood pressure monitors wrapped around his neck and they were all inflating at once. His hands still frantically searched for a weak spot in the hold. He yanked on Trey's forearm with both hands, but it didn't budge. Caleb felt like he was being held by King Kong, futilely trying to loosen his giant thumb. A deathly sound came out of Caleb's mouth as he began to gag. He saw dark clouds enter into both sides of his vision, and although he felt certain that he had his eyes open, he soon saw nothing at all.

His hands still fought. Underneath Trey's massive body, none of the recruits could see Caleb's face. His hands tried different grips on different places on Trey's arms, but his movement was slowing down.

"Tap out, you idiot!" shouted SSgt Folsom. "Tap out. Tap out!"

Caleb did not tap out. His weak arms were even further weakened, but he tugged and tugged for his life. Angry blind adrenaline was coursing through Trey's heart.

"Tap out!" more recruits began to yell, one after another, "Tap out!"

"Tucker, let him go!" shouted Jackson.

"Let go Tucker; you'll kill him!" shouted more recruits. "Tucker, let go!"

Trey felt Caleb's fingers go completely limp and fall away from his arm. Trey then felt two strong hands on his shoulder and bicep. It was SSgt Folsom lifting Trey off Caleb. Realizing who it was, Trey quickly let go. SSgt Folsom pushed Trey aside and rolled Caleb over. Everyone looked accusingly at Trey Tucker. Trey cried out in his defense, "He didn't tap out! Why didn't he tap out?"

SSgt Folsom checked Caleb's airway, his breathing and his pulse. He began to clap loudly only inches from Caleb's face, trying to wake him up.

Trey watched his limp body and unconscious face – now covered in mud, anonymous. Trey's voice sounded hollow and thin when he asked completely amazed, "Why didn't he just tap out?"

To Caleb, "tap out" was another term that meant "quit."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next spare moment for Jackson came at the end of that week. At his first taste of *square away time*, Jackson had something that he felt he had to square away. He quietly slipped out of his squad bay without anyone noticing. He ignored the questions and heckles as he walked through the upstairs squad bay of Sgt Ward's platoon. Jackson was on a personal mission and that required Sgt Ward. It didn't take long to find him and Jackson boldly requested an audience.

Sgt Ward addressed him mockingly, "A nasty little church mouse, nosing around in my holy sanctuary; what is that church mouse thinking?"

"Sir, the issue pertains to SSgt Folsom, sir."

"Well, do you expect me to guess? Get on with it."

"Sir, this recruit worries that he is treating one of his recruits unfairly, sir."

"Unfairly? Who told you that the Marine Corps was supposed to be fair? Is war fair? Will the enemy treat Hertz fairly?"

Jackson was initially shocked that Sgt Ward could infer that he was talking about Caleb, but then realized that he should not be shocked at all. "Sir, no, sir."

"Anything else, recruit?"

"Sir, yes, he has Caleb Hertz do incessant duck walks, sir."

"So?"

"Sir, the duck walk was banned from military boot camps because of severe damage to cartilage and tendons, sir."

"Do I look like I need a lesson in military history from a recruit?"

"Sir, no, sir."

"The duck walk has been known to cause serious and irreversible damage to one out of every fifty men." From Jackson's best estimate, it seemed that Sgt Ward just made that up off the top of his head. "SSgt Folsom's platoon has only forty-eight men and only one homosexual. So, nothing to keep you up at night, recruit."

“Sir, that brings this recruit to another concern. This recruit is concerned about the way that SSgt Folsom refers to Recruit Caleb Hertz as a homosexual, sir.”

“I hate to break this to you, recruit, but that man is a homosexual.”

“Sir, yes, sir, but this recruit is not sure if he should call him that, sir.”

“Is there something derisive about the term homosexual?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“Is there a more po-litically co-rrect name that you would like for SSgt Folsom to use when referring to Recruit Hertz’s sexuality?”

“Sir, no, sir, but that’s just it. This recruit is not sure why we need to refer to his sexuality at all, sir.”

“You mean to say that we, as Marines, need to get to the business of killing the enemy and not concern ourselves with the details of another man’s libido?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“You mean that we should not ask, and he should not tell?”

Jackson was confused. “Sir, well...no, sir. Not exactly, sir”

“Well, then what exactly?”

“Sir, this recruit supposes he doesn’t know, sir.”

“Well, then I guess you should get back to your own squad bay and forget all about our little talk here.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

When Jackson got back to his squad bay, a few members from Sgt Ward’s platoon were there talking with Trey, Terrence, and some others. They were all clustered around Trey’s rack, which was right next to Caleb’s. Jackson could tell that they had been giving Caleb trouble because he was sitting against the wall on the other side of the room pretending to read the letter from his mother, which Jackson knew he had already read. In Caleb’s hand was a pink envelop that, for one reason or another, he hadn’t opened yet.

“So, this is what you guys do with yourselves while I am at church?” Jackson chided them in lieu of a hello.

“Why aren’t you there now?”

“I had something that I thought I could do.” Jackson wished he had said *should* do, but he noticed no one was really

interested anyway. On the other side of the room he saw a recruit sitting with a letter that he seemed to have just opened. “Did we get mail today?” Jackson asked perplexed. The day before, SSgt Folsom hadn’t bothered with mail call.

Saying nothing, Trey motioned over to Jackson’s rack where they had left a letter for him. Jackson saw the fiery red envelope and knew right away who it was from. His face immediately lit up when he saw the glorious return address in the upper left hand corner.

Stephanie Sanders
3782 Crimson Lane
Phoenix, AZ 85005

To her, it was just her information, the body of trivia that surrounds every American, numbers and letters to be filled out on tedious forms. But to Jackson, in that moment, Stephanie was more than just her first name, it represented one of life’s most profound glories – another human soul that he loved and that loved him back. Sanders was more than a last name, it was a placeholder for where he hoped to see his own last name one day. The street address gave the location of where they had first kissed, and the city and state – that represented *home*. The last thing that Stephanie did, one-hundred percent for Jackson’s benefit, was write three letters underneath the city, state and zip code: *U.S.A.* – the reason he was there.

The final thing he saw was a small note, “Photographs: Do Not Bend.”

Jackson turned it around to anxiously tear into it, but before he had a chance it was aggressively yanked from his hands.

“Photographs?” asked Terrence, who must have seen the word when Jackson turned it to open the back.

Jackson lunged for it but Terrence was faster. He quickly handed it to Trey. “We don’t all have Suzy’s, so you have to share,” Trey said, as he smelled the envelope. “Scented...kinky.” Trey tore the envelope open. “Jackpot!” he said as he pulled out the photo. “Aw...she has her clothes on,” he said shocked and disappointed. He handed it to Anthony, one of the men from Sgt Ward’s Platoon.

“Not bad,” said Anthony. “What’s she doing with a guy like you?”

“Give me that,” said Ryan, who had followed Anthony in from Ward’s platoon. The photo was passed again. “Dude, how on Earth did you get a girl this beautiful?”

Jackson tried to grab the photo and the letter back when it appeared that their attention had lapsed, but to no avail. He walked in one direction, only to have to turn back the other way. His manor was calm and cautious, knowing that to show frustration would only provoke them further. They finally made their way back to Terrence, who read the letter out loud:

My dearest brave Jackson,

Every time I see a silly war protestor on the news, I think about you. Every time I hear of another fallen man or woman in uniform, I think about you. Every time I feel overwhelmed by the cheap and ephemeral problems of my life, I think about you.

If there is an antidote for the foolishness of the world, it is your wisdom. If there is a salve to heal the pain of my life, it is your smile. And, if there is a cause so noble that it – like a magic elixir – could bring comfort even to those who have lost loved ones, it is your cause, our cause: the American Dream. God, country, family, freedom – when I think of the only things that matter in life, I cannot help but picture your kind eyes. I see them as if they are right in front of me, as if they had never left.

Hurry home so we can dream this dream together.

Love, Stephanie

“Wow,” said Terrence, “Suzy still thinks she’s in love.”

“Who’s Suzy?” Jackson finally asked.

“Suzy is the name for the girl back home cheating on us,” Anthony said, and Jackson got the feeling that he was the one who taught the other’s that just before Jackson came in.

“She’s not cheating on me,” said Jackson.

“Not yet,” a few different men said in near-perfect unison.

“Sooner or later,” Terrence said looking approvingly at the photo, “this sweet piece of tail will-”

“She is a virgin,” Jackson quickly interjected.

With that, Terrence stopped dead in his tracks. Upon hearing the news, Anthony sprang up from his seat and dove for the picture in Terrence’s hands. Anthony’s sudden excitement forced the men to laugh. Terrence quickly held the picture out of Anthony’s reach, as if it was his duty to do so. He wordlessly relinquished it back to Jackson. He folded the letter and likewise held it out to Jackson. Everyone moaned.

Anthony said excitedly, like it had just occurred to him, “That means you’re probably a virgin too!” His tone was accusing.

Even the air between them stood still.

Before Jackson could answer, they were distracted by a new commotion. Trey was holding Caleb by the scruff of his shirt, swinging him back and forth like a ragdoll. Caleb’s right arm was reaching frantically and his left hand was desperately trying to dislodge Trey’s grip. The men followed the length of Trey’s long arm to discover what Caleb wanted to reclaim so badly. It was the pink envelope he had yet to open. There was a gasp.

“Look at what Tucker found!” Terrence yelled as he grabbed the envelope. “Hertz has a...” He stopped short when he realized that he had found something for which the Marines had no name. He took the envelope from Trey and looked at the return address, “Stacy?”

“What?” Anthony called out. “I thought he was gay.”

“It’s my sister,” Caleb quickly lied as Trey let go of him.

“Yeah, right!”

“Stacy can be a guy’s name,” someone offered.

“See if it’s scented,” someone else cried out.

Terrence offered it to Trey to smell, but Trey quickly yanked his face away. “I don’t want to know,” Trey said.

“Stacy Oliver,” Terrence read the name out loud. “Hertz’s got himself an *Oliver*. Let’s read what the Oliver says...”

Terrence opened the envelope and began reading the letter while doing his most boisterous and flamboyant homosexual imitation:

Dear Buttercup,

All the men laughed and Caleb had to admit, he did sound a lot like Stacy.

“Buttercup?” Terrence repeated to more laughter and continued reading:

OMG, last weekend was the most fun I have ever had in my life. Martin and I flew out to L.A. for a party at Jerald Schaefer’s mansion. Jerald Schaefer is only like the most important activist in the whole world, not that I would expect you to know that.

Martin was being a whiny brat the whole weekend, but whatever. I could not help it if Jerald wanted to spend all his time with me. It’s not what Martin thinks; he just doesn’t understand the cause.

Jerald is great. Isn’t that what you have always wanted to be – someone great, someone important? He wants me to come stay with him in his mansion. He wants me to be someone important too.

I told him yes.

At this point, Terrence stopped using the gay voice. He continued to read in his own voice in a tone that was low and solemn:

You didn’t really expect me to wait for you, did you? I have to take this chance, or else I might end up like just another dying rose. I feel like I have a hidden potential that you have never appreciated. Jerald does. I have to fight the battle that you weren’t up for.

As the men slowly realized the nature of the letter and how it was much different than Jackson’s, they all stopped laughing. He read the last line:

When you come back from pretending to be a Marine, I will already be gone.

Terrence crunched his brow into a look of shriveled disgust. "That weasel," he said quietly as Caleb lifelessly snatched the letter away from him.

"Pretending to be a Marine!" Anthony laughed and slapped Ryan's arm as Caleb was walking away. "Well, he got that part right."

"Pretending to be a *man*," laughed Ryan.

None of Caleb's platoon was laughing.

"Leave him alone," said Trey.

"Don't feel sorry for Daffy. So what if some little *foxtrot papa* cheated on him? We all get cheated on." He turned to look at Caleb who was staring at the ground. "Los Angeles – that's an FP's paradise. Or he might wind up at some bathhouse in San Francisco splashing water in a hot tub full of naked men." Anthony turned to Ryan and said with an imitated gay lisp, "Thh-top it!" as he pantomimed playfully splashing water.

"No you, Thh-top it!" Ryan played along.

"Either that or he is giving some guy a full body massage in the sauna," Anthony added.

"How do you know so much about San Francisco bathhouses?" scoffed Terrence.

Noticing that Caleb's platoon laughed at Terrence's joke but none of his, Anthony said, "Oh, come on guys. Don't think that this little fairy could ever be a Marine." When he said that, he saw the smallest movement in Caleb's eyes, which had previously been statue still. He knew that he had baited him. Anthony made an aggressive move closer to Caleb, and said, "Yeah, you heard me. You will never be a Marine."

As Anthony continued to advance, Caleb's platoon, as well as Ryan, followed him to Caleb's side of the room. Caleb continued to look only downward.

"Who did you think you were kidding? What made you think you could do it? Oh, you may survive boot camp, Daffy, and on paper they will be legally obligated to call you a Marine, but everyone will still know the truth. And most of all, *you* will

know.” With this, Caleb looked up into Anthony’s eyes. No other part of his face even twitched. The muscles surrounding his jaw were clinched tight as his eyes burned with anger and the beginning of tears.

“You going to cry now? See! What kind of a Marine is that?” Anthony shook his head in exaggerated disgrace, “You can’t escape what you are. A worthless faggot is all you will ever be.” Every eye there could see Caleb’s body shaking. “What? You want to hit me now? You want to hit me?” Anthony was twice the size of Caleb. Anthony was even bigger than Trey Tucker. “You think you can take me? Go for it. C’mon, take your best shot.” The crowd tightened in around them. “C’mon. Hit me. Go for it. Hit me.”

Each time he said those two words he stuck his jaw out in a quick taunting invitation.

“Hit me...

Hit me...

Hit me.”

And with that, Anthony received a devastating blow right on the jaw, courtesy of Trey Tucker. Ryan quickly jumped onto Trey, but was no match for him. Trey threw him off like he was roughhousing with his four year old nephew. Anthony had regained his bearings and rushed at him with his fists up, but before he saw it coming, Trey hit him again. This time Anthony fell to the ground. The entire platoon gathered angrily around them, with adrenaline and platoon loyalty coursing through their veins.

“A-ten-Hut!” sounded Sgt Ward, and everyone snapped to attention.

Sgt Ward shot SSgt Folsom a malicious look as he stepped past him into the squad bay. He was the only one in the room that knew SSgt Folsom had gotten there first. SSgt Folsom didn’t stop anything that was happening because his platoon was winning. The three outsiders slinked out the door with their tails between their legs.

“The confidence course is tomorrow and you pansies better be ready,” is all SSgt Folsom said, then gave the slightest hint of a smile and disappeared out the same door.

* * *

After completing the confidence course, their most challenging day yet, SSgt Folsom called the platoon to attention and said solemnly, "Congratulations. I know that was a difficult course, but you can be happy now because you are finished. And anyone who is not a homosexual...or who does not fight a homosexual's battles for him..." he looked directly at Trey, "can hit the showers. Otherwise, you've got to do it again. Platoon, fall out." When he said this, not everyone moved. The ones that instinctually did, hesitated when they noticed the others weren't moving. SSgt Folsom saw this and his eyes bugged wide, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "Are you deaf? I said hit the showers!" With this everyone did move, leaving Caleb alone with Trey at the start of the course.

Trey took off with a strong lead. Even after all the extra IT Caleb had been doing, Trey was still a better athlete. It was like he had superior physical ability in his blood. Finally, on a clear stretch between having to make it over a wall and having to crawl through sand, Trey could feel that Caleb had caught up and was running right next to him. He turned to look at Caleb. Caleb was looking right at him, but looked away.

"What?" Trey snapped.

"I'm sorry I got you into this."

Trey said nothing.

"I wanted to thank you."

"Oh God!" Trey huffed.

"No, I mean it. I can't believe you stood up for me like that."

"I didn't stand up for you. I stood up for the platoon."

"Still," said Caleb.

"Just don't try to kiss me, okay?" Trey said curtly as he quickly and skillfully faded back behind Caleb at just the right angle to kick Caleb's right foot so that it would collide with his left. Caleb went down face first into the gravel and the mud. The rocks cut his hands and knees and there was a sharp shooting pain as he stood back up, now way behind again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was an hour after lights out and Caleb's stomach was growling so loudly he assumed it would probably wake up the entire squad bay.

Earlier that evening, SSgt Folsom called him out of line in the chow hall and asked, "Recruit, help me out. I am trying to remember the name of the guy in *Funny Girl*?"

"Sir, is that a movie or something, sir?"

"Don't try to yank my chain, recruit. I know all you homosexuals like Streisand movies."

"Sir, this recruit likes *Die Hard* movies, sir."

SSgt Folsom shook his head wearily and sent Caleb straight to the end of the line.

His hunger had been escalating since then and the pain would not allow him to get to sleep. While he lay there suffering, he remembered a letter from his mother that he hadn't had a chance to read yet. *If nothing else, it will help get my mind off my stomach*, he thought.

As he snuck into the head to read it, he noticed that Jackson stirred when he passed his rack. Luckily, the head was empty, so Caleb made his way to his regular throne in the very last stall. Just as Caleb leaned forward to tear open the envelope, he spotted Jackson peering around the stall to get a look at Caleb's feet – making sure that Caleb's pants were not around his ankles.

"I'm not using it, Brooks, what do you want?" he snapped at Jackson.

Jackson did not say anything, but he walked down to the last stall and extended Caleb an MRE.

Caleb looked shocked, but stubbornly shook his head.

"Don't be a martyr," Jackson said.

"You could get in trouble."

"Yeah, I saw the sign out front that said, 'Don't feed the homosexuals.'"

Caleb laughed, "Where did you get it?"

"Don't worry about that. Let's just say I *acquired* it."

"You could get in trouble," Caleb repeated. He was so hungry.

“What difference is it to me? You’d be the one to do my punishment.”

Caleb laughed again, but it was a deeply sad, defeated laugh. He took the meal from Jackson and a desolate look came over him. His eyes were directed toward the MRE in his hands, but he seemed to be looking past it.

Jackson looked at the old scar on Caleb’s scalp, the fresh scars on his palms, and the slight shaking of his hands. “Have you considered my servant Job?” Jackson asked as he got comfortable on the *seat* across from Caleb.

Caleb stared on as if Jackson had said nothing. It was a full ten seconds later that he looked up and asked, “What?”

Jackson laughed. He said, “Have you considered my servant Job?”

“What are you talking about?”

“That is what God asked Satan in the Bible. He was proud of Job; he was showing him off,” he looked at the dark bags under Caleb’s exhausted eyes. He said, “Perhaps he is showing you off.”

“I doubt it,” said Caleb, rather disinterested. He added, “My school nurse used to say I suffered like Job. I never knew what she meant.”

“Do you not know that story of Job?”

“Not really, I know he is some guy in the Bible.”

“Do you mind if I tell you?”

“Knock yourself out,” Caleb said reluctantly.

“Well, Job was a wealthy and happy servant of God. God said, ‘There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’ But, Satan contended that Job’s faith and servitude were merely a natural reaction to his happiness and prosperity, challenging, ‘Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and he will surely curse your face.’ But God knew that Job belonged to him, not Satan. He knew that no matter how much Job suffered, he would not turn his back on God. No matter how much Satan tempted him to leave God, Job wouldn’t. So, do you know what God did? God handed him over to Satan. He basically said, ‘Have your way with him; I won’t stop you.’”

“God sold him out?” Caleb asked surprised.

“Pretty much.”

“God had forsaken him!” His second statement had a more accusing tone.

“Pretty much.”

“Just like me,” he said solemnly, almost a whisper.

Jackson shrugged.

“That’s what you are thinking, isn’t it?” Caleb asked. “God’s forsaken me?”

“It would answer a lot of questions,” said Jackson. Caleb laughed and Jackson added, “I mean you are the unluckiest SOB that I’ve ever met!”

Caleb chuckled and shook his head wearily. If a head shake can ever mean, yes, this one did. He asked, “So what’s the point?”

“I don’t know. A lot of people who look at the story remark on Job’s character. I am more interested in what the story tells us about God.”

“But, wait. That can’t be what is happening to me,” Caleb turned to look straight in Jackson’s eyes, “because, I never believed in God in the first place.” Caleb said it forcefully knowing that, to an audience like Jackson, it was a provocative statement.

Jackson nodded, casually. His facial expression treated it like the most irrelevant news he had ever heard, news he already knew. A thought occurred to him and he said, “Perhaps God is tempting you to leave Satan.” Jackson smiled. “Perhaps you are the anti-Job.”

Caleb gave Jackson a funny look. After thinking about it for a few minutes he reasoned, “So if I am the anti-Job, then God has theorized that the only reason I don’t believe in him is because my life has been so miserable.”

Jackson swayed his head back and forth, like he was weighing the idea on a teetering see-saw. He asked, “*Is* that the only reason?”

Caleb squinted for a second – it was almost a wince – when his own statement was thrown back at him. He did not answer, but continued his thought, “If I am the anti-Job, don’t you think that God would then cause me to not suffer, but experience great

joy? Wouldn't God use copious amounts of non-stop happiness in order to tempt me to leave Satan?"

Jackson pondered this for a second, then repeated, "Copious amounts of non-stop happiness?" He spread both arms and signaled their very environment, the squad bay, the drill instructor and the weeks they have been narrowly surviving boot camp. His expression read, *What do you call all this?!*

Caleb laughed out loud. He peeled the tan plastic off his MRE.

Jackson added in a more serious tone, "If it ever gets too rough here, I think about Job. God did not sell him out. God sees things from a far different vantage point. He knew that nothing Job would ever have to endure on Earth would amount to much when compared to the eternity of joy that God had in store for him in Heaven."

"Do you think He has that in store for me?"

Jackson froze. He wished he had not walked into it. "I'm not sure."

"That's a cop out."

"Probably."

Caleb's voice became very challenging. He looked directly at Jackson and asked straight out, "Can a homosexual make it into Heaven?"

Jackson wanted so badly to tell Caleb about God's love and God's grace. He wanted to tell Caleb about how Christ had transformed his own life. Instead, he was forced to start with *that*. He smiled and shrugged melodramatically. He said, "What do I know? Just last month I would have said that a homosexual couldn't make it into the *military*! Yet, here you are."

Caleb laughed. "So, when I get to the gates of Heaven, I need to remember, *don't ask, don't tell*?"

Jackson laughed, a bit longer than Caleb did.

Caleb tried again, "Quit stalling, do you believe that homosexuals go to Hell?"

Jackson returned his direct gaze. He cleared his throat and answered, "I believe that *atheists* go to Hell. If I were you, I would start there."

"Do you really expect me to believe in a God who calls homosexuality a sin?"

“Why not? I believe in a God who calls lying is a sin.”

“So, we’re all sinners?”

“I’m sure it’s not your first time to hear that,” Jackson smiled. “All sin separates us from God. It is a gap that we cannot bridge on our own. It can only be bridged by God’s grace. When Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice, he did it for all of us, for all people and all sins.”

“Thanks for the sermon, but you are still obfuscating. If I were to accept Jesus, I would have to give up all sex, wouldn’t I?”

Jackson hesitated. “There are people who are abstinent their whole lives for the sake of God. It does happen. And, they are probably less miserable than you think.” Jackson’s face tightened uncomfortably. He added, “And technically, you could have all the sex you want...in a marriage...with a woman. Technically.”

Caleb scoffed, “Gee, thanks.” Caleb loaded a bite of food onto his fork. When he was done chewing he asked, “Do you believe that accepting Jesus in my heart could make me magically straight?”

“Yes,” said Jackson to Caleb’s surprise. He added, “I also think that with faith we can move mountains, although I’ve never met anyone in either case who has done it!”

Caleb laughed.

Jackson continued, “The problem is, you are picturing a belief in God, and I am actually picturing God. People can’t judge the beliefs or actions of Christians if they start with the premise that God is not real – of course we would look kooky. When you really believe that there is an intelligence that created the universe and that He has granted us eternal life, then these details we are quibbling about – even the Herculean task of battling our sexual nature – just don’t amount to much. Once you truly understand the gift that Jesus has given us, then you would gladly do anything he asks, out of gratitude, not out of fear. And if we could really imagine eternity and really believe in it, nothing would ever be hard after that. Nothing at all. So, the only problem a man ever faces is not enough faith, because with enough faith a man would know that one orgasm, or one million,

would be a small sacrifice for what we get in exchange – an eternity in the presence of *God*.”

“Well...” Caleb said with his mouth still full. He waited till he swallowed and continued, “It’s not the price that upsets me, it’s the fact that I would have to pay more. And someone else would have to pay less. According to your God, you have to abstain until marriage, I have to abstain until death. That’s not fair. Isn’t God supposed to be fair?”

Jackson shrugged. “He wasn’t fair to Job.”

“Yeah, and he hasn’t been fair to me. He has given me a life...” Caleb paused dramatically. It looked like he was just punched in the face by a distant memory. Jackson imagined that it might have been a few distant memories and they were probably kicking him as well. Caleb started over. “God has given me a life that I do not deserve.”

Jackson smiled. He was considering the statement’s other meaning. He said, “I have no disagreement with you there.”

Jackson got up to leave, but Caleb stopped him. He said, “Brooks, wait!” Jackson stepped back into the doorway of the stall, anxious for another opportunity to reach him. Caleb said, “Do you mind throwing this away for me?” and handed him an empty MRE tray.

“Thanks,” said Jackson. “Thanks.”

“So you really believe in God, the Bible, Christianity...all that?”

Jackson smirked at the phrasing, but answered, “I know that there is a God and that He loves me and wants me to be happy.”

“How do you know?”

Jackson reached into his pocket and pulled out the photo he’d received from Stephanie. “Because He creates miracles.”

The photo showed a beautiful young girl with grey eyes. Surrounding both of her pupils was a splash of yellow that looked like the sun bursting out around a lunar eclipse. She was genetically predisposed to have dark circles under her eyes, but Jackson liked the way the color merged into the brown freckles at the top of her cheeks, and when she smiled two deep dimples formed in those spots.

Caleb smiled. “She’s beautiful,” he said warmly, then took a quick second look at the picture. Caleb gave his best impression

of a homosexual and said, "I just *love* her earrings. They're *fabulous!*"

Jackson laughed.

After Jackson left, Caleb looked down at the envelope from his mom. He felt some comfort holding it. He put everything that Jackson had said out of his mind and focused on hearing his mother's words. He anxiously tore the edge and pulled out the letter. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and read his mother's words:

I finally found it! I knew that I still had it somewhere. I would never lose something so valuable. You know why I could not find it? Because I had put it in my safety deposit box. I put it there so that I would never lose it. Ironically that was the reason I couldn't find it!

Your Grandfather served as an Infantry Weapons Officer in the 'Fighting Fourth' (4th Marine Division) during World War II. His nickname was TNT because he was always getting drunk and singing! ;) lol. That was his line. I never understood it then and I still don't. I think that is what makes it so funny. He was part of the campaign to capture Saipan and would have gone on to Iwo Jima if he hadn't taken shrapnel outside of Kanoa. Well, he made this necklace from the shrapnel they pulled out of his shoulder. He was lucky to have survived, and by extension, we were lucky to have ever been born!

As you know, he had two girls, but I am not sure if I have ever told you how much he wanted a boy. I even think I married a Marine just to make him happy. But he never did like the man I married, so I think that the man he was waiting to give this to was you. I know he would be proud of you, Caleb. You are like the son he never had. You are brave and kind, just like he

was. And now you are following in your grandfather's footsteps, his boots.

Perhaps this will be lucky and protect you, since I am not there to protect you myself. I have never been any good at watching over you, and that is all I ever want in life – for you to be watched over.

I miss you so much. I am so proud of you. Please don't be too hard on your Drill Instructor and fellow recruits. Show some mercy, okay?

Love, Mom

Caleb hadn't felt anything else in the envelope when he opened it. He turned it over to check inside and he heard something fall onto the tile floor. He reached down to pick it up and held it to where his eyes could focus. The engraving on it read "June 27, 1944." It had been sculpted into the shape of a cross.

As he held that cross in his hand, a new emotion overcame him. Everything in basic training had been going non-stop. He never really had a chance to reflect on what any of it meant. A warm feeling filled his face as he scribbled a quick note back to his mother. He wrote:

Dear Mom,

Jackson said that maybe God might be trying to draw me away from Satan with pleasure, the same way that Satan tried to draw Job away from God with pain. What pleasure? I asked him.

His answer was the Marine Corps... If that is true, I have spent too long underestimating God.

I am happy.

When I hated life, I for some reason feared death. Now I love life, I want to hold onto it, but I fear...nothing. I have found my identity. I have found my home. When you see me next, I will be a United States Marine.

He knew that the letter did not have time to reach her before he would see her in person on Family Day, the day before graduation and the first day that they were called Marines. He wanted to send it anyway.

Caleb did not put the cross around his neck, but tucked it back into the envelope. On his way back to the squad bay he passed Jackson who had found a spot a few stalls down. He was writing a letter – Caleb could only assume that it was to Stephanie – so Caleb stuck his head in. He said, “Hey, Brooks, guess what my grandfather’s nickname was when he was a Marine?”

“What?”

“TNT. You know why?”

“Because he was a Marine Gunner?”

“Actually, I think he *was* a Marine Gunner, but that wasn’t the reason he gave. He used to say, ‘They call me TNT because I like to get drunk and sing.’”

Jackson shrugged and shook his head. He smiled and said, “That’s hilarious.”

Caleb nodded and left Jackson to write.

Rounding the corner into the squad bay, Caleb saw something that stopped him dead in his tracks. He didn’t know how and he didn’t know when, but like magic, his rack had been made perfectly to satisfaction. An olive drab mystery-blanket had been tucked in with precise military corners. He scanned all the men in the room. No one looked over to him. Not one seemed to want to take credit for delivering such a gift. He scanned the racks in the room. Not one was missing a blanket. *Where did they get this?*

As Caleb curled up warm in his new blanket that night, he imagined that there must have been a recruit from Sgt Ward’s platoon, probably Anthony, currently freezing his tail off.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As he sat polishing his shoes, Caleb shot a quick glance at Jackson who was watching him. Jackson smiled. Caleb exhaled hard, shaking his head. He felt more frightened than he did the day he stepped off the bus. Their families had come to watch them receive their Eagle, Globe and Anchor – the Marine Corps emblem which symbolizes air, land and sea. It was the first day that they were called Marines.

When the men approached the parade deck, they discovered that the press was there to cover the event. Seeing the reporters, Caleb could not help but remember his first run-in with them outside the USO building. If one measures the passing of time by number of accomplishments or amount of personal growth, then for Caleb, it had been an eternity since that day. It felt more like a mysterious memory from a past life than something that happened to him just a few months ago. Caleb imagined that, to the reporters, it had felt like no time at all.

The media presence was the only dampening of an otherwise perfect day. No one had expected to see them; no one knew why they were allowed on base. If SSgt Folsom was as irritated about the press as the men were, he did not show it. The recruits were irritated, not only because of their dislike of reporters, but because of the intimacy of the event. Only another Marine could know what this moment meant to them. The eyes of outsiders felt intrusive and offensive.

“That ticks me off,” whispered Trey. “I can’t explain why it makes me so angry; it just does.”

“Don’t throw your pearls before the swine,” offered Jackson. “You don’t want the greatness of this moment witnessed by those who can’t appreciate it.”

“No, there’s more to it than that. It’s just...” Trey searched for the words. “It’s just, there’s nothing so special about Caleb. He’s just like any other man here.”

Jackson misunderstood these remarks; he thought that maybe Trey was jealous of the attention.

Caleb, who had overheard the conversation, did not misunderstand at all and he felt that those were the greatest words anyone had ever said about him.

As they lined up at attention, SSgt Folsom swiftly made his way from man to man. He shook their hands, pinned the EGA on them, and said simply, beautifully, "Congratulations, Marine." While waiting, Caleb's mind raced. He envisioned the happy moment where SSgt Folsom wraps his arms around him and finally gets the chance to break character. He will hold Caleb tight in his strong embrace and whisper in his ear that it had all been theater the whole time. And he will seize his last opportunity to go on record, so that Caleb will not silently wonder for the rest of his life – *It never mattered to me that you were gay. I knew that your homosexuality would cause problems with unit cohesion. I not only wanted to make you respectable through your quiet suffering, but I wanted to try you through fire, a fire so hot that it produced a blade so fine that all who beheld you in their sights would see a glorious warrior, not a frightened homosexual.*

It didn't happen.

As SSgt Folsom approached, Caleb could feel the news cameras zooming in on him, the same way that he could always feel SSgt Folsom's eyes, even while standing at attention. SSgt Folsom stepped into Caleb's line of sight, presented to him the EGA, and in a voice completely indistinguishable from the tone used for everyone else, he said, "Congratulations, Marine." He shook Caleb's hand just like, as Trey had put it, any other man there. At the moment that SSgt Folsom's hand clutched his, Caleb couldn't help but wonder if his father was watching live somewhere in the world.

SSgt Folsom announced their depot liberty. Most of the Marines turned and hugged each other. Many of them had tears in their eyes. Caleb ran straight into his mother's arms. Her cheeks were wet and when Caleb hugged her, she got her tears all over his face. Caleb knew that the cameras were filming every second, but he couldn't stop himself, the look on his mother's face made him burst into tears himself. Caleb had always had a hard time holding back tears, but at least this time was different, these were tears of joy. Caleb felt that this was a moment that could not be captured on film. The gawkers could never truly understand the meaning.

“Caleb, I am so proud of you,” Cheryl kept repeating. “I am so so proud of you.”

When they finally let go, Caleb turned his head to see Jackson approaching with a girl on his arm. It was then that his mother first noticed the scar that extended out from underneath Caleb’s cap and down to the back of his neck. She could tell it was an old scar, but she had never seen it before and had never heard the story of the three homeless men. It reminded her of the painful years in which the two of them had no contact and that there was a period in his life that still remained closed to her.

When Jackson stepped forward, Caleb extended his hand to shake Jackson’s for the first time as two Marines. Jackson ignored the hand and opened both arms to hug him. As soon as they let go, Caleb turned to the girl and said excitedly, “And this must be the miracle?”

Stephanie blushed a little as she extended her hand to Caleb and said, “It is an honor to meet you Private Hertz. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Caleb wrongly assumed she had heard it from Jackson. He ignored her outstretched hand with the same treatment that Jackson had given him and opted to hug Stephanie instead.

Caleb then turned to his mother and said, “Hey Mom, this is my friend, Jackson Brooks.”

Caleb’s mom in all the excitement reached out and hugged Jackson, too.

It was then that the microphones advanced. All the networks had sent their prettiest newswomen in hopes of getting more Marines eager to talk to them. No one but Caleb did.

Their very first question was, “Where is Stacy Oliver?”

A smile crossed Caleb’s lips. Something jumped into his head, something about a massage in a sauna, but he didn’t say it. “He’s in Los Angeles, ma’am.”

“How does it feel to be a Marine?”

“Well, if you are curious, ma’am, I can get you the name of my recruiter.”

“How does it feel for *you* to be a Marine?” the reporter quickly amended.

“You would not believe me, ma’am.”

“How did they receive you?”

Caleb did not appreciate being referred to like a package. He said, "They opened the door and signed for me."

"I mean, were they nice?"

"Of course, ma'am. Who isn't nice in boot camp? At the end of the first week, they threw me a party."

Caleb felt his mom's fingers tighten on his elbow. She said loudly and forcefully, "If you don't mind, I have not seen my son for three months. I would like to spend some more time with him alone before he goes off to fight for your freedom."

Once alone with her son, she couldn't stop embracing him. She never wanted to let him leave her again. She began to ask Caleb every question that she could ever think to ask. Caleb dutifully answered them the best he could, but Cheryl kept interrupting him with either another question or another hug. They talked until her eyes had finally dried, then Caleb asked if she would excuse him for one moment. He made his way over to where Jackson stood with Stephanie.

Caleb walked up so deliberately that it looked like he had something important to say. But when they both turned to look at him, he was momentarily rendered speechless. The three of them stood in silence. Caleb touched the tips of his fingers to his EGA. He made it sound like an insignificant and random remark when he said to Jackson, "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." In reality, it was the phrase that had been repeating in his head the whole time.

"Well, you must really resent me," quipped Jackson.

"What are you talking about?" Caleb thought about adding, *You're the only friend I've got*, but didn't.

"Well, I didn't work nearly as hard as you," Jackson had a strange glint in his eye that indicated he was up to something.

"Okay, spill it," smiled Caleb, knowing that Jackson was probably building to a point.

"Well, it's not the price that upsets you, remember?" Jackson paraphrased Caleb. "It's the fact that you would have to pay more. And someone else would have to pay less." Jackson adjusted his own EGA. "I have certainly had to pay less."

Caleb smirked and snuck a look at Stephanie. "It's true that I said that, but I wasn't talking about *this*."

"It doesn't still apply?"

Caleb shrugged. He didn't have a good answer. "I don't know, I guess I just don't feel that I've earned it. I think about legends like Chesty Puller and General Lejeune, and what it means to be a Marine, a jarhead, a leatherneck..."

"A devil dog," Jackson jumped in.

"The few, the proud," added Caleb. "I still don't feel like I've done enough."

"You feel like you've been given more than you deserve?" Jackson smiled because he knew that he had caught Caleb in a contradiction from before.

Caleb smiled because he meant it, "Yes, I have been given more than I deserve."

"I've got a quick parable, you want to hear it?"

"Sure," Caleb said and folded his arms.

"It's about workers in a vineyard. A landowner sets out in the morning and gathers some workers for his vineyard. He informs them how much the pay will be; they agree and get to work. He then goes out a few hours later and gathers more, then a few hours later and gathers more again. By the eleventh hour, he finds even more workers who have been standing around all day. He tells them to go work in the field also."

"Okay..."

"But at the end of the day, the landowner pays them all the same thing no matter how long they had been working. Well, the first workers hired that morning begin to complain."

"I bet."

"You know what the land owner says?"

"What?"

"He says, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you.' He reminds them that they had agreed to the price when they started – maybe were even excited about the price. Maybe the reward for their work was even more than they deserved. So why should they worry about who got it for less?"

"Because it isn't fair," protested Caleb.

"So what?"

"But..." Caleb began but cut himself short. His mind was racing for the perfect rebuttal. The simple question, *so what*, presented itself as more of a hurdle than he would have predicted.

Jackson argued, "If you've already received more than you deserve, why worry about what anyone else has? Because it's unfair? Life's unfair. Keep your nose down and bask in the richness and joy that comes with knowing what you just told me – *I have received more than I deserve.*"

Caleb's face became very pensive. He said quietly, almost a whisper, "But this isn't some random parable, is it?"

Jackson gave a guilty look and his head shook slightly. "The reward is the Kingdom of Heaven."

"I get it," said Caleb. "And, if I could believe the Bible, that would be enough for me."

Jackson shrugged. "Of course you can believe it," Jackson said. His voice was filled with both authority and optimism.

Caleb shook his head. "It's not that easy. People don't choose what they believe," he said. "They consider all the evidence and then they either believe it or they don't."

Jackson made a motion to respond, but at that moment Trey Tucker inserted himself into their circle of conversation. Caleb subconsciously leaned away. Trey reached out to shake Jackson's hand. "Congratulations, Brooks," Trey said.

"Congratulations, Tucker," Jackson smiled.

Trey turned to Caleb, hesitated, then extended his hand. Caleb looked at him reluctantly before deciding to accept the handshake. There was no emotion on Trey Tucker's face when he said, "Well done, Marine."

They were looking each other in the eyes.

Caleb said nothing, but suddenly tightened his grip attempting to crush Trey's hand.

Trey responded quickly by tightening his own hand. Their expressions remained impassive. Their eyes remained locked on each other's.

Responding to Trey's vice-like grip, Caleb clenched his hand as hard as he possibly could. Trey's face showed no pain and no effort as it tightened again on Caleb's hand. Caleb felt like his bones were being crushed underneath the tread of a tank, but still his face showed no strain. The white of Caleb's knuckles was the only hint to anyone watching that this struggle was even taking place, until finally Caleb's face turned a subtle shade of red and a vein protruded from his neck.

Trey let go. He laughed a warm chuckle, then turned around and left.

As soon as Trey's head was turned, Caleb's face winced with agony and he frantically tried to shake off the pain in his hand.

Jackson laughed, then became more serious as he pointed over Caleb's shoulder and said, "Looks like you have to save your mother."

Caleb turned to see a group of reporters forming around his mother. He panned his eyes from left to right and asked, "Now where is my rifle?"

Jackson smiled, but Stephanie laughed so hard that her head tilted forward and she reflexively covered her open mouth.

Caleb approached the crowd and could hear his mom's conversation with a reporter. Caleb could tell that she was trying hard to keep her patience. He heard her saying, "No, actually I disagree with the entire premise of the question."

Caleb walked up before the reporter had another chance to speak and said, "Excuse us, but I have a question that I have to ask her myself." He put his arm protectively around her shoulders and guided her away from the reporters.

"You don't really have a question for me, do you?" she laughed.

"Yes, I do," he said.

"You do?" she asked surprised.

"What did the lady at the hair salon say?"

"What?"

"The lady who did your nails? What did she tell you?"

Cheryl thought that she had gotten all of the crying out of her system, but instantly her eyes filled with tears again. She looked into her child's face and told him, "She said that she had never seen *The Wizard of Oz*."

"What?" The shock in Caleb's voice was sincere, without the slightest hint of patronizing. "Not even when she was a kid?"

His mom continued to cry and laugh at the same time. She wrapped both arms tight around her son and said, "You're the only one who really listens!"

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jackson slid the chicken from his MRE into the bag of chemicals called a *flameless heater*. He added water and tilted it just the right amount to activate it.

“No microwaves, no electricity...just magic,” said Teflon, as he witnessed the joy on Jackson’s face while he was performing a ritual that is uniquely military.

Jackson thought about this. “Are the processes of microwaves and electricity any less magical?”

“No, but microwaves and electricity are magic that I’ve had time to get over.” When Jackson opened the bag, hot steam came billowing out. Teflon said, “I don’t think I could ever get over that.”

Jackson was with Golf Company, 5th Battalion, 7th Marines. He was just starting to feel at home at Camp Kookaburra, twenty clicks west of Marjah in the Helmond Province of southern Afghanistan. Jackson’s bowels had emerged safely on the other side of the constipation that came with adding Meals Ready to Eat to his diet.

“What did you get?” Brit asked vaguely as he sat down with his own MRE.

Jackson was pretty sure he knew what Brit meant so he told him happily, “Skittles!”

“I got chocolate-covered pretzels, again...trade ya?”

“Not a chance,” snapped Jackson, grabbing his Skittles and moving them to a more secure location.

“You know that we could leave MREs out in the sun for years and they would still be good?” beamed Teflon.

“Really?”

“Yeah, these things are amazing. You can drop them from a hundred feet and they will survive,” Teflon said excitedly.

“I heard that there was this Marine once who came down with cancer, but he cured it by eating only MREs,” said Brit, with his eyes bright and his chest heaving slightly in mock excitement.

Teflon didn't laugh, but Jackson couldn't help himself and added, "Well, I heard that if you bury an MRE in the sand, two weeks later you will have a diamond."

Brit laughed and Teflon just made a face. Teflon wasn't sure if he should join in their fun laughing at him, tell them where to stick it, or just drop it. "Forget it," he said, "I just think they're cool, okay?"

"Oh, they're cool," said Brit, "I heard that if you lose your Kevlar vest, you can use an MRE to stop a bullet."

"I heard that if you hide your face behind an MRE, the enemy can't see you," Jackson added.

"Oh yeah," said Teflon, "Well I heard that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed gave up all his intelligence because they fed him an MRE. Upon first bite he renounced terrorism and switched to our side. His next MRE had Peanut M&M's so he stood up and started singing 'God Bless America.'"

"God Bless America! Land that I love," Jackson started to sing. With talent that did not rise to match their enthusiasm, everyone joined in.

"Stand beside her, and guide her...Through the night with a light from above."

Brit's real name was Sergeant Brandon Sparks and he grew up in Portland, Oregon. Both of his parents were born in the United States. To find the first immigrant in his family, you'd have to go all the way back to his great grandparents who came to America from Norway. He got the name Brit because he spent so much time watching Monty Python movies and British sitcoms on DVD that he would sometimes, intentionally or not, take on a British accent and diction. He would also phrase some of his sentences backward, like, "Tore me a new one, the Kill Hat did," or to add extra attitude, he would convert his sentence to a question at the end, like, "Well, then I will have to shoot him first, won't I?" or, "But if I don't, that's too bad, isn't it?"

Teflon's real name was Lance Corporal Edward Castillo. As soon as he got to boot camp he informed his fellow recruits that his nickname in school had been Teflon because of all the antics he had gotten away with right under the principal's nose. None of the accusations the school tried to pin on him ever stuck, so they started calling him Teflon. It wasn't true. He was called Big

Eddie in school and he always hated it. When he got to combat training after boot camp, he informed a whole new set of people that he had been called Teflon in boot camp, which this time he actually had been. And when he reached Camp Kookaburra he informed a whole new group of people that he had been called Teflon in combat training. He only had to lie once. His plan was to finally arrive home and honestly be able to tell people that his nickname in the Marine Corps was Teflon. By this method, he aimed to become one of the world's incredibly few men to choose his own nickname.

They were all still singing when Rider flopped his body down forcefully on the same bench. He said very angrily, "Did you hear? We are getting stuck with the fairy!"

Everyone stopped singing except for Teflon, "From the mountains..." he sang boisterously, then fizzled out once he noticed that he was the only one singing.

"Caleb?" Jackson asked Rider with an honest need to clarify.

Rider shot a strange look at Jackson; Rider didn't know Caleb's name and had only assumed that no one else at Camp Kookaburra cared to know his name either. He looked away, turned his head to the rest of their group and responded to Jackson's question while looking at Teflon, "The fairy. That guy in the news. He's coming *here*."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Jackson.

Rider shot another incredulous look at Jackson implying that he did not even need to bother with an answer. Jackson had passed on an opportunity to challenge Rider's views on *the guy in the news* in a previous conversation, so Rider had no reason to suspect that Jackson had ever met him. The two continued to stare at each other. When Rider finally spoke, he ended up picking only his third or fourth choice of responses. "And that's not to mention the embeds." Rider said it as if he was adding another argument to the points he didn't say, points that Jackson could have guessed. "Panty-waisted embeds. A bunch of them. They'll be following him around like he's their queen bee."

"Ha...queen," laughed Teflon

"Long live the Queen," said Brit with a thick, fake cockney accent.

Just then, the room was called to attention as Major Nash entered. Behind him stood Caleb and a man named Michael Ponce. Caleb looked, dressed, and walked like a Marine. Michael Ponce did not. Despite what Rider predicted, they had only accepted the request of one news agency. Michael Ponce was sent to cover Caleb for the *Times*. He was there to be Caleb's shadow.

Major Nash did not draw any attention to Caleb – the type of attention that Rider was anxious to draw – but rather focused on the reporter. “Gentlemen, we’ve got ourselves an embed. All of you have received a pamphlet on embedded war reporters and I suggest that you re-read it, especially the part about *nothing being off record*. If you remember only one thing about this gentlemen on my right, remember this: *He is not your friend*.”

Michael Ponce's eyes widened. This was not going as well as he had hoped and he had not hoped for much. He looked around at the Marines with morbid embarrassment, but discovered that none of them were even bothering to look back. They were all looking at Caleb.

Caleb, just like his first day on the bus, returned their glances and met their eyes fearlessly. He did this systematically, moving from face to face. Most of the men turned to look away. The fourth face he came to was the face of Jackson Brooks. Jackson was grinning from ear to ear. Caleb's eyes froze on his. He hadn't known that he would be fighting by Jackson's side. His face warmed and he felt a quick burst of comfort and happiness.

“You also need to know that Michael Ponce has – without the requirement of any boot camp or training – been given the title of Honorary Major. This means that he is welcome to all the comforts of an officer.” Everyone knew this actually didn't mean anything. It was designed for nothing more than to spur the resentment the Marines would feel toward him – or anyone – given a higher rank without the requirement of working for it. “You will also be expected to fight for him in the field as if he were a fellow Marine, and if it comes to it, retrieve his remains as if he were a Marine. But, make no mistake men, he is not a Marine.”

Michael Ponce grimaced as things went from bad to worse, but still no one looked at him. Caleb knew that Major Nash's

intentions were to use the embed to draw fire away from him, but it didn't work. No one in that room could have picked the embed out of a line up. The *Times* could have sent a reporter with two heads and none of the men would have yet noticed that fact. Major Nash left and Caleb walked slowly into the throng of men in silence. The crowd seemed to part as every man drew away from Caleb on his approach. The men who were standing around Jackson stepped backward as Caleb got near them, giving the illusion that Jackson had stepped forward. The two men laughed while they reached to hug each other, despite the eyes watching. They slammed their fists into the other's back, like men do when they hug.

* * *

Jackson was reading the Bible alone that night, but he could not focus on a single word. Sand was in the cracks of the pages, even between pages that Jackson had not opened while in Afghanistan.

Sand was everywhere. It was like no sand he had ever seen before. It wasn't granular, but fine like powder. Once kicked up, it seemed to float on the air. Sand was in every breath that he took, and in every nook and crevice of his body. Sand would come out of his mouth every time he sneezed. He had not had the occasion yet to bleed or cry, but wouldn't have been surprised if he found sand in both his blood and his tears. Occasionally when he would step outside the hooch, he would discover that the wind had blown so much sand into the air that he felt like he was wearing orange tinted shades. It was a visual sensation so surreal that he felt grateful he had never done acid. Sometimes Afghanistan gave Jackson the creeps. He was starting to sympathize with the men he'd heard about who put a bullet through their own femurs just so they'd be sent home.

Frustrated, Jackson closed the Bible and looked around. He wondered how Caleb might be settling in. He knew he was most likely already sleeping. His ears had almost certainly been ringing from the CH-53 engines up until the second he lost consciousness. It was probably for the best – that way Caleb couldn't hear the scoffs, sighs, grunts, and little laughs that Rider

had made at every opening to make his objections to Caleb's presence known.

Jackson looked over at Rider. Ridley Holt's full nickname was *Trigger Happy Holt*, but that was too long, so most people just called him Rider. He was watching a movie with Brit. Rider wore the only set of headphones, despite it being Brit's laptop. Brit didn't need them though; he laughed at all the appropriate moments because he knew the movie so well. Just half an hour before, Caleb heard Brit laugh, "It's just a flesh wound!" Jackson imagined that they weren't quite half way through the movie yet.

It's a pity, Jackson thought. He really liked Rider. There was a lot about Rider to like, but every time he heard him use words like *fairy* or *queer*, they sounded to Jackson like someone plucking strings on an un-tuned guitar.

When Jackson first got to camp Kookaburra, it was Rider who fascinated and inspired Jackson more than anyone else. At the end of his first week there, Jackson asked him, "How did you get the name, Trigger Happy?"

"Well, you remember that Rules of Engagement speech they gave us?" asked Rider.

"Yeah."

"I don't," Rider smiled. They were both sitting in the chow hall. Rider added, "I'm not afraid of the Taliban. But, I'll be damned if I will risk my life for some wingtip wearing, linguinispined lawyer who is still trying to give his drug addled hippy days in the sixties some meaning."

Jackson laughed in agreement. He added, "In World War II we were in danger of our freedoms being trampled underneath jackboots, today if you can't find your freedoms you should check underneath the nearest Italian loafers."

"Lawyers!" laughed Rider. "You know why Marines should never be judged by a jury of their peers? Because we have no peers." Rider smiled proudly.

Jackson could tell that he, more than anyone he'd ever met, woke up each morning feeling proud to be a Marine. "You really love being here, don't you?" Jackson asked.

Rider didn't know if he meant Camp Kookaburra or all of Afghanistan. He said, "I love being a Marine. Love it." Rider was on his fourth deployment. He had an energy and raw

intensity about him, the likes of which Jackson had never encountered in civilian life. Jackson felt like he was a young novice studying at the feet of a learned sage. Rider told him, “There is something profound about fighting. There must be. Everything that we have ever done in the Corps is geared to raise us up to our highest potential. Fighting for your life produces a luminous focus in the mind, an economy of priorities. Only the objective matters, nothing else. Nothing else. So look at our training. When the drill instructor insults us, it means that pride is a hindrance to success. Any hindrance is a potential tool of the enemy. When the upper brass speak casually about loss of life, they’re desensitizing us to both killing and dying. Killing the enemy requires an absolute morality – love of moral violence coupled with the mourning of every drop of innocent blood. Disregard for one’s own life is a bulwark against narcissism. What does that tell us? Our narcissism is a tool of the enemy. Narcissism traps us in a prison of our own skin. Releasing the self, surrendering to a greater cause, is the only way that the self is ever discovered. And then there is pain. Then there’s pain. *Through pain we retain.* When we suffer pain, and are meant to suffer pain, called to suffer pain, what should that tell us? That pleasure plays no role in accomplishing our objective, and that pleasure-seeking is a tool of the enemy. These are not just the priorities we need in order to fight; these are the priorities we need in order to live, truly live.” His words excited Jackson. “Do you know what finally got me to sign up for the Marines?” Rider asked.

“9/11?”

“No, I was still in high school for 9/11. Still a dumb kid. But two years later I was out of school and floundering. Didn’t know what to do with my life. Didn’t have any place where I fit in and too many places where I didn’t. Then on the 4th of July, my uncle was slipping Jack Daniel’s into my Coke, and the two of us were trying our best to keep our mouths shut as my aunt went on and on about how much she hated George W. Bush. That was the first time, since I never really watched the news, that I had heard his statement from earlier that week. Apparently the President ticked a lot of people off when he told anyone who wanted to engage with American troops to, ‘Bring it on!’” Rider laughed.

“It was so much fun to see her with her panties all jumbled up, but those words were a gift. *Bring it on!* They were an early Independence Day gift to every man and woman in uniform. They were like a hard backslap and an *oo-rah!* They were like an encoded message to our troops that the enemy got their hands on and couldn’t understand. My Aunt did not understand it because it wasn’t meant for her. It was meant for the troops. It was meant for me. My head was starting to spin from the alcohol while the fireworks were popping off loud in the sky, and I knew for the first time that there were people out there who spoke my language. I was beginning to understand that being a warrior was all I was ever meant to be.” Rider was becoming starry-eyed as though he could still see the fireworks exploding above him. He watched them explode every time he heard live ammo while engaged with the enemy.

Rider was overcome with another broad dopey grin. He laughed and said, “Then, I was wrapping up my first deployment when Lt Gen Mattis said he likes to shoot people!” Rider slammed his fist on the table as he laughed. “He said he likes brawlin’. Well, I like brawlin’ too!”

Jackson nodded, still never having seen combat he had little to add. He spotted a collection of tallies tattooed on Rider’s shoulder, but he didn’t ask about them. He said, “Yeah, I got kind of a strange feeling when they brought that lawyer in to tell us about the ROE.”

“Of course you did. He was an outsider. You tell me what he knows about shooting people. You tell me what that ivy league egghead knows about brawlin’. There is one thing – only one thing – that I remember about my ROE training. The pine box theory. If one of you is going to end up in a pine box, you’d better make it the enemy. But, the thing is: it is *my* pine box, not some ACLU lawyer’s. I will be the one to decide whether the threat of me dying is real. And if there is even the slightest chance that it is my pine box, it’s my call.”

“Win the hearts and minds of the people,” Jackson parroted what he had been told.

“Yeah, but not if I have to bet my heart or mind to do it,” said Rider.

Jackson understood where he was coming from. He said, "Even the instructor got silent when he had to bring the lawyer in. His whole demeanor changed. It was like nothing was fun anymore. Up until that point, everything could be mocked. Life, death, even my faith was constantly mocked. That's what guys do. Then this guy with a briefcase comes in and he was like the class trip chaperone. Christianity was fair game to be teased, but we were supposed to show reverence to *this guy*? Everything got so serious, so humorless. He was like a woman who wanted to put a stop to us just being *guys*."

Rider smiled. "Chickafied," he said. "Everything's chickafied. The military is the last bastion of masculinity, the last place on Earth where you are allowed to just be a guy. And now even *it's* under assault. Rules of Engagement. Embedded reporters. Lawyers second guessing decisions that they are too cowardly to ever have to make. Speaking of cowards, don't even get me started on the Attorney General." Rider shook his head disgusted. The fireworks had left Rider's eyes. "Did you know that the Army is not allowed to have separate male and female platoons for their boot camp? And now the Marines have let in a queer."

Jackson looked down. It was obvious that Rider had veered into territory where Jackson would not follow. It was obvious that the mental connection between the two men had been lost. The novice was no longer at the teacher's feet.

Jackson made no protest. He doubted he would ever see Caleb again after graduation and he saw no reason why Rider's use of one epithet should be a battle worth pursuing. But it was too late; Rider had already interpreted his expressions. Anxious to provoke a response from Jackson, Rider pushed further. "Can you imagine that fairy around here? That's rich! A pack of devil dogs and one devil *cat*! It makes me sick."

Jackson still didn't respond – although he thought that *devil cat* was sort of funny.

Rider asked, "Private First Class Brooks, what are you going to do when your four years are up? Are you going to re-enlist?"

Jackson shrugged. He really wasn't sure. "Probably not. I might go to college. I might go work for my dad."

“And what about that homosexual in the news?” Rider asked. “Do you think he will re-enlist? I doubt it. He will probably go back to civilian life and become a hair dresser, or pursue his interest in interior design or something. And good for him. He will discover that it suits him and he will be happy living off the royalties from his book deal. But what about the Corps? Will he, and those of his ilk, have left the military as good as they found it? You will be fine, working on your Ph.D. or something. But what about me? When the last place I can still act like a man is gone, what happens to guys like me? Where can I go when there is nowhere left? Where is my book deal? Not one of them will cry one tear for the death of masculinity. Brutal, barbaric, glorious masculinity. They want me to shed a tear for them, but not one of them will shed a tear for me.”

Jackson was thinking about those words when he was jerked back to the present by an unfamiliar voice.

“It’s Private Jackson, right?” The embedded reporter, Michael Ponce, asked. Jackson put down his Bible, which he wasn’t really reading, and looked up at the reporter.

“Actually, it is Private First Class Brooks,” said Jackson.

“Oh. I thought someone told me your name was Jackson.”

“Jackson Brooks. Jackson is my first name.” Jackson held out his hand, but Michael Ponce did not seem eager to shake it.

“Michael Ponce,” he said, slowly taking Jackson’s hand.

“I know your name from the paper. I have read your articles,” Jackson said vaguely.

“Oh...” Michael Ponce hesitated as his brain scanned Jackson’s comment. “Thank you,” he said, despite having found it to contain no compliment. There was a moment of awkward silence and Michael Ponce fidgeted a bit. “Um, actually, I was wondering if you could help me. You see, it was a long trip in, so...and I drank a lot of coffee, so I was wondering...” his eyes panned the length of the Bedouin-style tent, “how one went about using the little boy’s room?”

Jackson laughed warmly; he said, “Oh, well you just-”

“He’s going to need his own e-tool eventually,” Brit said forcefully, inserting himself into the conversation.

“What’s an e-tool?” asked Michael Ponce. Turning toward Brit, he missed the subtle curl that formed at the corners of Jackson’s lips.

“It’s an entrenching tool,” said Brit.

Michael Ponce still looked completely confused. Brit excitedly walked over to his gear and pulled out a shovel. He said, “Here, you can borrow mine.”

As the reporter stared at the shovel, it dawned on him just what exactly had to be entrenched. “You’re joking.”

“No. It’s not so bad really, just make sure you get far enough from the camp. Oh, and take this,” Brit pulled out a roll of toilet paper.

Michael Ponce slowly glanced over at the bathroom tissue and the shovel. He said, “So, I just grab a flashlight and-”

“A torch? Are you mad? A bloody torch?” exclaimed Brit, still holding out the offering.

“You can’t turn on a flashlight out there,” explained Jackson.

“You can’t even use a lighter,” added Brit. “Didn’t anyone explain to you light sensitivity?”

“No,” said Michael Ponce. “I guess they haven’t explained all that much to me.”

“The enemy shoots at any light it sees. You want to get us all killed?”

“So, I’m supposed to wander out in total darkness?” asked Michael Ponce slightly indignant, slightly just afraid.

“Can you hold it until morning?” Brit asked as he drew back the toilet paper and e-tool.

“No!” Michael Ponce shot forward and grabbed both items out of Brit’s hands.

“Okay,” said Brit. “Bring them back when you are done.”

Michael Ponce sighed. He raised both items like he was toasting, grimaced, then headed out to the front of the hooch.

“Wait!” laughed Jackson.

“Brooks, don’t,” said Brit.

“I can’t do it. I can’t do it,” Jackson said to Brit.

“Do what?” asked Michael Ponce.

“We were about to play a very mean trick on you.”

“Jackson!” protested Brit, disappointed.

Jackson continued, "We were about to send you out there without warning you about the scorpions."

"Scorpions?" the reporter asked nervously.

"Huge scorpions," said Jackson. When Jackson said it, Brit actually held his two hands up almost a foot apart to indicate the length of the scorpions. Jackson nodded in agreement. "There's how many different species of scorpions in Afghanistan?" He turned to Brit.

"Twenty-five, all deadly. And that's not to mention the scarabs, black widows and tarantulas."

"Arab tarantulas," confirmed Jackson.

"How are Arab tarantulas different from regular tarantulas?" asked Michael Ponce.

"They can jump," said Brit.

The Marines watched a chill go through the reporter's body. Michael Ponce turned to leave. With heavy bowels and a heavy heart, he stepped out into the cold desert night. He had spent most his life in New York City. He could not believe the incredible darkness that surrounded him.

They were lying about the scorpions, he tried to assure himself. *That part was the trick. They can't fool me.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning in the chow hall was Jackson's first chance to talk with Caleb. "So they got you in Echo Company now?" he asked. Echo Company had been airlifted in to join up with Golf. Their mission was to clear the town of Almoud, a mostly farming community that had become a Taliban enclave.

"Yes, sir," confirmed Caleb.

"I heard you were coming up from Camp Sydney, how long were you there?"

"Ever since I left ITB."

"What was it like down there?"

Caleb shrugged, "Well, I was allergic to all those pillows filled with goose down and ostrich feathers, and the bidet was out of order. Otherwise fine."

Jackson laughed, "Well, I hope at least the bellhops and the maids treated you well."

Caleb rubbed some peanut butter onto his cracker.

"And, your fellow grunts," Jackson asked with a grin, "how did they *receive* you there?"

Caleb gave him a mock look of insult and asked, "What are you, the press?"

Jackson laughed. "Yeah, what's that like, anyway? I mean all *that*." When Jackson said the word *that*, he tilted his head toward Michael Ponce as if he symbolized the entire concept of news reporting.

Michael Ponce, who was only a short distance away and could hear every word, raised his hands in a protesting shrug. Neither of the other two acknowledged his gesture.

Caleb casually said, "It's a drag," then began to exhibit more emotion. "I haven't told anyone about this. The strangest thing happened to me. I was at my mom's home for ten days. I hadn't been back there since..." Caleb shot an irritated look over at the reporter and decided to not finish his sentence. "She used to come visit me in Dallas, but I haven't been to see her in a long time. Anyway, one day while she was at work, I was home alone and started to wonder if she had kept any of my old drawings. So I opened her filing cabinet and saw a file simply labeled 'Caleb.' I'm not usually a snoop, but it did have my name on it. So I went

to pull it out and the file was like two inches thick. I opened it up and the first thing I saw was an article cut out of the paper with the headline, 'Do Ask, Do Tell; Tell it to the Marines.' Then I started to shuffle through it and realized that the whole thing was nothing but newspaper clippings and they were all about me. Two inches worth! The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *USA Today*, *Time Magazine*. Someone had even mailed her a clip from *Der Spiegel*. All the words were in German, and there was a picture of my face. The headline said 'Er ist Homosexuell!'"

"That's so creepy," said Jackson.

Caleb's body shuddered as he let out a chill that had built up in him. He went on, "Most of the articles were treating me like I was some sort of folk hero. They were calling me an *activist* – which to me is a dirty word. I just wanted to be a Marine, but the way some of them were talking, it was like they wanted to name elementary schools after me."

"Better check the internet, they may have already done it," Jackson teased.

"Next thing you know, school children will be singing about me on YouTube," said Caleb.

Jackson laughed. "Mmm, mmm, mmm!"

Caleb added, "I did hear that one congressman mentioned my name on the floor of the House; that really happened. I guess someone told him that my name polled well in his district." Caleb laughed awkwardly. "And it wasn't even for anything to do with gays in the military; it was for a vote on a school lunch program." Caleb shook his head. "Oh yeah, and there was this one article that even had a photograph of me at ten years old wearing roller skates. I had never seen the photo before in my life. Who took it? How did the press get it?"

"Did your mom give it to them?"

"No! God no. She won't talk to them. She hates all of those..." Caleb trailed off, then nodded toward Michael Ponce in the way Jackson had done before – blaming him for the actions of his entire profession.

Michael Ponce let both hands and silverware drop to the table with a thud, giving up.

"If she hates the media, why do you think she had all the clippings?" Jackson asked, ignoring Michael Ponce.

Caleb smirked, "Because I'm her boy. I know she hated seeing them. Maybe locking them into one file provided her some sort of therapy. It sure felt good to me when I shoved them back in and slammed the drawer."

"And you didn't know the whole time you were in boot camp?"

"I didn't." Caleb shrugged, "And I still try not to think about it. Being half a world away changes your perspective. Everything that the media seem to think is so important, doesn't make any sense to us here. " Caleb took a sip of his water. He swallowed and added, "Of course, the same could be said about living in Texas."

Jackson laughed. "Ditto, Arizona," he nodded proudly.

Brit came in and sat down next to Jackson. He gave Jackson a playful, and slightly painful, nudge hello.

Jackson smiled warmly.

"Hey, who else have you seen?" Jackson asked Caleb after a moment.

"What?"

"At Camp Sydney, anyone we know?"

Caleb's face suddenly changed. His expressions became demonstrably forlorn, partly because he felt genuine sadness, but also as a handy tool to warn Jackson of impending bad news.

Jackson understood what this had meant and asked only one word, "Who?"

"Trey Tucker," said Caleb solemnly.

"He's dead?" asked Jackson.

"No," Caleb made haste to say, realizing that he had overshot. He quickly repeated, "No, his team was approached by some villager. They didn't know who he was, so they had all their guns aimed right at him. The translator had both hands up and was mumbling some garbage, transitioning from one dialect to the next, trying to get the guy to stop advancing. Then suddenly the guy started running toward them, but no one knew what was going on."

"They didn't shoot?"

"They hesitated."

Jackson's face showed aversion, "Because of the Rules of Engagement?"

"They didn't want to kill an innocent Afghani," Caleb nodded. "Finally Tucker shot him, but it was too late."

"He was a suicide bomber?"

"Yep."

Brit said, "A buddy of mine told me that his platoon stopped when they saw an animal twitching in pain on the side of the road. They approached it carefully enough to see that one of the terrorists had taken a dog and cut it open to shove an IED inside."

"That's sick," said Caleb.

"Yeah, it was still alive. But they had to detonate it, didn't they? They couldn't leave live explosives for another platoon to come and find."

Jackson shook his head in disgust. He turned back to Caleb, "So what happened to Tucker?"

"He was the only one that survived, but he lost half of his body: his left arm, left leg, half of his face."

Jackson mumbled a swear word. He let out a long sigh.

Caleb frowned. He put his hand on Jackson's shoulder and said futilely, "I'm sorry. At least he's alive though."

Jackson gave the world's least visible hint of a head nod.

Caleb began to get up from his seat. He said, "I've got to go make a head call." He turned to Michael Ponce, "Media Man, I hope you don't have to report on that."

Michael Ponce smirked and teased him, "Yeah, whatever, just don't forget your e-tool!"

Every man in the chow hall laughed. Caleb shot him a confused look and said, "I think I'll just use one of the port-a-johns behind the hooch, thanks."

Michael Ponce's face turned bright red. Brit held his hand up for Jackson to give him five. Jackson was in no mood to laugh, but reluctantly slapped Brit's hand as to not leave him hanging. He made effort to console Michael Ponce and said, "It was all in good fun."

The first few weeks were the hardest on the embed. He developed a hacking cough; his body was not yet used to all the

sand. When he went to write a story, there was sand on his laptop between every key. He kept asking, "What about the scorpions? Are they really all poisonous? Can they get in the tent?" all the while knowing that he could never fully trust the answers. They had even told him about a Marine who woke up with a scorpion in his sleeping bag. The corpsmen were unable to save his life after it stung him. They almost had Michael Ponce believing it until they told him that the man's name had been Private Parts. He was having trouble figuring out if the hard time they gave him was merely a boys-club rite of passage or if they really just hated his guts.

Some of the Marines passed the downtime by trapping different scorpions, pitting them against each other in a fight, and placing bets on which would win. Before each fight, they would make sure that each new scorpion gladiator had a name. At first they used the names of un-captured terrorist leaders from the FBI's most wanted list. It didn't take long for all of those bugs to be killed. Wadoud Muhammad Abdullah Husayn Al-Ibrahim had a pretty good winning streak, but alas, he died miserably before a throng of Marine cheers. After that, they opened up the names to anyone they disliked in general. It bothered the embed a little to discover that one of the scorpions had been named Michael Ponce. "It's all in good fun," they assured him again. Still, he was glad when it lost rather quickly to Jane Fonda.

Caleb treated Michael Ponce no better. When he would try to get Caleb to sit down with him for an interview, Caleb would refuse. He would always brush him off with some dismissing statement like, "I'm just here to kill the enemy." Sometimes he would add, "But, I can talk to Major Nash about finding you a ride back to Manhattan."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Caleb sat in the corner of the hooch, out of the way. His arm was leaning against a pile of packs and flak jackets. He was hunched over a large drawing pad, leaning his head on his left arm while his right arm busily worked his set of charcoals. With each piece he picked up, chosen for its shape and its value, his hand would travel over the entire page, touching down in broad strokes that seemed unrelated to what he was drawing. As he continued to work, he opted for smaller and smaller pieces of charcoal and when they weren't available, he would meticulously break new ones. Slowly, as the details were being filled in, the unrelated strokes became less mysterious, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that were positioned first and connected later. The whole picture was emerging before his eyes. He was drawing from his imagination. It was the naked body of a young and beautiful woman.

"What's this?" Teflon snatched the pad from Caleb's hands. Caleb knew that it was only a matter of time before this happened.

Brit, upon seeing what Teflon was holding, jumped up from his cot and moved in closer. "Wow," he said sincerely. The two of them stared wildly at the curves of her naked body like small children seeing snow for the first time, or the ocean, or just staring at glossy presents reflecting twinkling Christmas lights.

"Art lovers, huh?" Caleb asked dryly.

"Well, this is real art, isn't it?" said Brit and added, "I thought you only liked the blokes?"

Before Caleb could answer, Rider butted in and asked, "What is it?"

The two of them tilted the pad proudly in Rider's direction. Caleb shot a sideways glance at Rider's face, leery of how he would react. Rider turned to him and Caleb instantly looked away. Rider scoffed loudly and snapped, "Who are you trying to fool?"

"No one," said Caleb as he stood up and seized the pad back.

"Switched teams again, have you?" asked Brit with more playfulness than Rider had shown.

"I didn't draw it to lust after," explained Caleb.

“Why’d you draw it?” asked Teflon.

“He drew it to overcompensate. It’s a pathetic attempt to fit in,” said Rider.

“No,” said Caleb. He looked at Rider for only the slightest of seconds then turned back to the pad. “I have always drawn stuff like this. I draw all kinds of things.” Slowly he began to flip the corners of his drawing pad and display different depictions of female beauty. Each one was an exquisite work of surprising talent. A crowd of Marines began to form as he continued to hold up images of naked women. “I also have a drawing of a horse,” he said as he found the right page. “And a building...and a mountain...and I don’t want to sleep with any of them.”

“Let me see,” demanded Rider as he stepped closer to Caleb. Begrudgingly, Caleb handed the pad over. Rider flipped from drawing to drawing. Each page gave off a loud sound as it rebelled against the wind resistance and strained its connection to the spiral binding. Caleb wished Rider would be more gentle when he thought about the literally hundreds of hours that he had put into the work contained in that pad. They were works for which Caleb had poured out his soul through each stroke, yet Rider flipped through them like he was searching for a number in a rolodex. Caleb worried that Rider might maliciously tear the entire thing to shreds. The memory of the first art pad taken from him was emerging from the dark recesses of his memory. He continued with the steadiest voice he could muster, “Just as I am sure that most of you, while standing in front of it, would be not only appreciative, but moved and inspired by Michelangelo’s David...a naked man.”

Rider’s eyes moved to Caleb’s. Caleb did not look away. He had not meant anything he said as an insult, but Rider acted like he had taken it that way, or that the subject itself was insulting to talk about – or at least for *Caleb* to talk about. He closed the cover of the pad and thrust it back toward Caleb, the spiral edge thumping against his chest. Caleb struggled to hold onto it as it bounced off him, but was able to catch it before it hit the ground. Rider found a seat on a nearby cot.

“I mean it,” Caleb said as he walked back to where he was sitting and set the drawing pad aside. “Haven’t you seen Michelangelo’s work? It’s awesome. And, it’s not about lust. It’s

about beauty. No, it's about more than beauty. It's about perfection. It is about *correctness*." Most of the people who had gathered around the impromptu art show had dispersed after no more naked ladies were being shown. The few that stayed found places to sit on the cots or leaned against the edge of the table.

Caleb had chosen his words as an intro for a conversation, but only Jackson seemed willing to bite. He asked, "What do you mean by *correctness*?"

"Michelangelo was a Neo-Platonist. He believed that even in aesthetics there is a right and wrong, or a correct and an incorrect. Plato theorized that there existed one perfect form for human beings that represented the ultimate correctness, and every person on Earth was an imperfect copy of that form's greatness. That was how Michelangelo also saw life, but he wanted his paintings to be greater than life. In his paintings, everyone was perfect. Every body was the epitome of strength and health, and every face was an example of perfectly proportioned symmetrical beauty. Even his depiction of Jesus was muscular."

Rider laughed and said to the men, "I do believe this is the very first art appreciation lecture ever given in the United States Marine Corps." Then he added, "And I hope it's the last."

Everyone laughed, but Caleb did not wait for the laughter to die down before he objected. He looked right at Rider and said, "It's not just about art, this has to do with us," he waited for the last bits of laughter to quiet and when people could actually hear him, he repeated, "This has everything to do with the Marines." The excitement in Caleb's mannerisms and voice – calling out for attention – were like that of an evangelist. "For example, it is correct to see a body healthy, alive and young. It is incorrect to see it blown to pieces...bones broken...skin torn off...flesh burning. Also, what we are fighting for is correct. It is correct to form a culture around life. It is incorrect to glorify death. But, it goes broader than that. Patriotism is *correct*. There is something correct about loving a great nation, and loving it just a little bit more because it happens to be yours. But, focusing only on the flaws of a great nation is definitely incorrect. There is something incorrect and unnatural about *hating* something just because it is yours, or hating a group just because you are in it. Honoring

courage is correct; fighting evil is correct. Fighting those who fight evil is incorrect, unnatural, and must inevitably lead to honoring evil and honoring cowardice. The straight, perfect parallel lines of a building, soaring courageously toward space is correct and it is beautiful. Flying planes full of people into such buildings is incorrect, unnatural, and should be fought against with all of our might.”

Jackson walked over to find a spot closer to the conversation. He had been watching the look in Rider’s eyes, the unchecked masculinity in which he so prided himself. Jackson knew that most of the stuff that Caleb had said was stuff that Rider would agree with. It was the exact type of rhetoric he had so often heard from Rider. Jackson, more than anyone, knew how much the two actually had in common ideologically. He wondered if these similarities would help Rider find some respect for Caleb, or irrationally make him hate Caleb more – hate him because his existence threatens too much of Rider’s worldview. Jackson imagined it was the latter. Rider needed to believe that all homosexuals were like those he saw in the news. He needed to believe that every gay man was as vile, hate-filled, incorrect, and unnatural as Stacy. Separating homosexuals from homosexual activists was too much nuance for Rider, and too much compromise.

“What about,” Rider put up one finger to interrupt Caleb and then paused. He waited until every eye was on him, then he smiled slyly and began again, “What about a man who is sexually attracted to a woman? Isn’t that *correct*?”

Every face, like house cats watching a tennis match, turned to look at Caleb. Caleb said nothing. No one could tell if the look in his eyes was anger or deep sadness.

“What about a marriage between one man and one woman?” Rider continued, “Wouldn’t that be *correct*?”

Caleb’s face relaxed just enough for him to regain control of his lips. He said, “Yes, that would be correct.”

“And, what about a boy who chooses to be attracted to other men?” Rider piled on, “Wouldn’t that be incorrect...or what was the other word you used? *Unnatural*?”

Caleb nodded slowly, then added, “But it’s not a choice.” Caleb said it quietly, but with authority. People – still unsure about his eyes – detected no anger in his voice.

“It’s a choice,” said Rider and added, “It’s a *sin*.”

No Marine there was hunting for a conversation like this. If Caleb had just kept his head down and started drawing again, the whole crowd would have dispersed. Instead, he surprised everyone when he stepped into the center of the floor, like giving a school presentation. He said to Rider, “If I chose to be gay, that means I was heterosexual before I was gay. After all, you don’t believe I was gay before I chose to be gay, that makes no sense. No, you believe that before I made the choice to turn gay, I was born heterosexual and lived heterosexual – heterosexual just like all of you.”

“That’s right,” said Rider.

“But, then by your logic, any of you here could choose to be gay.”

“We all can choose our behaviors,” said Brit.

“I could choose to be gay, I just don’t want to,” said Teflon. “But that *is* my choice.” For added emphasis he reasserted, “I just don’t want to,” for those that may have missed it the first time.

“No one is talking about choosing our behaviors,” said Caleb, “The subject in question is whether we can choose our *desires*.”

“What are you talking about?” Jackson asked.

“The word passion, comes from the same root as the word passive. We don’t control our desires, we passively submit.”

“But, we could *resist* our desires,” Jackson interjected. “You are talking about freewill. I don’t believe that it was your choice to be gay, but I know for certain we have freewill; that was given to us by God.”

“I don’t believe in freewill,” said Caleb. Someone laughed. Caleb added very succinctly, “Freewill is a myth invented by people who were too comfortable with their habit of judging and did not want to give up their system of judgment,” he turned to Jackson and added, “or their fantasy of a just God. If we choose our desires, why would anyone ever elect to suffer? Why would things like heartache even exist on this Earth? Couldn’t any

Marine in the Corps simply stop desiring any Suzy the second he learns about her cheating ways? Schopenhauer said that we can surely do what we want, but we cannot want what we want.”

“Oh-kay,” said Teflon sarcastically, making it into two isolated syllables.

“In other words, if we choose our actions – and I believe we do – then on what is that choice based?” Caleb asked rhetorically, then answered, “It is based on the type of person we are. But what then chooses the type of person we are? We cannot say that who we are determines who we are – that would be circular. No, who we are is determined by our genetics and our environment, neither of which we have any control over.”

“Save your empty pabulum for the ivy league fairies,” Rider injected. “This is the Marines, *Plato*, not a college dorm.” His tone was flippant, yet commanding.

Jackson, wanting to give his own statement more weight, moved to the center of the room by Caleb. He said, “He’s right.” He gave Caleb a conciliatory look, then clarified, “Rider is right.” Jackson was surprised just how right Rider was. He had learned it when he first arrived at boot camp: the sheer impotence of sophistry. He explained, “Marines don’t deal with theories, we deal with a reality as absolute as bullets and authoritative as death.”

Caleb stood up taller. Like smart war strategists, they were trying to bring the fight to their turf. “I hear you, no BSing,” he said as he went to his belongings, reached in, and produced a pistol. “Let’s start with bullets then.” He cocked it as he walked back to center stage. The familiar metal on metal sound from the slide slapping into place woke up anything that had been sleeping in his audience like a jolt of caffeine. Every man in the room straightened his posture. Everyone had heard the ubiquitous stories of Marines getting shot in the face because their best friend wanted to prove to them that the gun wasn’t loaded, or countless others with similar themes – stories that seem like they should never happen, yet do. People looked toward Jackson to see if he would object, hoping he would be the one to step in as the level-headed mediator. Before Jackson had the chance, Caleb threw the ball definitively into Rider’s court. “Rider, why don’t you be my volunteer?”

Rider stood up slowly and walked to a spot directly in front of Caleb and his locked and loaded 9mm. Rider said nothing, but scowled at him with a blistering hatred. Had there been no threat involved, Rider would have reflexively told Caleb to shove off, but he couldn't allow anyone to conclude that it was fear that made him refuse. "Come closer," Caleb requested. Rider, who did not break eye contact once, moved closer. Only an arm's length away, Caleb turned the gun around and presented the grip to Rider. "Point this at my chest."

"No," Rider said.

"C'mon, no BSing," Caleb said lightly as he forced the weapon into Rider's hand. He wrapped Rider's fingers around the grip with his hand on top – just as SSgt Folsom had once forced a knife into Caleb's hand. He guided its barrel to the center of his chest, point blank, and said, "Squeeze the trigger."

"Don't," called out one of the men. Rider turned to roll his eyes at him, irritated by the real fear in the person's plea. He looked back to Caleb and smirked. Caleb's hand was on top of his, holding the gun close. Rider shook Caleb's hand off. He looked at the gun, then ejected the clip. He was surprised to discover that the gun was indeed loaded. His eyes narrowed. He drew the slide back and ejected the bullet from the chamber. Caleb did not follow it with his eyes, but heard the small thud as it landed. They all heard it. The hooch had never been so quiet. Rider slid the magazine back in and chambered another bullet. Now certain that the gun was loaded, he placed it back point blank on Caleb's chest.

Everyone waited to see what Rider would do. Brit grabbed the reporter to casually escort him out. "No, I'm staying," said Michael Ponce.

"No, you're not," said Brit.

Michael Ponce showed signs of resisting. He managed to snap one photo off just to show his dedication as a journalist. But before he could take another, the autofocus of his camera quickly adjusted to Brit's angry face that had stepped into the frame. Upon seeing Brit's expression, Michael Ponce thought better of it and allowed himself to be removed from the tent.

Rider scoffed and asked, "Okay, what is your point?"

“My point is that our actions are determined by who we are, and we have no control over who we are. We just live with the cards we are dealt.”

“Not true,” said Rider.

“Then shoot me.”

“I choose not to.”

“It’s not a choice; you are *forced* not to because that is not who you are. It is only a choice if both options are possible. But, the option that involves you shooting a fellow Marine, even a gay one, to prove some inane philosophical point is an impossibility.”

“You think so?” Rider said with a gruff rumble in his voice.

“It’s not who you are,” said Caleb.

“Caleb,” Jackson’s words were slow and measured, “this is stupid.” Jackson knew what Caleb was doing – he was painting what he had learned about Trey Tucker onto Ridley Holt, but Jackson also knew that it wasn’t a fit. Trey was the homophobic tough guy who stood up for Caleb in the end, but Rider was just the homophobic tough guy. Trey’s reason for joining was tattooed on his arm – Old Glory. Rider’s reason for joining was tattooed on his arm – a running tally of his kills. Trey was the man who wanted to do something courageous and noble. Rider was the man who would brag about being a boiling kettle of undiluted testosterone. “Rider,” Jackson said, “You don’t want to play along with this clown. Why don’t you go ahead and give me the gun?”

“Forget it, Brooks; he started this,” said Rider.

“Don’t worry about me, Jackson. It is impossible for him to shoot me,” reassured Caleb.

“No,” said Rider, scowling at Caleb. “It isn’t.”

Jackson, understanding his philosophical point a little bit, decided that it might calm the situation to pretend that this was merely a conversation, at the end of which the gun gets put away just like any other visual aid. He said, “People do sometimes choose to shoot other people, Caleb. Marines have even chosen to murder other Marines.”

“It was possible for them, but it’s impossible for Rider,” Caleb said as he grabbed hold of Rider’s hands and pulled the gun from his chest up to the center of his forehead. “I am as safe

with Rider's gun to my head is I would be if he was behind ten feet of steel, or if the gun was not loaded, or if gunpowder had never even been invented."

Jackson didn't think so. Jackson was remembering the sound of Rider's laughter and the glint in his eye when he talked about Lt Gen Mattis declaring that some people are fun to shoot. Jackson was imagining the fury, like fireworks, popping in Rider's mind. He didn't want Caleb to end up another notch on Rider's arm. "You're right," he said, trying to get Caleb to stop antagonizing Rider and speak to him instead. "Rider wouldn't kill you. He has sworn to support the Constitution."

"Rider could kill you, if it was in self-defense," offered Teflon, not helping the situation.

"That is a different decision," said Caleb. "Killing to save his life, or yours, or even mine, is a choice possible to Rider. Killing a Marine for no reason is not."

"It is possible," said Rider, simply.

"Show me."

"I could do it."

"Do."

Rider hesitated; he hesitated for so long that it became a refusal to answer. Rider remained quiet for so long that people had even forgotten there was something to respond to. His face seemed to be made out of stone. The room remained deathly quiet and every man watching the scene unfold slowly began to realize that what had started as some pedantic point, had now become something else completely. The two men stared into each other's eyes, neither one had blinked for a long time. The slightest tremor ran through Rider's arm – everyone saw it – giving the only indication that there in fact might have been, in Rider's mind, two very real options to consider.

There *was* a choice for Rider to deliberate. Caleb had provoked him, dared him, used him as a prop. Caleb had told him that he could not do it. Slowly, people began to realize that Caleb had been trying to hurt and humiliate Rider, and that putting the gun aimed back at him into Rider's hand was the very method he was using to do that.

Another tremor ran through Rider's arm and the gun in his hand shook, tapping out a fast code against Caleb's forehead.

Caleb leaned into it. Watching Rider's face, Caleb could see his nostrils flaring. Rider's anger grew as he watched Caleb's smug expression. The thought occurred to him that Caleb had meant the whole thing to be a sick mind game, and perhaps a battle of wits was the only contest which Caleb could ever win – but only if Rider let him.

Caleb upped the ante. He began to throw out taunts. In the sing-song tone of a playground chant, he mocked, "Trigger Happy Holt. Trigger Happy Holt." Then, when Caleb could tell that Rider was at the peak of his anger, he said, one word at a time, "Bring...it...on."

A curious grin came over Rider's face. It wasn't the typical workings of a healthy mind, but the agitated mind of an addict. This was the whipped up state in which an alcoholic could betray his own mother for a glass of whisky. Rational thought and instincts of self-preservation became muted in Rider's mind and a ravenous hunger beat in his chest like a second – and more powerful – heart.

Again Caleb taunted, "Bring it on."

The muscles in Riders thick forearms began to tighten and his hand began to squeeze.

"Incoming!" someone yelled from just outside the tent. All of the men instantly scrambled for their gas masks. In the commotion, Rider quickly discarded the gun and Jackson managed to snatch it.

A moment passed in complete silence. Finally Brit asked, "Is this a bloody drill, or what?"

No one had an answer. Michael Ponce rushed into the tent followed by a few stray Marines, shouting "False alarm. False alarm. Someone was just trying to prank you guys."

"What?" Teflon shouted indignantly. "Who was it?"

"We don't know," said Michael Ponce. "No one saw who yelled it."

* * *

That night Teflon came to Caleb's cot.

"PFC Hertz," he said softly. When Caleb turned around to face him, he put up both hands and added, "Hey, I don't want to shoot you or anything."

“That’s good,” Caleb said with a grin.

“Hey, um,” Teflon looked apprehensive. “I don’t know if this is something that you do. I could totally pay you for it. I don’t have much money, but I am sure we could work something out.” He reached into his pocket and produced a photo of a two month old baby girl. “My wife sent me this photo...” his sentence trailed off as he handed the photo to Caleb.

“She’s beautiful.”

“Our Anniversary’s coming up and I don’t know what to get her. I feel so bad because I wasn’t there to see our daughter born.” Teflon stopped. He knew that he could get through saying it without his eyes tearing up, but Caleb had just handed the photo back. He stared at the photo for a long time in silence. His eyes had that standard issue glaze that contained both ecstasy and suffering, military grade. He said, off-topic, almost to himself, “How can I love somebody so much from just a photograph?”

“I’d love to,” said Caleb.

Teflon looked up from the photo, he had been staring so intently at his newborn daughter that he had forgotten that their conversation had been left unfinished. “You will, really?” He smiled. “You know I do a little bit of art, kind of, but nothing like you.”

“It’s no problem; I will get started right away.”

“I’ll pay you.”

Caleb shook his head. “Maybe someday we will think of something you can trade me for it.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fifteen clicks to the west of the city of Almoud was an insurgent compound high in the mountains. Major Nash formed a team of men to infiltrate the enemy's bunker. This was Caleb's first mission where he was guaranteed engagement with the enemy.

It was extremely hot. All the bodies in the back of the 7-ton truck just made it feel even hotter. The more they would sweat, the more orange sand would stick to their faces. Caleb counted the men around him, *Eleven Marines and one homosexual*, he said to himself in the way that SSgt Folsom and Sgt Ward used to ridicule him. Jackson must have been thinking similar thoughts because he turned to Caleb, smiled, and said in a voice that sounded like SSgt Folsom, "Twelve Marines and one embed!" This made Caleb feel good. He was glad to have Michael Ponce around – finally someone who was more of an outsider than himself.

The men had given Michael Ponce the nickname Blitz. They did this because the embeds were required to wear blue Kevlar vests that said PRESS on them. The blue vest led to jokes about blue helmets. Blue helmets, of course, led to jokes about the UN. The UN led to jokes about Hans Blix. Hans Blix became just Blix, then Blix became Blitz. Michael Ponce was happy because as little as the Marines seemed to want him around, he knew he was in danger of getting stuck with a really lame, wimpy or mocking nickname. But Blitz was cool. Jackson wanted to call him Reporter Smurf, but it never stuck.

Sometimes the best nicknames are the least obvious. It was for this reason that Caleb was yet to have a nickname. All the potential candidates were just too obvious.

Caleb looked a little nervous in the back of the truck, so Jackson leaned over to him and said, "I think I figured something out."

"What?"

"Your grandfather's nickname. Did he stay in after the war?"

"Twenty-four years in the service."

"So that means he was serving in the fifties?"

"Uh-huh," Caleb waited for Jackson's point.

“Who were the biggest celebrities in the world during the fifties?”

“I don’t know.”

“Martin and Lewis,” said Jackson. “Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.”

“Okay.”

“Well, Dean Martin was known for...” Jackson waited for Caleb to finish his sentence for him, but Caleb didn’t. “His singing and drinking!”

“Okay,” Caleb still looked dubious.

“Dean Martin’s nickname was Dino. They probably called your father Dino for a while, but because he was an Infantry Weapons Officer, it was only a matter of time before it became something like Dino-mite or Dynamite, then TNT.”

Caleb nodded his head slowly. “Well, it’s the best theory I’ve heard so far,” he said patronizingly.

“It’s just a theory,” Jackson retorted, slightly crestfallen.

“No, no, it’s great,” said Caleb sarcastically. “You’re a genius.”

Jackson fidgeted. “Ain’t that a kick in the head?” he mumbled. He checked the magazine on his rifle, although he already had three times. “Are you nervous?” he asked Caleb, anxious to change the subject.

Caleb gave Jackson a wry look, as if he had asked a silly question. “Of course,” he said. He could feel another bead of sweat slide down the side of his now caked orange face, but he ignored it. He said to Jackson, “I have a saying that I have always repeated when I get...nervous. It was something that my mom used to say to me. Do you want to hear it?”

This time, Jackson gave Caleb the same wry look, as if *he* had asked a silly question. “Of course,” he said.

“She used to tell me, ‘The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.’ I don’t know what in the world it means, but I have always found it comforting.”

Jackson smirked happily. He said sincerely, “It’s beautiful.” Then he added, “Thank you.” He leaned in to tell Caleb something but was interrupted by singing.

“Ameeeeriiiica...Ameeeeriiiica...” Teflon started singing the drawn out beginning of the “America” song from *Team America*,

World Police. Soon all the Marines joined in. Not many knew the words past the chorus, but they were happy repeating the chorus over and over.

When that song finally fizzled out, Teflon picked a new one. He sang, "As for this country I adore, I'd gladly give my life to her. And for the one who..." his voice deflated when he saw the blank faces around him. "I guess you guys don't know Mark Reed, huh?" He chuckled and tried desperately to think of a song that they all would know.

Brit jumped in and sang loudly, "Flintstones! Meet the Flintstones!"

Every single recruit joined in.

When the song reached its climax, everyone gave it their all, but when they came to the last words, "...have a gay ol' time," few people actually reached, "ol' time." Most stopped at the word "gay" and turned to Caleb. Some laughed. Others repeated, "A gay ol' time? A *gay* ol' time!"

Teflon shook Caleb affectionately by the shoulders. He said, "Fred Flintstone! Fred Flintstone!"

This was followed by several calls throughout the truck, "No. Barney!"

"Pebbles! Pebbles!"

Just as it looked like the name Pebbles would catch on, Michael Ponce shouted, "Bam Bam!"

"Bam Bam!" Jackson shouted.

"Bam Bam!" The men laughed.

Jackson just smiled. He said, "And that's how nicknames get started."

That was the last sound that anyone made. A silence descended on them as they neared the target and the weight of the mission took hold.

War became serious business once more.

When they reached their destination, they could see the enemy bunker built into the side of the mountain. They positioned themselves behind a ridge half a kilometer away. Immediately they could see muzzle flare from the enemy's guns. A volley of RPGs began to explode on the berm directly in front of them. Hot rocks and sand rained down on their necks and into their collars.

Brit called in the coordinates for air support and in no time at all, two F16s were making gun runs on the bunker.

A wave of terrorists ran out from their positions, wanting no part in contending with the aerial assault, and charged toward the Marines on the ground. They fired a merciless barrage of AK-47 rounds as they closed in on the Americans.

Caleb quickly found out that the zone of hypersensitivity that was fabled to happen in combat was actually true. His thoughts flowed through his brain at an excited velocity and focus. He could hear the shifting sands and he could have sworn that he could hear the enemy breathe. He imagined that the heart beats he heard in his head were those of the attacking force. There were too many beats to be just one heart. He watched as a terrorist turned toward his direction and raised his AK-47. His movements looked to Caleb like they were being played in slow motion.

Caleb placed his sight right over the man's head. His mind was granted a mysterious clarity. He had never killed a man before. He had wondered what it would feel like. His racing thoughts turned unexpectedly to Stacy. He remembered the words that had first announced his betrayal, "Don't you just want to stick it to those bigots?" The bigots he had been referring to were actually the men on America's side. He thought about Stacy's trendy friends in uptown Dallas, for whom activism was vanity and protests were social functions. Hadn't Stacy himself invited Caleb to a CAIR function just last year? Caleb could never wrap his mind around how a faction of people that are against homosexual rights, against women's rights, granted no freedom of speech, and sought to establish an iron fisted theocracy over the entire globe, could be the new darling of America's political left. "It seems like the trick to getting more affection from your crowd is to attack America," Caleb told Stacy once.

Caleb's heart truly broke for every decent American Muslim who felt even the slightest backlash after 9/11. Caleb knew better than anyone what it was like to be judged not for the person that you are, but the group that you belong to – and not even the majority of that group, just the fringe idiots who make the most noise. Caleb was scared to death of the people who watched

those planes fly into those buildings and turned around to say, "We hate all Muslims." But Caleb was equally frightened by the people who, even as the images were still repeating on cable news, turned around to announce, "We love all Muslims," and promptly took up the mantle for the Muslim cause. The difference was: Caleb had actually *met* people in the second group. If the first group existed, he was yet to see the evidence.

Caleb squeezed the trigger. He wished that he could have let the terrorist know that it was a homosexual that had just sent him to Hell.

Caleb turned his weapon to take out more of the enemy, but all that he could see were terrorists falling, one after another in quick succession, being torn to pieces by Rider's .50 caliber machine gun. Rider picked them off just as easily and as gleefully as if he were playing a violent video game – the kind that Caleb imagined Rider had played all his life. A type of fever came over Rider and it was plain to see by anyone who laid eyes on him that something inside his gut had been lit on fire. A switch was flipped in his brain and he liked it. He felt more at home, more complete, more natural behind such a weapon, dolling out the domination, than he did any place else on Earth.

Caleb caught a chill.

When the last enemy had fallen and the good guys were no longer taking fire, a cheer went up among the Americans. They had not taken a single casualty. It was after the cheering and back slapping that Caleb called over to Rider and said, "I'm sorry, Rider. I killed one of those terrorists. If you had wanted me to leave them all for you, you should have just asked." People began to laugh. The inner circle of laughter expanded outward. There was more laughter than Caleb thought his joke called for, so he began to look around to discover what they had really been laughing at. Brit, whose senses had been on hyper-alert also, thought that he smelled something. Upon investigation he discovered Michael Ponce curled up on the floorboards in the back of the humvee. He had peed his pants.

Michael Ponce was never called Blitz again.

“Looks like we both got new nicknames today, didn’t we, Bam Bam?” Michael Ponce asked Caleb after they got back to the camp.

“Don’t worry,” said Caleb, “I won’t call you *Mellow Yellow*.”

Michael Ponce grimaced at the sound of his new nickname and the fresh memories of the Marines’ mocking laughter. “Do you ever get flashbacks of being picked on in school?”

“There have been a few scenes that have crossed my mind.”

“They’re just bullies really. Especially Rider. He’s a real piece of work, that one.”

Caleb laughed.

“Did you see him today? How many men do you think he killed?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad he’s on my side.”

“Is he?”

“Of course.”

“Well, America, sure. But *your* side?”

Caleb shrugged. He looked away and added, “All I know is, the man sure likes killing.”

“I bet you wish you knew that before you pulled that stunt of yours.”

Caleb stopped dead in his tracks. He looked both ways to see who might have been listening to them speak. No one was around. He said, “I really misjudged him. You didn’t see the look in his eyes. I think he could have shot me.”

“Bet you feel lucky someone called out a false alarm.”

“I wonder if whoever pulled that prank knows that he may have saved my life.”

“He does,” Michael Ponce said as he turned to Caleb. The way he looked at Caleb let Caleb know that it was more than a hunch.

“Wait a minute, *you* called it out?”

Michael Ponce was, in fact, the man who called out the false alarm. He said, “I couldn’t have the subject of my story die, now could I?”

“You saved my life?” Caleb asked, then amended it, “Sort of.”

“Yeah, sort of.”

Caleb suddenly became very silent. He knew as well as anyone what it was like to be the one on the outside. He said, "I'm sorry I've been rude to you. I guess I really don't see the harm in sitting down to talk about...whatever you want to talk about."

"Listen Bam Bam, you don't owe me anything, okay? But, if you really feel in my debt, you can try to score me some whisky. For crying out loud, I thought men in uniform were supposed to be drunk. I've been feeling like some kind of idiotic religious teetotaler."

"No one's drunk in this war. The whole country forbids it."

"There must be a way, we're Americans after all."

"Tell you what, I'll look into it."

Just before turning in that night, Caleb saw that Trigger Happy Holt had many more tallies tattooed on his arm. He walked over to him and asked, "Hey Rider, how did you get those on so quick? Did you do them yourself?"

"Teflon," is all Rider grunted.

Caleb promptly made his way over to Teflon. He said, "Hey Teflon, I've thought of something that you can trade me for that drawing."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jackson was part of a fire team heading out on a mission, but he didn't know what it was. He was sitting in the back of a humvee staring out of the window when he felt a surge of panic. He didn't know where they were going. He didn't know or understand the mission. He looked out at the strange Afghanistan landscape and it looked like the surface of the moon. *How did I get here?*

He looked to Brit who was riding in the humvee with him. Brit was his team leader. "Brit, I don't think I feel too well. I don't know what I am doing. I don't know where I'm going. I'm totally confused, Brit."

"Relax, Brooks. It's just nerves. Take this." Brit handed him a bright red pill.

"What is it?"

Brit said some fancy word that Jackson could not hear and that Jackson imagined probably would not inform him of much anyway. Jackson swallowed the pill.

"Just rely on your training," was the last thing that Brit said before they both heard a loud explosion from just in front of their position. It was followed by louder explosions popping against the armor plating of their humvee. Their caravan had hit a landmine and they were taking AK-47 rounds.

Jackson did rely on his training. Within seconds he was outside the vehicle, had spotted the muzzle flair of the enemy, and was on the opposite side of the humvee giving it right back to them. The enemy was high on the ridge of the mountains. Jackson wondered who had led them into such a fragile position. They were completely pinned down. When Jackson looked up to Brit, he saw him with the radio in his hands. When Brit saw Jackson's eyes, he pointed straight in the other direction. Jackson turned to see a middle-eastern man running straight toward their position. He was less than fifty yards away.

Jackson turned his rifle on him and hesitated.

It didn't make sense for him to be running right there, right then. The enemy had them so successfully pinned down. Even if this man planned to martyr himself, shouldn't they reserve the suicide missions for when no other plan would work? Jackson

thought perhaps this man might be retarded; he had heard stories of radical Islamists strapping explosives to mentally challenged people who did not know what was happening, then sending them out to their deaths. It made him sick. But then he also could be a villager, or a brave member of the Afghan security forces. Maybe he was a heroic man who once was a mere farmer back when he had the luxury to be, but now that this garbage has been brought to his doorstep he didn't wait for anyone else to clean it up. Maybe he was running toward the Americans to bring them information that could save their butts right now. Maybe it was information that he had already risked his life for. The words, "Win the hearts and minds of the people" echoed through Jackson's head. The words, "It is *my* pine box, not some ACLU lawyer's. I will be the one to decide whether the threat of me dying is real," did too.

The rounds exploding around Jackson sounded so loud he could barely think. The man was so close that Jackson could see the whites of his eyes. Still Jackson did not shoot. His heart was pounding. He could feel the sweat run down the side of his face. Within that second, the man shouted something that Jackson did not initially understand. Only after it was already too late did Jackson realize that he had said, "Allahu Akbar!"

A blinding light seared both of Jackson's retinas. His sight went completely white, then completely black. The last thoughts going through his panicked mind were of how he lived, not how he died. They seemed to skip from one to the other. He heard, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." He heard, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Then he thought about the ring. Before he left to Afghanistan, he secretly bought an engagement ring for Stephanie. He wanted to ask her to marry him as soon as he got home. He had carried that ring with him every second since the day that he bought it. It was a constant reminder of Stephanie. It was a reminder to not get himself killed. He felt like the ring somehow connected him to her, and connected him to this worldly plane of existence. It was unfinished work that he had to do and he promised himself he wouldn't die before he had a

chance to get down on one knee, trembling before her pretty face.

His body thrashed violently as he fought against his invisible restraints. He could hear his breath still breathing. He could hear his heart still beating. The restraints had only been the tangle of his bedcovers.

Ever since he heard what had happened to Trey Tucker, Jackson had been having the same recurring nightmare.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Caleb had a big dopey grin on his face as he walked over toward Michael Ponce's table in the chow hall. He looked both ways and then presented him a bottle of Crown Royal.

"Where did this come from?" asked Michael Ponce.

"Canada," Caleb answered quite correctly.

Michael Ponce laughed. "No, I mean where did you get it?"

"I *acquired* it," Caleb said as a codeword for *you don't need to know*, then added, "I am finding out the full meaning of what it means to be a Marine." Caleb had learned the sheer usefulness of the motto, *improvise*.

"No better friend, no worse enemy," Michael Ponce said warmly and swatted Caleb's arm, "or so I've been told."

"You just remember that."

"I will."

That night, Caleb was sitting away from the other Marines working on a new drawing. Michael Ponce noticed he was alone, so he made his way over and asked, "Being antisocial?"

"Not really," said Caleb. "I just don't want anyone to see it until it is done."

"A new masterpiece?"

"I doubt it."

"Looks like you will be up for a while," the reporter commented, taking a look at the unfinished state of the drawing. It was not even far enough along to tell what it would be. Michael Ponce tilted the large cup he was holding and poured some of it into a smaller cup for Caleb.

"Thanks," said Caleb. After taking one sip Caleb quickly said, "Hey, there seems to be some whisky in this coffee!"

"You didn't think I was going to hog it all, did you?"

"Where did you get alcohol?" Caleb laughed.

"I *acquired* it," Michael Ponce coyly said.

Caleb happily took another sip, but stopped and asked, "You're not trying to get me drunk so I'll spill my guts to you, are you?"

Michael Ponce smiled guiltily; he hemmed and hawed, then said, "Umm...yeah, actually I am."

Caleb looked up at him a little shocked.

Michael Ponce innocently put up his hand and said, "Just a harmless story. What's so hard about that? You told me before that you had some stories about being picked on in school. Just give me something quaint, something Norman Rockwell. The readers will love it. Small town boy, right? Lake Dunham?"

"Lake Durham."

"Just give me something simple and I'll never ask again. Something straight out of *A Christmas Story*. Did the big kids make you lick a frozen lamppost?"

Caleb laughed, but still did not say anything.

"C'mon, I traveled ten thousand miles; I crapped in a hole in the sand; I'm having nightmares about scorpions; I have to hang out with a bunch of lunatic fundamentalists like Jackson; and I have even peed my pants after getting shot at, all just to learn about you!"

Caleb wondered if the *fundamentalist* crack was meant for his benefit, or if Michael Ponce had some issues of his own. He was still resistant to talk, so Michael Ponce pressed further, "Hey listen, if I hadn't offered them up Bam Bam, your nickname would be Pebbles right now! And, if you think that wouldn't have turned into Fruity Pebbles, you're mistaken!"

Caleb could see the truth to his argument. "Okay, I have a story. It's not a classic, but if you think you can use it then you can have it."

"You didn't shoot your eye out with a BB gun did you?" Michael Ponce asked as he pulled out his Crown and topped off both cups.

Caleb told the story of his first day suiting up for gym class in embarrassing detail. He continued drawing as he spoke. Having something to distract him made the story all the more honest because he did not have to watch the reporter's face. This is why psychiatrists have couches. As he spoke, his hand stayed in constant motion and he was in perfect focus, never distracted by his own words.

Michael Ponce laughed at the description of Caleb's embarrassing short shorts. Michael Ponce laughed as he pictured the tantrum Caleb threw and the children laughing at him. Caleb got the real sense that Michael Ponce was no stranger to being bullied. Perhaps he had a few *quaint* stories of his own.

When Caleb came to the part about his father, he reached over and poured himself some more Crown without waiting for Michael Ponce to offer.

“‘You quit,’ he said.” He took a big swig of his drink. Michael Ponce could not tell if the face he made was caused by the sting of the alcohol or the sting of the memories. “You quit,” Caleb repeated bitterly. For a second it even seemed to Michael Ponce that it was Caleb who was now the one saying it, scolding the young boy in his memories. “After that day, my father hung a rope for me to practice on in the barn. At the top of the rope he put a red flag. I never did make it to the top. For years that flag taunted me.”

“That’s awful,” said Michael Ponce sincerely.

“Do you want to know what the worst part of that day was?”

“What’s that?”

“The whole time that I was standing there, knees trembling, looking up at my father and listening to him tell me that I disappointed him, that I *quit*...I had this *stupid* trophy in my hands!”

“They gave you a trophy?” Michael Ponce laughed.

“We all got one!” Caleb said in a higher pitch, half humorous, half rancorous. “It was supposed to help my self esteem!”

The men both laughed, but Michael Ponce laughed uncontrollably. It had been a long time since Caleb saw someone laugh like that. He laughed so hard it made it difficult for Caleb to stop.

Still laughing, Michael Ponce said, “Oh, that must have been the worst day of your life!” Suddenly he stopped laughing. He said very sincerely, “Um...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...I mean, I wasn’t thinking. Of course that was not the worst day of your life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. I had just imagined that...” Michael Ponce’s words stumbled apologetically out of his mouth. He finally added, “You know what? Never mind. Forget I said it.”

“The day I came out?” Caleb asked and stared out past Michael Ponce’s shoulder, seeing nothing. “Yes. The day I came out was the worst day of my life.”

Michael Ponce shook his hands like he did not want to know. "I'm sorry I said that. I only thought that because, well, your father sounds like one of those closed-minded types..."

Caleb sat motionless for a few moments. Michael Ponce dared not move a muscle. Caleb grabbed a different piece of charcoal and returned to his drawing. He began to tell the story.

"I first spilled the beans to a girl named Joann. I don't know why I did it. Then I immediately lost my best friend. I started to head home, and just like that day in gym class, I knew my father had already heard everything that there was to know before I even had the chance to tell him. He wouldn't speak to me. I begged him and begged him to just say something. Tell me he had heard, or call me a queer, just say something! Finally after he cooled off, he came to find me. I was out back chopping wood. I had been chopping so long that blisters had formed on both of my hands and then broken open. He stepped onto our back porch.

"The sun had just finished going down and the old tungsten bulb on the side of our house was the only thing that gave off light. My father's face was orange and black. The hard-lined shadows on his face were one solid shade of black with no details. I could not see his eyes, just two empty holes. 'Stop it,' he said. I thought that he meant the chopping so I quickly stopped, but he meant something else. 'Stop all this sinning,' he said, 'and we can forget that it ever happened. It's a choice.' He turned around and walked back inside. I heard the door latch lock hard behind him; he had wanted me to hear it. Then the porch light went out.

"I don't know what he expected me to do, but I could not envision a situation where I obsequiously knocked and begged him to let me back in. I couldn't do something like that. I threw down my ax and ran to the barn. The light from their bedroom window on the side of the house produced enough light for me to see the path, and before I even reached the barn, that light was turned off too. It was dark. The barn never had electricity, so once inside I had to feel my way around. I could avoid stubbing my toe, or impaling myself on any pitch forks well enough, but I could not seem to find a light. We had a flashlight, but I knew that the batteries were long dead. I finally managed to find an old

oil lantern and light it with the lighter I had hidden by my secret pack of smokes. I placed the lantern on the ground at the foot of my true nemesis – the hanging rope. The lantern gave off so little light that as I stood at the bottom and looked up the length of that rope, I could not see the top of it. It stretched so high, so fast, that the dim lantern light could not catch it. I started to climb.

“I had told my father that my muscles were too small to pull myself to the top. He told me that it wasn’t about muscles. He told me that if I quit, I’d stay on the ground; if I didn’t quit, I’d reach the top. ‘It’s about physics,’ I said. ‘It’s about will,’ he said. I listened to everything that my father ever told me. When my father said there was a God, then there was a God. When he said that homosexuals go to Hell, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that homosexuals would go to Hell. When he said that if I never gave up that I would reach the top, I believed him. If climbing rope was a matter of will, then homosexuality could be also. My father was never wrong.

“Every time I lifted off the ground, I fell back down to earth, but I knew that was what will was all about. If I did not quit, I would make it to the top. Every time I fell, I just got back up. I imagined that I was trying to pull the roof of the barn down on top of me. Hour after hour, I kept struggling to reach a flag that I couldn’t even see. My parents were already sleeping soundly and I was alone in my own nightmare. For all that time, I had not reached any higher than ten or twelve feet, and each attempt was getting lower and lower. The blood on the rope was making it harder to keep any traction. It slipped painfully through my feeble grip. By this point, an entire five foot section of the rope shined red with my blood.

The theoretician in me determined that it was a quest that I never had to lose. *Just never give up. I never need to reach the top, I only need to not quit.* It sounded good. The only problem was that human bodies require food, water, and sleep. I imagined myself fasting for days, going so long without food that my body would begin to eat itself – devour the very muscles I needed to climb the rope. I imagined the effects of refusing to stop, even to use the restroom. I imagined trying desperately to keep my eyes open because surrendering to sleep is just like quitting. Even with my body collapsed on the ground in its own filth, neglected

and emaciated, I will not have quit. As long as my eyes were open, my heart was still beating, and I had at least one hand upon the rope weakly trying to pull myself upward, I will not have quit. I decided right then and there that I could either reach the top, quit, or die trying. I couldn't do the first one and I wouldn't do the second. There was no other choice but for me to die. With one last gasp, I made it half way up, but my grip slipped and I fell. My head slammed against the hard ground. I knocked myself unconscious and I knocked the lantern over into the dry hay. When I came to, I was still alone, but the barn was on fire.

"I panicked. I ran, not toward the house to wake my family out of bed, but *away* – into the dark night. That was a moment that I will remember for the rest of my life. I told myself in that moment that my father was right, it was about will. I did not have enough willpower to die. If I had stayed in that barn, I would no longer be gay."

Caleb took another drink.

"I was about fifty yards from the house when I heard the barn collapse. I turned to take one last look over my shoulder. The barn had cracked in half as it fell. A phantasmic image made my feet jerk to a stop so fast that the loose pebbles on the ground almost caused me to fall. In the second that I had turned back to the barn, I thought I saw the red flag. I had to run back to see if that really was what I saw.

"As I moved closer to the burning mess, I could see it clearly. No more than six feet off the ground and behind a wall of flames was the red flag. I knew that in another second the entire barn would come down. The flag would be buried and burnt. In another second, my parents would be awake and the fire department would come. I didn't wait another second. I stepped back a few feet to get a running start. As fast and high as I could, I jumped over the flames and onto the old boards that had once been the roof of the barn. I fell forward, and upon my impact the whole section I landed on sank lower and the entire wreckage seemed to moan. When it moaned, flames shot out of the front of it like it was breathing fire. The boards were searing hot to the touch and they burnt my elbows and knees. I stretched my arm through a narrow crack to grab the flag, but I couldn't reach it. I had to press more of my body against the hot roof to

gain enough reach. It burned, but I got it! The initial wall of flames I had jumped over had grown too high. My only option was to drive straight to my right. No sooner than I had hit the ground, was I off running, flag in hand.

“I never saw my father again. The next day I found myself homeless in Dallas.”

Michael Ponce put his hand on Caleb’s shoulder.

Caleb rubbed the side of his temple. His finger prints left dark charcoal marks on his face. It had been a long time since he had drunk any alcohol. He said, “You’re not going to print that, are you? I don’t want you to print that.”

Michael Ponce smiled warmly, “Just the part about the skimpy gym shorts,” he laughed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Hey Brooks, I’ve got an idea.” Brit’s voice was low and excited. His rate of speech was just fast enough to imply to Jackson that it was something urgent. “While Hertz is out on a head call, why don’t we grab some of his naked women drawings and pin them up on the north wall of the shower cabin?”

“No.”

“C’mon man. I don’t want to do it to be mean. I think he would like the idea.”

“If you think he would like it, why don’t you wait till he gets back?”

“Because I am afraid he *won’t*. Listen, the guy should be proud of his work. Plus, just think how badly he must want to fit in. This is the way to do it! Well, it’s something we finally have in common, isn’t it? Only we think it is good ol’ fashion smut and he thinks it’s the bloody Mona Lisa.”

Jackson did see the logic, but hesitated.

“C’mon, man. He’s not going to be pissed, I promise.”

“Then why do you need my help?”

“In case he’s pissed!”

Jackson laughed.

“I know you two are old friends. He’s more likely to forgive you.”

Jackson agreed and they headed to find Caleb’s art pad.

“There it is. There it is. Hurry up,” Brit prodded Jackson as he found it and flipped it open. Jackson quickly, but gently pulled each work of art off the spiral binding and handed them to Brit. Brit looked over both shoulders for Caleb and greedily collected each piece that Jackson gave him. “Yes...yes...” he was cheering Jackson on, “Skip the building... forget the bloody horse...That one. That’s the one. That’s my favorite!” Brit exclaimed as Jackson paused to admire it. The entire thing was covered in sand. Jackson knew that charcoal was a medium that could be rubbed off by his fingers, so he attempted to blow the sand away. “I like her covered in sand,” protested Brit. “We are all covered in sand now, aren’t we?” Jackson carefully pulled the page from the spiral’s metal rings. As soon as Brit snatched it,

the page beneath it caught Jackson's eye. He froze. His face went white and he lowered himself down onto Caleb's cot in stunned silence. Brit was irritated that he stopped; he checked over both shoulders again for Caleb. He could not see the portrait that had so bewildered Jackson until Jackson set the entire pad down, face up on the cot.

"Wow," said Brit reverently just from the sheer visual impact of the piece, but he still didn't understand what had stopped Jackson in his tracks.

The charcoal was depicting a muscle-bound Marine, wearing only pants and no shirt, drawn in full Michelangelo perfection. In his left arm he carried an M-16 casually. He did not carry it like a Marine who had been trained incessantly how to carry a rifle, how to raise a rifle, how to aim a rifle; but rather, he let it fall insignificantly down by his side like it was a part of his body.

Rider saw the drawing from across the room and came over to investigate. "Who is that?" he asked after taking a moment to admire it. It was clear from the tone in his voice that the skill of the drawing had impressed him.

"That's Private First Class Trey Tucker," Jackson said respectfully.

"He's the friend of ours who just lost half his body," said Caleb. No one realized that he had come back in. Brit and Rider's face turned to him, but Jackson's eyes stayed glued to the image.

Trey's left arm, leg and face were in the exact spot where God had originally placed them, unscathed. There were no scars on his face, nor was there any hint of fear, regret, bitterness or self-pity. In the details of Trey's arm, the individual muscles, tendons, and joints, Caleb had captured the very essence of humanity. The flesh seemed alive on the page. It was as if Caleb had done through art what Jackson's deepest wishes and prayers had failed to do in life – made Trey Tucker whole again, made him perfect once more. At the top of his left arm was his tattoo of the American flag.

"I finished it last night," Caleb said.

"It's amazing," said Jackson.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jackson was having another dream. This time he was not at war. He was not wearing his BDU's and his rifle was nowhere in sight. He was in a tuxedo, surrounded by flowers, candles and music. It was his wedding day. He was standing at the front of the altar and his heart began to pound as the organ music soared. Every face was on him and some of them were already crying. Slowly, a wave of confusion swept over the crowd. Heads began to turn back and forth, scanning the area. Women whispered into each other's ears and men woefully cleared their throats. Jackson could not figure out what was happening and none of the guests were willing to look him in the eyes. He felt like there was a cold lump of clay in the pit of his stomach.

He couldn't continue to do nothing, so he went to find Stephanie. There was a crowd forming outside the bride's room and he could see Stephanie's father trying to open the door. Jackson squeezed through the crowd and moved past her father. Stepping back slightly, he plowed his shoulder into the door and forced it open.

His heart skipped a beat because he did not know what he would see in there.

Stephanie was crying. She was hunched over in front of an antique vanity and she was sobbing loudly. They were suddenly all alone.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I spilled red wine on my dress," she said. She did not look up.

The news disturbed Jackson in a profound way, some strange *dream emotion* that would have no counterpart in real life. Jackson felt no relief that she was alright, but instead, felt deeply unsettled. He wasn't worried about the day, or the dress. Nothing could ruin the day and Stephanie would look beautiful in sackcloth. He was remembering Caleb's imagery of correct and incorrect. What could have been more correct than clean white satin? Virgin white lace? The very symbol of innocence? This type of true, faithful white could never be recaptured now that it was gone. A wine stain – dark purple, almost black – was an ominous warning of the senselessness of fate, a blind and

godless fate that judges not on merit, but on happenstance. One dress is stained while another remains unblemished; one Marine dies while another survives. The verdicts of life or death, clean or stained, are brandished mercilessly at the whim of meaningless chance.

She could not look at him, but remained hunched over crying.

"It doesn't bother me," he said.

"It's ruined."

"So what?"

"I can't go out there."

"Let me see it. It's probably not even that bad."

"No."

"C'mon, let me see it."

"No."

"It's okay, Stephanie. I promise. Just turn around."

"I can't."

"Stephanie, it's me. What are you worried about? I would love you even in sackcloth."

"I can't."

"Stephanie, please turn around."

"Okay," he heard her say before getting in a few more sniffles. Jackson could tell that they were the type of sniffles that indicated the crying was becoming under control.

She turned around to face Jackson. She screamed. She was so frightened that she recoiled her entire body away from Jackson.

"What? What is it?" Jackson asked as he turned to see himself in the vanity mirror. Half of his face had been blown off. Half of his head was a bloody open wound and the other half was freshly burnt skin, still dark like charcoal. Two frightened white eyes gazed past a horrific mask of red and black.

He woke up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Rider, what is that on your elbow?” Caleb walked over to examine Rider’s arm. “Oh my God, Rider, take off your shirt.”

“Watch your step, Hertz,” Rider barked at him and his face quickly conformed to a straight, serious expression – a look that announced that whatever Caleb was doing, Rider did not find it funny.

“I’m not messing around, Rider. Take off your shirt.”

With this, Rider grabbed Caleb by the scruff of his collar. “What is it about me that makes you think I can be messed with?” Rider shouted at Caleb so loudly that everyone in the entire sleeping quarters turned to see.

Brit ran over to break it up, but suddenly said, “Blimey! Rider, take off your bloody shirt.”

Jackson was now on the scene too and nodded, “Take off your shirt.”

Rider studied their faces. There was not a drop of irony, humor or malice in a single one of them. He quickly pulled his shirt off.

There was a chorus of profanity. Each swear word sounded like alarm bells to Rider. Fear filled his eyes. His chin quivered. There seemed to be an invisible restraint holding his head in place, petrified by fear. It prevented him from looking down and only allowed courage enough to look at the faces of the men looking at him. “What?” he whispered, but no one heard. Finally, he broke the mental barrier and looked down at his own chest.

“Everyone take your shirts off!” Brit yelled. All at once the entire platoon, as well as Michael Ponce, stripped off their tops. No one looked at themselves. No one had to. They saw the dark red splotches on their Marine brothers. That was all the proof they needed to know that they had them too.

A deep silence fell over the entire room. Michael Ponce’s voice was shaky and hollow. It sounded like it came through a tin toy trumpet when he pleaded, “Guys, what is this?”

They all looked at Michael Ponce. His chest was clear. Someone yelled optimistically, “Mellow Yellow’s not as far along!”

“Turn around,” Brit ordered him. As soon as Michael Ponce turned around, the men groaned. “It’s all over your back, my friend.”

“Check to see if they hurt,” Jackson said frantically.

Upon that suggestion, all the men began to press their fingers or thumbs against the red spots on their own bodies. And, while Michael Ponce was still turned around, Brit pressed hard on different spots of his back. Brit asked, “Does this hurt?”

“No.”

“Does this?” Brit pressed with so much force that Michael Ponce had to shuffle his feet.

“Um, kind of.”

Brit stepped back and put both of his hands in his pockets. Michael Ponce turned around to face him and the rest of the spotted platoon. Brit said slowly, but with a haunting urgency in his voice, “It’s the SMEG.”

“The what?” Michael Ponce’s voice cracked with fear and his eyes were almost out of their sockets.

“The SMEG,” a couple of the men repeated, sounding sullen and grief-stricken.

“We are all too advanced, but there is still hope for Mr. Ponce.” Brit respectfully used his real name. “We have to get him the cure.”

“What’s the cure?” asked Michael Ponce.

Brit did not look him in the eye.

“Brooks, you come with me. Teflon...” he looked at Teflon and gave a head tilt toward Michael Ponce. Jackson and Brit left the hooch.

“Teflon?” Michael Ponce asked hopelessly.

Teflon looked at him and said, “It’s...” he paused and he grabbed his abdomen in pain. “There it is,” he hissed. He squeezed his eyes shut in pain for a long time. When he finally could stand it, he spoke, his voice full of suffering, “There must have been some Selenium Magno-Exfoliating Gas in that rocket fire that exploded around us. I guess since you were hiding so effectively, you were exposed the least.”

“Argh!” cried Caleb as he grabbed his own stomach in pain. Immediately after that, even Rider was bent in half by the agony. Rider actually fell to the ground when he could no longer

continue to stand. Teflon was still hunched over, gritting his teeth. Michael Ponce looked down at his own abdomen with a forlorn expression on his face.

“What’s this about a cure?” he asked.

“There is rumored to be a cure, if you can spot it fast enough,” said Teflon.

“Rumored? Should we wake up the corpsman?” asked Michael Ponce.

“He doesn’t have it,” snapped Teflon.

“The Taliban began testing SMEG over fifty years ago on grounds about a hundred clicks from here,” said Caleb. “The desert winds were often so strong that all of the villages that were once right where we are today completely died out.”

“The human generation is about twenty-five years. The insect generation is only four years,” added Teflon.

“What does that mean?” Michael Ponce asked with a bit of hysteria.

“We got one!” Brit yelled as he ran back into the tent carrying a pair of steel tongs, at the end of which he held a five inch black scorpion.

Michael Ponce’s eyes bugged huge and Caleb spoke faster, “The insects were able to adapt; the humans weren’t. Exposed to only small amounts carried on the wind, the insects in these parts began to produce inside their bodies a natural antidote.”

“Give it to me!” Rider yelled the second he saw the bug. He stood up and rushed forward toward Brit, but Caleb grabbed him with both arms.

“It’s too late for you!” yelled Caleb, but Rider was able to knock him completely to the ground.

Both Jackson and Teflon jumped onto Rider, each grabbing one of his arms. It took all the strength they had, but they were able to restrain him. “It’s too late,” said Brit with authority. As he spoke, he gestured with the tongs. Michael Ponce could see the scorpion’s stinger bounce up and down as Brit shook it angrily at Rider. “Don’t you understand? You are already dead! You’re dead, already. We all are and you know it.”

Rider saw the look in Brit’s eyes and he slowly stopped struggling.

“But there’s hope for Michael Ponce.” He extended the tongs.

“Do I have to let it *sting* me?” Michael Ponce asked fearfully.

Teflon let out another moan from the pit of his gut. Caleb strenuously stood up and dusted off.

“You are wasting too much time,” said Jackson as he forcefully took the tongs and the scorpion from Brits hands, he stepped impatiently over toward Michael Ponce. Michael Ponce flinched as he approached, but Jackson stepped past him to grab a half-eaten MRE that was left out. He placed the tray on a table, then found another pair of tongs. Michael Ponce winced when Jackson grabbed both sides of the giant insect and pulled it right in half. He then turned around and mixed its body into someone’s leftover mashed potatoes. He held the entire tray up and said, “No, you have to eat it.”

Michael Ponce looked at the tray. The reflexes were still firing in the dead scorpion’s body and he could see lumpy parts of the potatoes twitch and wiggle. Caleb handed him a fork.

“First you feel that burning acid feeling in your stomach, then you feel a clinching pain that will bend you in half. After that it is too late.”

“I do feel a burning acid,” confirmed Michael Ponce, scared.

Brit moaned again in pain as Michael Ponce scooped a lump of potatoes onto his fork. They could see that it had finally stopped moving. He drew it to his mouth. All eyes were on him.

“Filthy liars!” He stopped. “This is all a ruse. It’s just a trick,” Michael Ponce said.

“No,” said Jackson sternly.

“No,” said Caleb pleadingly at the same time.

“Let him die!” said Rider.

“Come here,” said Brit as he grabbed the fork and tray and set them on the table. He grabbed Michael Ponce’s arm and lead him like a disciplined child out to the shower cabin. He grabbed a shaving mirror and turned Michael Ponce’s back to the mirror on the wall. In the small mirror, Michael Ponce could see his large reflection. His back was covered with dark red spots. His heart sunk. It had been wishful thinking. He imagined that these men could pull off a pretty intricate trap, but he did not know

how they could put sores on his own body without him knowing it.

Both men walked back into the hooch and Michael Ponce grabbed the fork and MRE tray from where Brit had left them.

“Just think of it as a chocolate-covered pretzel.”

Michael Ponce gave a nod and quickly shoveled the entire mound of potatoes into his mouth. He chewed as fast as he could and tried to swallow as much as he could without chewing. Through his stuffed cheeks, the men could hear loud crunching. The reporter’s eyes looked pitiful. When he finished the whole thing, he slid down to the ground and held his stomach. His face began to turn green and Teflon yelled, “You can’t throw up. You have to keep it down.”

“Keep it down!” yelled Rider like a drill instructor.

Michael Ponce’s body lunged forward and vomit spewed out of his mouth onto the floor. He spat twice, and still on his hands and knees said frantically, “Is it too late to try it again?”

Every Marine laughed. They exchanged high fives around the room. Rider grabbed Caleb’s shoulder and shook it victoriously. Brit had already begun wiping Caleb’s artist chalk off his chest with a rag. Teflon grabbed an MRE tray, identical to the one in front of Michael Ponce. He poked at the mash potatoes a little bit until he could clearly see that there were two uneaten parts of a dead scorpion in there, then threw it down for Michael Ponce to examine. Jackson grabbed a copy of the *Times*’ front page story titled “I’d Kill for My Father’s Love: Did Caleb Hertz go to war to impress estranged father?” and threw it down on the ground into Michael Ponce’s line of sight. Ponce didn’t think that they would ever see it. He did not know how they happened to get a hold of a copy. Perhaps they just *acquired* it.

Caleb grabbed a chocolate-covered pretzel from what was left in the bag and threw it into his mouth. On his shirtless arm he bore a fresh tattoo courtesy of Teflon – a beautiful rendering of the Eagle, Globe and Anchor, and the letters USMC.

Caleb loved being a Marine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Caleb was lying down reading a book by Gottfried Leibniz when Jackson walked up.

"I have something for you," Jackson said.

Caleb looked over to see that Jackson was carrying a Bible. He knew that it was obvious he had just seen it, so he sat up and made wide sweeping glances around the room and asked, "Where is it? You should have brought it over."

Jackson laughed as he extended the Bible. "Actually, Stephanie mailed it to me. You remember Stephanie. She's the one who wanted me to give this to you. So, if you are going to *press charges*..." Caleb laughed even before Jackson finished, "you'll have to go after her."

"Don't worry, I won't report you to Michael Ponce," smirked Caleb.

"Yeah, I get the feeling he doesn't like Christians very much," said Jackson.

"I've gotten that feeling a few times myself." Caleb grabbed the Bible, "Please thank Stephanie for me."

"I will," Jackson smiled.

There was an awkward silent moment and Jackson looked as though he was wrestling with a thought.

"Um, so I've been meaning to ask you, when did you decide that you wanted to be a Marine?" Jackson asked.

"Well, do you remember Stacy? He and I were in the middle of another fight..." He trailed off. "Well, long story short, I wasn't happy with where I was in life and I had watched a Marine Recruiter reporting to work. I liked the way he walked and held himself so confidently. I decided I wanted to walk that walk in life."

Jackson smiled proudly, "And, now you do."

"Dude, you've been watching me walk? That is *so* gay."

Jackson laughed and found a place to sit down. "My point is that people can choose who they are. Didn't you choose that day to change everything about yourself?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean our lives are not predetermined. I was always the type to be inspired in that situation. Another person wouldn't have decided to become a Marine right then.

But there has never been a me that, while in that moment, would have *not* become a Marine.

Jackson thought about what move to make next. "I read his article," he confessed. "I hope that's okay."

"I kind of figured everyone did. Did you hear it won a Pulitzer?"

Jackson winced. "What is wrong with people?" he cursed. "Anyway, the point is that you grabbed the flag. If the article was accurate, you seemed to be regarding your inability to reach the flag as proof positive that freewill doesn't exist, but you have the flag."

"But I *don't* have it. I lost it."

"How did you lose it?"

"Three men attacked me in a Dallas alley. I knew they were going to rob me, so I shoved it in-between a drain pipe and the side of a building so I could go back and find it later."

"Did you find it later?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I realized something."

"Which was?"

"It was unnatural for me to have. That flag represented the ability to change my sexual orientation, and everything about me, by an act of will. That flag did not belong to me; it belonged to someone else, someone who was born different than I was. And so I couldn't hold onto it. If I had been able to climb to the top of that rope, then I would never have been in that alley in the first place and I would still have the flag today. I could also deny my sexuality for a while, but it wouldn't be something I could hold onto."

"The flag does not have to represent your sexual orientation. The flag could represent faith in God."

"Jackson, I like you, I respect you, but I have more chance of being straight than I do Christian."

Jackson laughed, "That attitude is what I am talking about. You are picturing a small child who cannot climb the rope, but you are ignoring your own story. I have seen you climb a rope to the top; I saw you do it in boot camp. How do you explain that?"

"Conditioning."

Jackson spread his arms. He smiled and said, "Freewill." He added, "Even Rider could not, out of will, kill you on the spot. But couldn't Rider *choose* to become someone who could kill a man as easily as killing a fly, just like you chose to become a Marine?"

"Probably."

Jackson smiled, "I'm sure there is *someone* who could condition him to do that."

"SSgt Folsom," nodded Caleb. "Let's try to make sure those two never meet!"

Jackson smiled. "So if our environment has the power to change us, and it does, you cannot overlook the fact that we have the power to change our environment. And, that is still not to mention the *unexpected*. The barn burnt down. You are ignoring the power of the unexpected - God."

"You're saying that God burnt the barn down?"

"I am saying that God burns barns down every day! You only saw three options, reach the top, quit or die. You were never expecting the unobtainable to be *brought down to you*. The flag is salvation. You've never taken into consideration the power of getting down on both knees and humbly asking God to change your heart into whatever He wants it to be."

There was so much passion in Jackson's eyes that it possessed Caleb to ask, "Is that what you did?"

"Yes." It was a whisper.

For the first time since they met, Caleb imagined that Jackson may not have been Christian all his life. He smiled, "Wait, you're not really a virgin, are you?"

"I never said I was."

"Wow," Caleb's imagination was running on overdrive. "You've got a lot of bad stuff in your past." It didn't sound like a question, but Jackson nodded. "You've done a lot of bad, bad stuff," Caleb repeated.

Jackson nodded again. "Have you ever reached a point in life where you feel like you've reached the bottom; you can't sink any lower?" Jackson asked rhetorically. "There is nothing left in your life that you want to keep. It's like having a car that costs more to fix than the car is worth; all you can do is scrap it."

"What did you do?"

“I scrapped it. I let all of what I once thought was so important go. I just let it go.”

“Actually, I felt that way for a few weeks at boot camp.”

“Yes, that is by design, of course. They tear you down to bring you back up again. The military knows that in the moment that you have nothing left, they have a blank slate, or for *you* to picture it, an empty white sheet of paper. They can draw you back in any way that they want. I think God understands that too. Those moments are so few, so precious, and so dangerous. When I reached that moment, I got down on both knees and prayed to a God that I did not believe in.”

“What happened?”

“I left the room I was in. I walked straight to my car and did not look back. I forfeited the deposit on my apartment; I did not even go back for my stuff. I never saw any of my so called friends again and I wound up in Phoenix. A short time later I met Stephanie, and another year later I had signed up for the Marines.”

“Hmm,” Caleb said as he looked down at the Bible. He smiled and said dryly, “Well, I am really glad that worked out for you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The firefight was intense. Jackson had his back to the side of his armored humvee. He did not know what caused it, but a sudden urge prompted him to look around and find Caleb. He was alright, though he was trapped by enemy fire behind another vehicle. A mysterious feeling of dread came over Jackson the moment he caught a glimpse of Caleb's face. The two of them made eye contact and in the next second, the vehicle Caleb was leaning against burst into flames.

Jackson did not wake up in a cold sweat as he normally would. This was no dream.

Their security patrol had two humvees carrying big guns and one 7-ton truck. They were two hours out on Kassim Road when they made contact with the enemy. Everyone jumped out of the truck to hide behind it, as they had been trained to do. Brit was in charge and he ordered Rider to open fire with the M2. Caleb had his back to the truck's wheel hub, with rounds exploding all around him. He wrenched his neck to get a good look at the enemy.

The good guys were pinned down. Brit called in for air support. "They can get here in five minutes," Brit cried out. The sounds of bullets popping against the armor plating on their vehicles increased its intensity. It was difficult to get a good idea of how badly they were outnumbered. Rockets launched from RPGs exploded into the ridge around them. Sand flew high into the air making it difficult to see and difficult to breath. Brit announced the amended countdown before the air strike, "Three minutes!"

Marines know that three minutes can seem like an eternity.

They had one minute left to wait when the humvee that Caleb was pinned behind was hit by an RPG. The vehicle was destroyed and Caleb's body, on the other side of the direct hit, was tossed twenty feet. Jackson could see him squirming, stunned and hurt. His helmet was blown off and was nowhere in sight. As close as the explosion was, Jackson was happy to see him alive at all. Jackson ran over to him, despite the bullets flying all around. He grabbed Caleb's arm to drag him back to safe cover.

Finally the air strike came. The explosions shook the ground. Jackson threw himself over Caleb to protect him. Bodies of the enemy were lifted from their positions into the air, then instantly turned into pink mist.

There was silence.

Brit radioed in, "Target destroyed."

Turning all his attention now to Caleb, it was the first time that Jackson could see a stream of dark blood flowing from Caleb's head.

"Hertz?" He shook him, "Caleb? Are you alright?"

Caleb did not answer, but his eyes were able to focus on Jackson. They were frightened and disoriented.

"We need a medevac!" Jackson called to Brit. "Caleb's hurt!"

Jackson could hear Brit radio in for a helicopter to come and carry Caleb away.

"You're going to be alright." Jackson was able to slow the bleeding and he pulled Caleb up into his arms to more easily apply pressure to the wound.

Soon they could hear the rhythm of the chopper blade approaching. Jackson looked down at Caleb's bloodied face and searched for something comforting to say. "It was the 121st Psalm," he said. "That is where your mom heard that quote." Caleb looked up at him vacantly and Jackson recited the Psalm from memory:

I lift up my eyes to the hills,
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip,
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you,
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm,

he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

When Jackson finished, Caleb continued to look at him with the same lost helplessness. Jackson wished he could have brought him some comfort. The Psalm was the answer to a mystery Caleb had since his youth. Jackson would have settled for some surprise over discovering the quote's origin. He wished he could see some evidence of a reachable brain inside that wounded skull, some evidence that the Caleb he knew was still in there.

The head wound did not look to Jackson to be too severe and the bleeding had all but stopped; it was the look in Caleb's eyes that concerned him.

Two men rushed over to grab Caleb when the helicopter touched down. Neither of them showed too much shock over the extent of his injuries, but Jackson knew they would not make very good corpsmen if they had.

When they loaded Caleb onto the chopper, Michael Ponce quickly followed. He was greeted by a hand pressed in his chest – ironically right in the spot that read *PRESS* – and was told simply, “No room.”

Brit laughed at Michael Ponce, “Looks like you just lost your story, didn't ya?”

The reporter huffed.

The corpsmen began to dress the wound and the chopper lifted off. Rider put his hand on Jackson's arm, “That was beautiful, what you told him. You're a good friend.”

Jackson shook his head. “Did you see the way he looked at me? It was like his entire personality was absent.”

Rider deliberated on his next sentence. He wondered if making Jackson feel better on one score, would make him feel worse on another. Rider decided to go with the truth. He said, “He couldn't hear a word you said, you know?”

Jackson's head snapped quickly in Rider's direction.

Rider continued, “So close to an explosion like that, there's no way his ears will be working for a while.” He added, “That's good news. It means his head might not be so bad. Being so

close to an explosion like that, losing your hearing, then feeling the ground shake – that’s got to be terrifying.” When Rider saw the look on Jackson’s face he punched him in the shoulder. “What are you worried about? You’re just going to tell him that Bible verse later, that’s all.” Rider did not use words like, *you might*, or *you can*, or *you will get the chance to*. Rider said *you are going to*, as if Rider could see into the future and had already witnessed it happening. Rider saw the comfort on Jackson’s face, the comfort that Jackson sought fruitlessly in Caleb’s face, and added, “That’s a promise, Marine.”

Their eyes rose to the sky as they watched the helicopter that carried their Marine brother get smaller and smaller. Then they heard a frightful sound. Their senses identified it before their brains actually did; it was the sound of an RPG. It was launched from the spot where they believed they had just eliminated the enemy. The rocket left a streamer across the sky. They stood there, helpless, watching. Their eyes followed the path of the streamer upward until it led straight to the medevac chopper. The men waited to see it come out the other side. They imagined that the direct hit had been an optical illusion, a trick played by their depth perception. *The enemy missed, like they had a habit of doing*. An explosion and a burst of light entered their brains. They were not conscious of seeing one and hearing the other, just a sudden stabbing awareness inside their minds that the enemy didn’t miss. Caleb’s helicopter had been hit.

Black smoke flowed from the tail end of the chopper like a stage effect at a rock concert. The machine, like a wounded and confused animal, limped, jerked, and staggered. It flew in circles, spiraling downward as the pilot struggled with the controls that no longer provided sufficient dominion over the uncompromising air. Gravity thrust the ground up toward them and they fell back behind the range of the mountains, out of Jackson and Rider’s sight. They heard a crash, then saw the smoke.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

For fear of drawing RPG fire from an enemy fortified deep in the mountains, Major Nash was forced to forego an aerial search and instead opted to send in a small fire team to search for the wreckage. Their mission was to retrieve any survivors or any remains. They also were to report back the location of the crash and the condition of the helicopter.

Jackson made sure he was on that team. Brit was assigned fire team leader. Two other Marines went along named PFC Franco and Lance Corporal Kane. They filed into a humvee with a .50 caliber M2.

A narrow trench that could be almost described as a road led them most of the way to the crash site. When they turned a sharp corner into the mountains, they were able to see the helicopter, but not able to reach it. The passage became too narrow to fit a vehicle through.

“We can hike it,” Jackson declared optimistically.

“Are you insane? We would be too vulnerable,” said Brit as he panned his binoculars over the scorched helicopter for any hint of survivors.

“We are already too vulnerable,” Jackson said under his breath as he surveyed all the mountain peaks towering above them.

Seeing Jackson’s expression, Lance Corporal Kane said, “If we saw where the helicopter went down, then the enemy saw it too. They had to have known we would head here.” No one said anything, so he raised his voice more forcefully, “We are sitting ducks! If we keep waiting around here, our goose will be cooked.”

“Are we ducks or are we geese?” asked Brit casually.

“Geese,” said PFC Franco, correcting Brit.

“You people are nuts! We’ve got to get out of here,” insisted Kane.

“He’s right,” said Brit. “I can’t see any sign of survivors.”

Quickly, Jackson grabbed the binoculars from him. When he scanned the gruesome scene, his eyes seemed to get stuck on a charred black mess a few short yards from the smoking helicopter. Jackson knew it was a body. He could not look away.

It was the type of image he had been seeing in his nightmares. He knew that it could have been Caleb's body that he was seeing.

Brit grabbed the binoculars back. He said, "We've got to go. Let's report in and we'll come back with a plan."

"Wait!" said Jackson. "We can't leave the helicopter."

"The helicopter?" asked Franco.

"The charred helicopter could be photographed by the enemy and used for propaganda."

"So what?"

"A propaganda victory for them could result in more loss of life for our side," urged Jackson.

Brit knew that he just wanted to go and hunt for Caleb. *What could the four of them do about the helicopter anyway?*

"C'mon," said Jackson, "this is *Hertz* we are talking about."

Before Brit could say another word, an explosion hit the side of the mountain. The impact resulted in a small rock slide just behind their location. Half the Marines turned their faces to the source of the rocket – high up on the ridge, just as they feared – and half turned to watch helplessly as the road they came in on became completely blocked off. A giant slab of rock now tilted from one side of the gorge and leaned up against the mountain on the other side. Several more tons of rock landed on top of that.

It was unclear if blocking the road like that had been their intention or if the rocket had been meant for them and was fired with the usual dose of Taliban precision. Jackson turned to investigate the road going forward, seemingly the only option left open to them. From around the corner formed by the rock formation, he could see tracers of bullets flying to his left and his right. The enemy had the road completely covered. The noise of each blast echoed from one side of the rock over to the hard place and then back. Jackson's fire team was caught right in the middle. The echo made it seem like two or three times the number of bullets. Jackson jumped up on the M2 to return fire, but Brit grabbed him and pulled him down behind the humvee's back bumper.

"There're too many of them!" he shouted, then pointed to the crack in the gorge formed by the slab of stone that had just

fallen. "It's our only shot," he said. There seemed to be just enough room for their bodies to slip through the opening, but clearly not enough for a vehicle.

Jackson shook his head in disbelief. The distance to that small opening was as far as the length of a football field. Before Jackson knew what was happening, the motor of the Humvee they were hiding behind had started. Jackson and the other two instinctively jumped in. Brit had miraculously made his way to the driver's seat and put it in reverse. He was driving toward the opening in the stone backward when a rocket blast exploded so close to them that it forced the Humvee to crash into the side of the mountain. Brit tried two more times to restart it, but it was dead.

Brit quickly jumped up to the top of the M2, where he had forbidden Jackson a moment before, and yelled, "Go! Go!" pointing to the opening.

With Brit providing cover, Jackson and the other two ran as fast as they could to the opening. The other two went first and Jackson slid through last. As he did, he turned back to see Brit jump down from the gun to follow them.

As soon as Brit left the giant weapon behind, they could hear the enemy rounds increasing. The surface of the rock was exploding all around him as bullets whizzed past, ricocheting off the hard stone just to get a second chance at killing him.

Jackson had to clear the slim passage in the rock in order to allow him room to get through. Once on the other side, he could no longer see what was happening with Brit. He crouched to look back through the opening, but all he saw was the blinding light reflecting off the surface of the rock. He waited. The bullets were still firing at a fantastic pace. Jackson watched for any sign of Brit at all. "C'mon, Brit! C'mon!" Jackson was not sure if he said it out loud or just in his head.

"C'mon, Brit!" This time he yelled it.

Finally he saw a helmet and two palms suddenly appear. Brit had dived down into the bottom of the crack. Jackson lunged back in and connected with Brit's hands. Franco and Kane grabbed Jackson. The three of them pulled him swiftly to the other side.

Once free, they started running. Brit turned back once they had run far enough and tossed a grenade into the opening they had all just squeezed through. None of them stayed to watch the explosion, but they could hear it behind them, followed by a trembling and the sound of another rock slide.

They had run five miles when Brit stopped short next to a small nook in the side of a rock formation. The other three followed him and they tucked themselves out of sight in the shadow that was cast.

"We have their coordinates!" Brit said excitedly.

"What?" Jackson did not understand his excitement.

"We were just there." Brit shook his GPS. "We can bring up the exact coordinates from the spot we just left. A whole bloody faction of Taliban and we have their exact location," Brit said happily as he raised his radio.

"What about Caleb?"

Brit lowered the radio. He shot one genuine look of sympathy and concern in Jackson's direction, but it quickly turned as cold and as hard as the stone that surrounded them. Brit said, "Hertz is gone. You saw the bodies."

"I saw *a* body. There was only one visible body."

"He couldn't have survived, Brooks. I'm sorry, we have a job to do," he began to raise the radio again. "Besides, now they have a US helicopter and a Marine Humvee."

"So?"

"The propaganda war must be battled as well; you said so yourself," Brit said as he radioed in the coordinates to a couple of Navy HY68s with a couple of thousand pound bombs.

"You got those coordinates right? I don't want you to end up with this egg on your face," the radio asked.

"It's right. Let them have it."

"Roger that."

Through the binoculars, Brit could see the planes approach. As he saw them drop their cargo he whispered the words, "Bombs away."

Jackson watched as the bombs left the aircrafts. He was overcome with a feeling of utter helplessness. Images, memories of Caleb filled his mind. His brain raced, desperately searching

for any last option – of course there was none. Nothing has quite the finality of bombs in freefall.

In the final seconds before impact, the Marines opened their mouths so that the power of the blast would not break their eardrums. The ground beneath them shook like severe turbulence on an airplane.

Brit pressed the button for the radio and said, “Bravo. Now send someone to come get us out of here.”

* * *

Jackson’s hands shook ever so slightly. He sat and peeled Caleb’s drawings off the wall where Caleb had helped Brit hang them. One by one, Jackson stacked them neatly in a pile.

“Brooks,” Rider called out as he walked up behind him. He was carrying an envelope in his hand. When Jackson turned around, Rider said awkwardly, “This came for Hertz. I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Rider handed him the letter. The return address read:

Cheryl Hobbs
4217 Shady Dr.
Lake Durham, TX 75020
USA

“It’s from his mother,” Jackson frowned.

Rider breathed in deep. He said, “Well, I just wanted to find it a home before Michael Ponce publishes it.”

Jackson scowled, “He’s still here?”

“Looks like it. I guess his boss thinks there is still a story here. He keeps asking me how I *feel* about what happened to Caleb.”

Jackson sighed, “Just keep him away from me.” He turned back to grab the next drawing.

Rider gave him two kind pats on the back and said, “Just make sure Hertz gets it when he gets back.” Then Jackson heard him walk away. Jackson turned around to say bye, but he was already gone.

He pushed the drawing to the side and positioned himself to where he could lean his back on the wall. He suspended the envelope between two fingers and began to twirl it. He was stalling. He wasn’t sure if he should open it. He knew that Rider

had only added that last part for him. He was coming to grips with the idea that Caleb was killed in action.

He shoved one finger into the side and tore the top open. He pulled out one single folded piece of stationery. It was purple. The short note that Caleb's mom had sent was written by hand. Tears began to fill the bottom half of his vision and he shut his eyes tight. He leaned his head back against the wall.

When Mrs. Hobbs had written this note, she had no idea that Caleb wouldn't be receiving it.

He opened his eyes and read:

My dearest Caleb,

Well, it finally happened. You remember that stray cat I told you I was leaving food out for? Well, he finally came to me. I guess I earned his trust. He jumped up in my lap and I was hooked. He has taken over the whole house! I guess I have a pet cat now. His fur is so unkempt and his whiskers so wiry that he reminds me of Christopher Lloyd – so, I named him Doc Brown. The worst part is that I guess I never realized just how allergic to cats I really am! I can't stop sneezing; my eyes are all red and itchy; but what can I do? I can't just throw him out in the cold. I try to resist petting him, but he purrs so happily. This animal is going to put me in the ER...but he sure is cute.

I hope this letter finds you well. You're in my prayers every night.

Love, Mom

PS- I ran into that nice girl, Joann, today in town. I am not sure if you even remember her. You two were friends right? Anyway, she told me that she was proud of you for what you are doing over there. I thought I would pass that along. XOXOX

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You ever seen a sandstorm like this before?” Rider was trying to sound casual, even though he had a bad feeling. Their caravan was traveling through the adobe-walled village of Almoud.

“We’ll be fine,” said Jackson. He was addressing the question he heard in Rider’s tone, not his words.

“I don’t know how we could even see the enemy to fight them,” said Rider.

“Well, I doubt we will have to.” Jackson felt pretty comfortable due to the fact that Echo Company had already cleared this part of the village and had already swept for IEDs. Golf Company was heading out to rendezvous with them on the east side. Every mile they drove further from Caleb’s crash site was another mile further away from learning what really happened to him.

Rider could see the look in Jackson’s eyes, but he had no good words for him. He said, “He told me a joke.”

“Who did?”

“You know who.”

Jackson turned his head back out the window. He said, “What was Caleb’s joke?”

“Um...” Rider paused trying to remember it. “Oh yeah, how many gay rights activists does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

Jackson grinned. “I don’t know. How m-”

Suddenly, Jackson saw the ground slip out from under them as the front part of their vehicle was flung into the air with so much force that the entire thing flipped twice before it landed upside down. It was the loudest noise that Jackson had ever heard. He felt grateful to have heard it however; one of his biggest fears was dying from an attack that he didn’t even have a chance to witness, being turned into pink mist before the ka-boom even got a chance to reach his ears.

Brit pulled Jackson out from underneath the flaming wreckage. He couldn’t believe that they had survived. “Rider? Where is Rider?” He didn’t know he was shouting. He could not hear his own voice. When Brit pointed to Rider, Jackson saw that they had both emerged unscathed despite the unlikely odds,

but he could not hear a thing that Brit was saying. Jackson turned to Rider to see if his hearing was gone also. Then everyone, as if they were on the set of an old episode of Star Trek, ducked their heads simultaneously. Jackson could not figure out how they could do it in sync like that. Everyone ducked and began to run but Jackson and Rider. Brit turned back when he realized that neither of the two reacted as fast. Brit grabbed their arms just as they were figuring out what was happening. They all ran for cover. The entire scene seemed surreal to Jackson who felt like he was watching a war movie with the mute button pressed.

The whole thing had been a set up. The enemy had back laid IEDs on the ground that the Americans had already scanned, knowing that the Marines would be less likely to suspect them that way. The terrorists had been hiding, waiting for this trap to be tripped. With his back to the 7-ton truck, Jackson could feel the vibrations of the bullets against the metal. Slowly he began to hear them. They sounded more like raindrops on a car roof than the armor splitting and eardrum piercing sound he was used to.

The wind picked up and the sand was blowing more fiercely. Jackson considered the good fortune for the enemy – the Americans not only fell into their trap, but did so during such a blinding sand storm. Jackson was frazzled. He could not figure out how they would get themselves out of this one. On top of that, he felt worthless. Every sound that reached Jackson's ears sounded like it first traveled through two mattresses. Every sight was like trying to see through shear pantyhose.

Through the corner of his eye, he saw Brit point to the west and shout something that he could not hear. Jackson's heart raced. He knew that they were too vulnerable. If the enemy had them surrounded, they were finished. He turned but he did not see anything; the fog of sand was too thick. Finally, he saw a figure running toward their humvee. A suicide bomber! Jackson's heart raced as he remembered the image he had seen of his own charred body in his dreams, the image that made Stephanie scream in terror, but he steadied his rifle as the Rules of Engagement ran through his head. The man was traveling fast. In his peripheral vision he noticed that Rider had also turned his rifle toward the approaching figure. The sweat that dripped into Jackson's eyes stung so bad it was hard to keep them open. Why

had Trigger Happy Holt not yet fired on the figure? The wind sounded like rusty pipes in Jackson's broken ears. He heard someone shout, "Inserts," but that made no sense. The sound seemed to float strangely in the back of some unfamiliar part of his brain. It felt more like a memory than something he was hearing in real time. "Gala berts!" This time he could hear that it was Brit shouting and it wasn't a memory. The suicide bomber approached another step. "Ids gay lobe hers."

Trey Tucker's story raced through Jackson's thoughts.

Rider was in approximately the same position as Jackson. What Jackson could see, Rider could see. Rider tracked the figure's head in his sights. One bullet would stop his approach. But, with a body packed with explosives would it be too late? Could he still have life enough to trigger the explosives that surrounded his body? Wasn't he already close enough that the shrapnel could tear them apart? With one step closer through the fog of the sand, both Marines could see that the approaching man wore a turban.

Pine Box theory! My pine box, my choice.

Brit jumped down from behind the M2. He ran frantically to the side of both Marines on the ground but did not take his eyes off the approaching man. "It's Caleb Hertz!" he yelled once more at the top of his lungs, the same instant that he watched the man's head snap backward and a bright red circle on his forehead could be seen through the sand. The circle of blood seemed to be the only thing that did not move in slow motion, but grew out of control. The force of the bullet stopped the man's advance just as a strong wind blew past them and thinned the veil of sand. Every American eye was on the face of the fallen Marine. It was Caleb. His lifeless body first dropped to its knees, then fell face forward into the sand.

Rifles continued to fire until the very last of the enemy had been defeated, but there was no rousing cheer from the Marines when it was over. The entire world went silent. Every eye watched as the wind blew sand onto the fallen warrior. In a very short amount of time, a bank of sand had built up around Caleb's body as well as every nook and wrinkle in his clothing. It seemed as if the Earth was anxious to bury the horror, bury the evidence of what had just happened. Brit walked forward

without even being fully aware that his legs were moving. He turned back to his team. Rider had already lowered his weapon. Jackson trembled with his rifle still pressed against his hardened shoulder and his eyes still seeing the last images of Caleb's bloody face – knowing it had been his bullet that had done it.

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jackson was numb. Any real concept of what he had done, or the finality of Caleb's death, had been denied access to his brain. But it was patiently waiting and would eventually get in. The Marine Corps makes it a point to desensitize the Marines toward death. That may have been the only reason he wasn't currently breaking down. But Jackson had enough sense to realize that he couldn't stay numb forever. His mind would leave the battlefield and the only thing that would linger – perhaps the last thought ever to remain in his brain – would be the image of Caleb's face with the red blood streaming down.

Brit was representing Jackson's case before the upper brass very effectively. Any hint of his normal flippant attitude or British intonation was gone. His words were measured and sincere. Major Nash sat behind his desk, joined by Lieutenant Colonel Lucero. Both Jackson and Brit sat on chairs in front.

"While engaged in the firefight, I had a higher vantage than anyone else. When I spotted an approaching figure, I feared that our team had been surrounded. That was when I gave the order to fire."

"Sgt Sparks," Major Nash inquired to Brit, "Are you saying it was *you* that gave the order to fire?"

Jackson interrupted here before Brit had the chance to say anything stupid, "What Sgt Sparks meant to say is that he alerted us to the position of the advancing...of Private First Class Hertz, but he did not order us to fire."

Brit quickly jumped in, "Due to their proximity to an IED explosion seconds before, neither PFC Brooks, nor LCpl Holt could clearly hear anything that I ordered. And, that was only the first part of the problem."

"What were the other parts?"

"The main problem was visibility. The sand was blown so high and so thick that visibility was severely limited – a predicament which made us more vulnerable to the enemy, particularly if we had been surrounded." Major Nash did not respond, but pulled out a tissue from his drawer and used it to

wipe the tip of his nose. Brit continued, "Then there was the issue of Caleb's facial hair and bandage."

"What about them?"

"Caleb had nearly a full beard. That, combined with the bandage from his head wound, well that just made him look like..."

"I thought it was a turban, sir," Jackson completed the thought for Brit.

"Are you telling me that supposing a man is wearing a turban is a good reason to shoot him?" Major Nash asked.

"No sir," this time Brit answered, "We are saying that the very best reason *not* to shoot a man is knowing that he is one of our men. And identifying that a man is bearded and wearing a turban is a good reason to assume it is not one of our men."

Major Nash showed his approval by issuing no comment at all. He looked down at the report in his hands. Everything they were discussing was already on paper. He asked, "PFC Hertz had grown a beard?"

"Sir, his medevac chopper had been shot down seven days before. During that time he had no means of shaving. His hair had grown in quite thick for seven days."

"I see." Major Nash looked at the report again and asked Brit, "Sgt Sparks, can you think of anything that could explain how PFC Hertz could have received a head injury, survived a helicopter crash, survived the area being bombed, and then lived for seven days behind enemy lines?"

"Caleb Hertz never quit, sir."

Major Nash nodded, then let out a long, sad sigh. He studied the file. Jackson's insides began to tremble as he watched the old Major's war worn eyes move from left to right, top to bottom. Jackson did not know what they would do to him, but a persistent voice inside his head kept telling him that it was a betrayal to worry about his own fate. It would be a mockery of Caleb's memory. Whatever punishment that the military saw fit to dispense, he would take it. He would accept it, and a part of him even wished it would be swift and vicious.

But there was another part – the part that held onto Stephanie's unengaged engagement ring. Stephanie, who was an innocent party in all of this, would suffer without him. Stephanie

needed him. How could he hold her if he were not free? How could he protect her? How could he provide for her? How could they start a family if he were not free?

Major Nash looked straight into Jackson's eyes. Jackson looked straight back. He said, "You two may be dismissed."

"Thank you, sir," said Brit.

"Thank you, sir," said Jackson stoically.

As the two of them got up to leave, the doorway was blocked by three men who were just walking in. Two of them wore helmets labeled MP, the third was Colonel Shelton. Colonel Shelton put his hand up to halt Jackson and Brit. He said, "I am sorry gentlemen, but these men have orders to detain Private First Class Brooks and deliver him into the custody of the United States District Attorney."

Major Nash stood up, "This is not a matter for the DA, sir."

Colonel Shelton frowned, "Well, it is now."

"How did the States even get wind of this so soon?" asked Colonel Lucero.

"It was reported in the *Times*, Colonel."

* * *

"That is the reason we have federal hate crime legislation," Stacy Oliver was arguing passionately on the Mitch McCarty Show. Stacy had done several appearances on local television, both in Dallas and in Los Angeles – he had even done one webcast – but this was his first time on live national television. "...so that people are not punished just for the crime, but for *the motive*."

Mitch McCarty nodded and Veronica Cisneros put her index finger to her lips as if she was pondering something very profound, even though she doubted that her face was even on screen at that moment.

"But what evidence do we have that can illustrate Private First Class Brooks's motive? The Marines say that this was simply a tragic accident," Mitch McCarty said. There was an insincerity about his tone that implied he was only playing devil's advocate.

"It all comes down to who you are going to believe; the government? The government that does not allow gays to marry?

The government that kicked homosexuals out of the military in the first place? The government that lied to us about WMDs?” Stacy ranted.

“What about the soldiers?” asked McCarty.

“The soldiers? Oh my God, they are the ones who hated him the most. You don’t know – no one knows – what I had to go through. I am the one who had to read his letters about – letter after letter – about how cruelly they treated him, starting with boot camp.”

“Like what?”

“Like, um...first, his drill instructor found a donut in his footlocker and made the entire platoon do pushups while Caleb ate the donut. Then, when he was wearing this big metal scuba diving thing, they cut a hole in his bag and the water was really cold. Then the head guy tried to rape him and none of the other guys could stop him because they were all inside this cage thing.”

“Are you saying that Caleb told you someone in the military tried to rape him?”

Here Stacy began to cry. He put his hand over his face. Everything he said after that was unintelligible. McCarty quickly turned to the camera and announced, “We’ll be back after the break.”

As they went to the break, the camera panned back for a wide shot of the studio and the show’s computer graphics were superimposed on the screen. They bookended the segment by switching to the old footage of Caleb in the USO parking lot with the audio:

“How do you think you will be received?”

“I think they will try to kill me.”

After the commercial, the show came back on with more graphics, and before cutting to Mitch McCarty, they played the same clip.

“How do you think you will be received?”

“I think they will try to kill me.”

Mitch McCarty was shaking his head, looking very solemn. Stacy Oliver shook his head also, not knowing that he had been cropped out of the shot. “Let’s go to someone who was there,” said McCarty. “Our next guest was embedded with Private First

Class Hertz. He ate beside him, he slept beside him. They even saw combat together. Plus, he has the added benefit – to us back at home anyway – of having the credibility of a non-bias Pulitzer Prize winning reporter. Michael Ponce, if there is anyone who can straighten this out it is you. How long were you embedded with PFC Hertz?”

“From the very start. I met him at Camp Sydney, then followed him with Echo Company to Camp Kookaburra. I was there for the entire length of his tragically shortened service.”

“And, what light can you shed on the situation of his death? What can you tell us about Private First Class Jackson Brooks?”

“I can tell you for certain, *for certain*,” Michael Ponce repeated for extra emphasis, “that Jackson did not treat Caleb differently than any other Marine.”

“Interesting, so you are saying that Jackson showed Caleb no discrimination at all?”

“That’s a lie! That’s a lie!” Stacy broke in before McCarty was finished. “That is a big fat juicy lie!”

At this point Michael Ponce had both hands up. “Whoa, whoa, you misunderstood me. I meant that Jackson did not treat Caleb differently than any other Marine *treated Caleb*. I mean they all discriminated! They all treated him the same way.”

“Which was?”

“Brutal.” Michael Ponce gave a one word answer.

Mitch McCarty skillfully left the next second empty.

Michael Ponce continued, “I mean, brutality is what these guys do best. Marines are not known for their love of outsiders; they’re just as intolerant as the fundamentalist Christians. I can’t testify to anything Mr. Oliver has reported from Caleb’s letters at boot camp, but I can tell you that it wouldn’t surprise me. I can tell you that they showed no regard for his feelings; they constantly excluded him, laughed at him, made fun of him for every little thing that he did not understand. They even had a nickname for him.”

“What was that?”

“Mellow Yellow.”

“Because they thought he was a coward?”

“Um,” Michael Ponce stumbled, then offered, “Well, it’s a name that is very unfortunate. Very unfortunate,” which did not answer the question.

“Did you remember Jackson specifically using that name?”

“Yes, it was unanimous. It was a unanimous chorus of hatred. They were like school yard bullies.”

“We keep hearing reports that Jackson and Caleb were friends?”

“Well, consider the source. Those reports are coming from the very people who play the main roles of this cover-up.”

“Cover-up,” Mitch McCarty said with no indication that it was a question.

“Cover-up,” said Michael Ponce.

The term *cover-up* became the new favorite catchphrase of the media and the term most closely related to the story.

* * *

When Jackson posted bail, it was Stephanie who picked him up. She took him to her house, where all the TVs and radios had been unplugged.

He arrived to find that her entire house was filled with people. His friends from school, his parents, his pastor, and people from church had all come to show their support. There were even people who were members of his congregation that he did not know by first name, people he had smiled at, waved to, and shaken hands with, but with whom he never found the time to share a long conversation. They all came together now like old friends. They already knew everything about Jackson they needed to know in order to love him.

When he received the hugs and shoulder squeezes, Jackson began to cry openly, more than he had ever cried in someone else’s presence. The pastor prayed over him and every eye in Stephanie’s living room was wet. Before they left, the pastor told him, “It is not our task to understand why, all we can do is trust in God.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

As soon as the story began to fade from the front page and from the collective conscience of America, Michael Ponce unveiled the ace he had been holding – the photo of a Marine holding a gun to Caleb’s chest and a room full of Marines just standing around watching. From the angle of the one photo he had been able to snap off, it was impossible to make out the gunman’s face, but Jackson’s face and Caleb’s face could be made out perfectly. Everyone who had so far doubted Stacy and Michael Ponce’s exaggerated accounts, everyone who thought the claims were just too outlandish, suddenly had a different view about the type of shenanigans that might have gone on in their very own military, and a different view about Jackson’s innocence.

The photo ran on the front page of the *Times* for twenty-one days in a row that first month. Details were released by the media bit by bit, therefore keeping the salacious story alive. While doing more digging, Michael Ponce discovered in the archives of a local paper out of Ramona, California, what was reported as an irrelevant detail at the time. The article set the scene: the first openly gay man courageously heads off to war, leaving behind a worried lover. It described the last tear-filled exchange that Caleb and Stacy shared and the last words that Stacy said to him were reported accurately, “Do me a favor and watch out for *that* one.”

“Which one?”

“That ugly redneck with the big gaudy cross around his neck.”

Video footage of Caleb and Stacy holding hands, that every network had in their own archives, was slowed down and digitally magnified to reveal an image of Jackson standing – out of focus – in front of the USO building watching Caleb. For three seconds the cameras had an unobstructed shot of him. In those three seconds, the viewer could clearly see that the man in the fuzzy image wore an ostentatiously large cross, and that the man had the same facial features of Jackson Brooks, the very same man who ended up fatally shooting Caleb Hertz.

“Chilling,” people in the media said, analyzing it.

“Could it be that there was something so ominous in Jackson’s presence that Stacy Oliver was able to pick up on it even after only seeing him from across the parking lot?”

“Something looming behind his eyes, maybe.”

“Of course it has to be pointed out that Stacy could have chosen his words more carefully. No one is condoning his use of name calling.”

“Or perhaps that type of haunting intuition in his gut simply overpowered his desire for tact.”

“Perhaps, indeed.”

A video clip of this exchange was posted on a popular activist blog with a caption below it that read in all caps:

OMINOUS PRESENCE, GIMME A BREAK!
STACY SAW ALL HE NEEDED TO SEE
AND IT WAS HANGING AROUND THE
MURDERER’S NECK! SOME WING-NUTS
MAY HAVE THOUGHT HE WAS BEING
RELIGIOUSLY INTOLERANT IF THEY
HAD HEARD HIM AT THE TIME, BUT
NOW THAT WE KNOW HOW THE STORY
ENDS, I SAY STACY WAS BEING
DOWNRIGHT CLAIRVOYANT.

The bright sun had cast dark shadows over both of Jackson’s eyes, giving his face a sinister quality. The digital image noise that resulted from the magnification gave the clip an unsettling feeling. The three seconds were looped silently so many times that people had forgotten that the term *redneck* was ever used. Some networks put a highlighted circle around Jackson’s head and shoulders. Some networks put a highlighted circle only around his cross.

All of the momentum seemed to be on the side of Stacy. He became an icon for the entire gay rights cause. When Caleb became an emblem for fighting oppression and intolerance, Stacy became the living face of it. Stacy Oliver hogged up so much of the spotlight and developed such a following that some people had forgotten all about the name Caleb Hertz. Stacy continued to hit hard words like, *cover-up*, *conspiracy*,

intolerance and *hate*. When any interview got too hard for him, he would resort to crying. But he received very few tough questions and he would only go on shows that he knew to be *friendly* to his cause. He was never even asked to produce the alleged letters describing the treatment that Caleb had received in boot camp.

When the issue of the phantom letters was raised by opponents, blog posts would begin to sprout up containing articles from people who claimed to have been given first hand access to the letters. Quotes from the letters – words attributed to Caleb – even began to circulate: “I can’t bear another day of this humiliation,” “If I only believed in God, I would pray for my own speedy death,” and one describing his fellow recruits at boot camp as, “...just about the most twisted, antisocial bunch of psychopathic deformities I have ever run into!” The last one was actually taken from the *Dirty Dozen*. When this fact was pointed out, supporters of Stacy’s cause argued: “Caleb must have really liked that movie.”

When more scrutiny was brought to bear concerning the letters, a mass email was circulated stating that Stacy had revealed the letters, not to a few select bloggers, but to a non-bias panel of over fifty people. They even brought in handwriting analysts to compare the signature on the letters to the original papers Caleb signed when he joined the Marines. It was a perfect match. The email also said that this panel was interviewed on CNN.

From then on, the water-cooler debates sounded like this:

“Of course Stacy could lie, and a few bloggers could lie, but he showed those letters to a panel of over fifty people. Do you think all of them are lying?”

“Isn’t it possible that the idea of fifty witnesses is itself a lie, invented by only one person?”

“No, because all of them had been interviewed together live on camera. And they all confirmed having seen and held the letters in their hands.”

“Oh, you just read that from some left wing blog!”

“No, it was reported on CNN.”

Soon the line, “It was reported on CNN,” somehow morphed into, “I saw it on CNN.” And so, the debate over the letters’ existence was *settled*. Any new fabricated details about the letters would appear on Wikipedia with a footnote citing CNN, never giving the time or date aired because there wasn’t any. On top of that, major networks – once trusted – would post internet stories with new details and even peculiar quotes claimed to have originated from Caleb’s letters. After each new detail, there would be a link to the source. If anyone bothered to click on it, they would discover that it would take them to some unknown partisan blog or to Stacy Oliver’s own MySpace page. Most people, however, never bothered clicking. They were satisfied with seeing that the information actually was sourced and promptly began parroting it to their friends at work, to their siblings on the phone, or on their own blogs – linking to the internet story that linked to Stacy’s MySpace.

Having gained the respectability of a martyr – Caleb’s approval rating was 81% in the latest pole – every activist minded misanthrope with a laptop and an internet connection suddenly wanted to put words in Caleb’s mouth that supported their own pet cause. As a result, strange quotes that claimed to have originated from Caleb’s letters started to appear, such as, “Radical Christianity is just as threatening as radical Islam,” and, “The proletariats have nothing to lose but their chains.”

One effective video on YouTube, created by supporters of Jackson’s side, contained an edited side-by-side video of Stacy’s accusations about Caleb’s treatment in boot camp. It played the words Stacy used on Mitch McCarty’s show and followed them with the movie scene Stacy had been describing. After Stacy said, “His drill instructor found a donut in his footlocker and made the entire platoon do pushups while Caleb ate the donut,” the video played the matching scene from *Full Metal Jacket*. After Stacy said, “Then, when he was wearing this big metal scuba diving thing, they cut a hole in his bag and the water was really cold,” it played the matching scene from *Men of Honor*.

After Stacy said, “Then the head guy tried to rape him and none of the other guys could stop him because they were all inside this cage thing,” it played the matching scene from *G.I. Jane*. The video would have been a smoking gun as evidence against Stacy’s character; however, it never got more than three-hundred hits.

The footage of Stacy’s crocodile tears became too tempting a target for ridicule. Parody videos sprang up on YouTube ranging in quality from professional to amateur. They were all mean-spirited and received far more hits. This gave Stacy’s side further proof of the *hate*. The public narrative changed from debating the existence of Stacy’s letters to yet another *national dialog* about whether America was “still too homophobic.”

A gubernatorial race in Minnesota was heating up, gearing for an off-year special election. Jim Woodard had been behind in the poles when he held a press conference announcing that, inspired by Caleb’s bravery, he decided to finally admit to being gay. He told the press before he told his wife and children, a fact that was drowned out by the praises being sung for his bravery. He instantly surged in the polls.

The president of the United States, at the end of an unrelated press conference, was asked what he felt about the alleged murder and he responded that although he was not there and could not know what actually happened, he believed that “Private First Class Jackson Brooks acted stupidly.”

Both Stacy Oliver and Michael Ponce were offered book deals in the high six figures.

There was only one cable network that constantly played and replayed the same footage of Caleb Hertz and Jackson Brooks hugging on graduation day. It was difficult to tell from the angle, but they brought in body language experts to analyze the footage frame by frame, and determined that it was Jackson who refused a handshake and initiated the hug. This might have been powerful exonerating evidence in the court of public opinion if it couldn’t have so easily been dismissed by condescendingly evoking the name of the network. “Yeah, but you just saw that on FOX News.” It was like a magical incantation that could make unwelcomed facts disappear into thin air.

Most of the Marines who had known Caleb were still in Afghanistan while all of this was happening stateside. Thanks to the tireless efforts put forth by Caleb's mother, all of them had their chance to go on record and all of them went on record for the side of Jackson Brooks. Brit was back home in Oregon and had become quite skilled at giving a forceful interview. He would sit down with anyone – friendly or not – and take on tough, even underhanded questions. He was the most formidable defender of Jackson's freedom and Caleb's legacy. He told them that Jackson and Caleb were friends and that Stacy and Caleb weren't even an item by the time he met Caleb. He told them about the pranks they played on Michael Ponce and how *Mellow Yellow* was really his nickname, not Caleb's. When asked about the photo of the Marine holding him at gunpoint he said, "It's not what it looks like, sir. Caleb *asked* him to hold a gun to his head!"

"In the photo it was pointing at his chest."

"Oh yeah, first he pointed it at his chest, then he pointed it at his head."

"He pointed it at Caleb's head also?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Because he asked him to!"

"Why would Caleb do that?"

"He was trying to make a point, sir."

"What was the point?"

Here Brit scratched his head. He hadn't really been listening all that closely. "It was something about Plato, I think." This was his least effective moment.

Next to Jackson, Brit quickly became one of the most hated men in America.

That was until they got a hold of Rider.

Rider was home from deployment, back in Redding, California. He had refused to give any interviews, so one day a reporter ambushed him outside of Tequila Mockingbird, his favorite bar, and shoved a microphone in his face. The resulting sound bite was played so often, most of the nation's news junkies had it completely memorized:

Look, there's a lot that I don't understand about homosexuals. People don't like homosexuals because they are whiney and shrill, so what do they do? They act more whiney and shrill. Then they hold outrageous protests because people don't accept them. But why should we accept them? If they want to be accepted, they should act acceptable. But they don't, and they never will. Instead they want to change our definition of what is acceptable, of what is decent and praiseworthy. Yes, *they* are the ones who want to change *us*. They could not rise up to our values, so they want to bring our values down to them.

The reporter tried to respond here but was interrupted.

The only option left for those who want to get along is to pretend to like them, which is what you have decided to do – your station and others like it. You are simply pretending, as well as most of your viewers. And all of you think you are the only ones pretending! You pretend to like them, the same way that you pretend to like peace protesters, and environmentalists. Nobody likes people like that.

The reporter began to speak but was interrupted again.

People like courage; they like strength; and they like certitude. That is why people like Marines and that is why I liked Caleb. It's simple; gay rights activists can have the respect that they want and they can have it tomorrow. Just act like Caleb. That is all you have to do – just act more like Private First Class Caleb Hertz.

Only one network actually dug deep enough to find the men who went through boot camp with Caleb. In a special that aired on a Sunday night, two hours of live personal testimony came in from nearly every Marine in Caleb's first platoon in San Diego. Those that could not be flown out to the studios in New York were filmed via satellite in Afghanistan. The only two people missing were PFC Tucker and SSgt Folsom. Trey Tucker was still in physical rehabilitation and SSgt Folsom issued *no comment*. PFC Terrence Brown did most of the talking.

"What is your perspective on the death of Private First Class Caleb Hertz?"

"Unfortunately, sir, friendly fire incidents are a fact of life. As long as humans continue to be imperfect, accidents will happen. But I think what is important to remember is that men and women in uniform who travel half way around the world and lose their lives in an accident, sometimes as ordinary as a car crash, still give their lives for their country. Their deaths are no less noble."

"So, you believe that the incident was friendly fire."

"Yes, sir, I do. I really do. PFC Brooks and I were with PFC Hertz from the beginning. I can promise you there is not one man who was a recruit at boot camp with PFC Hertz who did not like him, not one."

"So there was no hazing? No special treatment?"

"No, sir. None whatsoever."

"You can't think of anything?"

"No, sir."

"Marines tease each other don't they?"

"Not us, sir."

"There were no playful jabs in fun, something that could be misinterpreted?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, sir."

"What about the drill instructor?"

"Staff Sergeant Folsom is a consummate professional who treats his recruits with fairness and respect. His behavior toward Private First Class Hertz was one-hundred percent indistinguishable from his behavior toward any other recruit."

"Did he ever draw attention to the fact that Caleb Hertz was a homosexual?"

“To be honest with you, sir, most days it had slipped my mind.”

“What is your opinion of Private First Class Jackson Brooks?”

“PFC Brooks is a good man, sir. He’s a great Marine.”

“Do you have any idea why Caleb Hertz would use these words, ‘If I only believed in God, I would pray for my own speedy death.’”

“He didn’t.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because that is not PFC Hertz. I’m telling you, sir, that is not him. PFC Hertz never complained about nothin’.” Terrence began to get emotional and he forgot to watch his grammar. He lost his live television enunciation and started dropping his g’s. He said forcefully, “And Hertz wasn’t even together with Stacy. That dude dumped him for some gay rights activist. Stacy was a total *Oliver*. Hertz never sent letters to that guy; he hated that guy. We all hated that...” Panic filled Terrence’s eyes as he feared what his tongue might do. He regained his primetime posture and his primetime voice, and said, “phony.” He smiled cautiously.

Every interview that night was virtually identical in message and in spirit. All of them professed their admiration of Caleb, all stood up for Jackson, all denounced Stacy, and all of them used the line, “Staff Sergeant Folsom is a consummate professional who treats his recruits with fairness and respect. His behavior toward Private First Class Hertz was one-hundred percent indistinguishable from his behavior toward any other recruit.”

The testimonies were powerful. Aside from the one near slip from Terrence, each man spoke respectfully and with heartfelt conviction. All of them lied, but all of them believed that – while lying – they were actually fighting for a more general truth. The truth was that Caleb’s experience with them was great and noble. The truth was that Caleb was a victim of nobody. Each man knew that if Caleb were alive, he too would stand up and proudly proclaim the same truth, and if he had to, he too would use lies to do it.

The public was convinced. There were too many names, too many real faces, all of them testifying to the same things, all of them proud Marines that were serving their country.

The interview requests for Stacy dropped off. His name became synonymous with liar. Letters to the editor and calls into radio talk shows all expressed their indignation over the fraud that had been attempted on the American people.

Michael Ponce was demoted by the *Times*. He spent his time covering school bake sales and staff meetings at the local library. His articles were all buried in the back pages of the *Times'* website, to which the online editor would sometimes forget to – or not even bother to – create a link.

Michael Ponce's name became iconic – exhibit A in the case against *mainstream media's* credibility. It was brought up as a counter argument against any news story that the political right did not agree with. "Why should we trust anything they say? These are the people who brought us Michael Ponce."

Within one week, the entire country had moved on. The networks searched for the next life to ruin; the people returned to watching *Dancing with the Stars*; the newest viral video on the internet was a kitten on a Rumba; and Jim Woodard's opponent was voted Governor of Minnesota in a landslide.

Everyone moved on but Jackson, who was still awaiting trial.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Terrence Brown woke up and stumbled out of bed. While still in his boxers, he staggered into his kitchen and searched for a clean bowl. There were none in the cupboard, so he found the bowl from yesterday's cereal and rinsed it out. *Good enough.* He poured himself some Count Chocula and decided to check his email. There was no one he was expecting an email from, but he liked to check it a few times each day. His girlfriend had been dropping hints recently that maybe he had a technology addiction. He argued that it was just because he had to live so primitively while deployed, that he had to catch up while at home. *I mean really, a Marine with a technology addiction? We'd die from withdrawal.*

When he clicked on the icon to open up his browser, he discovered that overnight, *he* had become the next victim that the press had been searching for. The headline on his home page read "Private First Class Terrence Brown's email hacked." The link to read the full story was labeled, "Military cover-up exposed." Terrence dropped his spoon on the carpet. The earliest emails in question were originally sent during the ten days in which Terrence was home after boot camp, before he left for combat training. The most damaging among them was sent in response to one of his civilian friends who had sent a short email saying, "Hey Terrence, sup? I hope you survived boot camp okay. Did you happen to run into that gay guy from the news?" Terrence had replied to him with a full account of the entire thirteen weeks. All the best pull quotes from Terrence's email had already made it into the article: "I have seen a lot of movies, but I have never seen a drill instructor punish a guy as hard as Caleb got it every single day," and then there was the prophetic closing line, "Don't show this email to anyone. If the press ever found out what really happened, we'd never hear the end of it." The email had introduced into social dialog terms like *duck walk*, *blanket party*, and SSgt Folsom's personal creation – *heterosexuals up*, the call for every man to conclude their pushups but Caleb.

More incriminating evidence came from his inbox. Correspondence with the entire platoon back and forth to

confirm they were on the “same page” before the interviews. “I don’t want to get on national television and lie if one of you guys is going to come along and blow the whole thing,” Terrence wrote in a mass email. Every single one of them responded. All of them agreed to lie. The article lifted a line from one Marine’s response. He said, “Jackson’s attorney told him not to talk and Caleb can never talk again. We are the only witnesses who can tell people what happened, even if we have to lie. That is the way that he would want it.” Everyone in the media incorrectly assumed the *he* referred to Jackson.

A new edited video appeared on YouTube. This one had clips of Terrence lying about boot camp, followed by the words typed out from one of his emails that directly contradicted what he just said. This video had over five million hits.

The responses from every single Marine involved was proof positive that if these Marines from Caleb’s boot camp had stuck together and conspired to lie, then the Marines that were deployed with Caleb at Camp Kookaburra probably did the same thing. Nothing after that was ever believed if it was perceived to be a Marine siding *with* a Marine and *against* a homosexual. They labeled it the *Chorus of Hatred*, a term lifted from Michael Ponce’s first interview.

Michael Ponce was reinstated to his former prominence and pay grade. The evening edition that day already had him on page one. He could not resist giving his two cents in the article with the line. “The only thing worse than a Christian is a Christian hypocrite. You can’t look down on me for my immorality while being a lying scumbag at the same time.” This comment drew about a day’s worth of criticism, but there was too much momentum on his side. His defenders excused it by saying, “He was just upset. You would be too if you had been the target of a modern day witch hunt.”

Stacy’s PO Box was flooded with apology cards. His phone rang off the hook with offers for interviews. The release date of his book was moved back up in order to compete for a portion of the pre-Christmas book sales. Before the cameras he cried, “I think the most hurtful thing is that they said I had left Caleb for someone else. Caleb is all I think about. I could never be with

anyone else while Caleb's memory still haunts me." These remarks were made outside Jerald Schaefer's mansion in L.A.

Gay rights protests began to pop up all over the country. The one that garnered the most attention was a school walk-out student protest. High school students all across the country left their desks and took to the streets. Vicky Rhodes, a student attending Northeast High in Seattle, Washington, was asked about her decision to be a part of the protest. She said, "Um, I think that homosexual people, and members of the GB...um...the GBLT community, are people too, and, um, I don't think that it is right for people to shoot them." Charles Pittman, a student at a school in Dallas said, "Jackson Brooks is a hypocrite. He calls himself a Christian, but wasn't it Jesus who said, 'Let a hundred flowers blossom. Let a hundred schools of thought contend?'" One honest student in Denver told a reporter, "I just wanted to get out of class, man."

Jackson's pastor had refused many attempts by the press to speak with him, as well as the pastor's wife and their thirteen-year-old daughter. Reporters even showed up at the home of June Pruitt, a woman who taught Sunday school when Jackson was five years old. June Pruitt, who had reached the grand old age of ninety-two, did not mind the attention at all. "Jackson was a mischievous boy. He always had his shoes untied," she told them anxiously. It was discovered later that Jackson and his family lived in a different state during the time she was still teaching Sunday school.

Protestors blocked the street in front of Jackson's church every Sunday. They made it so hard to get in that many people stopped trying. Attendance was down fifty percent. At three o'clock on a random Tuesday morning, the fire department was called to put out a fire in the back of the sanctuary. The recording from a church security camera assisted the police in apprehending the arsonist.

The footage was aired on the Mitch McCarty show, where it was clear to see that the male perpetrator was wearing leather pants and a skintight pink crop top with a picture of Hello Kitty on the front.

McCarty asked his guest, “Dr. Weiss, do we have enough information yet to know what could’ve been the motivation behind such an act?”

“No, Mitch, we don’t,” said Dr. Weiss, “I think what is most important at this stage is that no one jumps to any conclusions, which is why I find it an unfortunate coincidence that this happened at the church of Jackson Brooks.”

“We don’t know if the arsonist had even heard of Jackson Brooks,” injected McCarty.

“Maybe he had or maybe he hadn’t. It is just too soon to say.”

“We don’t have any reason to suspect that this man was even homosexual, do we Doctor?”

“We have no way of knowing that at this time. For all we know this was a member of the congregation who did not like last week’s sermon.”

“Or perhaps the guy just had a toothache.”

“Or perhaps he was still mad about the healthcare bill.”

“Doctor, with our limited information, is there any reason to suspect that the arsonist acted out of anti-Christian bigotry?”

“None whatsoever, Mitch.”

Several churches in other states were also vandalized and picketed. A wedding ceremony was interrupted inside a Mormon temple when a bomb threat forced everyone to evacuate. No bomb was found. Several major news papers speculated on whether these attacks were related to the death of Caleb Hertz. Michael Ponce’s paper did not report them at all.

The city of Chicago, which had already had a gay pride parade scheduled before Caleb’s death, had to arrange police barricades around the old church buildings on the parade route when parade goers began urinating and defecating on the front steps.

A Hollywood movie debuted about America’s first openly homosexual Marine. All the villains in the script were Christian fundamentalists; there was no mention of American greatness, no mention of who the Marines were actually fighting in Afghanistan, and it portrayed Caleb as a victim. They were able to get it into theaters so fast by simply recycling old screenplays. Although the film failed at the box office, it was a success with

the critics. Only one critic complained, “We’ve seen this movie before. The screenwriters merely used the word *gay* to replace *female* or *black*.” Jackson happened to see the review and thought, *The political speechwriters have been doing that same search and replace for years.*

At the peak of the outrage over the Marine cover-up, a virtually unknown blog listed the names and home addresses of every Marine believed to have been a part of the cover-up. It was reported on by a major news network,

“Well, yes, it really is a shame. It is one thing to fight aggressively for the side that you believe in, but to make it personal like this, it is really just despicable what this website has done. And I am very proud of our network’s decision not to release the web address.”

“Do you believe that anyone might be in danger?”

“Possibly – there certainly is a lot of outrage out there – so if not these Marines personally, then their families, or even just their possessions might be in danger.”

“Vandalism, sure. Do you think that the point of posting the addresses was to provoke such a backlash?”

“That has to be it. It’s really a danger to have this information so accessible. Any hothead can just do an internet search on *Cover-up Marines Addresses* and it’s the first one on the list.”

“That easy, huh,” he shook his head with a sigh and casually said, “Well, let’s hope cooler heads prevail.”

White powder, made to look like anthrax, began to show up in the mail at every address listed on the site.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Test, one, two, three. Test, one, two, three,” Mitch McCarty said into his microphone.

“We’re good,” said his tech guy in the back of the van.

“No one has gotten this guy to talk,” said Ben, his faithful cameraman.

“We don’t need him to talk. That is the beauty of ambush reporting. If he talks to us, that’s great; we will be the first to get a statement from him. But if he doesn’t talk, we get footage of the appalled look in his eyes, the evasive mannerisms, the tight bottom lip, indicating the inner struggle of wanting so badly to rip my head off but knowing he can’t do it on camera. Then there’s the best part – the hurried steps to flee the spotlight and flee honest questions. What makes a person appear guiltier than that? We can play that again in the background with any narrative we want. Every time a studio guest or so-called expert mentions his name, we could cut to the same footage.” Mitch McCarty smiled. “I almost hope he doesn’t talk to us.”

“But, it’s just that...”

“Just what?”

“Well, this guy is an experienced, trained Marine. This guy’s seen combat. He has killed people. Aren’t you afraid that maybe he *will* rip your head off?”

Mitch McCarty smiled smugly. He looked out the window to the front of Harrington’s food store. “Perhaps,” he said, “but that is why this is not a profession for the faint of heart. No, this is a calling for the brave. We are soldiers in our own rights, Ben, and don’t you forget it. The difference is, we are not *violent*.”

A hush came over the van when they saw SSgt Folsom walking out, pushing a cart of groceries. His eyes darted imperceptibly toward the unmarked van in the parking lot as he strolled casually by. “Not yet,” Mitch McCarty said as SSgt Folsom continued to pass. “Not yet,” he said again with a voice that revealed the tension he had denied having. “Now!” he shouted as the van door flew open and Mitch McCarty and Ben the cameraman leapt onto the concrete parking lot and hit the ground running.

SSgt Folsom did not flinch when he heard the van door. He did not speed up his pace when he heard the rapid footsteps advancing behind him. Two sets. He did not sweat when he saw the elongated shadow of a man carrying a film camera stretch out on the ground in front of him, but continued to blithely push his cart. The only thing that Mitch McCarty happened to notice as he came within feet of SSgt Folsom's back was that both of his hands had let go of the cart and were drawn out of Mitch McCarty's line of sight. The camera zoomed in close on the back of SSgt Folsom's head and shoulders as Mitch McCarty reached for him and grabbed his shoulder. "Are you guilty of hate crimes against Caleb Hertz?" he asked as he aggressively spun SSgt Folsom around to face him and his hostile camera.

As SSgt Folsom turned, the second that Mitch McCarty and Ben should have been able to see his face, they discovered that he had both hands raised, covering his face with two extended middle fingers. Ben knew right away that for this to ever air, it would mean the network would have to blur out the offensive gesture, and that by doing so they would be forced to blur out his face as well. Mitch McCarty, who didn't plan for himself to be the one taken off guard, said, "Um...Did you...How do you explain..."

Before Mitch McCarty could get any further, SSgt Folsom used his powerful drill instructor's voice to let out a loud series of repeated F-bombs, without once stopping to take a breath, thereby guaranteeing the audio would also be rendered useless.

A frustrated Mitch McCarty raised his own voice. "Are you a homophobe?! Do you hate all gay people?!"

SSgt Folsom continued to cuss at high volume and playfully circled his hand gestures in small strokes that never revealed his face.

"Forget it!" Mitch McCarty yelled, "Shut it off! Shut it off!"

SSgt Folsom heard the door of the van open and close. He looked past his middle fingers and saw that they had filed in as quickly as they filed out. The van started and within a few more seconds he was alone.

SSgt Folsom casually pushed his groceries the rest of the way to his car and loaded his trunk.

* * *

The frequency of ambush reporting for Jackson Brooks had diminished, mainly because every network had already managed to capture him fleeing in every possible setting. But, they still tried to pry him away from his lawyer's advice to keep quiet.

"They keep asking me about my stance on gays in the military," Jackson mentioned to his lawyer.

"Jackson, I do not have to tell you that they are not your friends."

"Yeah, that's what Major Nash told me, once."

"They are trying to draw you out. Don't be fooled by questions that seem innocuous. They are traps. They are code. In these people's minds, you can't be against gays in the military and not be anti-gay. You can't be against any hate-crime bill and not be anti-gay. You can't be against gay marriage and not be anti-gay. Whenever the press asks you if you take a conservative position on any issue, they are really asking, 'Isn't it true that you are a bigoted hatemonger?'"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Lorena Castillo was holding her baby. She had sold their fainting couch and used the money to buy a secondhand rocking chair. Edward had bought her the fainting couch because he thought that she would like it. She didn't, but wanted to spare his feelings. Meanwhile, Lorena knew that Edward did not like it, so it ended up that neither of them liked it, but only she knew. Lorena envisioned a homecoming where Edward would sweep her up in his arms, hold and kiss the baby, and then three months later ask, "Hey, didn't we used to have a fainting couch?"

As she rocked, she was thinking about how she and Edward had always talked past each other; it warmed her face and made her smile.

He held her late one night and told her, "I think when I get to boot camp I will try to give myself a new nickname, something cool like Teflon. I'm sick of Big Eddie. It makes no sense; I'm only 5'10" you know."

"When I am pregnant, you can call me Big Lorena," she said.

"When I become a Marine, I'm never going to let another second of my life slip by unappreciated."

She responded by saying, "I think when we have a baby, I am going to buy a nice rocking chair."

"Yes, I know just what you're saying. I mean I try to stay positive, but I don't have the energy. One day my body and my mind...and my heart...will come together as one."

"You've got a great heart," she touched his chest, "I'm going to put it right there in the living room."

"My heart?"

She laughed, "My rocking chair. Every night I will rock our baby to sleep on it."

"I can't wait," he said.

"I can't wait," she said.

When he left for deployment, she was five months pregnant. He told her that she could take his heart and put it right in their living room. "And in the spot where you rock our baby, there too will my heart be."

She smiled warmly and looked down at her baby. Sophia had been asleep for three hours, but Lorena just couldn't seem to let her go. On the wall behind her was a pastel drawing of a scene that had not yet been able to exist in the real world: Lorena holding her baby – done as tenderly as any portrait of mother and child – with Teflon, Edward, father, holding both of them. Lorena felt connected to Eddie. They were half a world apart, but were connected through the baby she was holding.

Her tranquility was broken by a terrible crash, broken shards of glass falling, then the sound of squealing car tires.

The vase on her glass coffee table seemed to have exploded spontaneously before she caught sight of the brick that hit it. In that same instant, the table shattered also. Lorena frantically twisted at her waist – more from impulse than conscious decision – and used her body to shield her baby. Small glass shards landed in the curls of Lorena's hair. The noise and violent shifting woke the baby and she let out a cry at the top of her young lungs. Lorena looked down at Sophia for any cuts and drew her close into her chest. She could see in her peripheral vision the bits of glass in her own hair. She used her right hand to pick them out. Although no longer flying through the air, she wanted the broken glass far from her and far from her baby. Sophia continued to cry and her mother joined her.

The haunting black space where the window had been, filled her with so much fear that she doubted she could make it across the room to the base of the phone – which was only a few feet from the window and still covered in broken glass. The monsters who threw that brick were still out there, long gone for sure, but still out there in the world – a world represented by the empty blackness between the remaining shards. The barrier between *world* and *home* had been breached. The safety and sanctity of their home had been violated and left with an open wound. She drew her baby in closer with both hands. She cried and trembled.

Fear of the open window, fear of approaching it, and even of making a sound could not prevent her from screaming as she looked down and saw the blood on her baby's face. She reached with her hand to help Sophia and was amazed to see her entire right hand was scarlet red. She stopped screaming when she realized that it was her own blood. The glass she had grabbed

from her hair cut her fingertips and the amount of blood that leaked onto her hand and her baby was surprising.

She ran across the room and into her bedroom. Blood smeared the phone as she dialed 911.

* * *

Teflon was shaving in the shower cabin at Camp Kookaburra. He was listening to the BBC on his shortwave radio and was having a conversation with the broadcast.

“Today brought three more cases of anthrax hoaxes reported in the States. White powder had arrived through the mail at residences in Chicago, Shreveport, and Boston.”

“Cowards.” He jiggled his razor underneath the running water to get excess hair off the blade, then returned it to his face with quick long strokes.

“The FBI has been called in to investigate. They can’t disclose if they have any leads, but have confirmed that each case targeted a different Marine involved in the cover-up.”

“Alleged cover-up!” Teflon snapped, then thought about it. Unhappy that he had just compromised at all with them, he amended himself, “It’s not a cover-up!”

“The most unique case so far came out of Portland, Oregon. A letter filled with white powder, made to look like anthrax, arrived at the residence of Leaf Fischer and Chloe Mahoney, who say that they had been unaware that the couple they purchased their house from earlier in the year were the parents of outspoken Marine, Sgt Brandon Sparks.”

“Oh, Brit’s gonna’ be ticked,” Teflon smirked.

“The couple, who belong to a variety of anti-war and civil rights organizations, commented to the press, ‘We were shocked to think that we might be the targets of someone’s hate. I mean, we’re against the war.’ Ms. Mahoney said, ‘It disturbed me to find out that someone like that could have been raised in this part of the country. We always thought that this was a decent neighborhood.’ Mr. Fischer added, ‘We thought people like that only existed in flyover country.’”

“Idiots,” said Teflon.

“The couple claims to have no plans to sell the house, but have been burning sweet grass and sage since they heard the

news, which they say should purge the house of any remaining negative energy.”

Teflon drew the razor away from his face; his body wobbled too much as he laughed out loud. He looked at his own face and shook his head in the mirror, a non-verbal form of talking to himself, and continued to shave.

“As cases of backlash continue to escalate across the US, the FBI is investigating whether an act of vandalism was purely random, or yet another incident in the continued saga. An unidentified party threw a brick through the window of the home of a woman rocking her young child to sleep.”

Teflon froze mid-stroke. Every muscle in his body tightened.

“She and her daughter suffered a few cuts, but escaped any major injuries. They were alone in the house at the time.”

Teflon began to tremble.

“The homeowner, who lives in the sleepy suburb of Goosefoot, Alabama, is the wife of one of the Marines involved in the cover-up. Investigators refuse to speculate on the motivation for the attack.”

Blood ran down Teflon’s cheek from the spot where he did not realize the blade had cut him. He drew his trembling razor away from his face. He looked into his own eyes, yet to wipe off the blood, oblivious to the fact that it was even there. His fist shot out in a burst of unfocused anger and shattered the mirror before him. Profanities flew out of his mouth and he grabbed the sink to rip it out of the wall. He groaned in pain, but could not budge it. He turned to kick the wall. He pounded it with his boot soles mercilessly, as if it had been the brick thrower’s face. He stepped with long strides back into the hooch, his fingers ran over his hair and he held both sides of his skull, only hoping his arms were strong enough to keep it from exploding. Blood from where the mirror cut his fist was transferred gruesomely to his head. So much rage filled his chest that he had no recourse but to continue his loud cussing. Several Marines swarmed the scene, each trying to question and comfort him in words that he could not hear. He moved back and forth furiously looking for something to destroy, someplace to channel his rage, while the true target was about seventy-five hundred miles away and unknown.

The other Marines all flinched when he turned to their direction. They took a huge step away from him, fearing what he might do. His sporadic pacing suddenly seemed purposeful as he made an about-face and stepped over to his gear. Withdrawing his pistol, he held it angrily in his hands. "Whoa," the room called out and several Marines stepped closer, but not too close. Teflon had nothing to kill. He looked literally insane as he gritted his teeth hissing, with small globs of spittle flying free. His arms quivered as spasms of adrenaline and hatred searched for a way out from his chest and into the world. The thought of putting the weapon to his own head only remained real in his mind for a split second. He lowered the gun, pointing at the ground. He saw the Marines all circling him. They had their hands up, palms forward, gently pumping, placating, like they were all trying to pat out an invisible fire.

There was a moment of calm as they could feel the tension leaving the room. Teflon's eyes were red from corner to iris. They were ravenous for revenge and wet with tears. "Give us the gun, Teflon," his buddies asked. Teflon's chest rose, then fell. Teflon had seventy-three days left on his deployment, seventy-three days until he could see his wife and daughter again, seventy-three days before he would be able to protect them. Suddenly, he put the muzzle of his gun to his leg – "No!" – and pulled the trigger. The bullet went through the chipboard floor as his buddies were able to grab and redirect his arm in time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The paint can slipped out of Stacy's hand. He was too drunk to hold onto it. There was only one letter left to write on the garage door that currently read "BIGO." Martin was sober so he knew the sound of the hollow spray can hitting the driveway cement was loud enough to wake a light sleeper.

"Be more careful," whispered Martin nervously, then added, "I think we need to get out of here."

"Well, I can't leave it at *BIGO*. He'll think I meant it as a compliment," Stacy laughed at his own attempt at humor, the type that Caleb used to – a long time ago – refer to as *Stacy humor*.

Martin shushed him again.

"Don't shush me," said Stacy.

"He'll wake up," whispered Martin.

"I don't care," said Stacy in a voice that was intentionally louder, "I'm not afraid of him." But Stacy must have been a little afraid because his boastful volume really wasn't that loud.

Martin looked back up at the small two story house just outside Redding, California. He was concerned about the upstairs window overlooking the parking lot. He knew the two of them had been there for too long. He knew that the window must have provided a perfectly clear view of everything they were doing. The street lamp produced a glare on the window and made it hard to see anything on the other side of the glass. Martin continued to stare at it, but saw nothing.

Ridley Holt was on the other side, watching every move they made.

"I don't care," Stacy repeated, "I have a knife." He pulled out a small pocket knife and displayed it proudly to Martin, who was unimpressed.

Rider put his fingers on both sides of the window latch and waited. He knew that they would be unable to see him. He knew he could bide his time. He watched the drunk one gesticulating wildly as he walked over to Rider's car. Rider recognized him from television: Stacy Oliver. Rider had heard about what happened to Teflon's home. Rider had heard about all the incidents of white powder in the mail. Every move that Stacy

made was a taunt in the Marine's face, although Stacy did not know it. He used his pocket knife to stab a gash into Rider's tire. The wind whistling through the tear made just enough noise to cover the sound of the window springs as Rider opened the window a few inches.

"Someone has to teach this bigot a lesson," Stacy was ranting. He was completely oblivious that Rider's hunting rifle had just slipped silently through the crack in the window. "Someone has to make him pay," Stacy sneered. Rider flipped up his scope.

The two of them seemed to be arguing when Rider found them through his scope. He moved the cross hairs over their faces, from the sober one, to the drunk one, then back to the sober. He knew it would be more tactically wise to kill the sober one first. The drunk one had less of a chance to retaliate or escape after his friend's head exploded right in front of him, yet Rider really just wanted to kill the drunk first. He wanted to be the man who killed Stacy Oliver. He moved the cross hairs back over the face of the drunk. He knew that he could destroy both targets without any problem. He had been taught never to underestimate his enemy, but did it really apply to these clowns? Stacy's head was swerving wildly, bobbing and weaving as his argument with Martin became more animated. Rider adjusted his aim for center mass. Stacy owned a wide variety of protest t-shirts – he also had twenty-three bumper stickers on the back of his car – so it was just coincidence that when Rider looked through his rifle sight he saw the words, *Violence never solved anything*. Rider placed the crosshairs right over the *l* in *Violence*.

He placed his finger on the trigger. He steadied his breathing. Every sound faded as the sight through the scope was all he perceived.

Martin turned to look over his shoulder again, paranoid. "The window is open," he turned to whisper frantically to Stacy, then turned back again. In the dim light Martin tried to make out what he saw. A quick flash of light reflected off the glass of the scope and Martin knew.

Everything that happened next took the span of only one second.

Rider knew he had been spotted and could not waste another moment. Martin's head happened to move into the line of sight and Rider could not get a clear shot of Stacy, then it moved, as if in slow motion, completely clear. He had an open shot. Rider watched as Stacy's entire t-shirt turned bright red, then blue, then red again. Martin was turning back toward the window for a glimpse of what he believed was the last sight he would ever see, but it was gone. The window was closed.

The two of them were forced to squint and raised their hands to shield their eyes when the search light on the police cruiser was aimed directly at them.

"Oh great, the pigs are here," Stacy said, unaware that they had just saved his life.

Police Officer Baker stepped out of his car and shined his flashlight on Stacy. He said, "Sir, I am going to need you to drop your weapon."

"Why? Because I am a gay man in America?"

"Drop you weapon!" commanded the cop.

"Do you have any idea who I am?"

Officer Baker reached for his hip and unsnapped his tazer. Stacy quickly dropped the knife.

"Okay, I need you to hold your hands up and get down on the ground."

"Yeah, your momma needs to get down on the ground."

The radio on the officer's shoulder rattled some unintelligible noise. The officer pressed the button and said into it. "I have a gentleman here; he is not cooperating. Go ahead and send backup."

By the time more officers arrived, Stacy was still bickering with the first one, accusing him of homophobia, insulting his mother, insinuating that he was too important to be questioned by a mere police officer. He said things like, "You don't know who you are messing with. I am going to make you famous," and, "You are part of a system that works to keep people oppressed." Martin was already on the ground with his hands up in the air.

The police arrested Stacy. Martin received a ticket and was let go.

* * *

Stacy had been in the holding cell for two hours when word came that he was free to go. When Martin called Jerald Schaefer, Schaefer placed some phone calls and had Stacy bailed out.

Stacy stood in the jail's foyer. A sheet of bulletproof glass separated him from the officer who had just released him. Stacy was still rubbing his wrists at the spot where they'd put the handcuffs. "You didn't have to put the cuffs on so tight," Stacy complained, "if I get carpal tunnel, I am suing this whole department."

The officer just kept his head down. Filling out the paperwork for Stacy's release was the hardest thing he ever had to do as a cop – and he had once told a mother that her child was dead.

"You should have a separate holding tank for homosexuals. I could have been killed in there with all those homophobes. I could have been killed," Stacy said.

The officer silently lifted a small door to slide Stacy his personal effects – a pack of smokes, a matchbook from Planet Hollywood, and a worn out ticket stub from the movie *Titanic*, that for the past fourteen years Stacy believed brought him good luck.

It was then that they heard the distant chanting. The voices were unintelligible due to the fact that not all of the mob could decide on the same chant. Some of them were chanting, "We're here, we're queer, get over it," while others formed a new chant from the title of Stacy's book, "I'm gay, don't shoot," while the heterosexuals in the crowd did not feel comfortable with either of those and by default went with, "Give peace a chance."

"Am I free to go now?" Stacy snapped. The officer said nothing, but sadly nodded his head. Stacy tore off to the officer's left, adding extra sass to his defiant strut. He pressed hard on both doors intending to force them out wide like a burst of energy, revealing himself in all the glory and splendor of a man who is free.

But they were locked.

"You just came from there," the officer sighed. "It's on the right, stupid."

Stacy was extra furious when he stepped outside to greet the throngs of media and protestors. There were at least five hundred people there and they were carrying signs that read “Christianity equals hatred” and “All cops

judge prematurely.” Stacy walked straight up to the microphones and said with a fist raised, “The only thing I am guilty of is being gay in someone’s front yard.” The crowd let out a raucous cheer. This really encouraged him so he continued. “Well, if it’s a crime to be gay in someone’s yard then I am guilty!” The crowd cheered again. “But, they can’t stop me! I am going to keep being gay in people’s yards until I get what I want. I will be gay in my yard; I will be gay in your yard; I will be gay in the cop’s yard and then I will be gay in the yard of the White House!” Stacy hadn’t planned out anything further than the first two applause lines, and he’d had a long night.

Martin walked up and handed Stacy a note.

A reporter asked him. “Can you describe the arrest?”

Stacy took a second to read the note, then shoved it into his pocket. He became very animated. He formed his fingers into an imaginary gun and said, “The first thing the cop said to me was ‘Hey stupid, drop the knife, stupid.’ I mean nobody calls me stupid, okay?” Immediately Stacy began to cry. He said, “That is all I can tell you now, I am just too shaken up.”

The note in his pocket said, “Jerald Schaefer said not to talk to the press for free. Have them bid for an exclusive.”

Jackson was watching live. He had been trying to avoid the news lately, but he had been glued to the screen ever since Brit called him and said, “Turn on your television, Rider’s in the news again.”

After a few more seconds of having to see Stacy pretending to cry, Mitch McCarty and Veronica Cisneros cut back in.

“That is the scene in front of the Shasta County jail tonight,” she said.

“I was struck, Veronica, by how the police had referred to him as stupid. Let’s go to our expert, Dr. Weiss. Can you tell us – is that normal for an officer of the law to belittle people like that?”

“Well, Mitch, I can tell you that it is not normal, but I am afraid today that it is just not surprising.”

“We all want to obey police officers, but what are the limits? Is a citizen required to be cooperative with a policeman that is just not being cooperative with them?”

“I think that you have put your finger on it; in a perfect world we’d like to expect that although a police officer has some sort of *technical* authority over citizens, he would still treat them with an acceptable degree of tolerance and respect.”

“Well, it’s obviously not a perfect world.” Mitch McCarty looked at his notes. “Now we have learned that Stacy was in the process of vandalizing a Marine’s house, and we know he shouldn’t be doing that-”

“Yeah, no one is excusing him for that.”

“-but, we shouldn’t let that distract us from what the bigger picture is here. Doctor, with our limited information, is there any reason to suspect that Officer Baker acted out of anti-homosexual bigotry?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt, Mitch. I mean, I can’t see into the man’s heart, but it’s obvious that he clearly has a problem with homosexuals.”

Jackson turned off the TV.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“I have a gentleman here; he is not cooperating,” Joey said into the phone to McCarty’s producer up in New York. It was a reference to the amount of trouble Stacy had given Officer Baker. The transcript of the officer’s radio transmission had just been released to the press and Joey thought the producer would get the reference and maybe understand that he was having a harder time dealing with Stacy than even Officer Baker did.

Joey was helping to set up a live satellite feed in Jerald Schaefer’s enormous California home. Stacy’s exclusive was scheduled the week of Jackson’s trial – the last blow to be landed before the court of public opinion was forced to hand the trial over to the actual courts. Stacy had already changed his mind about the back drop three times. At first he wanted to do it in front of Jerald’s floor to ceiling windows. He demanded that the camera crew make all the difficult lighting adjustments to accommodate the glare from the glass, but as soon as they were finished the sun had gone down and Stacy decided that the view just wasn’t as impressive at night. Stacy had then moved them to the study. He said that he would look more intellectual if he was shot with books behind him.

Jerald Schaefer – who was usually an attention hog – sat deep in a chair in the corner of the room, out of everyone’s way. Joey could swear that the only movement Jerald had made since the moment the news crew showed up was to lift his pipe to his lips, take a few puffs, then lean his elbow back on the arm of his chair. If it is possible for a man to roll his eyes without changing his face, Joey saw Jerald doing it several times.

“I will have him ready by airtime,” Joey said assuredly into the phone. The intonation of his voice had more confidence than he did in his heart. His head panned the room for Stacy, and finally spotted him. “I’m gonna’ have to let you go,” he said abruptly and hung up the phone.

Joey quickly walked over to break up a squabble. Stacy and one of the stage hands were both playing tug-of-war with a bottle of Boon’s Fuzzy Navel. “Don’t you think that you have had enough? You’re about to be on live television,” reasoned the stage hand.

“Uh-uh, don’t you judge me. My boyfriend just died defending your freedom!” sassed Stacy.

When the stage hand saw Joey in his peripheral, he turned to appeal to his authority on the set, but did not let go of the bottle. “This guy is already pretty hammered. If he keeps it up, there’s not even going to be an interview,” he said as his head bobbed from Stacy’s hard tug.

“I don’t need to put up with this,” said Stacy.

The two still had both their hands gripping every inch of the bottle. They looked like basketball players struggling for the ball. Joey wondered if he should just throw the bottle up in the air and see which one could tip it first. He said, “Stacy,” his voice was conciliatory and very respectful, “can we get you to stop drinking, just until after the interview.”

“I’m not a drunk, okay,” Stacy thrust the bottle free. “I get nervous on camera. I need a drink to settle my nerves.”

“Okay, what was wrong with all the drinks you have already had?”

“I need a drink in my hand. I won’t even drink it, okay?”

“Like a security blanket?” snapped the irritated stage hand.

Stacy shot him a look. Joey tried to think fast and he ran to grab the glass of water left for Stacy on set. He dumped it down the sink and said, “Okay, how about this? We can fill this glass up with ice, and then fill it with Vodka. That way when our primetime viewers – and their children – tune in, it will just look like you are drinking water.” He filled the glass up with Vodka from a bottle on Jerald Schaefer’s counter. “Harmless, primetime, *water*.”

Stacy reluctantly grabbed the glass from him and walked over to where he was supposed to sit. Joey checked his watch.

Jerald Schaefer checked his own watch after he saw Joey do it. He took another puff of his pipe. Joey happened to turn in his direction and the two of them held a tired glance. *I wonder what’s on his mind*, thought Joey.

What would Stacy do if not for this? That was what was on Schaefer’s mind. *What else was he possibly qualified for? How else could he have landed a book deal?* Jerald Schaefer was remembering a conversation that he and Stacy had earlier.

They were on his balcony looking at the stars and the dim reflection of the moonlight on the ocean waves. Stacy mused, "Oh, Jerald. Oh, Jerald." His cries carried no romantic ecstasy; they were pleas, the frustrated howl of the oppressed. "When will the world learn?" Stacy said it pensively, as if it were an old lyric from a forgotten song, and Stacy actually thought it might have been. "Can you imagine how beautiful this world will be when we are done here? A world of tolerance, peace, love, unity-

"Don't forget hope," Jerald said flippantly.

"And hope," confirmed Stacy, oblivious that Jerald was humoring him.

"What would you do then?" asked Jerald.

Stacy didn't understand it as the challenge that Jerald had meant. He answered it on face value, "I don't know. I guess I would get married."

"Why on Earth would you want to do that?"

"I don't know. Wouldn't you want to get married?"

"If I was interested in marriage, my dear boy, why would I be wasting time with you?" Jerald laughed.

Stacy folded his arms. Jerald could tell that he had just switched into hurt mode. He could tell that Stacy wanted to follow his jab with some sort of breezy remark, but was currently unable to. His face turned toward the ocean, his eyes strained to look only straight ahead and he was, above everything else, unwaveringly silent.

Jerald laughed again, this time with a little more compassion, the type of laugh that was meant to illustrate that he was only joking – even if he wasn't. He said, "You got one thing wrong though, Stacy. I think you've gotten the wrong idea about something."

Stacy's jaw clenched tighter because he was afraid Jerald was about to say that he had the wrong idea about something involving their relationship.

Instead, Jerald said, "You were wrong to use the phrase 'when we are done here'. We will never be done. We can win and have won victories, but there will always be more fighting to do." Stacy's eyes twitched like he was about to say something but didn't. He was still in silent mode. Jerald guessed what he

might have been thinking and said, “And I don’t say that we will never be done because our mission is so quixotic, it isn’t. I say that we will never be done because we are a movement that is looking for a battle.” Jerald shrugged indifferently, “If we win this one, we’ll move on to the next one. When we win the last battle, we’ll invent another one. We are like that kid, Ridley – I guess people call him Rider – he’s just out looking for a fight. So are we.

“There will always be two different kinds of people in America. There will always be one side that wants to order society one way and another side that disagrees. We can say we hope for no war, but there will always be war. That is how the world works. Just as we can say we hope for unity – that the country is united under *our* values, because that’s the only type of unity ever hoped for – but there will always be dialectic opposition. That is America.”

“Then why bother?”

“You know why,” said Jerald Schaefer, “Because we like the fight.”

Mitch McCarty was looking over his notes behind his foreboding news desk in New York. McCarty’s hair and makeup guy was performing a few finishing touches before the Stacy Oliver exclusive. McCarty turned his eyes to him and casually asked, “Well, what do *you* think of all this?”

The makeup artist shot him an irritated look and held up his left hand, which bore a wedding ring. He said, “You’ve met my wife.”

McCarty stumbled for a second then said, “Wha...Um...uh, I didn’t mean you were gay; I just asked you what you think.”

The makeup artist, having finished, turned to walk off set.

“Lovely woman, that Margret,” McCarty called after him.

“Megan,” the man said.

“Whatever,” laughed McCarty to himself. He made a last minute adjustment to the way his jacket hung on him.

The director gave him a count, “Five, four, three...” then pointed after a silent *two* and *one*.

“Good evening. I’m Mitch McCarty.”

“And I’m Julie Sanford; Veronica Cisneros has the night off.”

The camera zoomed in on McCarty and he continued, “Tonight we take you to southern California in our exclusive interview, via satellite, with gay rights activist and bestselling author of the new book, *I’m Gay, Don’t Shoot!*, Stacy Oliver. As you have probably heard by now, Stacy Oliver was recently arrested in an incident that some are calling police profiling. The arrest has sparked a debate that seems to have affected every one of us. As newscasters, talking heads, politicians and bloggers seem to all be offering their two cents on the issue, Mr. Oliver has remained relatively quiet. But he has agreed to talk to us tonight.”

McCarty shot a proud nod over at Julie Sanford who smiled and nodded back.

“So, without further ado, let’s go to Stacy Oliver,” said McCarty.

A large rectangle appeared on the screen, completely blocking out Julie Sanford, with the feed from the satellite. It showed a live shot of Stacy Oliver, who was still arguing about something inane with one of the camera crew, “...well, I guess that it’s the first time in history that fire has melted steel!” The words, “you’re on, you’re on,” could be heard in the background. Stacy quickly turned to the camera and smiled clumsily.

“Stacy? Stacy, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you, Mitch.”

“We seem to have our live feed working. Um, Stacy, what can you tell us about the arrest?”

“First of all, they shined a light on me and it was really bright...” As Stacy began to tell the story it was difficult, even for McCarty who had to pay attention for a living, to resist tuning him out. Stacy held the glass of *water* in his hands. He was gesturing so wildly that viewers could not help but be more interested in how long it would take for him to spill it on himself, than in any of his words. Those who had guessed one minute and seventeen seconds won the pot. That marked the moment from the start of the feed until Stacy spilled half his drink down the front of his shirt. Stacy did not jump up to grab a towel to wipe it; he continued to tell the story, fully animated, as if he did not

even notice the spill. McCarty nodded on professionally as if he didn't notice the spill nor the overall drunkenness. Jerald saw this and huffed in the corner. The stage hand said to Joey, "It's only water."

McCarty put both of his hands up in an effort to get a word in edgewise. He said, "Stacy, how about...Stacy, how...Stacy, Stacy, how about the reports that Officer Baker has a brother that is homosexual and who he supports?"

As McCarty asked this question, he watched Stacy extend his leg to straighten the pocket of his jeans. He reached in and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He removed the lighter that he usually keeps in the pack and removed a cigarette. Placing it between his lips, he raised his hands to light

it, but stopped to answer the question. "I don't believe he even has a brother," he said out of one side of his mouth as the cigarette dangled from the other.

"You don't believe he has a brother?" Mitch McCarty shifted in his chair.

"No, I don't believe anything that the *corporate media* reports." Stacy lit his cigarette. "All news is run by crypto-fascist, transnational corporations. They are completely controlled by the Masons, Skull and Bones, and the Build-a-Burgers."

"Build a burger?" asked Julie Sanford.

"They make burgers!" insisted Stacy. "They're a bunch of Jews who make burgers and control everything."

Mitch McCarty turned to the camera and spoke to the viewers; he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we do apologize; this is live television. We understand that this is very offensive." McCarty turned to the monitor in which he saw Stacy and said, "I am sorry Mr. Oliver, but I am going to have to ask you to put your cigarette out."

Stacy became livid and began to rant, "You mean to tell me that I don't have the right in this country – rights that Caleb Hertz died for – to smoke a cigarette in my own boyfriend's home."

Mitch McCarty didn't understand. He dropped the issue of the cigarette and promptly asked, confused, "Did you mean, you're inside *Caleb's* old home?"

Stacy's eyes bugged wide. He realized that he had slipped up. "Um...uh..." He began to fidget. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, then put it back in. His hands still continued to gesture, but his non-verbal communication was as uncommitted and truncated as his verbal. "Well, you see...the thing is..." He wanted to say something definitive so he reached for his cigarette, but his hands weren't coordinated with his mouth enough and he opened his mouth to speak before his hands got there to catch it. The cigarette fell from the edge of his lips down to his shirt. When the burning cherry hit the vodka stain, flames burst from his shirt and Stacy let out a high-pitched scream.

"Oh God!" Julie Sanford yelled.

Mitch McCarty put a hand to his forehead.

A thin smile came across the edge of Jerald Schaefer's lips.

Joey nudged the stage hand with his elbow and neither of them did anything to stop it. Stacy continued to scream in an octave somewhere above a high C and tried pat out the flames. All of America watched as only one person on the set lifted a finger to help. A young lady wearing headphones appeared from the edge of the frame, running in to help save Stacy. Unfortunately, she had actually been the person who poured the first glass of water and had not been present when Joey changed it. Having no reason to suspect that the water she poured would no longer be water, she grabbed it and threw it onto Stacy.

The satellite feed went dark.

Mitch McCarty said smiling, "We'll be right back after these messages."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The woman shook nervously behind the bushes in her own front yard, as her newly hired publicist introduced her to the reporters. Samantha Goodwin had hired Victoria Gillespie to act as a liaison between her and what she saw as a *hostile press*. Samantha Goodwin was Ridley Holt's next door neighbor. She was the woman who had dialed 911. Since then, her life had been a nonstop torment.

"We would like to please ask you that once you hear her speak for herself today, you will give her some space..."

As Ms. Gillespie spoke, Samantha Goodwin was hardly listening. She had trouble concentrating much on anything these days. Even her boss had noticed a decline in her performance at work. Whenever she left the house, the press were waiting at her curb. Whenever she made it to work, the press were waiting outside her building. And though the press stayed away from her children's school, she was haunted there by a different scene. Where once she would pick her kids up and they would be standing and laughing, surrounded by other kids, now she would drive up to the schoolyard to find them standing alone. Day after day, they'd run anxiously to her car, throw down their book bags in bitter anger, and slam the door behind them.

Samantha Goodwin began to cry as she thought about this. She never knew what to tell them. It had finally gotten to the point that the FBI instructed her not to take them to school at all. She had been receiving too many death threats. None of them specifically mentioned her children, but no one knew more than Samantha, if someone really wanted to hurt her, there was one easy way to do it.

She was exposed to the hatred of the world. She would forever be vulnerable to the most merciless attacks because she so loved her children. "It will all blow over," she had told her husband optimistically. "This is just the way news is these days. It's so sensational. It will blow over for us, then the press will move on to someone else," she frowned. "It's not the news," her husband said. He looked at the faces of their two children. He knew that he would leave them a worse country than he himself

had grown up in, but he didn't know how it had happened. "It's *something else*," he said with great pain.

"After a brief statement she will be taking questions," said Ms. Gillespie. "She will not answer every question, but these will be the only answers she will give. So, after today, we ask that you please give her and her family some privacy."

Victoria Gillespie turned and nodded to Samantha Goodwin. Amidst flashing bulbs, Samantha Goodwin walked to the improvised podium. Her husband followed alongside her. When she reached the podium, she drew in a deep breath to calm her nerves. She swallowed the lump that was in her throat and before she began, she was already fighting off tears. She said, "First off, I would like to thank all of my family, friends and neighbors who have joined together to help me in my time of need, as well as all the people from all over the country and all over the world who have sent cards and given their support. It has made such a difference to be able to hear your voices, sometimes overlooked, but always loving, always strong, and always...faithful." As she spoke, her husband whispered words of encouragement by her side. She continued, "Second, I would like to say that the way I have been treated is wrong. I have been called a homophobe, a bigot, and a liar. I am none of those things. I was raised by a loving family in an atmosphere of acceptance and Christian charity. I have been taught that all people are children of God and therefore deserving of respect. I respect all genders, race, class, and sexual orientation. I have also been raised to tell the truth and to protect my personal integrity and personal reputation. Yet I have been attacked in the press, in the papers, on television, and on the radio. I have also been receiving hate mail, as well as having my family approached and intimidated." Samantha Goodwin began to cry. As she cried, her husband continued to encourage and strengthen her with his words.

When it looked like her crying was under control, she didn't continue with her statement right away. One reporter deemed the pause long enough to provide an opening. He asked, "Do you think this will have a chilling effect for anyone else who might simply want to report suspicious behavior?"

She answered, "I don't know. I hope not. No one should have to go through what I have been through. It would have been

easier for me to just look the other way that night, but if I hadn't called the cops...who knows what would have happened."

"What effect do you think this will have on the relations between the homosexual and Christian communities?" another reporter asked.

To this, Victoria Gillespie shook her head. Samantha Goodwin looked to her and Ms. Gillespie shook her head again. "Um...No comment...on that one," Samantha Goodwin said.

The husband reached out to grab his wife's arm. He tugged her back toward the house. He wanted the press conference to be over. Samantha Goodwin began to show mannerisms like she was going to give in and stepped one foot back.

The press saw this and hurled their questions at her faster, one on top of the other, aggressive and fierce. Samantha Goodwin looked to Ms. Gillespie and she stepped to the podium. Ms. Gillespie forcefully said, "I am sorry, but this press conference is over."

The reporters continued to shout out questions more angrily as Samantha Goodwin walked away in her husband's arms.

Suddenly there was a ruckus and the press saw Ridley Holt forcefully approach the podium. No one had seen where he had just come from, but his house was obviously next door. Rider quickly nudged the publicist out of his way and said angrily into the microphone, "What is wrong with you people? Have you lost your minds? Can't you see what you're doing? Can't you see the damage you're doing in the name of fighting hate? Can't you see the direction that the hate is coming from? Look what you are doing to innocent people!"

Rider looked at all the lenses in front of him and he picked one. He stared right into it and said, "You should consider this woman a hero." He pointed backward at the house of his neighbor, who was already inside, and said, "This woman saved Stacy Oliver's life. Trust me. Trust me."

Victoria Gillespie said to herself, *This man really needs a publicist.*

"Has this whole country lost its mind? On the one hand, we have a man who we know has a problem with authority. We know he has a problem with people who serve as military and police officers. And, yes, we know that he has a problem with

straight people. He has a chip on his shoulder so large that you can see it from space!

“Then on the other hand, you have a man who serves his community, a man who not only has a gay brother, but took that brother in to live with him when his brother got sick. And you people sit and wonder which one might have acted out of *hate*?

“Stacy Oliver’s hate is on display every day. Stacy Oliver makes a living stoking the flames of division in this country.

“Yesterday, I actually saw a guy come on TV and say, ‘We know that it is common for police to profile; cops are known for their intolerance.’ How can you not see the irony in that? The sentence itself is profiling. The sentence itself is prejudice. How come only the underdog is allowed to be prejudiced? How come the loser is allowed to hate? Why is it that you are allowed to destroy lives in this country, as long as you can act like *you’re* the victim? You people make me sick.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Stephanie was relieved to find that this gas station had one of those new-fangled pay-at-the-pump credit card machines. The last station at which she had to stop in Texas required her to go inside in order to pay. Stephanie felt like she had traveled back in time. This was her second time to need gas in Texas even though she crossed the border with a pretty full tank. The people were perfectly nice, of course, but they wanted to draw her into a conversation. Stephanie told herself that she was not being antisocial; *I just don't want to leave Jackson alone in the car...not in the state he is in.*

She didn't mean Texas.

The real reason that she did not want conversation was because she didn't want to have to duck, dodge, and weave her way around the inevitable question, "Where ya'll headed off to?"

She told one lady behind the counter that she and Jackson were on their honeymoon. That may have been motivated by some wishful thinking. The lady gave her a peculiar look that Stephanie could not identify. Perhaps she figured that she was being lied to because Stephanie had no wedding ring, or perhaps she could not figure out where in West Texas they might be honeymooning.

As soon as Stephanie finished pumping her gas, she stepped back into her car to discover Jackson was awake. "Baby, I would have pumped the gas for you," he said.

"You were asleep," she told him.

"You should have woken me up."

Stephanie didn't say anything. She wanted to tell him that waking him up would defeat the whole point of her demanding to drive. She wanted him asleep the whole way. When he was asleep she didn't have to worry about how he was feeling.

"I'm fine," he said, predicting her thoughts. They weren't hard to predict; it was the pattern that she had been in recently. "Don't worry."

How could she not worry though? The trial was in only six days and she knew that they might be taking him away from her. She started the engine. *Perhaps I just wanted to drive. There's a*

cathartic feeling of the open road – the feeling of fleeing. She was worried about her own state as well.

As she pulled back onto the highway, she turned the music back up. Jackson did not adjust his car seat to its upright position, but stayed reclined, his body slack and relaxed the way she wanted it. “Just go back to sleep,” she pleaded. She saw her purity ring on his left hand. It looked silly on him because it was obviously a girl’s ring. To get it to fit him, he had to wear it on his pinky.

It comforted her. She could not help but think about that first week after Jackson came home on bail. He was doing his usual routine of playing it cool and hiding his feelings. She tried to give him space, even though it meant fighting every impulse she had to try to open him up.

“What happens if they put me in prison?” he finally asked late one night, far past the hour that he had planned to go home.

“Then I will wait for you,” she said earnestly.

“No. It will be too long to wait.”

“Not for a man like you.”

“No, I mean...what if they only let me out when it is already too late for you to have a child?”

Stephanie frowned, “We will just have to trust in God.”

“Don’t you think that the little voice telling you not to wait just might be God?”

Stephanie laughed. “No, because I don’t have a little voice like that.”

“Well, I haven’t been sentenced yet. Don’t you think you might hear something rational in your head saying you deserve better; *you* go be happy.”

Stephanie let out a long sigh, the kind that was frustrated and sweet. Jackson had heard it many times. He missed it while in Afghanistan. She put her hand on top of his hand. She adjusted her purity ring on her finger so that the face of it pointed upward. She said, “This ring symbolizes a promise. It’s not just about abstinence. It’s a promise based on a belief that there is one person that we are meant to find. Without the belief in a soul mate, the purity ring doesn’t make much sense. This ring means that I believe there is one man I will always be with, and in a way, *have* always been with. I have been waiting for you since

before I met you, and I will continue to wait for you as long as it takes.”

As she spoke, she was looking down at the ring. With her other hand she rotated it back and forth on her finger. When she finally looked back up toward Jackson, he had tears in his eyes. He placed his hand on her cheek and drew his face in to kiss her. He kissed her gently for a long time, the tenderness and sincerity of his touch caused her to tear up also.

When she finally pulled her head back, she quickly yanked the ring off her finger and placed it in his palm. She said, “I think you need this more than I do. You’re the one who has a hard time remembering the promise I made.”

After that day, Jackson went back to *playing it cool* – as he saw it, or *clamming up* – as she saw it. That was the last day that she had seen him release all that tension and pain through expression and through tears. Stephanie had done a magnificent job of resisting the urge to tell the Marine, “You need to cry.”

She saw the sight she was waiting for on the horizon, so she turned down the radio. As soon as she did, she was able to hear Jackson’s quiet snore. She was unaware that he had fallen asleep again so quickly. Hearing his gentle snore reminded her of how much she loved everything about him. She had turned down the radio to say something to him, but did not want to interrupt his sleeping. When she finally woke him, the Dallas skyline was no longer peaking over the horizon, but looming over the two of them. “Wow,” he said, “looks like we’re here.”

When they got out of the car in the middle of downtown Dallas, Jackson began to feed coins to the parking meter. He turned the lever for one hour, looked at Stephanie, then added more coins for another hour. With two hours on the meter he frowned, looked over the spread of alleys before them and added even more coins. “We’ll have to remember where we parked,” he said tonelessly.

For the next three hours they searched, winding down one alley and then the next, intentionally seeking out the more desolate turns. They headed south. “There’s one,” Stephanie would say as she saw a drain pipe fastened to a wall. Jackson would immediately rush to it and try to pry it away from the

brick and the stone, but he never found anything behind them. As the hours drug on, his actions became less enthusiastic.

Stephanie tried to hide her frustration with what she was seeing as a futile effort. She tried to keep her voice steady when she said, "We should probably get a hotel. We can come back and look more tomorrow."

"Not yet," said Jackson and his stride lengthened, making it harder for her to keep up.

"I think our meter has expired, did you look at the time?"

"It will be fine," he said dismissingly.

"Jackson, you already checked that one," she said as he bent down to investigate a drain pipe. "I think we are going in circles."

"It wasn't this one, it was different."

"No Jackson, I am telling you, we've been here before."

"Would you just let me do this?" he shouted.

After that, Stephanie didn't say another word. He knew that she was a little mad, but he knew that she would give him enough slack to be a little rude. He took it. The rest of the time they searched in total silence. When they returned to their car, there was a parking ticket underneath her windshield wiper. Still she did not say anything. Jackson felt pretty stupid.

In their hotel room, she finally spoke. The entire time she had been silent, her mind was repeating one sentence. As soon as she decided to say it, she would instantly decide not to say it. She finally said, "It's not going to bring him back, you know," then instantly wished she hadn't said it.

He didn't answer for a while. He was angry, not really at her, but at the whole situation, maybe even at God. He was frustrated that he could not find what he was searching for. He told her, "You didn't know him. He never quit. Caleb would have searched every drain pipe in Dallas, every single one. That's just how he was. What kind of tribute would it be to him, if I did any less?"

Stephanie reached for him and held him. She kissed his neck and said, "Well, let's get to bed then. We've got a long day tomorrow."

The next day was Saturday, so the parking was free. The sky looked dark and Stephanie feared that it might rain. She asked

herself if Jackson would be so crazy as to keep this search up in the pouring rain. She knew she didn't have an answer to the retort, "*Caleb* would. Caleb wouldn't quit just because of a little rain."

After five hours, it hadn't started to rain, but the sky was getting darker and the alleys they were heading down appeared less and less safe. Stephanie drew her body in close to Jackson's arm every time they would pass any homeless. She was wrapped up pretty tight in his arm when they heard the sound of water splash under their feet. They could see far down the alley to where a group of homeless men had started a fire. Jackson crouched down to investigate the drainpipe as he had the hundreds before. The tips of his fingers, already calloused and a little bit bloody, struggled to get some space between the pipe and the wall. When he did this, he saw something wedged behind it. It was grimy and black, the exact color of the entire alley. It felt stiff, like thin cardboard; Jackson did not think this was the treasure for which they had been hunting. He dipped it quickly into the water from the drain and wiped it off. The bright red he discovered underneath was as bright as a new dawn, the only splash of color in the bleak colorless alley.

Jackson, already crouching, had to lower himself down to the ground. He sat with his jeans right in the puddle of water and didn't even notice. He didn't show Stephanie what he found, in fact, he suddenly felt all alone in the world. He had not expected the emotions that hit him. He said, "Caleb was here," looking at the alley. He suddenly realized that it was not just the symbol, but a real piece of Caleb's history. "Caleb was here. He fought for his life here. He almost died here." Jackson broke down in tears. Stephanie fell to the ground too and wrapped her arms around him as he began to wail, "Oh God, I am so sorry. I am so sorry. Caleb, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Please forgive me."

CHAPTER THRITY-EIGHT

Inside the courtroom, Jackson could not take his eyes off Michael Ponce. He had not seen him since the day that Caleb died. Something had changed, not just in Michael Ponce's face, but his whole presence. His shoulders slumped lower, he seemed shorter. Despite the slouching, his mannerisms did not convey a feeling of languor. He had a unique energy to him, a nervous, caffeinated energy. His wrists looked wiry and his eyes twitchy. The lines on his face had grown deeper. He seemed to have aged, but without the benefit of the serenity that comes with age. He had the face of an older man, but the petulant sneer of a teenager...and the agitated glare of a true believer.

In this fight, as in any fight, there was a full spectrum of combatants. There were those who merely sought attention, like Stacy; those who would rather destroy the other side than build up their own, like the vandals and the protesters; those who simply liked to fight, like Jerald Schaefer; and a very narrow category of true believers, those who actually just believe in the cause. There are fewer of these at any one moment than most people think.

Jackson was not sure of when it happened, but at some point between the day that Caleb died and the day of Jackson's trial, Michael Ponce had become a true believer. Michael Ponce had made this fight his own.

"What I will show you today is that Jackson Brooks is not only guilty of murder, Jackson Brooks is guilty of *hate*," the prosecuting attorney was already beginning his opening statement.

Jackson Brooks sat in the front of the courtroom behind a desk with his lawyer, Joseph Landry. Landry reached over to give Jackson two gentle pats on the side of his arm, as if to remind him of what he said earlier: "Don't let any of this get to you today. Their attempts to smear you will only illustrate their lack of facts. Once we win this thing, the only person left defining your character will be you."

"And if we don't win?"

The pause that Landry made was not meant to be dramatic, it was only the time necessary to deliberate whether he had to sugar coat bad news to a Marine. He said, "You go to prison."

"Think about that," the prosecuting attorney continued to the jury. "Is hate a crime? Is it a crime to hate someone? It might shock a few of you here to know that it is. Depending on your viewpoint, you might be pleased or disappointed to know that we are not here today to debate the legitimacy of having hate crime laws. We are not, let me repeat, not here to discuss the use or legality of hate crime laws. Those laws are already on the books. Your job as a jury is to follow the laws of this country as they are written and to determine if Jackson Brooks was in violation of those laws. More specifically, we are here today to determine if Jackson Brooks is guilty of *unlawful hatred*. I plan to demonstrate that he is."

Jackson wore Stephanie's purity ring on his finger. Her engagement ring was in a box in his right pocket. He held in his hand the red flag he had found in Dallas. If they were going to take him straight to prison, they needed to know – by his personal effects – just what type of life was being put on hold, and what type of promises were going to be stuffed in an envelope and filed into a drawer. Jackson wanted the first thing he got his hands on upon regaining his freedom, besides Stephanie herself, to be those two rings and one inspiring symbol.

The prosecutor's name was Albert Randolph. He was big city raised and ivy league educated. Growing up he once wanted to be a fireman, but after twenty-three years of schooling, at some point he decided to be a lawyer. Last night he could not sleep, not from nerves, but from excitement. He was like a child on Christmas Eve. Visions of incarcerations danced in his head. He salivated to see his name in print the way a rock star longs to see his name on a marquee. He pictured his reception at the cocktail parties – in ballrooms with more glitz and glamour than Jackson or Caleb had ever seen – with a new appendage added to his title. Albert Randolph, the man who convicted Jackson Brooks. Albert Randolph, the man who avenged the Caleb Hertz murder. Albert Randolph, the man who, for one sparkling

moment, stood up and did something great with his life, something noble.

“Just so you know, the defense is going to bring out a lot of witnesses that will testify to a different version of the story of what happened. Do not believe them. There’s an easy step to uncover their lies; one must simply reflect on the infectious nature of hate, of prejudice, of intolerance. With a deeper understanding of the principles at work – the same principles that once motivated the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the McCarthy hearings, and the men who not so long ago turned fire hoses on people in this country – you will see that hatred acts like the current of a tidal wave, drawing everything and everyone into its path. Hatred is a cancer that spreads. Hatred leads to hysteria, and hysteria leads people – sometimes even heroic people – to act out of ignorance and fear.

“It is only when we understand these principles that we can understand how one, twenty, or even twenty thousand testimonies can and should be viewed as different mouthpieces for the same big lie. Do not underestimate the power of mob mentality. Do not suppose that it is harder for two dozen men to lie at the same time, than for one man to lie on his own. My friends, it is *easier!*”

Caleb’s mother entered the courtroom. It was obvious to anyone who looked at Cheryl Hobbs that she had not been late. The interruptions in her eye-liner, combined with the hurried attempts to repair it, were clues that she had been crying. She’d had a hard time convincing herself to walk through those doors. Jackson turned his head to see what everyone was looking at. He and Cheryl inadvertently made eye contact and Jackson quickly looked away. He could not bear to face her, not in that moment. It was too much pain and guilt to deal with now. He could feel it burning his face like a hot coal.

By the time Cheryl Hobbs sat down, people realized that they had not been the only one who stopped everything to watch her. There was no motion and no sound in the courtroom until she sat down.

After a brief opening statement from Jackson’s attorney, the prosecution began to call their witnesses.

“Were you in contact with Caleb Hertz during the time he bravely served his country?” The first witness to take the stand was Stacy Oliver.

“Yes, I was.” Stacy’s tone sounded half like a beauty contestant and half like a man on a quiz show who had just hit his buzzer.

“How were you in contact?”

“Through letters.”

“And what did Mr. Hertz’s letters to you say?”

“They spoke of desperation, lonely and frightened desperation.”

Jackson watched him curiously. He realized that he could not look at Stacy Oliver without picturing the mug shot of him that had circulated all over the internet.

“When you say frightened, what do you mean?” asked Randolph.

“I mean scared for his life.”

“You mean of the terrorists?”

“I mean of the *Americans*,” said Stacy.

Albert Randolph was a bad actor, he asked in artless feigned astonishment, “The Americans?”

Stacy leaned far into the microphone and tilted his face toward, not the jury, but the television cameras and said robotically, “That is correct.”

“Did Mr. Hertz mention which Americans he was afraid of?”

“Yes, he did.” Stacy now sounded a little bit like the car in Knight Rider.

“Is the man that Mr. Hertz claimed to fear most in this courtroom today?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Can you point to that man?”

“There he is!” Stacy’s excitement appeared to have been suddenly unleashed. He dramatically stood up out of his chair, shouting, “That’s your man, *Jackson Brooks*!” The way that Stacy stressed his name was like the way an old fire and brimstone preacher would say the name Satan.

Stacy was a bit disappointed when there was no murmur in the audience, no dowager in the back gasping or fainting. The Judge did not pound on his gavel, and no one came to

immediately lead Jackson away in handcuffs. One of the jurors coughed twice. He could have been sending an audible message, but he was probably just clearing his throat. The prosecuting attorney whispered, "Please sit down."

When it was finally time for Jackson's attorney to cross examine Stacy, it did not even go *that* smoothly. "Can you show us the letters that Caleb allegedly wrote you?" asked Landry.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because they no longer exist."

"No longer? What happened to them?"

"They were destroyed in a fire."

There was a sound from the audience of a laugh being stifled. Stacy knew that at least one person must have seen his last TV appearance.

"Did you call the fire department when this happened?"

"I put it out myself."

"Did you file an insurance claim?"

"Nothing else was burned besides my letters."

"How do you explain a fire that burnt only Caleb's letters?"

"I was so distraught after he was murdered by *that man* there..."

Joseph Landry held up his hand preemptively and said, "Please stay seated."

"I was so distraught over Caleb's death that I thought I might give drinking a shot. I accidentally spilled my drink onto the letters, *while I was crying*, and accidentally lit them on fire with the end of my cigarette." Stacy had discovered that all the best lies are borrowed from reality.

"And these alleged letters had been sent to you while Caleb was in boot camp?"

"Most of them."

"What color was Caleb's stationery?"

"Um, blue." The word blue almost sounded like a question.

"All of them were blue?"

There was a look of panic in Stacy's eyes. He felt like he should not answer but could not see the harm in such a small part of a much bigger lie. He said unsurely, "Ye-es."

"No further questions."

The next witness that the prosecution called was Michael Ponce.

The bailiff brought over a Bible for Michael Ponce to place his left hand on as he swore the oath. Michael Ponce took one look at the Bible and asked, “Are you kidding me?” His tone was snarky and though the bailiff was simply taken aback by his rudeness, Michael Ponce took the hesitation as an indication that the bailiff didn’t understand. He repeated, “Are you kidding me?”

The bailiff drew the Bible back to the side of his leg and Michael Ponce recited the oath without it.

“I, Michael Ponce, do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” Michael Ponce repeated after the bailiff. The bailiff wisely left off the, “So help me God.”

“Mr. Ponce, can you describe what happened on the day that Mr. Hertz died?” Randolph asked him.

“Yes, I can.”

“How is it that you are able to tell us?”

“Because I was there.”

“You were there.” It was a statement, not a question. Randolph made eye contact with the members of the jury. He was anxious to get straight to the story from someone who saw it firsthand.

“Yes, I was working as an embedded reporter for the *Times*.”

“And how were you treated?”

“Miserably.”

“Mr. Ponce, please tell us what you saw.”

“I saw Private First Class Jackson Brooks shoot Private First Class Caleb Hertz right in the head.” When Michael Ponce said these words, he used so much conviction and passion that the entire courtroom loudly gasped. Stacy Oliver jealously huffed.

“Was it intentional?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think Private First Class Brooks would do that?”

“Because Jackson Brooks has been taught to hate – first by the Bible, then by our own government.”

When it was Joseph Landry's turn to ask the questions, he got up to face Michael Ponce and asked, "You said that they treated you miserably, can you give me an example?"

"Um," Michael Ponce looked at the television cameras in the room and squirmed a bit. He continued softly, "They convinced me that I had to eat a scorpion."

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"They tricked me into eating a scorpion. Only it wasn't really a scorpion; it was a chocolate-covered pretzel."

"What did you do after that?"

"I threw up."

"Why did they pull this prank on you?"

"Objection, Your Honor, he would have to ask them."

"Thank you Mr. Randolph, I will."

Just as the Judge was giving Landry a dirty look for talking out of turn, the witness went ahead and answered the question, "It was because they didn't like my article."

Landry looked over to the Judge, almost asking for permission, the Judge nodded. Presenting a copy of the article from his briefcase, Landry asked, "Is this the Pulitzer Prize winning article in question titled, 'I'd Kill for My Father's Love'?" He showed it to Michael Ponce.

Michael Ponce examined it. "Yes, it is."

"If they hated Private First Class Hertz so much, why would they have played such active roles in exacting his revenge?"

"Perhaps they just hated me more."

"Hmm," Landry stopped as if he were considering it. "That's the funny thing about revenge. It never seems to end. Is it possible that you could now be seeking revenge against them?"

"No."

"How can we be sure?"

"I'm a reporter. I make a living being impartial."

What happened next was something that neither side in a murder trial would ever want to happen in response to something they said – one of the jurors laughed.

"Just one more question, can you tell us why they nicknamed you *Mellow Yellow*?"

"Objection, Your Honor," yelled the prosecution. At the exact same time that the Judge was saying, "Sustained," and

Landry was saying, “No further questions Your Honor,” Michael Ponce was already on his feet behind the witness stand, waving his finger at the defense attorney and looking alternatively at him and the camera, yelling, “That’s a lie. It was never my nickname. That is a bald-faced lie. That illustrates the hate!” He was shouting and turned to the jury. “That right there illustrates the hate.”

The next witness that the prosecution called was Terrence Brown. Albert Randolph asked Terrence to describe what Caleb went through in boot camp. Terrence reluctantly described every gruesome detail, knowing full well that the Judge, the jury, and the whole world now had copies of his email that would betray him if he lied. “But, you have lied before about this very issue, have you not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you then think of any reason why I should trust you now?”

“It doesn’t matter, sir.”

“What doesn’t matter?” Randolph asked, taken off guard.

“If you trust me or not, sir.”

“Why wouldn’t it matter?”

“Because you have not asked me anything at all related to this trial.” Randolph suddenly became very cautious, as if he had just learned the garden snake he had been manhandling was poisonous after all. Leaving the issue unresolved, he turned to the Judge, “No further questions Your Honor.”

Promptly the defense attorney, with a smirk on his face, picked right up where Terrence left off. He asked him, “Can you think of a reason why Randolph would have taken such an interest in what happened to Caleb at boot camp?”

“Because he’s a hypocrite. He talks on and on about hate, but he has no problem impugning certain groups he doesn’t agree with, in this case the military. How is lumping all servicemen together different from lumping all homosexuals together? We saw it when the media judged Jackson for being a Christian and Officer Baker for being a cop. And, if someone thinks that the worst trait in the world is intolerance, then

intolerant is the worst name he or she could call anyone. It sounds to me like the hate is coming from their side.”

“Sir, can you please tell the jury how you know that PFC Hertz never wrote letters on blue stationery as a recruit?”

“Because we weren’t allowed any, sir.”

“There was no blue stationery?”

“The only paper we could ever get was this crazy Marine stationery that you had to buy at the PX, sir.”

“So at no time while you, or the other recruits, were in boot camp could you have gained access to blue stationery?”

“No, sir.”

When it was time for Brit to take the stand, Randolph continued to try to smear all Marines. “Tell us *your* opinion, what do you think of the repeal of the *don’t ask, don’t tell* policy?” Randolph asked.

“Well, sir, on the one hand-” Brit began very measured, but was interrupted.

“It’s very simple, either you want our country to give homosexuals the right to serve openly or you don’t. Which is it?”

“Sir, the thing is, I-”

“Are you for homosexual rights, yes or no?” Randolph interrupted again.

Brit hesitated. He did not even attempt to answer.

“Yes or no?”

“Go ahead, Sergeant,” said the Judge.

“Your Honor, I am unable to answer the question as Mr. Randolph requests, due to my oath.”

“Explain yourself,” said the Judge.

“Well, Your Honor, I put my hand on the Bible and swore to tell the whole truth, but Mr. Randolph here keeps wanting to force me into half truths.”

There was laughter from the crowd. Even the Judge smiled slightly. He turned to Brit and dipped his head. It was part nod, part nudge. He said, “Why don’t you give us a full report, Marine?”

Brit smiled broadly back at the Judge. He felt like a child who had impressed his father.

“Go ahead, answer the question,” the Judge prodded when Brit hesitated too long.

Brit said, “Which question, Your Honor? Should I address the way he actually asked it, or the way he really meant for the question to be understood?” Again the room was filled with a mix of murmurs and laughs. Brit smirked proudly. Through the corner of his eye, he thought he saw the defense attorney shaking his head in fast, short passes. When he turned to the Judge, he saw that the proud father face was replaced by that of a stern federal judge. *Oops, too far.*

“You scored some points earlier son, but now you are trying my patience.”

Brit sat up much taller and squared his shoulders to the front. “Yes, sir, Your Honor,” he said quickly. Randolph’s face showed irritation when Brit began, “I am for whatever is best for the military. Our military spending is not to be used for creating jobs. It is not welfare. Our military spending is meant to protect us. I am for using the military to do that in the best way possible. I happen to love that in the process of building better warriors, as a happy bi-product, the military creates better citizens and better people. I would love for that happy bi-product to be available to everyone, but not at the expense of the original purpose. I am happy to let the experts, the military upper brass, decide what is best and wherever they land, I side with them.”

“I believe the general consensus among the military higher-ups is that homosexuals should not serve openly, so that is your stance as well?”

“Wherever they land, I side with them, sir.”

“So that means that you are against it?”

“I side with what is believed to be best for the military, sir.”

“So then you are against homosexuals in the military?”

The Judge sighed. “Now, Mr. Randolph, *you* are trying my patience. He answered your question. You’re not going to get him to say he hates homosexuals; stop fishing.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Without missing a beat, Randolph turned back to Brit, “Mr. Sparks, do you think it would be *fair* to a homosexual if he were forbidden to serve?”

“Life’s not fair, sir,” Brit answered too quickly, but immediately added, “No, it’s not fair, but the United States Marine Corps does not exist to be fair.”

When Teflon took the stand, the prosecution showed him a photograph of a Marine pointing a gun at Caleb. “Is this you in the photo watching on the left, Mr. Castillo?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“To the best of your knowledge, was the gun being pointed at Caleb Hertz loaded?”

“Yes, sir, it was.”

“Can you explain why, if Caleb’s life was at stake, you stood there doing nothing?”

“Um, well, we never thought he was *really* in danger. You don’t understand what is happening in this photo, sir.”

“Well, by all means, explain it to us.”

“Well, sir, to be honest, Rider didn’t offer Caleb a very warm welcome.”

“It doesn’t look like it,” Randolph confirmed as he looked at the photo.

“So, Caleb wanted to get back at him.”

“Caleb wanted to get back at *him*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, how – pray tell – does putting a gun to your own chest help you to get back at someone?”

Teflon shrugged. It was not the type of shrug that would indicate that he didn’t know the answer to the question; it indicated, rather, that he could not understand why the question was asked. He said, “It happens all the time, sir. As unintuitive as it sounds, sometimes the best way to hurt someone is to put the weapon in their hands and purposely turn it onto yourself.” Teflon looked over at the television cameras in the courtroom. He added, “Providing, of course, that people are watching.”

When Rider took the stand everyone recognized his face from the news. Joseph Landry and even Jackson himself felt a little bit nervous about what he might say.

“Mr. Holt, how do you feel about homosexuals?” Randolph asked boldly, right out of the gate.

“They give me the creeps,” said Rider calmly. He added, “If you are trying to paint every one of us Marines as xenophobic, let me save you some time, sir. Some of us are. At least, we often can be. Patterns exist in the world, sir. Stereotypes do not materialize out of nothing. If you are asking if I like homosexuals, I don’t. But I liked PFC Hertz.”

“Let me ask you, Mr. Holt,” The attorney held up the infamous photo, “Do you always threaten people you *like* with violent death?”

Rider said calmly, “I hadn’t gotten to know him yet, sir.” There were a few stray laughs from the courtroom. Rider added quickly, “Listen, if we accept the new hijacked definition of the word *judgmental*, I am proud to be judgmental. I was raised to be judgmental, sir. But, what is important to remember about being judgmental is to judge the group by the actions of the group, and the person by the actions of the person.” He turned to the jury, “To some of you that sounds malicious, but listen to what the prosecuting attorney, himself, told you that he is trying to do; he is trying to get you to judge Jackson by the actions of the rest of us.”

“Just try to answer my questions,” reminded Randolph before scurrying to the next question, but when it was time for Jackson’s attorney to get a crack at him, Landry broached the subject again.

“So, you make no bones about your right to judge people by their actions. What is your judgment of my client?” he motioned to Jackson.

“I appreciate the chance to make myself clear, sir. I don’t believe in judging a person’s soul – that’s up to God – and I don’t believe in snap judgments.”

“Did you make a snap judgment about Mr. Hertz?”

“Yes, I did, and I regret it. Before you can judge a person, you must know them. And there is no better way to know a man than to fight with him. I fought with both PFC Brooks and PFC Hertz. I am the man who can now tell you the truth.”

Landry smiled. He said, “Well, please tell us the truth.”

Rider turned to the jury, “Gay activists get so mad about us not liking them, but they don’t like us either. There might just be something unbridgeable between typical homosexuals and

typical Marines. For some people, that's a concept that keeps them awake at night. *They* are the ones who are afraid of differences. I embrace differences. They want to make everyone the same, or pretend they are the same if they aren't.

"That all being said, sir," Rider continued, "PFC Hertz was not your typical homosexual and PFC Brooks is not your typical Marine. These are two men who would have been friends no matter what. Caleb acted so admirable that he did not need Jackson's tolerance, and Jackson was so tolerant that he did not require Caleb to be so admirable.

"It was his Christianity, by the way, that guided PFC Brooks' tolerance. Men behind the pulpit say that homosexual acts are an abomination, but walk into any church and they will tell you to love the sinner, hate the sin. The Bible says that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God, but it also says that whatever you do to the least of His brothers, you do to Christ. And, the Apostle Paul orders bluntly, 'consider others better than yourself,' a goal that I have never accomplished... but Jackson has. Jackson Brooks has."

Rider pointed to Jackson. He said, "I know this man, sir. I have fought with this man. This man is something beautiful and rare in this world, and becoming rarer. Don't let his life be ruined by their hate."

The first witness called by the defense was Trey Tucker. When Trey stood up, a hush fell over the courtroom. Every head turned to where he had been sitting in the aisle. The skill with which Trey reached to grab the bench in front of him and used the muscles of his remaining leg to raise his body up was testimony to how hard he had been working at his physical rehabilitation – just as hard as he had worked at becoming a Marine. His younger brother was with him. Everyone could see the patience on his younger brother's face. Jackson could guess that it was a patience learned slowly by attempting to help Trey with everyday activities and getting yelled at every time he tried. His brother handed him his crutch.

Trey's brother was scheduled to start basic training in San Diego at the end of the month.

The courtroom remained silent, so every motion that Trey made seemed to echo against the smooth tile floors. His crutch clonked loudly against the hardened old wood of the benches as he struggled to free himself from the cramped space. Once he was into the clear aisle, he took longer strides, his shoe and the tip of his crutch squeaking alternatively against the ground. Every mouth in the courtroom was dry.

Jackson had not seen Trey since he was injured, but everything Caleb described was true. Trey had almost literally lost half of his body. His left arm and leg had been amputated, and the side of his face had been severely burned. Jackson imagined some sort of Ray Bradbury fantasy world where reflecting mirrors could magically copy his perfect side onto his injured side, making him as flawless and pristine as he had been in Caleb's artwork. His empty left pant leg had been cut and stitched closed into a neat cuff. His left arm sleeve was the same way. The left side of his face still contained splotches of black, red and purple. The texture of his skin was like a candle that had been lit and re-lit. His right nostril was fine, but his left nostril was nothing more than a hole in the burnt flesh that traveled from his nose onto his cheek without distinction. The only remaining bump of his ear did not look human.

Trey slowly made his way down the aisle and into the center of the room on his way to the witness stand. As he passed the jurors box, one of the jurors stood up. As Trey continued to walk – carefully planting his crutch at a reasonable distance, followed by a small hop – other jurors continued to stand. Jackson stood also, followed by his lawyer. As the very last juror stood, Jackson raised his hand in salute to Trey. Finally, the entire bench of the prosecution reluctantly rose.

Stacy rolled his eyes.

When Trey lowered himself down into the seat behind the witness stand, everyone sat back down. The bailiff walked over to swear him in. He asked Trey to raise his right hand. Out of sheer repetition, the bailiff clumsily displayed a Bible for Trey to place his left hand on. Realizing, red-faced, that Trey had no left hand, the bailiff quickly drew the Bible back to his side.

The bailiff began the pledge for Trey to repeat after him.

“Hold on,” interrupted Trey. He pointed back down at the Bible by the Bailiff’s side and motioned for him to bring it back. Slowly, using his only hand, he grabbed one side of his left sleeve cuff and put the other between his teeth. A few short tugs separated the weak stitching to open the end of the sleeve. Everyone held their breath. They wondered if he was doing what they thought he was doing. As soon as the sleeve was opened, he pulled it up over what was left of his arm. If seen out of context, the people there would have had a hard time identifying it as human. The end, just above where the elbow had been, tapered into a smooth round tip. It had many scars from burns, but fewer than the left side of his face. Upon displaying his arm, Trey said apologetically, “I know this might be offensive to some, but it’s the best I have to offer.” His voice was gentle; most people did not hear him. When he placed it on the Bible, everyone in the room saw a torn, charred, tragic, and tenacious old American flag. There was just enough of the tattoo still visible for people to identify what it had been. Jackson’s imagination filled in every missing star and every missing stripe. The women in the jury all began to wipe their eyes. Jackson did also. None of the disturbing feelings he had felt in his dreams remained. His tears were not sad, but inspired.

Trey said to the bailiff’s prompting, “I, Trey Tucker, do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

Landry breathed deep, he approached Trey respectfully and began his questions, “Private First Class Tucker, you attended boot camp with Jackson Brooks and Caleb Hertz, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What can you tell us about their friendship?”

“They were close, sir.”

“How close?”

“As close as two people who had been through Hell together can be.”

“I am sorry to ask this, but can you tell us how you obtained your injuries? It was a suicide bomber, wasn’t it?”

“Objection, Your Honor,” cried Randolph.

“Your Honor, I called Private First Class Tucker here today to provide expert testimony into the decision making process inside a war zone.”

“Overruled. Go on, counselor.”

Landry turned back to Trey. He was about to begin his question again, but Trey interrupted him. “If you are asking me if I could have avoided my fate, I ask myself the same question every time I wake up in pain, every time the pain prevents me from going back to sleep, every time I walk past a pretty girl and her eyes are strait forward like she is petrified, like she is dead; too polite to stare, but having to fight not to take one more look, as if looking at a train wreck. I have asked that question every time that I’ve had to endure the *torture hour*, the agonizing process of removing and replacing my bandages – could I have prevented this?”

“And?”

“I could have, sir,” he said quietly, almost a whisper, “if I had acted sooner; if I had deliberated one second less, maybe even a fraction of a second. But, had I done that, I would have taken the chance of shooting an innocent person, and I then would have had to live with that decision.” Trey threw up his only good hand. “These are your choices, you know?” He breathed in a deep and pensive breath. “Michael Ponce has never had to make one like that. Stacy Oliver has never had to make one, and the prosecuting attorney has most likely never had to make one.” He turned to the jury and said firmly, “*You* have to make one, all of you. If you convict Jackson Brooks and you are wrong, then you will have destroyed the life of an innocent. You twelve are standing in a thick sandstorm. But, unlike the two of us, you have time to decide. Take your time. Take a good look. I trust that you will see the true face of Private First Class Jackson Brooks. If you hurt this innocent you will regret it for the rest of your life. You will have made the same mistake he did.”

“No further questions,” Jackson’s attorney said as he retook his seat.

The prosecuting attorney walked slowly over to the stand.

“You mean to tell us that once a person has been through boot camp with someone, they are suddenly incapable of

murdering them?” Randolph asked gently to start the cross-examination.

“Sir, I am saying that PFC Brooks is incapable of murder, period.”

“Except for Muslims, you mean? He has murdered Muslims?”

“He has killed terrorists, if that’s what you mean.”

“Aren’t Muslims, just like homosexuals, someone with a different lifestyle, different set of beliefs, someone...well...*different*? Jackson has proven that he is capable of murdering people like that, hasn’t he?”

“Sir, are you saying that Jackson Brooks, myself, and all of our fellow Marines, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and anyone who has proudly served this country in uniform are all murderers, or potential murderers?”

Randolph froze. It was in the following second that he made, unwittingly, uncontrollably, a crucial blunder – a rookie mistake. He shot a quick glance over to the faces of the jury, just as a misbehaving child instantly and instinctively turns to see if his mother saw what he had just done. They did see it. They also saw the look on his face – guilty. “No,” is all he said before quickly choosing a different path. “Returning to your assertion that Marines having served together are likely to form a bond, can you describe that bond?”

“It’s a brotherhood, sir. We put our lives in each other’s hands. There is nothing we wouldn’t do for each other.”

“Even lie for each other?”

“I’m not lying, sir.”

“But there’s really no way for us to ever know, because you would lie to protect Mr. Brooks. We know that – it’s a brotherhood; you have all but admitted it.”

“Then why wouldn’t I side with PFC Hertz? How is he different than Jackson?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“Not to me.”

“Because he is gay,” Randolph said boldly, “You would treat him differently because he was gay.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Did you once...treat him differently because he was gay?”

Trey's face became very sad, more filled with pain and regret than Jackson himself had considered this callous Marine capable of. Something amazing happened for Jackson in that second. Trey's expressions became so genuine and so filled with raw humanity that Jackson no longer saw the burns. Just as with Old Glory in the moment before, Jackson's imagination had filled in the missing pieces of Trey's unblemished face.

"Mr. Tucker, can you tell us how you treated Caleb Hertz?" Randolph became impatient.

"Badly."

"Badly? Isn't that an understatement?"

"Yes, sir, it is." As Trey spoke, Jackson was amazed to see more flashes of his old charisma still coming through. The more he stared at him, the more the burns seemed to disappear. Trey's good-looking, rugged self seemed ultimately undaunted.

Randolph pushed on, "Didn't you and your fellow recruits, in fact, throw a blanket over his head and beat him within an inch of his life?"

"Yes, sir, we did."

"What did you use to hit him?"

Trey flustered a bit, it was obvious that he wanted to avoid the question. His instinct was to say something evasive like, "I don't recall," but he knew that sounding like a liar would not help Jackson's case. He said, "Our fists."

"And?"

"Our boots,"

"And?"

"Pillowcases,"

"Filled with?"

"Anything hard and heavy."

"And,"

"Stop!" pleaded Trey.

"What else did you beat him with?" yelled the attorney.

Trey just shook his head, both his eyes drawn painfully closed.

"Why?" asked the attorney, "At least answer me that, why?"

"Because he was gay!" exclaimed Trey. Trey now met his eyes. The two of them stared at each other, just as he and Caleb once did on the bus. This time Trey looked away. He turned his

face sharply away from Randolph, toward the jury. "I'll tell you what you want to know," he said. "I will tell you all of it." He was silent for a moment. The whole courtroom was. When he finally began to speak, he left his head turned in that awkward position. It was not uncommon for a witness desiring to get his point across to look at the jury; however Trey surprised everyone when he addressed his statements toward Caleb's mom. "Ms. Hobbs," he called out with his powerful voice. "Ms. Hobbs, I want you to look at me." He asked her to look at him, although he himself did not look at her. The Judge and the prosecuting attorney found this behavior strange but neither one of them stopped him. They did not want to be viewed as badgering the wounded Marine. Also, they wanted to see where he was going. He continued to look at the jury, but spoke directly to Cheryl Hobbs. He said, "When people used to look at me, ma'am, they saw a man who was handsome, confident and respectable." Slowly people began to realize that Trey was turning his head that way to hide all of his burns from Cheryl Hobbs's sight. From her vantage point, only Trey's healthy skin was visible. There was no clue on his face that he had suffered any injury at all. "When I looked at your son, ma'am, I saw only a homosexual. I saw someone weak. I saw someone different. I saw someone miserable. But I was wrong. I was vicious to him. I hurt him, abused him. I was the man behind everything that you heard, no one else, only me. I am sorry. I am so sorry, ma'am. I know now that I was the one who was weak. I was the one who was different and miserable. On the outside I looked like a hero, on the inside I was just," Trey turned to face the Judge, "a monster."

The effect it had from Cheryl's angle was Trey's handsome face turning suddenly to one covered in painful scars. It was unsettling. He turned his face slowly to look her fully in the eyes. Half hero, half monster. He confessed the whole truth of the man he was. He said, "I'm so sorry. I was a monster. I am so sorry about what I did to your boy. He wasn't different. He was just like the rest of us – sometimes weak, sometimes strong; sometimes brave, sometimes scared; sometimes natural and beautiful, sometimes unnatural and scarred. But we grew together. We grew together, ma'am." Trey repeated the

statement hoping people would understand the double meaning. “Caleb was a hero, and heroes like Caleb never die. Every Marine lives on in the Corps.” Trey pulled his shirt sleeve up and displayed the wounded flag. “He lives on in the Red, White and Blue. He lives on in the courage that future Marines will desperately search for within, because when they find the strength to never quit, never once quit, they will find your son Caleb.”

The last person to testify as a witness in the trial was Cheryl Hobbs, Caleb’s mother. Jackson’s attorney had been in contact with her and received several copies of Caleb’s letters to her. Not only did Joseph Landry submit them as evidence, but blew them up large enough for everyone in the jury to be able to read from across the room. Not only was this a convenient way for them to see his words, but also a powerful way to illustrate that his letters to *her* actually existed.

Most the letters from boot camp were short notes and they were on the PX stationery:

Dear Mom,

I am learning a lot. We don’t get much time to write. Everything is great here. It is just like I had imagined it. I don’t want you to worry so much, okay?

– and –

Dear Mom,

You asked if I was making friends, of course I am. Don’t people make lifelong friends in the military? A few people here look like they have a problem with me being gay, but you know me mom, I just give them the evil eye and they back off in fear right away.

– and his last from basic training, the first to mention Jackson –

Dear Mom,

Jackson said that maybe God might be trying to draw me away from Satan with pleasure, the same way that Satan tried to draw Job away from God with pain. What pleasure? I asked him.

His answer was the Marine Corps... If that is true, I have spent too long underestimating God.

I am happy.

When I hated life, I for some reason feared death. Now I love life, I want to hold onto it, but I fear...nothing. I have found my identity. I have found my home. When you see me next I will be a United States Marine.

Cheryl read each one as Landry handed them to her. Her voice trembled from time to time, but she bravely resisted the urge to cry. None of them had the lonely, frightened or desperate tone that Stacy claimed to have heard in his.

“Ma’am, have you ever met Private First Class Jackson Brooks?”

Jackson looked straight at Cheryl Hobbs. Cheryl looked back. This time Jackson did not look away. The two of them watched each other over the tears that were pooling in their eyes. There was no malice in her expression toward him. He wasn’t sure what to hope for.

“Yes, I have met him.”

“When?”

“At Caleb’s graduation from boot camp.”

“How did Caleb introduce him?”

“He introduced him as ‘my friend Jackson.’” Cheryl began to cry a bit harder and some tears escaped her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

“Did he introduce you to anyone else from boot camp?”

“No. He only wanted to introduce me to him.”

“So Caleb liked Jackson?”

“Yes, very much.” She wiped the tears and regained her composure.

“And Caleb believed that Jackson liked him.”

“That’s true.”

“Was Caleb a good judge of character?”

“No,” Cheryl Hobbs said despite Landry wishing she would have answered the other way.

“Now why would you say that?”

“Because he picked that Stacy,” she said plainly, as if it had been a silly question.

Stacy huffed loudly.

“Besides Stacy, has Caleb ever been dead wrong about a person?”

“Well, Michael Ponce, apparently,” she answered quickly.

“Ms. Hobbs,” Landry proceeded patiently. “Do you believe that your son Caleb was wrong about Jackson Brooks?”

Cheryl turned to make eye contact again with Jackson. The other lawyer barked, “Objection, pure speculation,” then the Judge said, “Sustained.” He saw the way that Cheryl seemed not to hear either of them and he ordered, “Ma’am, you are not to answer that question.”

Cheryl did not say a word. She did not respond. She just held eye contact with Jackson. She seemed to be trying to see into his soul. His eyes were open and unguarded. As much as she sought to gain entrance, Jackson sought to grant it. His bottom lip began to quiver. Her eyes were clear. The blue of her irises glimmered like gems. Jackson could not help but notice how much they looked like Caleb’s. Her chin was raised and strong. All at once her face softened – everyone saw it – but she did not look away. In that second she realized that even without the trial, and even if he had not been the cause, Jackson was the one person in the world who ranked second to her in grief over Caleb. Jackson was the one person in the world who ranked second to her in loving him for who he was. Jackson came closer than anyone else to her love and her pain. Tears began to roll down Jackson’s cheeks. Cheryl’s lips parted as she expelled the breath she didn’t realize she had been holding.

“No further questions, Your Honor,” Landry nearly whispered.

Cheryl turned her eyes to the prosecuting attorney as he approached the witness stand. There was obvious contempt in her eyes, even hatred.

He said, "Ma'am, has Caleb ever lied to protect you?"

"No," she snapped.

"With all due respect, Ms. Hobbs, can you or anyone ever answer that question with certainty? How would you know if you were being successfully lied to?"

"I wasn't. He didn't," she said firmly.

"Ms. Hobbs, you have heard the testimony of the people who attended boot camp with him. Do you see a disconnect between the reality you heard described by them and the façade of Caleb's letters?"

"He may have sugarcoated it. He may have put on a brave face for my benefit, but there were no direct contradictions."

"I am not here to speak ill of the dead, Ms. Hobbs. I personally think it is a wonderful thing to lie if you are trying to protect someone. And when we imagine the pain and the heartache that you would have felt if you had known the truth, isn't it natural for someone to lie? Isn't it possible that Caleb did not only lie to you in his letters, but lied about everything? Isn't it possible that by virtue of being the one who cared for him most, you are, in fact, the one who has the most obscured view of the truth?"

"No!" Cheryl snapped angrily.

"I see," said Randolph as he turned away from her and headed back to his table. From his briefcase he pulled out a piece of crumpled paper. It looked as if it had been crushed into a ball, thrown out, and then re-flattened. "Can you tell me if this is Caleb's handwriting?" He handed it to Cheryl.

Cheryl's eyes bugged wide. "Yes," she said surprised, "It is."

"Can you tell us if that is the official Marine stationery that Private First Class Brown was so kind to describe?"

"Yes."

"The same stationery, the jury can see," he motioned to all the poster-sized copies of her letters, "as all the letters you received?"

"Yes."

“Would you mind reading the letter penned by your son?”

“Where did you get this?” she snapped.

“Would you mind reading the letter, please?”

She read:

Dear Stacy, I love you so much.

“I love him!” Stacy Oliver interrupted with an outburst. “We were so in love!” he exclaimed with fake tears in his voice.

“Order!” cried the Judge as he pounded on his gavel. Stacy slumped over to Jerald Schaefer’s shoulder where he was quickly shoved off. He turned the other way to slump onto Martin’s shoulder, where he continued to pulsate with tears, but quietly so.

“You may continue reading, ma’am,” said the Judge.

As Cheryl read, there was a slight shake in her hand that vibrated the letter, but she forced herself to continue:

You were right about everything. Everyone. There are only two types of people: homosexuals and homophobes. I was wrong about Marines. They are boorish and crude. They represent all the worst qualities in men, concentrated in a blinding focus. These men aren’t heroes, but schoolyard bullies. They fear what I am so much that their every action is a thinly veiled attempt to prove that they are heterosexual. They must constantly try to act the most masculine, most brutal, most emotionally calloused, and furthest away from being a freak like me.

The drill instructor here is the worst bully of them all. I am trying to decipher whether he actually believes his own lies about training us, or has come to terms with the fact that he just likes making young men (especially gay young men) suffer.

Cheryl quickly handed the letter off to Randolph, wanting it away from her. Randolph said, “No more questions, Your Honor.”

“I assume you would like to re-examine your witness?” the Judge asked Landry.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Landry approached the witness stand very solemnly. He said, “Isn’t it possible that Caleb just changed his mind?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Isn’t it possible that Caleb just had a bad day?”

“That sounds more like Caleb.”

Landry walked to grab a letter of his own. This one had not been blown up because he wanted the jury to hear it only from Cheryl’s lips. He handed it to her. “Can you tell us the date on this letter?”

“November 10th.”

“That is almost an entire year after he left boot camp, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“This was the last letter you ever received from Caleb, is that correct?”

“Yes,” she said sadly.

“Do you mind reading the letter out loud?”

Cheryl Hobbs cleared her throat. She read:

Dear Mom,

I have been reading a Bible that Jackson and Stephanie gave me. Don’t get too excited, I am having a real hard time believing all of it. But I like to read it.

Do you remember me telling you the story that Jackson told me at graduation? Well, that story is in here. Why didn’t you tell me? Jackson is a stinking plagiarist! Jesus told a parable about workers in a vineyard. Some did more work than others, some even a lot more. But, they all got more than they deserved. That is the important part. They all got *more* than they deserved.

It is about salvation, obviously, but I got to thinking – it's also about America, isn't it? I know how the press talk about me. I know that they want to use me as an emblem for their cause and their war. But I want no part of it. I never understood those type of people while I was still with Stacy.

Caleb's mom paused here and straightened up pompously. She said loudly to the whole room, in her best imitation of a lawyer's voice, "Let the record show that after the name Stacy my son drew a frowny-face with its tongue hanging out and an X for both eyes – the international symbol for 'Yuck!'"

People in the courtroom laughed. Stacy folded his arms tight across his chest. The Judge shot a warning glance that quickly quieted the room. Cheryl Hobbs returned to her letter, searching for the right place:

I never understood those type of people while I was still with Stacy, *yuck*, but I think I am starting to understand them now.

Those who talk about unfairness in society, by definition, must have their noses in everyone else's business. If someone receives injustice, they should fight for justice. But there is a big difference between injustice and unfairness. (The first worker's pay wasn't fair, but it was just.) And there is a huge difference between those people who fight against injustice and those people who fight against unfairness.

People like Stacy are missing the main point. What they don't realize is that in America we have already been given more than we deserve. Don't they see how good we have it? The people who go on and on about equality have failed to realize that on a global scale, they *are* the privileged class; *they* are the fortunate few.

Those who claim that life has been unfair to them (as I once did) should be careful because they might wake up one day and discover that they were exactly right. That is what happened to me. I discovered that life has not been fair to me, and in fact, fate – *or maybe God* – has been far too kind, far too generous. There are three things in my life that I've always needed – desperately, desperately needed – but never thought I would have. Now I have them. Now I have all three – an identity (United States Marine), a place where I belong, and a friend that I can count on.

I swear, Mom, who wouldn't want to be me?

I feel sorry for Stacy and his ilk, I do – real sympathy. I wish I still had Stacy's address; I wish he could read this letter. You know what's funny, Mom? I still love him – not romantically; what was I thinking? But I understand him. Stacy and I have been through so much of the same stuff. Our lives were quite parallel up until we reached a certain point. I went one way and Stacy went another. Stacy began to reject all those who rejected him (sometimes preemptively), while I continued to love them. To love, to admire, to emulate those who only mock you is such a difficult task – and I should know – that I do not fault anyone for giving in to resentment. Pray for him. I know that you think it will help, and I am convinced that it will not hurt. Pray that he finds the same peace that I have found.

That's all I have for now, Mom, except one more thing, I've discovered that *you* are a dirty plagiarist too. I found this:

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills,
where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip,
he who watches over you will not
slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you,
the Lord is your shade at your right
hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm,
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming
and going
both now and forevermore.

I'm trying to memorize this. I want to be
able to say it to myself before I go into combat.
It comforts me. I don't know much about
anything else, but I know I am comforted.
Haven't you always wished for someone to
watch over me?

I love you,
Caleb

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

There were four windows that lined the walls behind the jury. It was a clear day with only one or two billowy white clouds in the sky. The sky was a decisive shade of blue, constant and committed. It was a color that reminded Jackson of a firm handshake. It reminded Jackson of the Marine Corps. It reminded Jackson of God.

Beyond that glass was freedom and open sky. Beyond those walls was America, the country worth giving his life to defend; not the land, but the ideas; not a collection of states, but a collection of values. It was a dream so beautiful to Jackson that he wanted to get down on his knees each day and kiss the ground beneath his feet, the brackish earth a poor stand-in for a greater, intangible spirit. A husband, a wife, and children. Working hard, keeping your nose clean, and waking up each morning to the one that you love. A *home*, first here on Earth, and then in Heaven. Jackson could have no gripe if God chose to take all this away, because he never did deserve it. There is a type of joy that can never be earned. There is a type of joy that only comes from the grace of God.

Now is when I need to have faith, he told himself. He was waiting for the jury to return with the verdict, twelve people who would decide his fate. If he couldn't summon the will to trust in God now, did he ever really trust in Him? *If I can't trust God now, what has been the point?* Jackson, in that moment, wasn't asking God for a verdict of not-guilty, men who have asked God for that have gone on to receive guilty verdicts before. Jackson was asking God to grant him a larger perspective. He was asking God to speak to his heart and tell him just how short of a time a life sentence is. Jackson was seeking to redefine himself, or just remind himself that he had always tried to place his identity on things that are eternal. *My love of God, faith, humility, my soul...her soul*, he listed in his head. His finger stroked the box in his pocket. If he believed everything he claimed to – really believed it – then he and Stephanie would spend eternity together. The two of them would spend eternity with God. It was an immutable, blinding greatness. It was a pro that could

outweigh any con. "The only problem a man ever faces is not enough faith," he told Caleb once.

Jackson bowed his head and closed his eyes. He reached out in his mind and placed his hand on an anchor, the one that could steady him through any storm. He remembered the words of the apostle Paul, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." When he opened his eyes again, he felt like he was ready for any of life's verdicts, come what may.

Jackson rose on the Judge's orders as the jury returned to their chairs.

"Mr. Foreman, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor."

"What is your verdict?"

Stephanie reached forward to grab and squeeze Jackson's hand.

"Not guilty, Your Honor."

There was a cheer from exactly half of the courtroom. Jackson turned to quietly hug Stephanie. "It's over," she whispered. "It's over now." After a long embrace, Stephanie loosened her grip to pull away, but Jackson would not let go. So much pressure had built in him for so long, so much fear that he hadn't even confessed to himself. The idea that he wouldn't be there to continue to hold the woman he held right now. The idea that he would not be there to start a family with her was too much to bear. The visions he had of crying to her across a barrier of glass, begging her, "Go! Find someone else. Go be happy. You do not have time to wait for me."

None of those fears mattered now. He drew back to look at Stephanie. Jackson felt the weight of those fears lift off his shoulders like a child's balloon that had been let go. The weight of the guilt from that one moment in Afghanistan would not be as easy. Stephanie saw those details in Jackson's face. She said, "We'll get through it together."

Jackson leaned in to hug her again. He could feel the hands of unknown people reach in to pat his back. He knew the ones that hurt were from his military buddies.

Outside the courthouse, the crowds had all just heard the news. A miserable bellow rose up – a mixture of boos and profanity. Young men shook their protest signs like they were pitchforks or clubs. Young women began to hold each other and sob. Newscasters that were positioned in front of the crowds trying to deliver the news were unable to be heard.

The noise could be heard indoors. Jackson lifted his head from Stephanie's warm neck when he heard the sound.

Jackson shook the hand of his lawyer and said, "Thank you." He rejoined Stephanie's side, anxious to get out of there forever. When he reached the doors of the courthouse that led outside, he stopped. Jackson knew that when he stepped out of those doors there would be a flurry of cameras and microphones. Literally millions of eyes would be glued to his every gesture and every step. People will take time out of their day just to see him walk to his vehicle, or sign on as soon as they get home from work to see the same footage where it will live forever on the internet.

This was not the hardest walk he had to make, not even close, yet he hesitated. He turned to Stephanie. "I don't want to go out there," he said flustered. "How do I do this?"

Stephanie laughed at him the way she often would. She took a look at how straight he stood in his suit jacket, how perfectly pressed it was. She said, "You ask me what to do, but you already know the answer. Walk like a Marine. Make Caleb proud. Walk like a Christian. Stand tall for the next generation of Caleb's who might see you and ask, 'Why does he walk that way? What Earthly accomplishments have given him so much confidence? What Heavenly promises have given him so much strength?'"

Jackson opened the door.

Just as he had pictured, he was ambushed by a sea of reporters asking questions that they knew beforehand he would not answer. Over the heads of the reporters, he noticed the faces of the crowd. They believed they were there in support of Caleb. Each face he saw was straining his or her neck to peer past the reporters and likewise see him. There was a police barricade set up along the line of the street. Armed men kept their eyes on the chanting mobs. Jackson stopped mid-step. Curiosity alone compelled him to see them. He wanted to see the people who

had been sending threats to him, as well as to the finest men he had ever met. He wanted to see the faces of the people who callously ruined lives, but felt that they were on the side of love, the people who spoke with such hatred against hate. He stepped slowly toward the rail and the reporters swiftly cleared a path for him. When he reached the rail it set off an escalation of boos, whistles and angry shouts. His combat experience gave him the ability to analyze them calmly amid so much noise and chaos. He studied each face. In slow motion he watched their mouths form their taunts and curses without being able to match a single sound to its source.

He was disappointed. He wanted a more worthy adversary. They were sloppy. They looked like their emotions were tearing them apart. Their expressions reminded him of the medieval paintings that he had seen of Hell. He did not consider them demons, obviously, but perhaps they shared the same type of pain. He imagined at some point they had learned to tuck their shirts in. At some point their mothers had told them not to slouch. At one stage in their youth they must have cared about whether their hair was in place or what kind of message their appearance gave to those around them. Somewhere along the way they had forgotten, or stopped caring. Somewhere along the way they stopped listening to the gnawing voice that drove them to reach their highest potential. And, with no one to listen, that voice grew silent. He imagined the same voice being silenced not just in regard to their appearance, but to their character as well. He imagined the same voice being silenced not just in their heads, but all of society. No one was asking them to be heroes. They had been told they are already heroes, heroes just because of the way they smile, heroes just the way they are. It all starts with an inspection where one drill instructor says, "So what if the socks aren't folded right?" and leads to a division where those who want to eliminate standards despise those who want to hold on to them. It leads to weakness being held up as a weapon. The military had taught Jackson to use his opponents' weaknesses against them, but these people have learned to use their own weaknesses against their opponents. He noted that not a soul among them could have ever survived *Hell Week* in boot camp. He thought of all the strain and all the pain, everything

that he had endured, just to filter out the bad habits that these people had preferred to embrace.

Within a matter of seconds, one by one, each person stopped their screams. This was the first instant where any single verbal assault, now with no overlapping sounds, could be deciphered. He heard “homophobe” and “hypocrite,” but then even those stopped. The faces all dislodged themselves from looking only at him and he witnessed each one turn decidedly to the right. He turned to see what had caught their attention. It was Caleb’s mother. Cheryl Hobbs was walking along the rail slowly toward Jackson and her presence alone had silenced the entire crowd.

The sight of her saintly face had taken Jackson’s emotions off guard. Everything he had felt, not only that day, but all the way back to the day he slid over to offer Caleb his seat on the bus, were now suddenly and devastatingly focused in Jackson’s heart. Tears leapt from his bottom lids in silent torment. His face showed little change. He owed more to the woman in front of him than a blubbering mess. Keeping it together the best he could, his voice broke, “I’m so sorry!”

Caleb’s mother said nothing. Tears filled her eyes and she threw her trembling arms around Jackson’s neck. He returned her embrace and they held each other and cried. The crowd, once rowdy, held its collective breath. Flashbulbs fired all around them.

When Cheryl Hobbs let go of Jackson’s body and her face came into his view, she looked like she was going to say something but didn’t. Instead, she presented her right hand for Jackson to hold. Jackson’s other hand had already subconsciously found Stephanie’s. Grabbing Cheryl’s hand, he made his way through the crowd with Cheryl on his left and Stephanie on his right.

The media cleared a path for them. In the distance, Jackson saw that the Attorney General had found this event significant enough to make an appearance. He was being interviewed by the press, *no doubt describing his disappointment in the jury’s verdict*, thought Jackson.

When he turned to look ahead, he saw the reporter, Michael Ponce. The sight startled him for a second. At first he did not recognize that it had even been Michael Ponce, although he had

just seen him at the trial. He looked like a madman. The flesh of his face was being poisoned from the inside out. The bitterness and repugnance of his mind was spilling vulgarly out of his eyes. The sight of him was unsettling.

Jackson had seen Michael Ponce leave the courtroom long before he did, and wondered now if he was back on official reporter business. All the rest of the press had been asking unanswered questions that Jackson had not even bothered to listen to. He knew that Michael Ponce's special relation to the trial would make evasion more difficult. Before he could even ask his first question, Jackson said preemptively, "Listen, Michael, not now, okay?"

Michael Ponce reached into his coat and withdrew a handgun. Aiming straight at Jackson, he fired off a shot before anyone had a chance to react.

Two officers quickly tackled Michael Ponce. Jackson fell to the ground, both hands suspended between Stephanie and Caleb's mother, no strength left in his legs to hold him. Both women were screaming. The crowd cried out in shock. The cameras were filming every second of it. The police officers were radioing for an ambulance.

One of the policemen was already by Jackson's side administering first aid. Stephanie held his hand, weeping uncontrollably.

When the ambulance arrived, the police were still loading Michael Ponce into one of their cruisers. They had Jackson on a gurney and into the ambulance in no time at all.

The press split up into thirds. One third of them followed Jackson's ambulance. One third followed Michael Ponce's police cruiser. One third of them clustered around the District Attorney.

"Will you be pushing to try this as a hate crime?" they asked the DA.

"Against which minority?" he asked, honestly confused.

"Christian," one reporter offered.

"Christian is not a minority," he said.

*

POSTSCRIPT

When Jackson opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Stephanie's smiling face. "Heaven," he said joyfully as she leaned in to kiss his lips.

"Then what would explain me?" Rider said as he nearly inserted his face between them.

When Jackson took in more of his surroundings, he realized that he was in a hospital bed. Stephanie put her hand on Rider's face and pushed him out of the way so she could give Jackson another kiss. He touched her face tenderly, then she stood up straight. He turned to pan the whole room. Everyone was there: Stephanie, Rider, Trey, Brit, Teflon and his wife, Lorena.

"Terrence Brown is on his way back to Afghanistan to stick it to the enemy, but he left a message for you," Trey cleared his throat. "He said, 'quit your whining, it was only a bullet.'"

Jackson laughed, which made him wince. He was so happy to see everyone.

His eye fell on Teflon. He was holding his baby girl on his hip. Sophia was no longer a baby, but a toddler. "She's so beautiful," said Jackson. He had not had a chance to talk to Teflon at the trial and had not seen him since he got out of the service. He asked, "How is civilian life treating you, Teflon?"

"Actually, Jackson, everyone calls me Big Eddie these days," he confessed sadly. His wife drew her body in to comfort him.

"What happened to Teflon? You've always liked Teflon."

He shrugged, "It just didn't stick."

Jackson laughed again, even though it hurt. He turned to Trey and said, "Thank you. Thank you all."

There was a murmur of *It's nothing's* and *Don't worry about it's*.

"Caleb's mom was here," Stephanie spoke up.

"Oh my God," Jackson gasped. He looked to Stephanie, knowing that there was more for her to tell.

Stephanie squeezed his hand. "When she thought you couldn't hear, she let you have it," said Stephanie.

"She called you some names that even I have never heard," Rider injected with a grin.

“She just had to get it out,” confirmed Stephanie, then tears filled Stephanie’s eyes, “She collapsed on the side of your bed. I have never seen anyone in that much...” Stephanie stopped herself from saying more.

“God help her,” whispered Jackson.

“He will,” said Rider.

“But, then she blessed you. When she pulled herself together, she blessed you and kissed your hand.” Jackson looked down at his hand. “She prayed over you. She asked God that you would live and be happy.”

A distant look filled Jackson’s eyes. He felt like he remembered some of that, like he had dreamt it.

“She gave you this,” said Stephanie and her trembling hand outstretched a package wrapped in felt. “Caleb was wearing it when he died. She wants you to have it.”

Jackson gasped quietly as he grabbed it slowly with both hands. He unwrapped one fold, then the next. What he saw when it was uncovered was a small metal cross with the date “June 27, 1944” engraved on it. He held it for a long time and his hands began to tremble. “TNT,” he whispered.

Stephanie reached out and fastened it around his neck. Sitting up enough for her to do that hurt him badly. When she put it on him, he realized that he wasn’t wearing his usual one. He panicked and instantly felt for his pockets. This was silly because he was wearing a hospital gown. His hands patted the top of his lap anyway – where his pant pockets would have been. He looked around to see what they had done with his personal items. On a small nightstand by the bed he saw his clothes folded neatly. He turned to find that his ring was still there.

With the hand of a magician, he pulled the ring from the pocket while keeping it hidden from Stephanie. He began to try to stand up. Everyone made attempts to stop him from moving, but he insisted, “I got it.” Jackson held out the ring and slowly lowered himself down on one knee. His broken body screamed out in pain, but he did not stop. His excruciating Marine training had enabled him to propose properly, even with a bullet wound.

He was shaking. Stephanie’s eyes began to tear up once she realized what he was doing. He said, “I don’t know if this is the right time, in front of everyone, and I honestly don’t know if I

am in any shape to stay down here much longer...” Jackson laughed at his own physical pain. He felt a hand on his back. It was Rider’s. Then suddenly another – Brit. Then both Teflon and his wife. They were all showing him support, as if wanting to transfer their energy into his body. It somehow worked.

He said, “But I love you and I don’t want you to have to wait another second for me. I don’t want to live another second without being committed to you. Forever is just not enough time for the two of us to be together. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Stephanie squealed as she grabbed his body and helped him get to his feet. Jackson let out a moan of ecstasy and agony as Stephanie hugged him much harder than would have been medically advised. She just couldn’t help it. The Marines in his room helped him to support his own arms and hug her back.

His joy could be heard by the whole room through the beeps of his heart monitor.

“Yes,” Stephanie repeated sweetly, “Yes, forever, yes.”

*

ELEASHA POSTSCRIPT

As Stephanie wiped a tear from her eye, she thought that she heard a distant melody. Jackson lowered his body to the edge of his bed. The look in his eyes told her that he heard it too.

“What is that music?” she asked.

“I think it’s Journey,” said Rider.

Louder now, they could hear the music, and clearly hear the individual words. It was “Don’t Stop Believing.”

As the music played on, Jackson started to sing along.

Stephanie and Lorena joined in also. The girls put their heads together and pretended to have a microphone.

For the chorus, everyone joined in singing at the top of their lungs.

Two beautiful nurses came and put their arms around Brit and Rider. Then another two came in just for Trey. One of them had a cooler of ice cold bottles of Blue Moon. Stephanie pulled Jackson back up to his feet and the two of them started to dance.

Everything in the room stopped when Caleb Hertz walked in.

No one could believe their eyes. Caleb Hertz had a mischievous grin. He said, “Marines prank each other. It’s all in good fun.”

Everyone laughed and laughed. Jackson said, “You jerk, you really had us going.”

“You actually believed you shot me?”

“Yes!”

“Hey, guess who else was in on it?”

“No way!” said Jackson, correctly predicting who it could be the split second before Caleb’s mom and Stacy Oliver jumped into the room yelling, “Gotcha!”

Everyone was laughing uncontrollably as they all circled into a group hug. As they were hugging, Terrence walked in. “I thought you were at war?” asked Cheryl Hobbs.

“The war’s over!” yelled Terrence triumphantly. He had expected a chorus of cheers to this comment but everyone just watched him expectantly. He added, “We won!”

The whole room cheered. A chant began, “U...S...A! U...S...A!” and Terrence joined the hug.

There were men and women; whites, blacks and Hispanics; mothers and sons; fathers and daughters; gays, straights, and Marines; believers and non-believers; all loving each other and listening to 80's music. The song was still playing loudly and the hug began to sway back and forth. Everyone sang without a care in the world, "Don't stop believing! Hang on to that feeling!"

###

Note to Reader:

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God bless you!

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