

THE LAST TIME I WAS HAPPY
A Novel
by
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Chapter One: The First Lesson

Private Jeremy Judd stepped out of the 737 and felt the thick air of a Georgia noon hanging in the jetway. He was eighteen years old and this was the first time he had ever flown by himself. Tucked under one arm was the Army recruiting packet full of his enlistment paperwork, the glossy black surface of the folder embossed with golden letters: PREPARE TO BECOME ARMY STRONG. Behind the slogan was a stock photo of a newly-graduated basic trainee smiling proudly with his parents on the parade field. In Jeremy's other hand was a care package that his mother had tearfully presented him outside the TSA checkpoint in Columbus, Ohio. His first instinct was to refuse the gift bag – he had packed meticulously the night before with only the approved list of items for his duffel bag and a single carry-on, his faded backpack from high school – but when he saw his mom's wet eyes he took the little tote and let her hold him a final time. He had then entered the security chicane and forced himself to not look back, even though he knew she would stay and keep watch until the final moment when he passed out of her view.

After takeoff, Jeremy had rummaged through the snacks and leafed through the pocket devotional for soldiers which his mom had tucked inside the bag. The final item in the bottom was a plush toy: a tiny tiger she had wrapped in light blue tissue paper. He rolled his eyes and sighed. Then he found the little note, written in cursive on her monogrammed stationery:

6/7/07

*My Dearest Jeremy,
So you won't forget who you
are deep down.
Love,
Mother*

Jeremy quickly refolded the note and pinched the corners. The old lady in the middle seat was pretending to read her paperback but she kept sneaking peeks and smiling to herself. He blushed, put the note in his pocket and stuffed the tiger back into the bag.

Jeremy's excitement faded when he emerged from the jetway and entered the Atlanta concourse. He walked upstream past hundreds of faces who didn't bother to make eye contact, saw him but didn't see him, didn't care who he was or where he came from or where he was going or why. There was no longer a mother to hover over his every decision, and though he had been eagerly awaiting this day since elementary school – had insisted on it over her perennial objections, had become utterly adamant after his father's death during sophomore year – Jeremy now felt the true gravity of his decision while consulting the concourse signs pointing him towards the main terminal. He found the stairwell down to the platform and boarded the next train with the anonymous crowd.

After squeezing his way out at the other end, Jeremy stepped onto the escalator and craned his neck to stare up towards the end of the tunnel. He was fascinated by the incredibly long, steep corridor. The upward pressure beneath his feet combined with the strange angles of the walls and handrails to create an illusion of leaning forward, suspended, while gliding downward. He closed his eyes, shook his head and regained his balance. At the top, a massive blue banner welcomed passengers in a dozen languages. Jeremy bypassed the little horde of onlookers awaiting their reunions and headed toward his carousel. He dropped his

backpack and leafed through the Army folder, consulting his orders for the fiftieth time, training his eyes again to read the foreign CAPS LOCK:

...REPORT TO MILITARY LIAISON OFFICE IN ATLANTA MAIN TERMINAL
SOUTH BAGGAGE CLAIM NLT 07 1400 JUN 2007...

Jeremy looked at his watch and reminded himself that NLT meant “no later than” and 1400 meant 2:00 p.m., not 4:00. He still had 90 minutes.

The red beacon atop the carousel began twirling and a buzzer sounded. The passengers moved toward the slatted silver conveyor and it rattled to life. Across the carousel, Jeremy noticed another teenager holding an identical folder. The boy had short dark hair and a wide face with a strong chin. He was short – maybe five-eight, but he still had Jeremy beat by a couple of inches – and his arms were stubby but full of biceps. The kid’s eyes were level and his expression was flat. Jeremy saw a confidence that made him wonder about his own face. Could people see how nervous he was?

Jeremy set his jaw and watched down the length of the carousel for the olive drab Army duffel which his Uncle Terry, a Vietnam vet, had helped him pack after the big farewell dinner the prior evening. “Know how much gear you can fit in this bag, J.J.?” Uncle Terry had asked when it seemed to be full. Jeremy shook his head, so Terry held up a finger and said with a sly little smile, “One more piece.” Then he grasped the top of the open bag with both hands, hoisted it up into the air and slammed it down into the carpet three times. The whole house shook and Jeremy’s mom practically ran down the hallway to make sure everything was alright. Terry and Jeremy had laughed and she had rolled her eyes, but then covered her mouth and retreated back to the living room. Terry looked at Jeremy and

shrugged, then pointed into the bag. The clothing and prescribed supplies had compacted and sure enough, there was room for Jeremy's black zippered hygiene kit after all.

At last, his duffel dropped from the chute. Jeremy retrieved it and knelt with all of his belongings. He removed the candy and granola bars from the colorful gift bag and stuffed them into the only remaining pouch of his backpack. The tiger was lying underneath the blanket of tissue paper and Jeremy paused. He looked up and noticed the dark-haired kid was staring at him. Jeremy's face flushed and he broke eye contact. He compressed the gift bag into a ball and hooked a pinky through the bit of handle loop still sticking out. Shouldering the duffel and collecting his backpack and the folder, he headed back toward the terminal hallway. On the way he dropped the crumpled gift bag into a trash can.

A few minutes into his fruitless search for the Military Liaison Office, Jeremy dropped his bags in front of a terminal map. While he retrieved his orders once again for any clue or detailed instruction he might have missed, another pair of bags hit the floor by his feet.

"Place is a real nightmare, huh?" The voice was dry, some flavor of northeastern. It was the kid from the carousel.

"Yeah," Jeremy replied. He studied the kid's profile, the angular jaw, the rim of a cheekbone. "Are you looking for the military office too?"

"Well, I guess so," the kid said, then turned to face Jeremy. His blue eyes glinted and he added, "Unless I say fuck it and just go AWOL before we even get started." He held a deadpan gaze for a moment and Jeremy waited. Then the kid grinned and held out a meat hook. "Flanagan." His grip was a quick vise.

"Jeremy." When Flanagan didn't release, he added, "Judd."

Finally Flanagan let go and nodded. “Well, Jeremy Judd, what do you say we find these fuckers and get on with this thing, huh?”

Jeremy smiled. “Sure.” He was relieved. “Which way do you think?”

Flanagan looked around, then jutted his chin toward the end of the hallway farthest from the carousels. “I bet they hide out down there.”

They hoisted their loads and moved out.

The Sergeant didn't even look up at the Privates when they entered the liaison office. “Orders,” he grunted, reaching out one hand with a “gimme” gesture and maneuvering his mouse with the other. The Privates laid their folders on the desk and dropped their bags. When the Sergeant still didn't look away from the screen, Jeremy cast a sideways glance at Flanagan, who noticed and gave a little shrug without taking his eyes off the Sergeant. Jeremy looked around at the dozen or more recruits lounging along the side walls of the narrow, cramped space. The white walls themselves were empty except for some standard recruiting posters touting the Seven Army Values. None of the recruits were talking and most of them were either asleep or staring into space with their headphones in. At last the Sergeant sighed, removed a copy of orders from Jeremy and Flanagan's folders and pointed toward the only wall space not already covered with a bag or a body. “Drop your shit over there and wait for the bus,” he said, then went back to clicking.

When Jeremy reached down for his bags, he noticed a crutch propped against the desk behind the Sergeant's computer. He and Flanagan lined up their gear along the wall and plopped down on top of their duffels. Jeremy started to ask Flanagan where he was from but the Sergeant growled, “No talking.” He glared at them around the screen and Jeremy simply

nodded. Flanagan seemed unfazed and put in his headphones, kicked back and closed his eyes. The Sergeant went back to whatever he was doing. *Maybe it's Minesweeper*, Jeremy thought. He considered finding a prayer in the booklet his Mom had given him, but his stomach flooded with guilt when he realized he had trashed it along with the tiger back in baggage claim.

Jeremy's family prayed every night between his dad's sudden diagnosis of prostate cancer and his death at the age of 53. They normally only went to the Methodist church in town on Christmas Eve and Easter, but when the oncologist gave the grim assessment and the timeline, Jeremy's Mom started insisting they attend weekly services. One Sunday morning near the end, after Jeremy had stayed out too late with his girlfriend Raechel, he refused his mother's request. Jeremy was sprawled out on the couch. His Dad reclined in his cracked leather La-Z-Boy. His mother knew Jack didn't want to go, either, because he was exhausted from the chemo. The only reason Jeremy was even up was because he had heard his father throwing up in the bathroom and couldn't go back to sleep. He had come out to keep the old man company for a while, watch the NFL pre-season shows with him, and try not to think about the precious hours ticking away.

But his mother doubled down. "Jeremy, I don't ask for much, do I?" she pleaded. "Maybe God will listen to us and bring a miracle. Can't you just come with me for an hour?"

Jeremy didn't budge. "Mom, we prayed at dinner last night," he sighed. "We'll pray again tonight. I'm sure God can hear us from here just fine." He pointed the remote at the TV and turned up the volume. His father closed his eyes.

Jack died two weeks later, just after the beginning of Jeremy's sophomore year of high school. The church-going stopped and so did the daily prayers at dinner. Yet sometimes

late at night, even after his Dad was long gone, when Jeremy went to the kitchen for a glass of water he heard his Mom's muffled sobs and her mumbled prayers through the crack in her bedroom door. Those moments stuck with him, and even now in the airport holding room as he faced all the unknowns of Army life, Jeremy clung to the idea that if his mother could still cry out to an unseen God, maybe he should too. But she wasn't here now, and he couldn't recall any of the Scriptures or prayers she had quoted in those months until God didn't save her husband. All Jeremy could come up with now were the simple words, "God, please help my Mom." He pictured her sitting on the couch in her now-empty living room, staring through the picture window in his direction.

The gaggle of recruits quickly grew to two dozen, then three, and they compressed themselves into the space and waited in varied degrees of boredom, disinterest and trepidation. Jeremy felt the creeping sense that he needed to pee, but he was too afraid to ask the Sergeant if he could use the bathroom. Instead, he clenched his crotch muscles and ignored it, figuring that he could hold it until they boarded the bus. He was hoping that another one of the recruits would ask first. Relief seemed to come when the Sergeant finally hoisted himself up with his crutch and limped toward the doorway with a black robo-boot on one of his feet. "Follow me," he said. The mass of new Privates collected their belongings and shuffled in silence behind him down the terminal hallway. Jeremy spotted a bathroom ahead and considered dropping his gear to make a quick run for it, but he was close enough to the Sergeant that he knew he would be noticed, so he decided to wait until the bus.

The mid-afternoon humidity was claustrophobic when they walked through the automatic doors into the bright sunshine and brutal heat. Jeremy's shoulders were already aching from the bags. His heart dropped when he saw that the waiting bus was only a longer,

whiter version of the flat-faced model he had ridden to elementary school. There were no labels on the side and although there were no bars on the windows, the pale paint gave it the appearance of a prison transport.

Jeremy shuffled forward to the door and looked up at the Sergeant, who was counting them on board. The Sergeant's impassive face switched to an expression that said "whatever-it-is-I-don't-give-a-shit," so Jeremy simply squeezed harder and pushed himself and his bags inside the bus. He fumbled his way up the stairs and toward the back, clunking each of the seats with the bottoms of his bags. He quickly realized that there would not be room for both people and baggage in the seats and he anticipated the command to place his gear on top of himself. He put the backpack between his legs with the duffel spread across his lap and they pressed down onto his crotch. Now the weight provided some relief.

"How far is it to Fort Benning?" Jeremy asked across the aisle. Flanagan was similarly smashed beneath his load.

"I think it's like 90 minutes?" Flanagan maneuvered his only free hand into his pocket to fish out his headphones. The last few recruits were still figuring out how to fit themselves into their seats at the front of the bus. Jeremy closed his eyes and prayed again for help, this time for himself, even though he wasn't expecting a response. At last, the bus lurched forward.

One thing Jeremy had always been good at was taking a nap, and even with his swelling bladder, he managed to doze off once they were on I-85, lulled to sleep by the high hum of the bus engine and the vibration of the tires beneath their feet. Jeremy thought of his Big Sis Katie and their farewell that morning in the driveway. "You're going to fight for your country," she had said, her hazel eyes wide with sisterly pride and full of tears that she

successfully held back for the moment. It was her turn to be strong for him, just like he had been there for her during her battle with breast cancer only the year before. That nightmare had culminated with a double-mastectomy when she was only 31, and the pain of sitting at her side, helpless, was even worse than the months he had listened to his Mom crying herself to sleep at night. As the only man of the household, Jeremy had somehow managed to support both his Mom and his Big Sis through the darkest time of any of their lives, all before he was able to legally buy a pack of cigarettes.

He was dreaming a dual image of his mother's face contorting in grief above his sister's sunken chest in a hospital gown when a pothole rattled him awake. They were now somewhere down the line where the freeway had narrowed to two lanes each way. Long swaths of pine trees lined either side of the southbound corridor. The air conditioning which kept the bus at least bearable on the first leg of the journey had now disappeared, leaving a nearly palpable fog. The stifling heat mixed with the stench of school bus leather seats and hormone-laden late-teens sweating beneath their baggage. A green sign said Columbus, Georgia was only 10 more miles. Jeremy was almost home.

After three days of hurry-up-and-wait at the Reception Battalion – of lying restless on a stiff bunk in the listless hours between pulling weeds and marching to the dining facility, of sneaking into the latrine to rub one out to alleviate the nerves and the aching he already felt from being away from Raechel – Jeremy finally reached his destination for the next fourteen weeks of Infantry One Station Unit Training. He was now a member of Second Platoon, Bravo Company, 146th Infantry Regiment, dubbed the “Wolf Pack” in hand-painted graffiti letters and colorful caricatured murals in the hallway outside their barracks bay. Through a

combination of persistence and sheer luck, Jeremy Judd and Mikey Flanagan had somehow managed to stay together all the way from the airport through Reception and into this final barracks, even miraculously ending up as battle buddies who shared the same bunk. Whether it was God's favor or just some cosmic coincidence, Jeremy was relieved to have a friend from the start.

At the end of their first official day of training in their new Platoon, Jeremy climbed onto the bottom mattress, sore, heavy, spent. The springs squeaked underneath the rough wool blanket he had been issued that afternoon, along with two more olive drab duffel bags and a rucksack full of camouflage gear. *I bet this blanket is the same kind Uncle Terry slept on before Vietnam*, he thought. One day down, ninety-five to go until he would be smiling on the parade field with his family, just like that Private on his now-discarded recruiting folder. Of course, Jeremy wouldn't have his Dad there like that soldier – and even though his Big Sis Katie had warned that she probably wouldn't make it down for graduation because of work, at least Jeremy knew his Mom and Raechel would be in the stands.

Raechel.

Jeremy laid on his back and stared up at the little laminated photo which he had secretly tucked between the springs and Flanagan's mattress above his head. It was a cutout of one of her senior pictures. Before leaving, he had chosen his favorite of the wallet-sized shots, and with Uncle Terry's advice he had used scissors to carve out her image and make it as small as possible. He didn't care about the woodsy background of the portrait, only those auburn curls, the lone dimple from her lopsided smile, the deep blue eyes which had captivated him since middle school but which he had lacked the courage to look into until his Dad died. After the funeral, he had told himself he had nothing to lose and finally struck up a

conversation with her in the hallway about the latest GEICO caveman commercial – of all the things to choose for an icebreaker with the girl he'd secretly loved.

Jeremy couldn't see the details in the darkness now, but he knew them by heart. All he needed was the outline of her face. She was the girl he hadn't ever expected to love him back, but now felt like he couldn't remember living without. When they became friends that fall of sophomore year, Raechel consoled him while he, in turn, comforted his Mom in the wake of his father's death. After junior prom when they officially started dating, Rae had shown herself doubly loyal when things got even heavier with Katie's sudden diagnosis and return home for chemotherapy. "You lean on me as hard as you need to," Rae had reassured him softly while he cried into her shoulder one night during senior year when the world felt like it was caving in. Even now, he was still too proud to be weak, to admit to her or to anyone else that he wasn't in control. He had always wanted to be the strong one for her, not the other way around. But over time, he was learning to be vulnerable with her, to give her his heart.

Sooner or later, Jeremy figured, the Drill Sergeants would find the picture in the bunk, but he knew he needed a moment at the end of each day to look forward to for the next few months, and lying here in the settling air of the bay – the fat Private from Idaho in the next bunk already snoring, the slowing series of rattles and squeaks as the Privates in the upper bunks rolled over and made their bed frames shake – in spite of the exhaustion and the anticipation of the beginning of actual training the next day, Jeremy was surprised to feel something like peace.

The first mournful notes of Taps began to play on the loudspeakers outside across the Sand Hill barracks. Jeremy felt himself start to fade with this somber new lullaby. The image

of Raechel's smile dissolved, and as he drifted off, a strange thought passed by: he wondered if any of the Privates who laid on this mattress since 9/11 were killed overseas. *That's a morbid thing to say*, came an echo of Raechel's voice, a glimmer of the glare she would sometimes give him whenever he did something that wasn't to her liking. He was floating now. The swirling sepia pixels morphed and spun and he watched her silhouette fade away.

Just after the final sad note of the song outside trailed away toward the pine trees, a strange stillness fell into the room. Then the double doors to the hallway exploded and the Drill Sergeants stormed back in.

"Toe the Line, Privates!" Sergeant First Class Thompson's already unmistakable voice shouted through a bullhorn. "Put your nasty toes on my line!" Behind him, a deeper voice was screaming obscenities and someone was tossing what sounded like foot lockers into the middle of the bay. Jeremy startled and sat up, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. Flanagan flailed around and made the steel frame wobble back and forth. Their bunk was toward the far end of the bay near the emergency exit, and Jeremy scrambled out and peered around their wall locker down the center aisle while Flanagan flopped down onto the linoleum. Two dark silhouettes were fast approaching, the hallway doors behind them fading shut and the darkness returning to the room. Behind Thompson, Jeremy made out the profile of the quiet drill, Staff Sergeant Montez, who was clanging a pair of metal trash cans together as he paraded down the bay. Behind them was the tall, slender figure of Sergeant Brown, the junior drill, who was in his first cycle on the trail.

At the foot of their bunk, Flanagan lined up at attention next to Jeremy just behind the yellow line on the linoleum which they could barely see but had already memorized from similar invasions throughout their first day in these barracks. They faced the other Privates

across the aisle with stiff backs and lungs full of air. Out of the corner of his eye, Jeremy saw Thompson stop in the middle of the bay and stand on the darkest spot, where the regimental insignia was painted on the floor.

“First lesson, Privates!” he bellowed into the bullhorn. “Don’t never, *ever* let your guard down. You don’t get to relax no more! Ain’t that right, Drill Sergeant Montez?”

Montez didn’t say a word. Instead, he heaved one of the trash cans down the length of the bay. It clanked and rumbled to a stop in front of the Private directly across from Jeremy – *the one from Kansas*, he thought, *or was it Oklahoma?* In the faint red glow of the exit sign, the other Private’s expression said exactly what Jeremy felt. Then Montez took the other trash can and slammed it down on the ground by his feet with a deafening crash. He started zigzagging down the line of Privates, continuing to slam it into the floor with both hands in front of each man. He would smash it down, pause and look up to mean-mug the Private, then move on. Thompson let it continue until Montez had terrorized nearly every trembling Private in the bay. Just before Montez reached Jeremy, he stopped across the aisle in front of the Private-from-Kansas-or-Oklahoma. Montez stood stock still by the kid’s shoulder, staring into his face with the round brim of his campaign hat almost touching the kid’s temple. The echo of the last trash can impact faded. Now all Jeremy could hear was the ringing in his ears and the short breaths coming into his nose.

“You know why they just played Taps out there, Privates?” Thompson resumed, as if on cue. “Cause all of y’all *died* today, that’s why! Your old life is *gone!*” As the senior Drill Sergeant, he was the one who had already been to both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the one to be feared above all the other drills. He was short and wiry with dark brown skin and beady eyes and a perfectly manicured little mustache that he kept wiping in between commands all

afternoon. He wore the brim of his brown Smokey Bear campaign hat down so far that it blocked his eyes from view. Because he was shorter than everyone except for Jeremy, he would lean his head backwards to look down his nose at whatever poor Private was the latest target of his rage. The members of Second Platoon had learned the hard way on their first day in the “Wolf Pack” that it was never, ever advisable to make eye contact with a Drill Sergeant, and especially not Sergeant First Class Thompson.

Now Thompson prowled down the center aisle and launched into a sermon through his bullhorn pulpit. “Sleep is a crutch, you understand? Y’all better reach deep down and make sure there’s a set of balls hiding in there somewhere. You’re going to need them in this Platoon, I promise you that!”

He passed in front of Jeremy, who closed his eyes and prayed he would keep walking.

But Thompson stopped preaching and swiveled toward Jeremy between breaths.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Jeremy winced and peeked. The bullhorn was inches from his face. He sounded off, “Private Judd, Drill Sergeant!”

“Where the fuck you from, Private Judd?” Thompson dragged out in a mechanically-distorted drawl through the hand mike.

“Groveport, Ohio, Drill Sergeant!” He stared into the center of the bullhorn.

“Where the fuck is that?”

Jeremy knew this was a setup. Uncle Terry had warned him that once they zeroed in on you, there was nothing you could say or do. “It’s not if, it’s when,” he had advised at the final dinner, which already felt like it was from a different lifetime. Terry had placed his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder and a serious look fell into his eyes while his mother and sister

continued chatting on the other side of the table. “You’re screwed, so just take it,” his Uncle then shrugged before turning back to his slice of apple pie.

Jeremy’s problem, though, was that he was never good at awkward silences, so as Thompson waited for a response and Jeremy’s chest began to squeeze in on itself, he heard himself blurt out the first thing that came into his mind:

“The place that used to be my home, Drill Sergeant!”

Thompson paused. “Well, that’s real clever, Private Judd,” he said in a flat tone, but Jeremy heard the grin in his voice. “Real clever.” Jeremy’s heart thumped against his ribs. Then Thompson’s voice crescendoed and he snarled, “You know what, even in the dark, I remember *you*. You that one little Private got the bumpkin face look like it been hit by a frying pan. And you got a *real* pretty voice too. So I’m going to call you Private Wynonna until you the day you leave Sand Hill. Probably be tomorrow, from the looks of you!”

Jeremy waited.

Just take it, Jeremy.

“What you think about that, Private Wynonna?”

“I love country music, Drill Sergeant!”

Thompson wheezed a mocking laugh and dragged it out. He bent forward and rapped his knee with the bell of the bullhorn, then looked up at Jeremy and laughed again, this time in a roar. Jeremy knew the longer he waited to inflict the punishment, the worse it would be.

“Oh my *God*, Drill Sergeant!” Thompson turned around and cackled through the bullhorn across the aisle toward Montez, who still hadn’t moved or said a word as he stood like a cemetery statue next to the poor Private. “You believe this shit?” Thompson kept laughing, then swiveled back towards Jeremy and put the bullhorn in his face again. “You

love country music, huh?” he sneered. “Well, you about to really love it now, you little tick turd.”

Jeremy heard Flanagan whisper, “Fuck.”

“No One Else On Earth, Private Wynonna!” Thompson declared. “You know the words to that song?”

Jeremy turned to stone. He *did* know the words to that song. He also knew Thompson was going to figure this out very quickly and would make him pay for it in some very, very brutal fashion.

Jeremy mustered, “Negative, Drill Sergeant!” but heard the quaver, registered the breathless pause between the question and his response.

Thompson inched the bullhorn forward, now just off Jeremy’s nose, pressed the button to speak, and waited. Jeremy held his breath. Then Thompson said, matter-of-fact, “You think I’m a stupid motherfucker, don’t you, Private Wynonna?”

Jeremy reminded himself that he was fucked no matter what he did, but the adrenaline had seeped down inside his bones and was now a paralyzing fear.

“You think a black man like me don’t know some honky-ass country songs? Think again, son!” The click of the hand mike echoed through the silence. Then, rising back into a shout, “You probably jerked off to the Judds, didn’t you, Private Wynonna? Be honest now, I *know you know* that fucking song!”

Sergeant Brown started laughing in the middle of the bay. Jeremy now remained silent.

“I knew it,” Thompson finally said, back in the low monotone, then turned to face the rest of the Platoon. “Listen up, Privates!” he proclaimed through the bullhorn with a hint of

glee in his voice. “Private Wynonna here is about to serenade you sorry sons of bitches and you’re going to learn the song and sing it along with him. We’re about to have ourselves a little concert, and if you ain’t a honky-tonking hillbilly like Wynonna here, then you best learn them words fast and sing it like you mean it!” His voice echoed off the wall lockers. Then he added, “And ain’t *nobody* going to stop until Drill Sergeant Brown says he’s satisfied with your performance. Does everybody understand?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!” the Privates boomed in unison.

There they were, a brand new Private and the newest Drill Sergeant, both on center stage. Jeremy had to decide when to sing the words and admit that he had lied, and Brown had to choose how long he would let the hazing go on to prove himself to his senior drill. Jeremy prayed Brown wouldn’t let it go so far that the Platoon would blame him for the rest of basic.

Thompson shoved the bullhorn and hand mike into Jeremy’s chest. He took them and fought back the rising panic. Then Thompson leaned forward and touched the front of his hat onto the bridge of Jeremy’s nose. “Time to sing, Private,” he whispered. His breath smelled like purple mint Listerine.

Thompson grabbed a handful of Jeremy’s shirt and dragged him into the center aisle. Out of the corner of his eye, Jeremy saw Montez still standing like a gargoyle next to the terrified, nameless Private. Jeremy could tell the kid was shaking even in the dim red light.

Halfway between Jeremy and the yellow slits in the hallway doors at the end of the cavern, the slender silhouette of Drill Sergeant Brown and his campaign hat towered above the shiny dark splotch of the regimental insignia. Brown cried out a baritone command that Jeremy would never forget: “Front leaning rest position, MOVE!” Thirty-nine dark figures

along the sides of the bay dropped in unison to the pushup plank and waited for the cadence to commence.

Jeremy felt Montez come over and stand sentinel next to his shoulder. He gulped and clutched the bullhorn.

“Let’s hear it, Wynonna!” Brown called out from up ahead. “We’re all waiting.”

“Just sing the fucking song, man,” Flanagan pleaded in a shaky whisper from the floor.

This nightmare was way worse than anything Jeremy had imagined. His heart was pounding, his palms were clammy. He realized that he was not in control anymore.

Jeremy saw Brown’s shoulders shrug. “Have it your way, then, Private,” he said. “Tell you what, I’ll go ahead and give you the beat, Wynonna. In cadence...EXERCISE!” Brown shouted. Then he started to sing, “One, two, THREE...ONE, TWO, three...” The Platoon called out the number of each successive repetition after every “three” in the cycle. The four-count heartbeat of the United States Army Private.

Jeremy stood in the center aisle cradling the bullhorn under one arm and grasping the mike with his other hand. He watched the shadowy forms rising and falling, nowhere near in sync with each other, or with the cadence Brown was calling for that matter. They were all completely smoked. Thompson stood by Jeremy’s other shoulder opposite from Montez and he said through the din, “See what happens when you make jokes in this man’s Army, Private?”

Jeremy felt a pair of tears start to well up but he blinked them back and forced the hand mike up to his mouth. He knew the only way to make it out of this shit show was to go straight through it, so he squeezed the button and sang into the mike with a womanly alto,

because he knew that's what Thompson would demand anyway, "*No one else on earth, could ever hurt me...*" in time with the cadence.

Thompson leaned back and whooped, "Yeah!"

"Break my heart the way you do..."

"Sing it like a Judd, now!"

"No one else on earth, was ever worth it..."

Now Thompson was just laughing.

"No one could touch me like, no one could love me like, you."

"Oh yeah, that's some good shit, Private! That's some country-ass singing! Now do that again so they can learn it!"

Jeremy took it from the top and Montez started clapping on every other beat right by his ear. After the third or fourth iteration, most of the Privates were moaning in the throes of muscle failure and echoing the words back as best they could. After the tenth round or so, Jeremy felt tears streaming down his cheeks. It was only the first night and he had already fucked up. Even worse, his peers were paying for it.

For the remainder of basic, Jeremy would remember that moment of utter humiliation every night when Taps played across the base. Even when they were in the field for training, sometimes when the wind blew just right, they could hear the lonesome notes floating faintly from the cantonment area through the pine needles above and sinking softly down into whatever foxhole they had dug into the sandy soil for the rest of the miserable night ahead.

But it was the Wolf Pack's "pass in review" on the parade field during graduation that he would never forget. Jeremy marched behind Flanagan in Fourth Squad on the right flank

of the formation one final time in cadence to the drawling tenor of Sergeant First Class Thompson's soothing left-rights. When they approached the platform where the Commanding General stood at attention, Thompson syncopated the rhythm and gave the command for "Eyes Right." The General watched them passing under the rim of his bus-driver cap adorned with golden-leafed flourishes that glowed yellow in the morning sun. But Jeremy's eyes looked past the General's shoulder and into the stands where he knew Raechel was watching with his mother and sister, who had made it after all. Earlier, far across the parade field he thought he had smelled Raechel's lemony perfume while his Platoon milled around in a gaggle before the ceremony. When Thompson called "Fall In" for the final time, Jeremy had fidgeted as best he could to conceal the hard-on that pressed stubbornly against his dress green slacks like a salute toward the holiness of her presence only a hundred meters away. The anticipation of being alone with her that night was almost more than he could bear.

But as Second Platoon marched down that final path of manicured grass past the podium, when Jeremy turned his head with eyes held right, striding proudly in front of the bleachers with his chest puffed out and his back held taut, he saw his mother's camera held aloft and Katie's huge smile. Next to them were Raechel's sunglasses pointed in his direction, but even from the distance he sensed that her gaze was angled above his head toward the horizon. Jeremy dismissed the thought.

"Ready, front!" Thompson called.

Jeremy turned his eyes forward and kept marching.

Chapter Two: The Cross

Christopher James Colwin knew he would be a preacher from the moment in the May 1996 revival when he felt the tingle of the Holy Spirit curling up his spine for the first time. At his locker earlier that day, between history and pre-calculus, MaryAnn Warner had invited him to attend the final night of a revival meeting at her church. Chris accepted immediately; it would be the third occasion where he spent time with her in the spring, but the first where they would be alone. Besides, this was the first time a girl had ever asked him to go anywhere, and the thrill of that fact alone was reason enough to say yes. Late in the afternoon, though, he wondered what the revival was really all about. Chris was a cradle Catholic and had never been to church outside of the Mass. But MaryAnn's brown eyes had gotten so big when he accepted that he didn't care what happened, as long as she was there with him.

MaryAnn picked him up at seven in her parents' rusted maroon Camry. Chris's mother stood on the porch with her arms folded across her chest, her face devoid of expression except for her lower lip curled inward.

"Is your mom okay?" MaryAnn asked while Chris put his seat belt on. "Should you maybe introduce –"

"Let's just go." Chris shook his head as imperceptibly as he could, but knew his mother probably saw it anyway.

"Okay," MaryAnn said. She glanced past him toward the porch while she shifted into gear.

Chris felt his mother's stare until they made it behind the wood line and turned onto the pavement. It was only then he noticed the sunlight on the trees and smelled the honeysuckle. MaryAnn rolled her window the rest of the way down and smiled at him.

"Thanks for coming with me," she said. "I hate going to these things alone."

Mount Zion Full Gospel Church sat by itself on a rolling hilltop southeast of Winchester, Kentucky surrounded by horse farms and green fields folding out toward every horizon. Chris knew the place but had never stepped inside. Until now, he had been strictly forbidden by his parents from ever setting foot in the likes of any Protestant place of worship, least of all an Evangelical one. That sort of building was not, his mother had always warned him, a church at all. So Chris still felt his guard up when he stepped underneath the massive tent that night. There was the strange softness of the sawdust under his shoes and the smell of sweaty souls mingling among the metal folding chairs. The warm light of the lanterns hanging from the rafters fell on MaryAnn's dark brown hair as she led him down the aisle toward the last pair of unclaimed seats near the front.

The visiting preacher for the week was a one-legged, ancient man named Brother Ron who had a gift for healing the lame and a penchant for collecting and artfully displaying the crutches that were no longer needed by the repentant souls whose faith had restored their bodies. While he proclaimed the Good News, Brother Ron's blue eyes shone in the soft yellow light. At first, Chris was skeptical and bewildered by the emotional preaching, spontaneous public testimonies, and impassioned hymn-singing. This was a far cry from the solemn, sit-stand-kneel system of the Mass. But he persisted because of MaryAnn. It wasn't just because she was beautiful – the brightness of her easy smile revealing how comfortable she was with her "doe teeth," as she had jokingly called them the first time she caught Chris

looking at her mouth – but he was drawn even more to the way she leaned forward in her chair, like she was being drawn back towards the God who had created her. Chris felt encompassed by an almost visible aura of her faith. Just like her, it felt genuine, clear, and true.

Pure. That was the right word, Chris decided, while he watched MaryAnn listening to the message. She reminded him of one of the polished ivory pebbles he would retrieve from the creek bed where he played as a boy: washed with water until it had been smoothed into something sacred to hold.

Somewhere during the third hour, long after he had stopped counting the sermons and Scripture readings, Chris felt himself being somehow absorbed into the fabric of the atmosphere inside the tent. For the first time in his life, he thought he was beginning to understand the simple Gospel message which got lost amid the dutiful reciting of creeds and prayers in the endless Masses he had been forced to endure as a boy. The Colwin family's little parish church in downtown Winchester was the only Catholic Church for miles around. After attending the parish school through eighth grade, the past three years of separation from daily catechism lessons and this magical evening with MaryAnn were enough to loosen his childhood attachment to the Sacraments.

During Brother Ron's final sermon – the one about being faithful to God's calling on your life – MaryAnn reached over and laid her hand softly on Chris's. He found himself suddenly distracted and shifted awkwardly to hide the additional arousal brought on by the smoothness of her fingers. He smiled at her. They blushed and both turned forward to face Brother Ron. She folded her hand around his. They both gave a little squeeze and watched each other still smiling out of the corners of their eyes. They were seventeen.

It was after the last testimony of the evening when it happened. The pianist began gently playing the hymn “Where He Leads Me,” and Brother Ron took up the final altar call. While the congregation started singing the words behind them, Chris felt a sudden pang in his stomach and an inescapable pressure building in his chest.

I can hear my Savior calling...Take thy Cross and follow, follow, follow me...

Brother Ron was calling out above the song, urging the penitents: “Come unto Him, you who labor and are weary, and He will give you rest! Come now and wash away your sins in the blood of Jesus! Make Him the Lord of your life and you’ll be set free from worry and fear forever!” A handful of holdouts started moving forward.

Chris looked at MaryAnn again. Her eyes glistened. He stood, stepped into the aisle and knelt beneath the pulpit at the makeshift rail. Beside him was an elderly woman who was trembling and in tears. Brother Ron began praying over her from the stage above. Chris closed his eyes and listened to the refrain while he waited.

Where He leads me I will follow...I’ll go with Him, with Him, all the way...

Chris now felt Brother Ron’s strong hand gripping one of his shoulders. There was a softer touch on the other, this one laid from behind. Chris heard Brother Ron praying and asking him if he acknowledged that he was a helpless sinner and if he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Chris heard himself saying, “Yes,” and felt himself nodding. There were slippery tears against his palms and he was sobbing and saying again, “Yes, Lord.”

“Congratulations,” Brother Ron whispered into his ear. “You’ve been saved by grace through faith. Welcome to the Family of God.” He smiled at Chris and added, “The Lord is going to use you for something special in His Kingdom, son. I always know a preacher when

I see one.” The hair on Chris’s neck stood up. Brother Ron squeezed his shoulder and moved on to the next man.

There was no parting of the sky or vision of angelic hosts, but when Chris turned around and MaryAnn was standing with him, crying, he felt like he was experiencing the true presence of God for the first time. The worshippers in the front rows were smiling at him while they slowly swayed. An adorable elderly couple even made silent applause while they sang the hymn. MaryAnn put her arms around him.

I’ll go with Him through the Garden...I’ll go with Him, with Him, all the way...

After the benediction, there were congratulatory handshakes and slaps on the back all around the tent. Chris and MaryAnn walked to the car holding hands, a milky May sky above and dew on their shoes below. They sat on the hood of her Camry and talked for another hour before she dropped him off a half mile from his house on the other side of the wood line. He wanted to spare MaryAnn the awkwardness of another glare from his mother.

When MaryAnn leaned over from the wheel and kissed his cheek, a wave of warmth spread throughout his body. She said she was proud of him for taking a leap of faith. Chris yearned to reach for her, to pull her into himself, to feel the flood of release from her flesh against his, to press his lips against hers and taste the sweetness of life she exhaled. But he knew that if he didn’t force himself away immediately, he would be no longer able or willing to contain the heat. A moment like this, he resolved in the moment, required the fortitude of faith he had been hearing about all night at the revival.

“Chris,” she whispered, “you’re shaking.”

He wiped his hands together and squirmed. Then he opened the door and scooted himself halfway out before turning back to look at her under the dome light. "It's because I love you," he blurted, still grasping the handle.

MaryAnn's eyes got big. Chris, terrified, fled into the dark wood line. He knew the path by heart from thousands of hours spent here as a boy, creek stomping and bike riding and escaping from the tension inside his house. A hundred yards in, he realized he hadn't closed the door to her car. He looked back and saw MaryAnn still idling, one headlamp and one brake light visible through the trees. The door was still open.

What had he done? Chris resisted the urge to run back and instead pressed on into the night towards home.

His mother was waiting at the dining room table. Chris paused at the foot of the stairs, bracing himself, but she didn't look up from her coffee. Relieved, he rushed up to his room. In the darkness, he laid on his bed and stared at the ceiling amid a swirl of emotions and another stubborn erection. He thought about the preacher's words, the softness of her hand and the excitement of a life spent sharing the Gospel with her by his side. Could she really be the one God wanted for him? It was crazy to think like this. But God, she was amazing!

A pang of embarrassment shot through his stomach. What kind of idiot tells a girl he loves her on their first real date? Still, he knew it was true.

Eventually his breathing slowed and he drifted to sleep with the final verse of the song echoing in his ears:

He will give me grace and glory, And go with me, with me, all the way...

“Honor your mother and your father,” his mother breathed out through clenched teeth. “That is a commandment.”

Chris looked at his father, who slouched in his chair, hands folded across his lap, eyes staring at the floor under the dining room table.

“Christopher,” she continued, her whisper now rising. It was the biting tone she had been using since she extracted his confession of the revival and his deepening relationship with MaryAnn and her church. “I have imagined all sorts of things in my life about the kind of man you might become, and none of them involved you leaving your faith.”

“I’m not leaving my faith, Mother,” Chris sighed. “I’m just beginning to find it.”

“You found a *girl!*” She put her fists over her eyes.

“So what?” Chris barked. He saw her wince.

His father shifted in his chair, glanced at Chris, looked away again. Chris glared at him, too, then pushed himself away from the table, rose up and turned to leave.

“Young man, get back here right now,” his mother growled.

Chris stopped in the threshold between the dining room and the den, squared himself toward her and breathed in slowly to straighten his back. Trembling, he looked at her curved finger, traced his gaze up to her face and proclaimed, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, he cannot be My disciple.”

His mother stared back at him, breathless, her clenched jaw softened by a sudden quiver of her lip. Chris knew he had won.

“Where are you *hearing* these things?” She turned to face her husband who remained motionless at her side.

“You’re not the only one who can quote scripture, Mother.”

She looked back up at Chris, her eyes welling.

“Maybe you should brush up on it,” he added.

Chris bypassed the couch in the den and headed for the door. The desperation rose in her voice when she called after him, “I will not pay a *penny* of your father’s hard-earned money to some Bible-thumping hillbilly college!”

Chris stopped and looked back at them. He waited for his father to raise his eyes. Under the incandescent light of the brass chandelier, they sat framed by the faded purple paisley of the dining room wallpaper watching their only child across the darkness of the den.

“It’s okay,” Chris told them. “The Lord will provide.”

He pushed through the storm door and heard it slap shut behind him.

MaryAnn’s body was soft and warm beneath his, her flesh radiant with life, her lips tender, her mouth ambrosial and wet. She shuddered and gasped. To keep himself from crying out, Chris bit his lip so hard it nearly drew blood. It was the fourth time they had made love, and the first time he had been able to hold out long enough to come with her. Still clenched in her arms, he held his breath.

Before the shame had a chance to accuse its way back in, he realized that it was the greatest moment of his life.

She let out a long, slow sigh and her body relaxed. He finally exhaled and buried his nose in the crook behind her ear. They held each other in the silence of his twin bed.

Together they listened to the dark.

“I hope nobody heard that,” MaryAnn whispered.

“That was so good, I don't even care,” Chris murmured, confident they were the only ones on his floor still awake at this hour. He felt her smile.

“I wouldn't either,” she said, “except it would get you kicked out.”

The bare cinder blocks of the dorm wall were cool against his back when he peeled himself off of her and sat up. The room was cast in sepia, the only light coming from the distant glow of the hilltop floodlights which shone onto the 50-foot cross overlooking the campus of Gospel of Truth Bible College.

There was just enough light to reflect off her eyes. “MaryAnn,” he said, feeling the guilt start to descend, “I know you're not supposed to be here, and especially not like this. But I know we're supposed to be together.”

She reached for his hand.

It seemed stupid to even consider marriage, since he was only halfway done with his degree and he would only be deeper in debt at graduation. She was just a waitress at a family restaurant near their hometown, a hundred miles away. But Chris remembered his own words to his mother about God's provision during that summer showdown in the dining room two years ago. He also recalled how the following morning at church, Pastor Blevins had preached to the faithful: “If it's God's will, it's God's bill.” That was the sign Chris had asked for.

MaryAnn sat up and scooted herself in front of him. “Chris, you don't need to be afraid to say whatever's on your heart.” They were both sitting cross-legged now, their knees touching.

In her shadow, he said, “We shouldn't live in sin anymore.”

“Okay,” she said. It was half-statement, half-question. She waited.

“I love you, MaryAnn,” he stalled.

She leaned toward him and put her hands on his knees, slid them softly up his thighs.

“I love you too, Chris.” They touched their foreheads together. He felt her breath.

His heart, only just recovered from their climax, raced again.

“Let’s get married,” he whispered and smiled.

“Okay,” she whispered back.

They kissed. He felt the tears falling down her face and when she pulled back, he wiped them away.

“I have no idea how we’re going to make this work,” he sighed. “You know this is going to be complicated.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s already complicated.” Then she touched his face and told him, “I’ll follow you wherever God leads you.”

She climbed forward and sat herself sideways inside his lap. They held each other, naked and no longer ashamed.

MaryAnn’s breathing slowed. He found himself rocking them both to sleep. A jolt went through her body and her sudden breath startled him awake.

“You okay?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Just one of those dreams in between, where it feels like you’re falling.”

He kissed the top of her head. “We need to get you out of here before sunrise.”

She nodded but didn’t move. He watched the red lines of the clock and told himself just five more minutes. MaryAnn’s body relaxed again and this time she slept. Chris held her

and looked out once more at the Cross above the campus. Behind the glow of the spotlights, the faintest gray of the coming day silhouetted the trees on the black hilltop.

Two days before 9/11, Chris was named the interim pastor of Mount Zion at the beginning of his senior year at Gospel of Truth. Pastor Blevins had died from old age in August, only a month after officiating Chris and MaryAnn's wedding. His departure to be with the Lord left a gap that the congregation was happy to fill with Chris for now because of the promise he had shown over the past few years. The anointing was strong on him, the faithful assured him after last Wednesday's extended prayer meeting where they asked for God's wisdom in choosing His new man for their little flock. Chris continued commuting from campus each week to preach on Sunday mornings and evenings, then again on Wednesday nights. It was the same routine, but now he felt the increasing burden of responsibility as their only pastor.

In November, the local paper did an article about one of Chris and MaryAnn's mutual friends from high school. Corey Hall was among the first Marines to deploy to Afghanistan, and he was the one who had quietly nudged Chris and MaryAnn toward one another. He hadn't responded to their wedding invitation until after it took place; he was away at training all summer. He had emailed to say he was so sorry he missed it, that he was so happy for them, and that he hoped to see them on his Christmas leave.

So much for that: now he was boots-on-ground at the tip of the spear in America's War on Terror. Chris read the article and looked at the picture of Corey in his dress blues. He had the same focused expression Chris remembered seeing at home plate when Corey waggled his bat, waiting for the next pitch. But he seemed much older than now, more

mature. Hardened already by his trials in training and the rigors of Marine life, Corey was now staring an evil enemy face to face with those same eyes. Chris felt an unexpected twinge of envy at the risk and the adventure of it, the opportunity Corey had to be a direct part of something so significant in the history of the country Chris had been taught to love so much. Chris was honored to know this man, but there was an unsettling feeling about the story that had nothing to do with the possibility of a childhood friend dying in a war overseas.

When Chris showed the newspaper to MaryAnn at supper in her apartment before the Sunday evening service, her eyes widened.

“I guess he’s our hometown hero,” she said while scanning the article.

“Yeah,” Chris replied.

MaryAnn’s gaze lingered on Corey’s photo for a moment. Then she handed the paper back to him. “We need to pray for him tonight. And all the troops.”

“Of course.” Chris was still uneasy, and he didn’t know why.

“I still can’t believe he joined,” she went on. “Remember when he left for boot camp the week after graduation? I don’t think we’ve even seen him since then, have we?”

Chris shook his head.

“I hope he doesn’t regret it now,” she said.

The stirring Chris felt for the first time that night came back every few weeks that winter. Eventually, he stopped dismissing the feeling and he decided to start praying about it. But he didn’t tell MaryAnn, and this required even more prayer because of the guilt he felt for breaking their honeymoon promise to never withhold anything from each other. He kept choosing to avoid the conversation because he knew that it didn’t make any sense. What rationale was there for stressing her out? She was already working double-shifts during the

week to help with his expenses and still have some time with him on his trips back from campus.

One Sunday in March, MaryAnn stood with him by his car after the evening worship. Between services that afternoon, Chris read the news about Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, and it had been bothering him ever since. He just was about to confess his longing to her when she cast a furtive look around the parking lot.

“Want to know a secret?” she whispered and raised her eyebrows.

“Okay?” He didn’t want her to become the gossipy pastor’s wife, so normally he tried not to encourage the sanctuary scuttlebutt. There was enough drama to deal with already in the congregation. By the end of the week, or the beginning, or whatever Sunday was now, he always just wanted to get on the road.

“I heard,” she said, stretching out the last syllable and leaning towards him, “that the search committee is going to make you the senior pastor after you graduate.”

“Really? Wow.”

She nodded. “All your hard work is starting to pay off.”

“Yours too,” he shrugged. “I’m not the one making the money.”

She grabbed his chin playfully. “We’ve been over this. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.”

“Well, then you’ve got even more to look forward to. Maybe they’ll finally give you the raise you’ve been deserving for all this extra work since Pastor died. Congratulations, Chris.”

“Thanks.” He forced a smile. Where was his excitement? Instead of feeling relieved or at least encouraged for the final push through the spring semester, he only felt an even greater burden. “I guess we’ll just see what happens, right?”

“Give it to the Lord,” she lowered her voice and pointed her finger upward like she was standing at the pulpit. “That was your message tonight.” She pulled the finger down and gently poked him in the chest. She was still smiling.

“Yeah, I guess it was.” He kissed her and opened the driver’s door. “I need to get going.”

“See you Wednesday night,” she said.

He pulled away. In the rearview, she waved and blew him another kiss.

Chris ruminated the entire ride back to campus. The gentle hills beside the four-lane freeway rose into looming mountain ridge lines. He revisited every detail of his research, every reason he had devised for this strange desire to deploy which refused to fade away, every excuse he could come up with to stay or to go. Although he had briefly investigated becoming an Army Chaplain, he quickly discovered that in addition to the years of senior pastor experience that he didn’t yet have, it would also require a Master of Divinity degree. He also researched the role of the Chaplain Assistant, who served as an enlisted bodyguard for the Battalion’s noncombatant pastor and played a supporting role to help coordinate religious services. This seemed like it could be a quick and natural fit, and the recruiter’s response email said Chris could be promoted to Sergeant quickly thanks to his degree.

But none of this mattered because any path to the uniform would have to go through MaryAnn, and rightly so, after all she had sacrificed for him to go to college. Especially now

that he was so close to being a senior pastor, there would have to be something a lot more serious than patriotism or a sense of duty in order for her to sign off on such a radical change.

When Chris pulled into his dorm's lot, he looked up at the white Cross on top of the hill. He realized that MaryAnn would have to hear from God Himself if this dream was truly from Him. With that, Chris resolved to leave it alone until and unless God spoke to her otherwise.

Graduation in June was followed by the congregation naming him senior pastor, just as MaryAnn had predicted. With the tax-free housing allowance the church gave him as a raise, they were able to upgrade from her dingy apartment to a single family fixer-upper a few miles outside of town on the State Route. The ramshackle two-bedroom bungalow was a dump, but it was theirs.

America's war in Afghanistan turned out to be the prologue to another invasion of a foreign land. Chris ignored the news and reminded himself to focus on his wife instead. It was a Sunday night in December 2003. They had just finished their prayers and climbed into bed.

"What's wrong?" Chris asked across the pillow.

"It's Bernice and Jeannette again," MaryAnn muttered. "They won't shut up."

"What's their problem now?"

"If I hear them casually mention a baby one more time when I'm around, I swear I think I'll," she stopped herself. "Well, I guess I'm not supposed to swear, now am I?"

Chris kissed her forehead. "They're quite a pair. I've probably done worse than swear beneath my breath with those two. They're not the only ones, either. Some of the men even

drop hints with me. They're like, 'So, *Pastor*, have you thought about adding a manger to the Colwin Family Nativity?'" He mimed their elbow-nudging and added, "'Heh heh!'"

MaryAnn giggled. "'Bless their little hearts,' right?"

"Yeah. Or maybe, 'Father, forgive them, for they know what they're doing.'"

She laughed again. "It's so hard being one of the only young couples. I don't feel like we can really be friends with anyone. They've always got their guard up. No matter what, you're still the pastor. And I'm always the pastor's wife."

"Yeah," he said. "And the older couples treat us like we're their kids."

"Right. They've got no problem telling us exactly what we should and shouldn't be doing."

Chris nodded and rolled his eyes. Then he got quiet and looked into hers. She searched his face and waited. Finally, she squinted and shook her head to silently ask him what it was.

"MaryAnn, do you want a baby?"

At first, she clearly thought he was kidding. When he didn't change his expression, though, her sudden scowl changed to shock.

"Chris," she said. "I thought you wanted to wait."

"I did. But we're starting to settle down, you know? You've got a new job, we're both making some more money now, and your insurance should cover most of it." He could tell she still wasn't convinced. "Besides," he teased, "the old people always said there's never a good time to have a baby, so you should just do it. So maybe we should listen to them. Then they'll shut up for a while."

Now she laughed again, blinked long and breathed deep. It was the MaryAnn he had fallen in love with, the radiant girl in the white dress standing in front of the same altar where he had given his life to Jesus.

“You’ll have to move your office,” she said.

“What, you mean the room with all my Bible commentaries and your scrapbooks piled everywhere?”

“Umm, yeah, that’s the one.”

“I’ll start cleaning it out tomorrow,” he said.

They tried.

Each month, she prayed harder.

The chatter at the church faded into whispers.

A new pile of books slowly formed in the spare bedroom, full of words about fertility.

His dreams of distant combat returned.

At last, he confessed.

By the end of 2005, when it became clear there would be a troop surge in Iraq and MaryAnn had still not conceived, Chris began to openly press her about the possibility of joining the Army. She would simply roll away, most nights not even dignifying it with a response. But one night she made her position clear after she turned off the light: “You’re already in the army of the Lord, Chris. Goodnight.” He didn’t dare continue, he knew, so he listened for the snore she always let out when she fell asleep – always only the one little snort, then silence until the morning – and was left to imagine himself being a part of the

War on Terror. He was growing sick of the ridiculous daytime soap opera of their country church. He had never been shot at, but he started to seriously believe that it had to be simpler than surviving a committee meeting unscathed. In his daydreams, while one of the blue-haired women rambled on about the project she had been wanting for decades, Chris was somewhere out in the desert, proudly defending the freedom he had been enjoying his entire life, especially the right to preach the Gospel of Truth.

He found himself glued to the news. The yearning got bad enough in the spring that once a week over breakfast he would bring it up again but she would just frown at him and still refuse to even engage in the conversation.

“But babe, think about the money,” he tried, resorting to the argument he had been retooling over the past few nights. “We could finally have free health insurance and an even bigger paycheck. No more wondering what’s going to be in the plate this week.” She was silent, still staring into her bowl of cereal, so he continued, “And look at this place. The military would give us something better than this to live in.” More silence. “MaryAnn, I want to give you a real house, not a shack.”

She drank the milk from the bowl, wadded up her napkin and tossed it onto the table. Then she looked him in the eye and said, “How can you even think about leaving me?” Her brown eyes flashed a darkness he had never seen.

“MaryAnn, I...” he began, but she rose, picked up the spoon and clanked it into the bowl. She turned away toward the sink.

Chris wrapped a hand around his lukewarm mug, sighed and stared at the faded yellow scrunchie in her ponytail while she started the dishes. He took a draw of the tepid coffee and slouched back.

She put her palms down on the counter, her fingers invisible in the depth of the sink, and lowered her head. “Do what you want,” she said, still facing away from him. “Go and have your adventure.”

“MaryAnn, that’s not what I meant.”

“No, Chris, you’re right. What difference does it make?” she said, turning around with eyes full of tears, “I can’t give you or your mother a baby and I want you to be happy so if that’s what makes you happy then just go and I’ll stay here and pray you don’t get killed.”

Chris rose to go to her but she held up a hand and rushed toward the bathroom. He stood in the kitchen, shoulders slumped, staring at the cracked linoleum floor.

Late one evening in February, he knelt with MaryAnn at their bedside. On many days so far this winter, the long silences between them were punctuated only by their nightly prayers. Usually, these sessions were brief, but on this night they fell into an old familiar rhythm. The Holy Spirit suddenly felt strong.

During one of her turns, MaryAnn rose to ask God for a special blessing over her husband. She stood behind Chris and laid one hand on his shoulder, the other on the crown of his head. Just after she prayed, “I ask you, Lord, for a fresh anointing on the call you have placed on his life as a minister of the Gospel,” she stopped and pushed a little burst of air through her nose. Chris turned himself around on the floor and, still kneeling, looked up at her eyes, which were squinted shut. There were scrunched lines on her forehead, the kind he only saw when she was having a migraine.

“Babe,” he said softly. “What is it?” He put his hands lightly on the back of her legs. “Is it your head again?”

MaryAnn shook her head and held up a finger. Chris smoothed the back of her calves through the rough cotton of her favorite old PJs. He waited.

When she opened her eyes and spoke at last, she caressed his hair with both of her hands, but she didn't look down at him. Her gaze was fixed on the framed picture of their wedding on top of the dresser.

"I saw you in a uniform," she said with one of her hands over her mouth.

Chris pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped his arms around the small of her back and pulled her into the side of his face. He listened to her heart beating hard in her chest between the softness of her breasts. She was weeping now and kissing the top of his head and saying between the sobs, "Not my Chris," and, "Jesus, please," and, "Anything but this..."

Now Chris felt a strange concoction of guilt and fear mixed with elation and duty.

She pulled herself away from his grasp and buried herself under the covers.

Chris pushed himself up onto the bed. He sat by her in silence.

Chapter Three: The Solitaire

Seventeen days until Afghanistan.

It had only been five months since President Obama officially announced the Surge for the 2010 spring fighting season. The Warning Order came just before Jeremy's Brigade went on Christmas block leave that they would be a part of a historic offensive to regain strategic momentum for America. Captain Kinsley concluded the brief to the men of Alpha Company, "Rest well over the holidays, gentlemen. This is going to be a hell of a year."

It was four months now since the Brigade put an accelerated and revamped training schedule into action during a bone-chilling January on basic marksmanship ranges across the back-forty of Fort Campbell. Three months since a series of Squad and Platoon live fire exercises, all sprinkled among frozen foot marches in a February that felt like forever. Almost two months back, the Brigade was hastily validated at the Joint Readiness Training Center in the forsaken swamps and forests of Fort Polk, Louisiana. The final month of the ramp-up culminated with an endless series of mandatory Death-by-Powerpoint briefings punctuated by Rapid Fielding Initiative clothing and equipment issues from warehouses chock full of the latest, greatest gear, the pixillated-gravel color scheme of the Army Combat Uniform camouflage pattern covering every inch of nylon and cotton – all "Made In

America” by the lowest bidders in record time for the Surge, fresh off the assembly line, ready to be stained with the blood of Screaming Eagles.

Jeremy didn't make big plans for the two weeks of pre-deployment block leave; he didn't feel like he had the time. All winter and spring, he had remained so focused on his Fire Team – Specialist Hawkinson, Private First Class Gutierrez, and Private Second Class Pak, the three souls who would rely on his every word and action for the next year in combat to survive – that he only allowed himself a quick call to Raechel late each night once he knew his men were safely back from wherever they had gone for the evening. It was the mindset he needed to have overseas, and ever since his own Sergeant in Iraq had shown him what right looked like when he was a lowly, brand-new Private in the Baghdad Surge, Jeremy had vowed to emulate that same example and to embody every characteristic of a squared-away infantryman wearing stripes.

On the late April afternoon when block leave began, the men of First Squad, First Platoon, Alpha Company joined the mass horseshoe formation for the final safety brief. Beneath the pom-pom of battle streamers atop the unit colors, Lieutenant Colonel Swanson delivered a melodramatic address to the Battalion about the history of the 101st Airborne Division always leading the way into every battle since the jump into Normandy on D-Day. Then Captain Kinsley rattled off the laundry list of the dozen things to not do while drinking. The Platoon Leader held them for five more precious minutes with a canned and clearly rehearsed speech about “duty, honor and country” – *fucking lieutenants*, Jeremy thought. At last, it was down to their Squad Leader, Staff Sergeant Morrow, who simply looked them all in the eye and said, “You fuck this up, you won't fight with us.” Then he told them to go the fuck home.

The six-hour drive to Columbus unwound him at least a little, but Jeremy still thought of his men at least once an hour. He spent most of his time on the first week of leave with Raechel at her apartment just off campus. But whenever she was in class or studying, he played golf and drank with a couple of his old high school buddies. By midweek, he was sick of being around people so he hunted turkey alone in the morning before hanging out with his Mom while she watched *The Young and The Restless* in the early afternoon. His phone was never out of his reach, and he checked it constantly to make sure the chain of command hadn't tried to reach him.

His Big Sis Katie drove up from Cincinnati on the middle weekend for a quick visit between her latest marathon of business trips. Katie was fourteen years older than Jeremy, so in some ways she was more like an aunt, or even a second mom. But she was still the Big Sis.

After a late dinner on Saturday night, the midpoint of leave, Jeremy offered to do the dishes as an early Mother's Day present. His Mom said thanks, but she insisted that Jeremy and Katie go into the living room so he could share the big news. Katie looked at them both and her eyes lit up.

"Oooh, I love a good surprise!" Katie dragged Jeremy around the corner toward the couch and they all laughed.

When he showed her the ring, her cheeks flushed. "Oh my God, *Jeremy*. It's beautiful!" She took the little black box and held it up in the slanted rays of the setting sun. "Look at how it sparkles!"

Jeremy blushed and grinned. They hugged.

“I’m so happy for you!” she said. “And I want *all* the details! How are you going to ask her?” She was glowing. “Tell me it’s this weekend! Oh, and can I *watch*?”

They laughed.

“I love you Katie, but no,” he said, then took a deep breath and forced another smile. Katie’s face changed into a question so he went on, “I’ve been trying to make myself do it all week. I’ve had this plan to take her to The Oval. It’s her favorite spot on campus. I’ve been thinking about doing it at the circle, you know, where the sidewalks all come together?”

Katie nodded. “I love that spot,” she said, softer now. “Any Buckeye girl would love to have her man pop the question there.” She handed the box back to him and touched his arm. “Jeremy, what’s wrong?”

After a long silence while he fingered the velvet, he admitted, “I’m scared, Big K.” It was the nickname he had given her when he was a little boy. In return, she had always called him Little J. She was the only person who could ever call him by a diminutive and make him feel good.

Katie gave an understanding smile. “About the deployment?”

He shook his head. He opened the box, pulled out the ring and squeezed the gold band below the diamond. “Well, maybe.”

“Look, this time you’re a Team Leader. That’s serious shit, Jeremy. You’ve got what, like, three guys to take care of?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but once we go wheels-up, I’ll be in mission mode and it won’t be an issue. I’m a different person when I’m downrange.” He knew it was bullshit bravado, but he didn’t want Katie and their Mom to worry any more about him than they already would.

He felt her searching his face.

“So, what is it, then?” she asked.

He sighed and met her eyes. “It’s Raechel. Something’s not right, K.”

Katie’s pupils got wide. “What are you talking about?” She sat on the couch and pulled down on his forearm. He sat with her but stalled, so she switched to the Big Sis voice. “Let’s go, J. Out with it.”

He put the box on the coffee table and clicked it shut. “Ever since my pass on Easter weekend, she’s just been...different,” he began. “Her touch hasn’t been the same. Not cold. Just different. It feels forced. Same thing for our conversations. It’s like I’m pulling teeth to get her to really talk to me. There’s so much silence on the other end. I’m struggling to find something to talk about and it’s like she’s always distracted or annoyed.”

When he paused and looked out the picture window at the wrangled roots of the oak tree in the front yard, Katie asked, “She’s got finals coming up though, right? This is the end of, what, her junior year?”

“Yeah, but you know her, she’s the only-child-overachiever. She’ll do fine on her finals and she knows it. She always does. And she’s never been this quiet before, no matter what’s going on. If anything, she won’t shut up when she’s stressed.”

“Maybe she’s just thinking about the deployment,” Katie offered. “She knows what to expect this time, how hard it is. She’s probably dreading the separation. A year is a long time for a girl in college.”

Jeremy shrugged and reached for the case. “Maybe that’s it. That’s what I’ve been telling myself all spring.” He pulled out the ring and stared down at the diamond.

“Or, maybe she knows you’re going to ask her and she’s just nervous about it,” Katie said hopefully. “Forever is a long time. Look, when Tom asked me – I mean, when I figured

out he was going to ask me – the longer he waited the scarier it got. I kept wondering if he was second-guessing himself, or second-guessing me. Instead of being excited, it ended up stressing me out!”

Jeremy nodded. “Yeah, well, we haven’t really talked about getting married for a while. Probably since I was up here for Christmas.”

Katie’s face scrunched. “So, if you’re not sure about things, then why did you buy the ring?” She pulled a hand up over her mouth. “I’m sorry, J. I didn’t mean that to sound nasty.”

“No, no. You’re fine.” He smiled and squinted his eyes shut. “Katie, I’ve had this ring since I got home from Iraq.”

He exhaled and opened his eyes. Her fingers were back on her mouth.

“I know,” he explained, “it’s just that, well, I was going to ask her after we got home. The whole time I was in Iraq I’d been thinking about getting a ring and how I would ask her on leave. I figured if she made it through that year, she was Army Wife material for sure. So after the airfield reunion, we had a couple weeks until leave started and Raechel had to get back to campus and I was getting antsy. I was having trouble killing the time.”

“Did you go out? Like, weren’t the guys all going out to party?”

“Yeah, but I was afraid of getting in trouble since I was still underage. I didn’t trust myself to keep it together if I got trashed. So I kept offering to be their DD to make sure they were safe, but that got old fast. One night when they all stayed in to drink at the barracks, I just couldn’t deal with being around anyone. It all felt so pointless. I was having a lot of bad dreams about some stuff from the deployment and I was in a terrible mood. So instead of ruining their party, I got in my truck and just drove. I ended up at the mall and I had all this money from the deployment so I bought a bunch of clothes and a new Xbox.”

Katie smiled. "You and your video games."

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "So I just started wandering around because I knew the guys would be wasted by the time I got back and I was enjoying the quiet while I could. I saw this jewelry store in the hallway by the parking lot, so I went in just for the hell of it. I mean, the sign said they were having a big sale that ended that night, so I thought, 'Why not take a look, there might be a deal?'"

Katie laughed. "That's totally something you would do."

"Yeah," he grinned, "I told the old lady behind the counter, 'Look, I know you guys close in fifteen minutes, so that's how long you have to teach me everything I need to know about engagement rings.' She gave me this huge smile and took me over to the case with the solitaires. Then she went through her speech about clarity and cut and all that stuff, but none of it ended up mattering, because when I saw this ring," Jeremy opened his palm, "I just knew it was the one."

Katie looked at the ring and beamed again. "It's a very romantic story, J." Her face changed back to confusion. "So, why didn't you ask her when you came home?"

"That's the weird part." Jeremy pinched the ring between his thumb and forefinger. "I got this strange attachment to the ring. In the barracks on those nights before I went on leave, I'd lay in bed and hold it up and imagine it on Raechel's finger. It was like I was holding a part of my future wife that she didn't have yet. Like I knew a part of her before she knew it herself. It became this good luck charm, I guess."

"Like you needed to keep it so you'd have something to look forward to?"

"Maybe that's it. Yeah, I mean, I knew we were going to deploy again in a year or two, so in a way I guess it represented the good I had to look forward to in the future. The

happiness just over the horizon, you know, all that storybook stuff. I knew we wouldn't get married until she was done with college anyway, so I figured, 'What's the point in asking her now?' It was easy to dream about it overseas, but once I actually had the ring in my hand, it was a lot scarier."

Now Katie stared out the picture window while she processed the story. She turned back to Jeremy and asked, "So, now that you're finally here at the next deployment, you still haven't done it because something still isn't right?"

"Right."

They sat together on the same floral-printed blue couch that had been in the same spot in the living room since he was a little boy. The soft orange light of the May sunset made Katie's blonde hair glow. She was radiant but every time he saw her, there were more little lines on her face from the stress of her bitter divorce and the agony of still not having the child she had always dreamed of. Katie was thirty-five now, her whole life both in front of and behind her. "Old enough to know I'm young," she liked to joke, "which means I'm getting old." Jeremy hadn't spent a lot of his life with her, but in his first few years, Katie had held and fed and dressed and bathed him as much as their mother had. They had always been there for each other at the critical moments – their father's death, Jeremy's rites of passage in school and sports and the Army, Katie's sudden divorce and all the convalescing from her breast cancer when Jeremy was a junior in high school – and every time they saw each other, the unspoken connection resumed immediately. But this time Jeremy needed her words; he needed her wisdom. Most of all, he just needed to know that he was going to be okay.

"Look, J, I'm speaking from experience here," she said. Her hazel eyes seemed grayer than he remembered. "You can't ever be sure of anything, but you should have a

sense, somewhere deep down inside, that the risk you're taking is worth it. When Tom finally proposed, I was just so relieved that he did it, I wasn't thinking anymore about whether it was the right thing to do."

Jeremy closed his palm back around the ring. "So what are you saying?" he said quietly.

"What I'm saying is," she reached over and laid her hand on his fist, "you should be sure."

"But you just said I can't be completely sure."

"No, I said you should be sure the risk is worth it. There's a difference."

They sat in silence. She took her hand off his.

"Jeremy, you love her. And I know she loves you too. I've seen her with you. Not a lot, but enough to know." She leaned towards him a little and went on, "Besides, no girl spends all of her college years with a guy who's away all the time unless she really loves him."

Jeremy conceded the point silently.

"So," Katie added, "you have to figure out what's the risk here. Are you just afraid she'll say no?"

"No, not at all. I'm almost positive she'll say yes."

"So what is it then? What's the risk?" When he didn't answer this time, she waited. Then she practically whispered, "J, you don't think there's someone else, do you?"

Jeremy felt himself wince, but he shook his head and said that Raechel would never do that – she was capable of a lot of things and sure, she had hurt him sometimes, but that wasn't who she was. He heard himself saying these things and saw Katie nodding, but he

knew that she wasn't stupid, and he knew that she knew. But he said them anyway, and in the long pause while she waited to see what he would say next, he decided to say, "Maybe the risk is that I stopped asking myself whether it's the right thing."

Katie's face fell and she exhaled. "Oh *God*, J. I'm sorry." She scooted over and pulled him into her shoulder. "That's my story, kiddo. And I know it's a sad one, but it doesn't mean you're making the same mistake." Dishes clinked in the kitchen. Katie cupped her hand on the back of Jeremy's neck and held him. He stared past her shoulder at the armrest. Her shampoo smelled like flowers.

"But what if I am?" he whispered.

She pulled back but kept her hands on his shoulders. "That's the risk," she said and wiped the corner of his eye with her thumb. "But I think the only way to find out for sure is to ask her." She touched his cheek, then smiled and sat back against the armrest.

"You mean, just go ahead and ask her to marry me when I'm not sure?"

"Sure, if you want," she shrugged, "*or*, you could just ask her how she's feeling about the whole marriage thing. Test the waters. If it's been a while since you've talked about it, and now there's another long deployment looming right in front of you, then I think it's fair to say a conversation is in order. That's a pretty big elephant to have in the room all winter and spring."

Jeremy considered this. "I've tried all week, but I just can't make myself do it."

"Well then, Mister Big Bad Ranger, sounds like you need to man up!" She nudged him with her knee.

He smiled. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He opened his fist and reached for the box.

“Of course I’m right, I’m your big sister. Have I failed you yet?” She held up her hands and grinned.

“I’ve got a week left. I’ll figure out a time to talk.” He snugged the ring back inside the box.

“Oh, *bullshit*,” she said and swatted her palms towards him. “This coming from the guy who bought an engagement ring in fifteen minutes?” She snorted. “Come on, J. You know what you need to do, so just get it done and you won’t have to carry this weight around anymore.”

He looked away. He knew she had a point.

“And besides, that way you’ll have the whole week to talk about it more if you need to,” she added.

She was a good Big Sis. He considered what to do.

Katie broke the silence. “What’s she doing tonight?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“She’s studying. She has a huge paper due on Monday and an exam on Tuesday. She said she could hang out last night, but she needed the weekend to study.”

“Man, she is an overachiever,” Katie said, “just like you.”

Jeremy shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Shut up, K. Besides, once I knew you were coming up to visit anyway, I told her it’d work out perfectly. I don’t want to bother her.”

Katie scoffed. “So what if she’s studying? You’re more important than any college paper. Call her and tell her you’re coming over.”

Jeremy felt the smooth velvet of the case. He looked through the window at his truck, then back at his smiling sister. He gave in.

Jeremy didn't call Raechel, but he did go to her apartment just after the sun dropped below the horizon. The usual late afternoon pop-up thunderstorm hadn't materialized and it was still muggy. On the way up Route 33 and all through the downtown interchanges, he practiced his speech. "Rae, we need to talk." Too bossy. "Rae, can we talk?" Too soft. "Rae, you know how much I love you, and I've been thinking..." Too melodramatic. This whole thing was too melodramatic. What he needed to do was just man up and ask her. Katie was right: he'd been dragging his feet out of fear of the risk that it wasn't the right thing. But there was that other fear, too, the deeper dread of betrayal, and he still wasn't sure how he was going to broach the topic, or even if he should. There were too many unknowns, too many choices, too many risks.

Jeremy parked outside her building, pulled the ring out of his pocket and looked up at her bedroom window. A deep purple hung in the sky above the apartment complex. Raechel's shades were pulled down and there was only a faint light through the slits. She was probably using her desk lamp to study with Mozart on in the background. She always kept her room dim and it drove him crazy. He had already spent far too many nights of his life with only a headlamp for light, fumbling around in the dark in whatever godforsaken hellhole the Army told him to sleep.

Jeremy climbed the stairs and pushed the doorbell. A few seconds later, Raechel's roommate Kayla practically flung the door back. She was laughing over her shoulder towards someone in the living room, probably Hunter. When she looked out at Jeremy her face froze

in a wide-eyed, awkward expression. “Jeremy!” she said, her smile fading into something strange, “What’s up?” She didn’t step back from the door. She kept one hand on the knob and in the other she held a blue Solo cup full of something red.

“Hey Kayla,” Jeremy smiled. “Is Raechel here?” He looked past her shoulder through the kitchen. Hunter shouted something to her about a receipt. Kayla stayed still and Jeremy watched her eyes.

“Babe?” Hunter called, then sauntered into the kitchen with his own Solo cup in hand. His eyes rounded when he saw Jeremy and he said, “Jeremy, bro! What’s *up*, man?” It was unusually familiar, considering they’d just seen each other the day before. Hunter stood behind Kayla and put his free hand around her waist.

“Hey,” Jeremy nodded. There was another pause so he added, “Can I...come in?”

Kayla practically squirmed. “Sorry, I thought you were the pizza guy at first.” She stepped back. “Of course you can come in!” She scurried across the kitchen and said, “Let me just go get her.” She turned the corner into the hallway and shouted, “Hey, *Raechel!* Jeremy’s here!”

“Is everything okay?” Jeremy asked Hunter. The edge of the diamond pressed into the flesh of his palm.

“Oh, absolutely man.” Hunter held up his cup. “Want a drink?”

“No thanks, I’m just stealing Raechel for a little while, then I’ll head back home so she can keep studying.”

“Cool.” Hunter looked relieved. He shifted his weight, stared down into his cup and took a long drink. Kayla was just out of sight, but Jeremy saw her fingers drumming on the corner of the wall.

Raechel came around Kayla. She was barefoot in purple workout shorts and a white t-shirt with her hair up in a ponytail. She stopped on the far side of the kitchen.

“Hey?” she said with a squint.

“Hey, beautiful.”

She smiled back and said, “What are you doing here?” then quickly added, “I mean, I thought Katie was in town for a visit? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, we had dinner. It was great. I just, I need to talk to you about something. Want to take a study break and grab some coffee?”

“I don’t want to go anywhere like this,” she said, looking down at herself, “but I could use some fresh air. Could we just go for a walk?”

“Sure, but it’s still really hot outside.”

“Better than my stuffy room,” she said, then held up a forefinger. “I’ll be right back. I just need to grab my shoes.” She smiled again as she backed away. Jeremy’s breaths were getting shorter.

Neither Kayla nor Hunter had moved. It was quiet except for the sound of a commercial in the living room: Betty White was going to host a special Mother’s Day edition of *Saturday Night Live*. To escape the awkwardness, Jeremy said he’d see them later, went back outside and shut the door behind him.

If this is what I think it is, I have to get out of here. I can’t lose my shit.

He leaned against the railing, swatted at the bugs swarming around the floodlight suspended just below him, and willed himself to take deep breaths.

Refocus, Jeremy. Think about Goot and Hawk. Private Pak needs you too. It’s going to be okay. Don’t lose your shit.

The door opened but he didn't turn around. Raechel put a hand between his shoulder blades and kissed his cheek. She smelled like hand soap. "Jeremy, are you okay?"

He turned. There was something he'd never seen before in her eyes. They were too tense around the edges. The corners of her mouth, too, were pulled back a little too taut when she smiled. He realized she was afraid. This walk was just a feint.

"Why were you guys acting so strange in there?" He was aiming for nonchalant but knew he missed.

"You just dropped by, we weren't expecting you," she said with only the slightest hint of indignation. "You could have called ahead, you know." It was a teasing tone, but it wasn't right. Her posture was too stiff. This wasn't his Raechel.

"Let's walk and talk," he said and moved toward the stairs.

They descended in silence.

"So, what's up?" she asked when they reached the bottom of the steps.

Jeremy continued toward the hood of his truck, then turned to face her. "Rae," he took a deep breath and began, "I love you." He stopped. In his sweating palm he clutched the ring. With the other hand he rubbed the back of his neck and stared down at the asphalt. He still hadn't settled on what to say or how to say it. The upstairs encounter only made it worse.

He looked up at her. She was standing slightly up on the toes of her running shoes. Her shoulders were drawn back a little. Her eyebrows were arched. The night air was heavy and still.

"Raechel," he said, "do you, still want to get married?"

Her face went blank. Then her eyes got wide. She was holding her breath, too.

"When?" she finally sputtered. "You mean, like, now? Before you deploy?"

“No, not *now*,” he said. “I mean, in theory.” He waited. When she broke his gaze, he puffed air through his nose and said, “Rae, tell me you still want to be my wife one day.”

But she only stared at his chest. Bit her lip. Blinked.

“Jeremy, I’m...this is all so unexpected.” She put a hand on her forehead.

Still no eye contact. *Shit*.

“Raechel, what’s going on?” His tone shifted.

She finally met his eyes. Her thin veil was gone. She was terrified.

“Who’s upstairs with you?” he heard himself asking, felt his arm pointing.

Tears welled. “Jeremy, what are you talk—”

“Come on, Raechel, I may be a lot of things but I’m not stupid!” He was yelling now.

It echoed off the apartments in the courtyard.

He waited again, forgot to breathe.

She buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shuddered.

Jeremy stood still, just out of arm’s reach, and watched her. He had always immediately held her whenever she cried; but in this moment he was focused on the rage that was liquifying in his limbs; the sheer terror of pressing further with another question; the swirl of possible courses of action for the next few seconds and their most likely outcomes for the next few days, weeks, months, years, decades; and the breathless realization that this was the final time he would ever see this woman who he had honestly believed would become his wife, the woman he had given his entire life to for the past four years, the woman he was prepared to give the rest of his life to until this moment.

Raechel took a step towards him with a hand held out like she was going to touch his chest, but he turned away, moved by some deeper instinct than his desire to hold her one

more time, to kiss her hair and feel her tears against his cheek, to smell her scent, to say something he would be proud of later, to be the bigger man here, to not overreact, to not make her feel guilty, to take responsibility for whatever he'd done to drive her away, to forgive her and promise to find a way to make it work in spite of the pain.

Jeremy made it to the driver's door. She had given him the truth he was seeking, had already chosen her path, had already preordained this moment to take place with the treachery that he knew was hidden only two flights of stairs away from this very spot. He returned the ring to his pocket and exchanged it for the keys. He pulled open the door and pushed himself into the cab through a thick wall of leftover heat.

Now Raechel was following him and sobbing and covering her nose and mouth with one hand and still reaching for him with the other, but he pulled the door shut and she put her palm on the window. He started the truck and shifted into reverse, his hands shaking, his face now set in the blank expression of mission mode, his eyes pointed ahead, his breaths shallow but steady. When he looked over his shoulder and backed out, she stood still and remained facing the empty spot, weeping. This was happening. He watched it happen.

Jeremy stopped to shift into drive, rolled down his window and looked up toward her apartment. The silhouettes of Kayla and Hunter's heads were in the kitchen window. On the landing, a shirtless figure leaned on the railing, the details of his face invisible above the floodlight.

Raechel watched him going, her arms now hanging limp at her sides, her shoulders drooping low. Before he took his foot off the brake, he looked at her a final time. Then he gave her a little wave with the back of his hand and said, "Have a great senior year."

Chapter Four: The Knot

It was late on the mid-May night before Chris deployed to the 2010 Afghanistan Surge as an Army Chaplain. Three long years of seminary, three months of Chaplain training at Fort Jackson and almost nine months at Fort Campbell had led them to this moment.

MaryAnn was spooned up against him as best she could with her basketball belly. The bulge of their firstborn was sweating against the small of his back. MaryAnn slid her arm over him and started inching her hand below his waist. Although he was finally on the verge of sleep, he roused and rolled over. She climbed on top of him. He buried his face between her breasts.

This could be it, he thought. This could be the last time I ever make love with my wife. He pushed the notion away and focused on her hair falling down around his face. She was voracious and focused. He drank her in and memorized the sensation of her hips bucking against his, the mound of her stomach pressing down on him, their one flesh united in a final communion before he went into the desert.

They held each other after and panted. She was curled sideways on top of him. Chris felt the sweat beginning to cool. She made little circles on his neck with the tip of her nose.

He brushed his fingers across her skin. They whispered their love for each other, for their only begotten child.

They wept.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” she whimpered in his ear.

“I promise,” he whispered.

“We can’t do this without you,” she sobbed.

“God won’t take me away,” he heard himself saying. He knew it was a promise he shouldn’t make, but he made it anyway and echoed the mantra he had chosen to believe: “We just have to trust in Him.”

Eventually, her breathing slowed and she fell asleep. The weight was crushing, but Chris let his family press down. He stared at the ceiling and prayed for the strength to let them go.

Chris had been ecstatic when his orders arrived in the summer of 2009 during the Chaplain Officer Basic Course at Fort Jackson: the Army had granted his request for assignment to an Infantry Battalion. Yet after graduation when he and MaryAnn moved to Fort Campbell, he found himself immediately surrounded by combat veterans who had spent years in this coarse subculture. It was far more intimidating than he had expected. Even the newest Privates were at least somewhat acclimated to the rough, crude world of the infantry from their months in basic training. Chris’s “gentleman’s course” this summer at the Chaplain School was full of preaching, not pushups. He even got to spend all of his evenings and weekends with his wife in the Visiting Officer Quarters. Now he realized how much he still had to learn.

Early on the evening after Labor Day, his first official day in his new Battalion, Chris came in through the garage and took off his boots. Beneath his excitement, he was already feeling exhausted from the whirlwind of new people, endless tasks and unfamiliar terminology. He dropped his patrol cap and camouflage ACU top onto the laundry room floor, weaved around the mess of partially unpacked U-Haul boxes from their do-it-yourself move and flopped into the recliner. He stared at the blank white wall, yet to be filled with their family pictures.

MaryAnn came in from the kitchen and kissed him on the cheek. “Well, how’d it go?” she asked.

“Let’s just say this isn’t ‘Relaxin’ Jackson’ anymore.” Chris rubbed his eyes.

“I miss it there,” she said. “It was so quiet.” She eased herself into his lap.

Chris nodded. “Did I miss supper?”

“It’s cold now,” she said. It sounded more like disappointment than irritation.

“I hope you didn’t wait for me,” he said and pulled her closer. “Sorry I didn’t call. I wasn’t sure when I was actually going to get out of there. By the time I was in the car my brain was on complete overload.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled and gave him a little punch in the gut. “Now we’re even.”

He grunted like it hurt and she laughed.

“I got spoiled with you being home by 1300 last week,” she said. His first few days in the Division were spent at the Replacement Company, where in-processing had been a breeze.

Chris twirled a lock of her hair. He stopped and said, “Sweetheart, did you just speak in military time?”

“Oh my goodness, I did!”

“Welcome to the Army, Ma’am,” Chris joked in a deep voice, echoing the first military wedding he had performed at Fort Jackson for an adorable enlisted couple in one of the base chapels. After Chris had pronounced them man and wife, in keeping with tradition the bride and groom chose to do a procession arm-in-arm underneath sabres arched above their heads by soldiers in crisp Class A uniforms. The guests pelted the newlyweds with a gauntlet of rice while the final pair of soldiers lowered their arch to make the couple stop. The best man then moved his sabre behind the bride, ceremoniously whacked her rear with the broad side of the blade and formally welcomed her to the Army with those same words.

“I’m still glad nobody hit me on the butt at our wedding!” MaryAnn laughed.

Chris kissed her cheek.

“You smell terrible,” she whispered.

“Thanks a lot.”

She patted him on the stomach and stood up. “Get in the shower and I’ll heat up your supper.”

“Yes Ma’am.” He smiled up at her, gave a little salute.

She rounded the corner into the kitchen. Chris thought this whole thing was going a lot better than he expected. They had sort of known what was coming, but hearing people tell you about the Army and actually living in it were two different things. It was a lot to take in, but so far MaryAnn seemed to be doing well.

By 0600 on the day of the flight, the sun was up and MaryAnn was playing possum. Chris could tell by her breathing. Five hours left until the final roll call. He pulled her over to

face him and they laid together staring into each other's red eyes. He put his hands on her belly. They smiled and looked down at the outline of their daughter's foot when she wiggled it beneath MaryAnn's skin.

At 0700, MaryAnn dragged herself out of bed and climbed into the shower. Chris listened to her gagging while she threw up in the tub. It was her morning ritual, one that he had only experienced with her on weekends and block leave. How much more was he going to miss? The thought made him sick.

Almost immediately after joining the unit, Chris had headed out for two weeks of field training with his new unit. The Fourth Battalion, Fifth Brigade of the legendary 101st Airborne Division boasted a long and proud lineage of combat action dating back to World War I. It also had the reputation of being given the most difficult missions in each of its post-9/11 deployments, plus training the hardest in the months between each trip overseas. The learning curve was steep and the expectations were high, but there was still a year until the next deployment, so Chris mustered his confidence. He also leaned hard on his energetic Chaplain Assistant, Specialist Joe Bellamy, a wiry, paste-white farm kid from Iowa who was always a little too hyper, but who made up for it with a good heart.

More than anything, Chris prayed. Most of the time it was simply: "Jesus, help."

Late one night in the middle of that first field exercise, Chris climbed inside the covered cargo bed of the Unit Ministry Team's Humvee at the Battalion's temporary Forward Operating Base. He was too tired to call MaryAnn so he texted her to apologize. He explained his exhaustion from the training and his need to be ready for the next day, which promised to be just as relentless. MaryAnn didn't respond so he hoped she was watching one

of her new favorite shows on cable – they actually had *cable* now! He smiled at the thought of her with the screen light flickering across her face, the covers pulled up tight under her chin.

Chris climbed into his sleeping bag between Bellamy's bag and the wheel well. He squirmed around to situate himself, settled on his side and silently prayed, "God, please bless my wife." Bellamy grunted, rolled over and bumped Chris with a knee. Chris smiled and added, "Bless Bellamy too. Give us all the strength to do this. Amen." This first month had been overwhelming, sure, but he felt like he was just starting to hit his stride. Walking with soldiers – and running, and ruck marching – and sharing the Gospel with them had become his dream. Finally, here he was.

A text message buzzed. Chris reached out through the zipper, found the phone and brought it into the bag. He flipped it open and squinted in disbelief at the bright, pixillated picture of an EPT test. The image was grainy but it clearly had a plus sign. His heart raced. There was no written message. He blinked and waited. His palm was wet against the warm battery.

"Everything okay, Chaplain?" Bellamy's muffled voice came from the other bag.

"Yeah," Chris responded, his eyes still fixed on the screen.

"You sure, Sir? You sound sick."

Chris realized he was now sitting up. His legs were still inside the sleeping bag but his chest was heaving with long, loud breaths.

"No, I'm –" Chris exhaled, "– I'm good. Thanks, brother. Get some rest."

Bellamy waited a moment, then settled again and said, "Roger, Sir. Goodnight."

“Goodnight.” Chris slipped out of the warm bag into the chill of the cargo bed and fumbled around for his shower shoes. He unzipped the rear canvas compartment cover, dropped down onto the dirt and dialed his wife.

She answered on the first ring with a simple, “Hey.”

“Tell me this is a joke,” he said. It came out like a command.

“I thought you’d be excited.” She sounded as scared as he felt.

“MaryAnn, this isn’t –” he squeezed his eyes shut, “– this can’t be happening.”

“Well, if you want, I can send you a picture of the first positive, because what I just texted you is the second one.”

Chris no longer felt the cold of the early October night. His face flushed with heat. The hair on his arms stood up and there was a rush of warmth down the back of his legs. “You’ve been late? Why didn’t you tell me you were late?” he demanded.

“I didn’t think it mattered,” she said and sniffed. He could see her sitting in the bathroom, the tissue box on her lap with the used ones strewn around her feet on the cold tiles. “I’ve been late before, and it’s never meant anything.” She blew her nose. “I didn’t want to distract you.”

There was a long silence. The hum of the FOB’s generators filled the void on his end.

How can I be so selfish?

Chris nudged a little rock with his flip-flop. He pinched the bridge of his nose and wished he could drive home, but he knew this was one of the risks he had taken by joining. Had he really believed this would never happen? That it couldn’t happen now, of all times?

Why isn’t she happy? This is what she always wanted.

Chris knew she was pointing the phone away so he wouldn't hear her crying. He gathered himself. "MaryAnn," he said softly. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm just in shock. God is giving us a baby. It's what we've always wanted. We're finally parents. Can you believe it?"

"But what am I going to do when you get deployed?" she moaned.

"Our families are just up the road," he offered. She didn't respond, so he added, "We'll cross that bridge. You know we have to trust the Lord." The words felt hollow, canned, cliché. But he still believed them. So he said them in spite of the fear, the doubt, the what-ifs and the self-accusation for putting them in this position after all he had already put her through for his dreams of a combat deployment.

She told him that she understood. That she loved him. That she knew he had to go.

Chris said he loved her too, that he would call tomorrow. He said bye and stood in the cold listening to the generators. He still had goosebumps. But instead of being thrilled at becoming a father, he now felt utterly alone.

At 0800, they shared a solemn breakfast of his favorite, chocolate chip pancakes and fried eggs and bacon. They looked at the clock every few seconds and counted the minutes down to themselves. More than once when he looked at her, she smiled and stifled back tears. He felt an aching in his chest like nothing he had ever experienced. The due date was only three weeks away, but there was no way Chris could remain behind while his Battalion went into the heart of Taliban country. He hadn't asked the unit about the possibility of staying home because he knew the answer would have been "no." The Brigade Chaplain had already planned with Fourth Battalion to get Chris home first among the Chaplains for mid-

tour in August. Besides, even if Chaplain Halley gave his blessing, Chris knew the retribution from for even daring to request a later flight could be disastrous to their ministry efforts in the Battalion. If anything, deploying now would give them credibility with soldiers and families for sharing in the hardships of Army life. There was at least one enlisted man in each Company in the same situation, and those guys didn't get the luxury of requesting a delayed flight, so Chris shouldn't either. No self-respecting staff officer would ever presume to avoid combat, even for something like the birth of a first-born child.

Things improved when Chris came back from the field the week after the EPT text. MaryAnn attended her first neonatal appointment at Blanchfield Army Community Hospital – BACH – where she was herded into a room with two dozen other wives for a “what-to-expect-in-the-Army-when-you’re-expecting” orientation from a fifty-something nurse. MaryAnn said the woman had all the bedside manner of a gray-haired drill sergeant.

“She acted like she was irritated that people are procreating,” MaryAnn told Chris over supper. She described how some of the wives already had one or more kids in a car seat, a stroller, clutching at their heels, or just running around the room while the women either chatted with one another or stared sullenly into the pages of tattered motherhood magazines.

“Sounds like a combat zone to me,” Chris joked.

MaryAnn rolled her eyes and smiled, but he realized he needed to really try to listen. He sensed this was an important moment: both the story and the telling. She was living in a new world of her own that he was only starting to glimpse through his counseling interactions with soldiers and their wives.

“Sorry, keep going.” He put his elbows on the table and laid his chin in his palms.

MaryAnn put her fork down. “She said this is the semi-annual peak season for new pregnancies because it’s just after the last deployment ended.”

“When’s the other one?”

“Right before the next deployment.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense.”

MaryAnn grew quiet and her face fell. She stared down at the little ball she had been making with her napkin.

Chris wondered what was bothering her so much about the briefing. He also didn’t know what he should say. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to be there,” he finally offered. “The XO made his Thursday staff sync meetings mandatory, no matter what’s going on in the unit or at home.”

“It’s okay,” she said without looking up. “There were only a couple of dads.”

Chris was still unsure how to comfort his wife, or if that’s even what she was hoping for him to do, so he changed the subject. “Hey, are you excited about the Chaplain Spouses Coffee tomorrow night?”

Her face brightened. “Yeah, I am. Thanks for asking. I thought you’d forgotten about it.”

“Nope,” he replied with a dash of pride, “I pay more attention than you think.”

She flashed a smirk. He sensed a shift.

“Can I take you out to breakfast on Saturday so you can tell me all about it? Things have been so busy I haven’t taken you on a date in a while.”

“Food I don’t have to cook? Now you’re talking.”

The final breakfast was over.

It was almost 0900.

They did the dishes in silence side by side.

The skillet was scoured clean. The last plate was dried and put away.

MaryAnn broke down and clutched him.

She said into his shoulder, "Let's just get it over with."

He nodded.

They touched foreheads and noses, smiled through the tears. It was their last tender moment, maybe the last one they would ever share alone.

He kissed her. Again. Once more.

He let go. She released him. He would not hold her again, he resolved, even when they said goodbye at the unit in twenty minutes.

In December, President Obama had announced the pending Afghan Surge. Chris would now fly at the tip of America's spear with the rest of Fourth Battalion in mid-May. The plenty-of-time he and MaryAnn were counting on for the delivery and postpartum vanished, and almost a year's worth of training had to be compressed into the next several months.

While Chris signed out on Christmas leave at the unit, MaryAnn was at BACH for an ultrasound. They were praying their baby would cooperate this time so that they could at least have the good news of a gender reveal after sharing the new deployment timeline with their families. Their plan was to link up back at the house for lunch and get on the road to make it to Winchester in time for supper with her parents. Chris was already changed into his

civvies and getting ready to load the car when MaryAnn burst into the kitchen waving the printout.

“Are you ready?” she said, beaming. “Take a look at our Carolina girl!”

“Girl?”

MaryAnn nodded. Tears dropped down her cheeks.

Chris took the sonogram and stared down at their daughter. She was glossy and alien and beautiful.

MaryAnn pointed to the new gestation date. “See?” she said. “I told you it was before we left Fort Jackson.”

Chris looked at his wife. He was still stunned. “Our Caroline,” he whispered.

Her alarm clock read 9:07. Chris changed into the uniform he had laid on the cedar chest at the foot of their bed the night before. He laced his boots tight, rose and checked himself in the dresser mirror. In the reflection he saw the empty Cross hanging on the wall above their bed.

Chris steeled himself and moved down the hallway. “Get through the goodbye, and it’s all downhill from there,” he remembered Chaplain Halley counseling the Battalion Chaplains, most of whom had never deployed. Chris thought of how he had wanted this deployment for so long – had hoped for it, prayed for it. Yet now he saw his wife bent over the sink, sobbing, the weight of his dreams laying on her shoulders.

Chris bypassed the kitchen and retrieved his bags from the recliner where he had stacked them the night before. He moved toward the garage, turned back to her and said,

“MaryAnn.” She was leaning forward on the counter with one hand and caressing her stomach with the other.

“Okay,” she croaked.

He turned away before she looked at him.

Chris had alternated the winter weeks in and out of the field. MaryAnn’s ritual morning sicknesses began to stretch into the afternoons and she stayed in bed most of the day. Chris slipped away to check on her whenever he could in between visiting soldiers at firing ranges and suffering through even more of the XO’s mandatory meetings. As MaryAnn’s belly grew, her complexion paled, her skin stayed flushed and clammy, and her eyes darkened with a deepening sense that something was wrong.

In March, Chris was away again, this time for a month of validation exercises at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Just before the unit went “in the box” for the war game, Chris and Bellamy took a convoy to the Brigade FOB for a meeting with Chaplain Halley in the TOC. They arrived a few minutes early, so Chris climbed into the open cargo bed of the Humvee and pulled his cell out of the Ziploc bag in his shoulder pocket. He flipped it open and got a single bar. He waited and prayed. A voicemail popped up from the early afternoon. He pressed the button and cupped his hands around his ears to shield them from the wind.

“I just left BACH. There’s a knot in the umbilical cord,” MaryAnn’s message began without a greeting. Her voice was chilling. “And my blood pressure is through the roof. The OB says if I don’t calm down, I’m going to have gestational hypertension and that could develop into preeclampsia.” The fear rose as she continued, “Yeah, okay, how am I supposed to calm down when you just told me my baby girl is wrapping herself up in the cord?” There

was a bite in her voice he had never heard before. It was desperation bordering on despair.

“Anyway,” she concluded after taking a deep breath, “call me when you can. I know you’re so busy, Chris. I’m sorry to bother you with this.”

Then she hung up.

Chris held up his index finger toward Bellamy, who was glancing down at his watch just outside the entrance to the TOC. Bellamy nodded. Chris tried to call MaryAnn back but the intermittent signal had already disappeared. He suppressed a nauseous fear and typed out a text: *Got your voicemail. Tried to call. Terrible signal. Praying. Love you both. Will try again ASAP.* He held the phone aloft and waited in the setting sun for the bar to return. The wind picked up. He shivered. “Jesus,” he prayed, “please get this message through. Please take care of my wife and our little girl. Lord Jesus, help me trust in You.”

Bellamy called out, “Sir? Chaplain Halley is waiting for us.”

“Roger.” Chris clicked the phone shut and tried to conceal his anguish.

“Is everything okay, Sir? Is Mrs. Colwin doing alright?”

“Roger.” Chris forced a smile. “Everything’s fine. Let’s go.”

They walked into the TOC together.

At 0910, Chris loaded the duffel bags, rucksack, assault pack and laptop case into the back of their newly purchased Honda Odyssey. It was the best baby gift he could come up with, the least he could do under the circumstances, especially after all those years of just scraping by. The new-car smell and the ding of the seat belt alarm made it feel like a rental, like they were only on a temporary trip together. MaryAnn put the van into gear and drove

him towards the unit. “Our God” by Chris Tomlin was playing on the local praise and worship station. Chris reached over and turned it off.

All downhill from here.

Ten silent minutes later, she parked. He forced himself to unbuckle and open the door. He unloaded his bags onto the pavement, lugged the duffel bags and rucksack to a waiting cargo truck and returned to the van to retrieve his carry-ons. A sick feeling rose from his stomach. He ignored it and pressed on.

Almost there. Take up your Cross.

Chris touched MaryAnn’s cheek, mustered a smile.

“I love you,” he said.

She nodded. Her eyes were bloodshot, glassy. She held his shaking hand against her face.

Chris knelt, put his hands on the mound of her belly. He spoke to their daughter: “I love you, forever.” He kissed her navel and stood.

MaryAnn’s expression was different now, an unspoken agreement that all was done that could be done. He lifted the bags onto his shoulders, pushed the nausea down again, and turned about face toward the headquarters.

Chapter Five: The Ramp

First Squad never should have been on the convoy to begin with.

It was a bullshit tasking – escorting local Afghan contractors who were delivering new porto-johns for the outlying COPs – something the fobbit fucks from the Forward Support Company should have been doing. Apparently they were once again “spread too thin

across the AO,” so when the shit started rolling downhill from Battalion, it made its usual stop at First Squad, First Platoon, Alpha Company.

The mission brief was at dawn on a pinkish-gray morning in late July. Sergeants Judd and Jorgensen stood beside the line of armored M-ATV trucks. They wore sweat-encrusted ACU combat shirts and faded torn pants held together with patches of olive drab “100 Mile An Hour” duct tape. They held identical black government Bic pens and standard notebooks that had lost their issued green color, both half-falling apart. Their lips bulged with fresh breakfast plugs of Copenhagen and their expressions lay somewhere between disgust and dejected amusement. Staff Sergeant Morrow issued their task and purpose, the primary and alternate routes, the timeline and actions to take on enemy contact. Nothing was new except the cargo.

“This is some fucking bullshit,” Jorg said. He shook his head and spit a long line of brown juice to the side of his boot. It disappeared in a puff of moon dust. “These motherfuckers made it this far without an escort, you’re telling me they can’t go ten more miles on their own?” He looked down and nudged Jeremy’s upper arm with an elbow. “You believe this, J.J.?”

Jeremy pressed his pen into the page and didn’t look up. He had learned long ago in Iraq to suppress the urge to lay down his weapon and yell “What the fuck?” at the top of his lungs with a pair of fists raised towards the sky. No matter how angry he felt, he would still be eating the shit sandwiches Battalion kept serving up all year, so it was simply a matter of retraining his palate. But Jeremy found it even harder now in Afghanistan as a Team Leader every time he had to make his own Privates swallow a mission like this. It felt like a betrayal

of everything he had always vowed he would never become as a leader in the chain of command.

“Eleven-Alphas love 1-1-Alpha,” Jeremy muttered while he wrote the mission details in his book. “11A” was the Military Occupational Specialty code for infantry officers, so the first time that First Squad, First Platoon, Alpha Company received a ridiculous mission like this one back in June, it was Private First Class Armando Gutierrez in Jeremy’s Team who pointed out the irony. Goot had quipped that their Squad was destined by its very designation as “One-One-Alpha” to be the favorite choice of the infantry brass. Jeremy wasn’t supposed to have favorites among his men, but he loved Goot the most. The scrappy smart-ass from Texas had been disgusted by the Mickey Mouse games of wannabe tough-guys in ROTC back at his campus. Determined not to miss the guaranteed fight of 2010, Goot dropped his double major in English and Journalism to enlist in time for the Surge. Jeremy had always respected that.

“Shut the fuck up guys, alright?” Morrow grunted. He slapped his green book shut and stuffed it into a cargo pocket. “We all know this is retarded.” He pointed toward their soldiers, who were smoking and joking by the 16-ton monster trucks. “Brief the boys and get them ready for PCIs back here in 10.”

“Roger, Sergeant,” Jorg and Jeremy mumbled together. They turned toward each other, closed their green books and exchanged a half-hearted version of their signature fist-bump: a tap of the knuckles followed by simultaneous opened palms, like they were dropping invisible pieces of garbage onto the ground.

After a hasty convoy brief, the Squad stood in their gear beside the lead vehicle for pre-combat inspections. Morrow stared into the distance while Jeremy and Jorg went down

the line, pulling at various pieces of their soldiers' battle rattle. The men stood with arms held out to their sides or up on their helmets, answering questions about the mission, muttering "Roger Sergeant" or "Negative Sergeant" or "Sorry Sergeant." Jeremy reached Goot, took a cursory glance across his gear, then asked him to brief back the task and purpose.

"Task: *Escort Shitters*," Goot announced. "Purpose: *To Assert American Superiority!*" The whole Squad laughed. Then Goot leaned back a little to add a resounding, "Ser-geannt!" He was grinning above his frayed chin strap.

"Okay, wise guy," Jeremy couldn't contain his own smile. He pointed at the tan trucks and ordered, "Mount up, assholes."

While the junior enlisted men climbed in, Morrow, Jeremy and Jorg inspected each other's gear.

Out of the blue, Jorg brought up the order of movement. "I think it's my turn to take the lead, gentlemen."

Morrow's brow furrowed. When he didn't say anything, Jeremy looked up at Jorg and said, "We already briefed the plan, you Nordic fuck."

Jorg finished silently inspecting Jeremy's gear, patted him on the top of the helmet and said, "It's okay, Little Fella, I've got this one covered." Then he flashed his perfectly-aligned teeth, their former brilliant white now beginning to yellow from months of smokeless tobacco.

Jeremy swatted Jorg's hand away and told him to fuck off. Morrow held out his arms toward Jeremy. "Sergeant," Jeremy said while he squeezed Morrow's Camelbak bladder and looked over his kit, "can you please tell Jorg to stop trying to be a hero and just do what he's told?"

Morrow rolled his eyes. "I'm fine with it. Get over yourself, J.J.."

Jeremy knew it was superstitious, and probably stupid, to always insist on being in the front of the formation. But he was the Alpha Team Leader, and whenever they were on dismounted patrols, his Fire Team always led out. Why should a convoy be any different?

"Yeah, *J.J.*," said Jorg. "Let me get a clear view for once. I'm sick of looking at the ass-end of Sergeant Morrow's truck." He cast another stream of spit into the dust. "No offense, Sergeant. I mean, you do have a nice ass."

"Alright, enough of this shit," Morrow said. He checked his watch. "Jorg, you're in the lead. J.J., bring up the rear."

"Roger," they responded. Jeremy glared at Jorg, who flashed him an eat-shit smile. They went to their trucks and plugged in their headset cables.

A minute later, Morrow's voice broke the faint hissing of the radio silence. "All elements, listen up, FRAGO one." He paused. "Change to the order of movement, Bravo will lead the jingles out, I'll stay in the middle and Alpha brings up the rear. Otherwise, it's all the same."

Each truck acknowledged with their call sign and a "Roger." Jorg's truck pulled past Jeremy's and they gave each other the finger. Up ahead, a line of several top-heavy Afghan jingle-trucks laden with blue-green porto-johns waited. The drivers squatted and smoked, little curls of gray rising from their hands as they stared toward the burnt orange glow in the east.

Jeremy watched Jorg dismount to wrangle the Afghan drivers into their trucks before leading the convoy to the front gate. They idled again briefly while Morrow called the

movement in to the TOC. After they were cleared to SP, they passed under the long red and white steel bar that a hapless Afghan soldier raised with a long pulley rope.

The route down Highway One was green because the Engineers had cleared it late the previous night. An array of assets – from observation blimps at the larger FOBs like the one here at Crenshaw, to tower-mounted cameras at the smaller bases, to various UAVs in the sky – had also been scanning the major roads for overnight enemy IED emplacements. The intel portion of Morrow’s mission brief was unusually scant on details: it was a quiet week, the Battalion S2’s summary paragraph advised, with the local network of insurgent groups regrouping and trying to coordinate a final push against the Coalition before start of Ramadan in mid-August. “But you should still be on the lookout at all times for enemy activity.” Jeremy remembered Morrow reading that perennial part of the INTSUM aloud in a deadpan voice. Morrow had then looked up at his Team Leaders while he turned the page of his notes and grumbled, “Well, no shit, Sherlock.” Jorg and Jeremy rolled their eyes in agreement.

Goot turned their truck onto the pavement of Highway One. Jeremy scanned the rear of the convoy through the thick slanted windshield. The idiot jingle-truck drivers were taking their sweet time speeding up – one of them had damn near gone off the road and almost rolled over just getting onto the hardball – and already Jeremy was having to call to Jorg up front to slow things down.

“Aaaand, roger,” Jorg responded. Jeremy could almost hear him adding, “Now you see what it’s like following you.”

Fifteen minutes and four miles later, they reached the first drop-off location. Jeremy and Jorg waited outside their trucks, cradling their helmets and rifles while two of the jingle-trucks pulled into the COP's makeshift motor pool.

"I can't fucking believe it," Jorg said while they watched the outpost's lone forklift lumbering towards them across the gravel. "They knew we were coming and they were ready? This is a first."

Jeremy squinted and said, "Day's young, man." He finished wiping off his clear ballistic lenses and put the frames back on his face. From the moment they received the mission, Jeremy hadn't felt right about this morning. Things were too calm, too quiet. Jorg was in the lead, and so far they were exactly on the templated schedule.

"You okay, bro?" Jorg asked.

"Yeah man," Jeremy replied. He looked across the line of HESCO barriers at the crags of distant mountains on the northern horizon. *It looks like Mars*, he thought. *I'm on fucking Mars*. He remembered Morrow warning them back at Fort Campbell: "Afghanistan is like Earth, except retarded." After Jeremy's first deployment to Iraq, he thought he knew what the third-world looked like, but when they began patrolling the ancient grape rows of Kandahar Province this summer, Afghanistan made Iraq seem like a futuristic civilization. Baghdad had a hell of a lot more than one paved highway. There was electricity and at least some semblance of an educated middle class. Here, it was mud huts and poppies and a population with a mean age that was younger than the average American soldier.

"J.J.," Jorg was saying. Then he gave Jeremy a little push and said, "Dude, seriously, what's up?"

"What the fuck are we doing here, man?" Jeremy shook his head.

Instead of his usual wisecrack to lighten the load, Jorg said, “Our fucking jobs.”

Jeremy didn't reply.

“Okay man?” Jorg went on. “Today our job is to deliver shitters. So what? Tomorrow I bet we get to shoot some motherfuckers. Maybe even today, who knows?” Jorg chucked his plug of dip into the dust.

Jeremy looked up at his brother. “You need a haircut, hippie.” He pointed at Jorg's matted mop, which was glowing white-yellow in the rising angle of the morning sun.

“What's wrong with this, man?” Jorg said and pushed a gloved hand back through a swath of blond tangles. “It's off my ears, so I'm within regs.” He smiled wide. “Plus, all the ladies love it.”

“What ladies, man?” Jeremy laughed. “You're such a douche.”

The last of the shitters was being unloaded. Morrow hollered to saddle up and whirled his finger in the air. The Team Leaders fist-bumped and headed back toward their vehicles.

“You need to chill out, Sergeant,” Jorg shouted from the side of his truck while he put his helmet back on. “You're paying a visit to the Jack Shack when we get back. That's an order!”

Jeremy grinned and gave Jorg a masturbatory salute with his fist curled by his crotch and a middle finger extended as he stroked the air.

Between the third and fourth stops, now late in the morning and the autumn heat beginning to rise in earnest, Jorg halted the column due to a crash between local nationals that was blocking the highway up ahead. Morrow asked how bad it was and if they could squeeze around the cars. Jorg said he didn't trust the jingle-truck drivers to keep themselves from going off the side of the road into the drainage ditches on either side of the road. He

said there was a side path that might be passable and he asked for permission to leave the hardball to confirm. Morrow said okay, but to not flank out too far.

Jeremy's view was blocked by the jingle-trucks ahead of him and Morrow's M-ATV. Just as Jeremy was about to press the PTT to tell Jorg to be careful – that RCP probably hadn't cleared that area this morning – he saw Jorg's truck start moving into the desert. In the breathless moment between the flash of the explosion and the percussive whump of overpressure inside his own cabin, Jeremy watched the turret of Jorg's vehicle flipping straight up through the fireball and the engine block flying forward from the plume. A massive tire spun sideways from the gray smoke into the blue sky.

Jeremy blinked and whispered "Fuck." He stared at the silent scene ahead, refusing to acknowledge it, quelling the panic rising up from his bones. He waited for Morrow's voice on the radio. He started counting to ten, but stopped at five.

"One-One?" Jeremy squeezed the button and asked into his mic. "This is Alpha, I'm ready to move forward." His muscles coursed with adrenaline and he forgot his tactical breathing. *Fuck*, he kept saying under his breath.

"All elements," Morrow finally answered, "Freeze, Freeze, Freeze."

Jesus Christ. Jeremy looked over at Goot, who was gripping the wheel hard with one hand and pounding it with the other. Goot looked back at Jeremy with helpless eyes, pleading for permission to do something, anything.

Keep your shit together, Jeremy told himself and steeled his face. He shouted back to Pak, their gunner, to scan for a trigger man.

"One-One, cover me and I'll bypass you for CASEVAC," Jeremy then said as slowly as he could into the mic. "I can stay in their tracks." It still came out too high and fast.

The plume of tan-gray dust had now risen high into the sky and was beginning to drift towards their position.

“Goddammit, I said stay where you are!” Morrow’s voice was strained but still controlled. “I need gunners scanning for spotters. I’m working the Nine-Line. Stand by.”

Jeremy acknowledged with a “Roger” and looked at Goot again. “Calm down, man,” he told Goot, even though he knew his own eyes had to be full of horror. Knowing he had to steady himself, Jeremy allowed the fog of autopilot to descend. Through the thick windows, the haze of moon dust and explosive residue wafted closer and enveloped their M-ATV in a temporary brownout. When the cloud cleared at last, Jeremy searched the expanse ahead for Jorg’s truck and any sign of life, but the M-ATV had vanished. There was only the slight bulge of a crater sticking up from the desert floor.

“Where the fuck’s the truck?” Goot cried out, leaning his face forward across the steering wheel. “Sergeant, where’s the fucking truck?”

Three hours later back at the Battalion FOB, the six remaining men of First Squad slouched on their gear under the open smoking tent behind the TOC where the Sergeant Major had told them to assemble. They were waiting for the remainder of their Platoon to arrive so the Battalion Command Group could see them.

Morrow’s eyes were vacant, his dirt-caked hair splayed in a mess above his forehead. Jeremy’s men knelt around Private First Class Stanley, the only surviving member of Bravo Team. Stanley was sitting cross-legged in the dust, weeping with his face in his hands. He had been the gunner in Morrow’s truck for the morning. From his turret, he had a front-row

seat to watch helplessly as the rest of his team was obliterated by the 200 pounds of homemade explosives which had been buried under the desert floor.

Jeremy stood above his Team while they comforted Stanley. In Iraq, Jeremy had experienced death, but only from a distance: his sister Platoons suffered the worst of the wounded, and the only KIA in the Company was a replacement who took a mortar round before most of them even learned his name. Jeremy had never experienced a mass casualty event like this. First Squad was now combat ineffective until replacements could be found or the Platoon could be reorganized. But he had been trained for it, and beneath the numbness and the grief was a deeper dread: he knew that he had what it took to carry on, that he had no choice about continuing, and that his Team would need him even more now. But how could he possibly lead them, when the Army defined leadership as “instilling purpose, direction and motivation to accomplish the mission?” He had none of those anymore, and in this moment he no longer cared about the fucking mission.

There was no sound except for the faint white noise of distant generators and Stanley’s whimpers. The mid afternoon was hot, dry and cloudless. Jeremy stared at the HESCO wall and thought about his mother and sister, how they would be gripped by panic when the news rippled through the Family Readiness Group, how they would remain distraught even after he called them. If he would even call them.

The Battalion Commander, Command Sergeant Major, and Chaplain approached the tent. “Group, *Atten-tion*,” Jeremy called out softly. The men of the Squad roused and began to stand. The BC and CSM stepped around the ropes and stakes beside the tent, then removed their headgear and motioned for the men of the Squad to stay as they were. Chaplain Colwin, who was following just behind the CSM, tripped on the last of the ropes, regained his balance

and stumbled his way into the tent next to the Command Group. Everyone pretended not to notice.

Morrow rose from his crouch and moved next to Jeremy. They stood with their hands laid on the small of their backs, somewhere between the formality of parade rest and the laxity of at ease. The command team clutched their patrol caps and looked at their men. All of them knew this conversation was awkward, but essential.

“The rest of your Platoon is almost here,” CSM Hardin began. “But the Commander and I wanted to talk to you first.” He surveyed their faces. With a pained expression, he then took a knee in front of Stanley and said, “Son, this may be the worst day of your life, but it’s not the end. I promise.” He looked up at the other soldiers, who were still squatting and kneeling with Stanley.

Stanley nodded and blinked above the rivulets of tears streaking the dust on his cheeks. “Roger, Sergeant Major.”

The CSM gave a quick nod, squeezed Stanley’s shoulder and stood. He faced Morrow and Jeremy. “Same goes for you.”

Jeremy felt his lip quiver but saw in the corner of his eye that Morrow maintained a stiff expression. They both nodded and echoed Stanley’s words.

“Gentlemen,” the BC now spoke when the CSM stepped back. “You’ve got the rest of your lives to think about this once we get back. But what we need you to do right now is focus on getting through, one step at a time. Tonight that means getting our brothers onto the plane home, and tomorrow it’ll be the memorial, and the day after that we’ll start reorganizing you to get back in the fight. Alpha Company needs you.”

The men waited in silence.

The Commander added, “Roger?”

“Yes Sir,” they practically whispered.

“Our country has asked a lot of us this year. We’ll keep going because we owe it to our people, and to our fallen brothers, to not give up,” he continued.

There was again no response, and Jeremy saw the CSM cringe. The BC stopped himself. He looked over at Chaplain Colwin, who had been standing with his eyes toward the ground during the speeches.

“The Chaplain is here, if any of you need anything from him,” the BC said. “We’ll see you at the ramp.” He put his patrol cap back on and followed the CSM out of the tent.

Chaplain Colwin stood a few feet in front of the men in silence, wringing his boonie hat and looking at the kneeling group of soldiers and the pair of Sergeants standing before him. Jeremy saw the fear and pain in his Chaplain’s eyes and waited for his speech along with the rest of the Squad. But all the Chaplain said was, “I’m here.” He walked over to Morrow and Jeremy, put his hands on their shoulders for a moment, and with wet eyes he looked into theirs. Jeremy felt in his expression a message of hope: that he had no idea how they would get through this, but that they would, and that he was not going to leave the remainder of First Squad to go through it alone.

Then their Chaplain took a knee in the dust behind Private Stanley and waited with them for the rest of the Platoon.

Early that evening, the survivors of First Squad and others from First Platoon baked on the tarmac of Kandahar Airfield – KAF – the dusty, smoldering armpit of a third-world staging base that reeked of sewage from the infamous Poo Pond near the PX. There was also

the shameful stench of countless rear-echelon motherfuckers who probably told all their friends back home what a rough deployment they were having, what with having to walk almost a whole klick to The Boardwalk for T.G.I.Friday's and Green Beans Coffee, which just weren't the same as back home.

Jeremy stood at parade rest waiting on the line of MRAPs to idle their way from Mortuary Affairs, just down the airfield near the control tower. Crowds of miscellaneous U.S. and Coalition troops congregated at the rear of the aircraft, all removing their headgear and arranging themselves into formations beside the ramp.

Jeremy was still dehydrated from the afternoon – he also hadn't eaten since before sunrise – and he was so worried that he would fall out during the ceremony that he drank too much water during the rehearsals. Now, instead of focusing on keeping his knees bent slightly to keep his blood circulating properly, the lower half of his body was tensed. He distracted himself by watching two troops walking solemnly onto the flight line side by side. One was tall and blond, the other short and wiry. A memory sprang up: it was five months ago in May, just after they had arrived at KAF. Jeremy was standing with Jorg in the shade outside their transient barracks after dinner chow, feeling the relative cool of the early evening and enjoying the pause before their night marksmanship range.

“What a fucking shit hole,” Jeremy said while they enjoyed a dessert of Copenhagen on the stoop. They were both desperate to get into the fight. Each nightly intelligence brief only increased their urge to get away from this godforsaken sewer of an airfield and out on patrol.

“Yep,” Jorg had agreed, tsk-ing a line of spit through his teeth. “Only way I'm coming back here is when I get on the fucking bird home, bro.”

Now Jeremy felt the wide wings of the C-17 looming behind him on the tarmac, sensed the open throat of the aircraft and the tongue of the ramp waiting to swallow them all. The three MRAPs, which had been parked down the tarmac with their hazard lights blinking, at last began inching their way silently toward the formation. Far behind Jeremy, an Australian Sergeant Major at the rear of the aircraft called the formations on each side of the ramp to attention. Jeremy and the other Sergeants in charge of their respective details on the open tarmac followed suit. The vehicles slowly turned and stopped in front of each of the three groups of pallbearers.

Jeremy ground his teeth at the generic invocation some chaplain was giving over the PA system in King James English. *Dearest God, we beseech Thee, be near unto us in our hour of need...* Who invited this asshole? Jeremy ignored it and stared instead at the door of the MRAP in front of him, telling himself to focus on the mechanics and ignore the emotions. His detail had a simple task to perform: get their brother onto the aircraft in cadence with the ceremony, then get the fuck out of there and back to the COP. All that mattered to him in this moment was, simply: “Don’t piss on myself, and don’t drop my friend, and don’t fuck this up or I’ll have another reason to never forgive myself.”

At last the prayer ended. The detail slid Jorg’s flag-draped transfer case out of the back of the MRAP, and goddamn, this Danish motherfucker was heavy. The addition of the ice made the weight nearly unbearable, but the men of Alpha Team grunted together and followed Jeremy’s commands to rotate the transfer case with awkward tiny steps. Then they hoisted Jorg up to their shoulders and faced toward the aircraft to begin the slow, half-step march toward his final flight home. Jeremy, as the shortest member of the detail, had to hold the front corner of the case above his shoulder and his triceps were already screaming. He

knew if he ignored the pain long enough, he would go numb, so he focused on his Chaplain up ahead, who was standing at attention waiting for the detail to reach him. When Jeremy was several paces away, Chaplain Colwin turned about face and began to march forward just ahead of them in time with the count of Jeremy's quiet cadence.

Chaplain Colwin was beginning to pull away, so Jeremy increased the volume of his left-rights for a moment. The Chaplain shortened his strides and fell back into the proper pace.

Jeremy halted the column at the foot of the ramp and waited under the weight for Taps. He saw in his peripheral vision the mirrored formations on both sides of the ramp saluting. Salty beads of sweat trickled down his face. They itched. He focused instead on his screaming triceps. *It's almost over*, he told himself. *Almost there. God, give me the strength to make it to the end.*

After Taps, they negotiated the strange step onto the ramp and transitioned from the soft orange sunset of the tarmac into the sterile white fluorescent of the aircraft's interior. Jeremy now heard only the beating of boots against the floor and the sickening sound of those goddamned bagpipes playing Amazing Grace behind them outside. At the front of the cargo compartment, a line of Air Force pilots and Loadmasters stood at attention in their green flight suits, solemn beneath the American flag hanging high on the wall behind the flight deck.

Now Jeremy could barely feel his arms or his hands. He mark-timed his men at the designated pallet position, then ordered to halt. After facing inward, together they lowered Jorg to the floor. When the other two details behind them had done likewise, the men knelt next to each other and laid their palms on the stars and stripes. Jeremy remained upright and

waited for the others in his group to finish, then pulled a unit coin from his pocket and placed it near the center of Jorg's transfer case, just where the corner of the blue met the edges of the red and white. He was the last one to return to attention, then Staff Sergeant Morrow quietly called "Present Arms." Chaplain Colwin saluted from the head of the column. At "Order Arms," they dropped their salutes as slowly as they had raised them. Their Chaplain prayed:

Almighty God, we commend our fallen brothers to your care and ask that you bless this crew as they carry them home to their eternal rest. Give their families the peace that passes all understanding to guard their hearts and minds. We also ask that you would be with us as we mourn them here, and give us the strength we need to carry on the fight. I ask this in the Name of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Staff Sergeant Morrow called "Dismissed" and the eighteen men took a simultaneous step backwards with their left feet. Some stifled tears. Others put hands each other's shoulders while the Loadmasters began strapping the transfer cases to the floor.

Jeremy was numb.

A gaggle of Colonels and Sergeants Major and even a General Officer who had been observing from the ramp were now approaching the front of the aircraft. They paid their respects with solemn salutes and kneeling tributes and their own unit coins placed ceremoniously atop the transfer cases. One of the Loadies raised the ramp. Through the remaining aperture at the rear of the aircraft, Jeremy watched the formations on the tarmac dispersing, little dyads and triads of quiet conversations now developing in disgusting little clusters of fobbits. He remembered an evening like this one just after Alpha Company had arrived at KAF in May: he was leading his Fire Team on an evening PT run past a crowd that was exiting the flight line from a ramp ceremony. Jeremy heard an overweight Sergeant with

a mustache and a spotless uniform ask his buddy, “So, where to for chow? Asian DFAC, or German?”

Jeremy pushed the memory away and turned his attention back to his men, who were finishing their respects and moving toward the side exit door. He gazed at the line of transfer cases, the red and white stripes perfectly aligned down the length of the cargo bay floor. He was regarding the coin atop Jorg’s transfer case a final time when he felt Chaplain Colwin stand next to him.

“You okay, Jeremy?” he asked quietly. Then, before Jeremy could respond, he added, “Sorry, stupid question.”

Jeremy nodded and sniffed. “I’m okay, Sir. It’s okay.” The VIPs had now cleared out along with most of the remaining members of the detail. Jeremy continued staring at the coin while two of the Loadies torqued the ratchet straps down to hooks in the floor. The other Loadie collected handfuls of coins that the senior leaders had left behind on the transfer cases, but when he reached the head of Jorg’s case, he made sure to secure Jeremy’s coin in place underneath one of the straps. The Loadie looked at Jeremy and they silently dipped their chins at one another.

“Is that an Alpha Company coin?” Chaplain Colwin asked.

Jeremy nodded again. He wiped his nose with his forearm. “Yes Sir. It’s the one the C.O. gave me for having the highest PT score in the Company when we had a fitness challenge. But I know Jorg did more pushups than me. His grader screwed him. It was one of our old NCOs who hated him. I tried a dozen times to give it to Jorg, but he’d never take it.”

Chaplain Colwin smiled. He cupped his fingers around the back of Jeremy's collar. "You're strong, brother. Stronger than you think." Jeremy blinked and his Chaplain added, "I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Sir."

"I'll see you at the COP soon."

Jeremy moved toward the side exit. Before he reached for the handrail, he took a final look back and saw Lieutenant Colonel Swanson and Command Sergeant Major Hardin talking quietly with Chaplain Colwin, who was nodding. Swanson finished and moved toward the exit where Jeremy was watching.

"Let's go, Sergeant," the BC said. "Time to get back to work."

"Roger Sir." Jeremy waited for CSM Hardin to pass by, then ducked and followed them down the stairs onto the tarmac.

The Command Group walked briskly past the remaining members of First Squad, who were standing together underneath the wingtip. Staff Sergeant Morrow and Private First Class Stanley followed the seniors away but Jeremy's Team waited.

A refueling tanker trundled toward the plane. Jeremy looked back at the side door, now sealed, and realized he didn't want to go home anymore.

The plane's auxiliary power unit ignited with a loud whoosh. Jeremy's Team was still watching him. There was Hawkinson, head and shoulders above Goot and Pak. Their expressions were a blank slate. Behind them, the half-buried sun bled out on the horizon.

Jeremy knew his men were tired, but ready to do whatever he told them. He took a step toward them and twirled his finger in the air.

They would saddle up for the Chinook ride home tonight. Half of them would sleep. The other half would pass the controllers to Pak's Xbox silently to one another when they got up to take a piss. Tomorrow they would start to inventory the personal effects and suffer through the mandatory critical incident debriefings. By the end of the week, they would be back on guard duty. In another week, maybe, back on patrol. Life at the COP, in the grape rows, on Highway One, would go on until it ended. But it could never make sense the way they had made it before. There was rationalizing, and there was patriotism; but if he ever set foot again on his native soil, Jeremy knew that no explanation for this mission, no justification, would ever pass muster again.

His men waited for him to reach them at the edge of the wing. An engine began turning behind him.

“Let's go, Alpha.”

They followed.

Chapter Six: Raechel

I'm not a bitch, I swear.

I bet that's what he's been calling me. I'm sure that's how he'll always remember me. He won't answer my emails. He unfriended me. Even his Mom won't talk to me. And I wouldn't dare reach out to Katie. Ever since he left, I've been avoiding the news. I'm still on the Battalion's Facebook page. At least he didn't have me thrown off there. But I try to not look at that either. I do okay during the day. But late at night, once Zack falls asleep, I have to see if Jeremy's safe. If his guys are safe. God, they went into a terrible area. I feel sick about how things ended. Even though I know it had to happen sooner or later.

Look, I'll admit I should have done things differently. But it got to the point I just knew it wasn't going to work out. I loved Jeremy. I still do, even if I don't want to. For a while I thought I would marry him. Even that I wanted to marry him. But after Iraq, he spent practically half his time home in Ranger School. That's when I knew he already gave his heart away. The Army was always his secret crush. Still is. But I'm the cheater, right?

God, that night at the apartment. It still makes me sick. That look on his face. It was like this dog my Mom and I saw get hit one night. It came out of nowhere from the woods. The car in front of us hit it and it got thrown up in the air. Mom took a huge breath and slammed on the brakes. The dog spun around and landed beside us. The car in front of us

kept going but we sat still, just breathing. Mom told me to stay in the car but I didn't listen. I was twelve. In the headlights, the dog had these wide eyes. These panicked, scared eyes. This probably sounds weird but through the pain, I swear it's like the dog knew it should have seen what was coming. Something about the way it squinted. The way it winced when Mom laid her hand on its head. And like it knew what was coming next, too. Mom told me to get back in the car and I did. But I didn't close the door. There was a muffled yelp and this awful gurgling sound. Then it was quiet except for the air conditioning blowing through the vents. Mom got back in the car and she tried to hide that she was crying. I was sobbing and asking her why, over and over, why did she do that. She was checking herself in the vanity. "Raechel, a woman only hurts someone when she has to," she said into the mirror. Then she shifted the car into gear and we drove away.

I hate that Jeremy found out the way he did. I wish I would have just told him. That way it would have been on my terms. But at the same time it was a relief, you know? Maybe that sounds really bad. I was just so thankful it was finally over, the pretending. I kept telling myself it was just a temporary thing. That it was okay to have a spring fling. I was lonely already and it was going to be another long year ahead. Kayla cheated on Hunter in freshman year, and they still made it through. I wasn't trying to be done with Jeremy. Just taking a break without asking permission.

Now I realize the Jeremy I fell in love with in high school was gone a long time ago. I wanted him to still be there. But his heart was lost somewhere behind his rank. He's so proud of those fucking stripes. Good thing they're right there on the front of his uniform. He always talked about how hard he worked to earn them. That goddamned Ranger tab, too. Good for him, though. At least he's still got something to show for all the time we spent apart.

Jeremy could never understand what it was like to be a freshman girl in college. Surrounded by parties and boys and football games and all this fun. But my boyfriend is halfway around the world in a combat zone. With the nine-hour difference, half the times he called I was either asleep or in class. His emails were so short. I tried writing him letters but he never wrote back. I sent care packages with the stuff he and his buddies loved. I even bought those disgusting logs of dip. It made me want to vomit but he said it helped them stay awake on guard duty.

When we did get to talk, I tried to listen and I tried to understand. I swear, I tried. But how could I? He couldn't tell me what was really happening anyway. "OPSEC," he kept saying. The first time, I asked what it meant. He said "operational security" like I was an idiot for not figuring it out. Anyway, thanks to the fucking "OPSEC" we usually spent 10 of our 15 minutes on the phone in silence trying to figure out what to talk about. I'd tell him about a party I went to and he wouldn't say a word. So then we were both pissed. Whenever my friends wondered what he was doing, I told them I wasn't sure. "Why not?" they asked. "OPSEC," I shrugged. They looked at me like I was from another planet.

Maybe I wouldn't have felt so alone if the unit would've just let me be a part of the FRG. But I wasn't "family" yet because I was just his girlfriend. It didn't help that I was 400 miles away. So I had to beg and plead for any information from the couple of wives I met on visits between deployments. I guess as far as the Army was concerned, I was just some bitch too. Never mind that I was trying to help him. The Army, too.

You know what? Fuck the Army.

Jeremy never told me what happened in Iraq, but I know there was one night that changed him. Changed who he was. Who he is. Sometime in April, just after his mid-tour

leave, they had a bad night. When they got home that summer, I kept asking him what was wrong. He always said he'd tell me some day. Then I visited him at the barracks on a long weekend and Jorg came next door to say hey. Jeremy went out to find someone to buy us more beer, so I asked Jorg what happened that spring. Jorg started saying something about a checkpoint and a kid. Then he looked away and said it wasn't his place.

Shit. I still can't believe Jorg's gone. I saw it all over Facebook last Friday. I stopped breathing. I know Jeremy has to be hurting so much right now. I sent him another email to tell him I'm so sorry about Jorg. I keep hoping he's going to write something back. Anything. But he hates me. I was already the bitch. Now I'm the bitch that broke his heart before his best friend got killed.

Jesus, I never thought I'd become that girl. Of course, I couldn't have known this would happen. But Jeremy told me this year was going to be different. So I should have known. And I never should have risked this with Zack. I don't love him anyway. Turns out I'm going to lose both of them. Jeremy won't ever take me back. I saw it in his eyes when he drove away.

Maybe I'm crazy, but I keep thinking I'm going to see him on campus. Even when I'm out with Zack. Especially when I'm with Zack. After my last final in June, he wanted to celebrate at Dominick's. That always Jeremy's favorite bar, but obviously I didn't tell Zack that and I said okay. When we ordered our first drink, I thought I saw Jeremy walk through the door and start cutting his way through the crowd toward us. That's the night it started and now I can't get it to stop. Every short guy I see this summer with light hair and fair skin, I shudder. I feel those round blue eyes looking at me. Except this time they aren't sad or scared

or hurt. They're angry. And I want to look into those eyes and tell him that I still love him. I just don't love the Army. I tried to love it too, but I can't. Ever.

I think I knew even before Iraq that it wasn't going to work out. When Jeremy graduated basic training, I sat up in the bleachers with his Mom and Katie. They were treating me like I was already part of the family. It was really nice, I guess. But it was my first month of college. I was thinking about how I was missing classes. All my new friends on campus were getting invited to parties. They were texting me pictures of Fall Rush and football and freedom. But instead of being on campus, I was sweating in Georgia at a parade field. It was like a fucking sauna that morning. Hundreds of guys out there marching on a field, listening to the drum beat from the band. Everyone was clapping and I was too. But deep down I already knew this wasn't the life for me. I loved Jeremy in the uniform, but that was high school. I never thought he'd actually join the Army. His grades were good enough, he could've gone to college. Should've. I still don't get it.

I was always really happy to see him after we were apart. But over time, the Army made him different. Sure, I liked that he was more confident. I was always trying to get him to believe in himself. He always felt like he had something to prove. I don't know if it was his height or his personality or both. Before basic, he was so laid back. But after, he got really impatient. Especially with my friends. And *especially* the boys. He said they were lazy and spoiled. "College seems pretty hard," I heard him tell some guy in a really nasty tone. It was at a house party during his mid-tour from Iraq. I had to make up an excuse to pull him away. I was so afraid he was going to beat the guy's face in. Later that night after he had way too much to drink, he started crying. I had to get him out of there. Everyone was looking at us. I had no idea what to do. My boyfriend was killing people overseas and now he was

crying in front of my friends. How was I supposed to relate to anyone? Now he's my ex and I still feel like a freak. My girls think I'm crazy for obsessing over the news. They tell me I should let him go and enjoy myself. Enjoy my senior year. My last year to be young and free, they say. I know they're right, but I don't think I'll ever escape from this guilt.

Maybe I should have never said yes to that prom. But I always had this secret crush on Jeremy after he finally took the hint and started talking to me. It wasn't just the uniform. It was the way I saw him hold the door for people. There was something genuine about him. It took him forever to ask me out, and my girls gave me a hard time when they heard about it. "You like them short, huh?" they said. I told them to shut up. Never mind half of them thought he was cute. I could tell when I watched them whispering to each other. They just didn't want to admit it to me. I liked them being jealous. I was relieved. My only other option at that point for prom was a guy who just wanted me for a night. I'd had that before and I was over it. I knew Jeremy wanted me, too, but he wanted me for more. Call me stupid but he was such a gentleman. After a few weeks with him, I started thinking we were going to be together forever. What a bunch of romantic bullshit. I was so stupid.

We waited until Christmas break of senior year to have sex. He was the one who insisted on waiting. I think he was scared he wouldn't do a good job. That's when I really started to think he loved me. But right after that first time, I remember asking him why he wanted to go into the Army. Especially with the war going on. He didn't answer right away. I had my head on his chest. He stopped breathing and I heard his heart start beating faster again.

"You could still accept and come to OSU with me," I whispered.

"I could," he said. "But I'd always regret it later."

“What about ROTC? That could be an adventure.” I tried, but he was already gone.

He shook his head. “I can’t wait four or five more years. The wars might be over by then. I can’t risk missing out on combat. This is my chance to control my destiny.”

I guess I shouldn’t be mad at him. He’s just a romantic like me. Unfortunately he fell hard for a jealous lover. And that Bitch has a lot more experience keeping good guys than me.

Chapter Seven: The Wakeup

The familiar thud of heavy feet on the floor woke Chris just before his alarm went off. They stopped just outside the door to his quarters in the rear of the chapel. Chris kept his eyes closed and waited.

“Two eighty-nine and a wakeup, Sir!” Bellamy’s daily announcement echoed above the partition wall.

Chris sighed and turned on the desk lamp beside his cot. The alarm sounded and he silenced it. “I still don’t understand how that’s supposed to motivate me,” he called toward the door. Then he rubbed his face and muttered, “Or anyone.”

“Chaplain, we have to think positive.” Bellamy pulled the door open and stuck his head in. He was smiling, as usual. “We’re going home. Eventually.”

Chris sat up. “Right.” Though the kid never slowed down and his chipper attitude could get old, Chris had learned to appreciate what his assistant’s energy could do to power them through the emotional slog of the summer.

“After all, today’s better than two-ninety and a wakeup.” Bellamy stood in the doorway and pulled up a foot to stretch his quad. “And besides, your count’s getting pretty short. How long now until you get to hold Caroline?”

Chris looked at the black coffee mug on his desk. It was the custom kind that slowly reveals a picture when you add heat, a gift MaryAnn had tucked inside his latest care package. The missing image was MaryAnn holding Caroline for the first time. Tacked on the wall behind the mug was the calendar with the Xs. Chris counted the remaining squares before the circle. “Six and a wakeup until I go to KAF,” he answered. “Plus travel time.”

“See, Sir? It’s better than you think. Now come on, let’s get our two miles in.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Chris pulled on his shoes.

Six days later, Chris was packing his bags for the mid-tour flight the following morning. It was the blessed calm after the final service he always held on Sunday evening for the guys who had been on day shift. These couple of hours were the closest thing he got to Sabbath Rest each week. An even larger weight than usual had lifted after the final hymn and the benediction tonight. It was almost time to hold his wife and daughter. The next three weeks of travel and time at home would be a respite from the summer of bullets and Bibles, the season of ministry he had long prayed for and now wished God wouldn’t have given.

There was no going back on it now, of course, so the only option was to make the best of things and trust that God had a plan.

Chris had just pulled out his only change of civilian clothes from the bottom of his duffel when he heard Bellamy's thuds coming down the center aisle of the sanctuary once again. Now, so close to the trip home, Chris straightened, sighed, and wondered what melodrama it would be this time. Please God, he prayed, let it be the stupid toner cartridge again.

"Chaplain," Bellamy burst in without knocking. "I'm sorry, Sir." He stopped himself and caught his breath.

Chris tried not to roll his eyes. "What is it?"

"They need you," Bellamy panted. "In the TOC, Sir."

"For what?"

"Sergeant Major sent me. Something important. That's all he said."

Chris felt his pulse quicken, heard the crescendo of emergencies crowding in at once. Maybe it was just another Red Cross Message for a soldier: another dead grandmother. Or maybe an injured soldier, an accident at one of the COPs. Somebody's suicidal, or it's some emergency counseling situation. Lord Jesus, please don't let it be a WIA. Or...

"Is this about my flight home?" Chris asked.

Bellamy's face was grave. He shook his head. "I don't think so."

Chris stood still. He bowed his head, clenched the jeans and polo shirt in the palms of his hands. Forced himself to breathe. When he opened his eyes, there was a dark knot in the plywood panel between his boots.

Bellamy waited, wide-eyed and still breathless. Chris dropped the clothes onto his cot next to the pair of loafers. Reached for his boonie hat. Breathed again, deeper this time. Clearly, someone was dead. And if they weren't, they might be soon. His brain scrolled through the Battle Update Brief slides from the shift changeover earlier in the evening: which guys were out right now? Was it Charlie Company? The most familiar faces from Charlie flashed through his mind while he followed Bellamy to the front of the chapel and down the gravel toward the TOC.

The words Chris muttered weren't prayers. The cool of the mid-August evening should have been pleasant, the remnants of a violet sunset still visible through the antenna farm above the TOC. The generators droned. A pair of soldiers were smoking silently near the porto-johns. They avoided eye contact. Bellamy scurried ahead and held the TOC door open.

Inside, the air was quiet and still. Chris searched the backlit faces of the Battalion staff officers above their respective laptops. The Night Battle Captain, Lieutenant Thomas, looked up and pointed Chris toward the Command Group's office behind the wall of screens. Chris swallowed and braced himself. *The flight home*, he was now saying under his breath. *Jesus, don't take away my flight home.*

He knocked.

"Come in," Lieutenant Colonel Swanson called.

Chris opened the door, held it. "Sir."

"Chaplain, have a seat." The Commander motioned toward an empty chair in the middle of the room between his desk and the Sergeant Major's.

Chris hesitated. "Can my assistant join me?"

Swanson shook his head, so Chris motioned for Bellamy to sit tight.

Chris closed the door, sat in the folding chair and faced the Commander. The CSM wasn't here. Chris was breathing shallow. The fear now soared to the irrational. It was his own family who was dead, wasn't it? His wife and baby, both gone: a hit and run on 41A outside the main gate at Campbell. Or SIDS, maybe that's it? Caroline is dead, which means MaryAnn won't want to live.

Swanson squared his desk chair. His narrow blue eyes stared at Chris. Then he said, "Chaplain Jenkins is dead."

Chris blinked.

"I'm sorry, Chris."

Chris exhaled, went blank. There was instant relief that it wasn't his own family or any of his soldiers, then immediate guilt for feeling relieved. Then a sickening wave of grief at the idea of Marty Jenkins, his dear friend, dead.

"How?" Chris finally mustered.

"Pressure plate. Foot patrol with his Bravo Company a little while ago."

Chris scrunched his face, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Others?" he asked.

"One."

"Not his assistant?"

"No. Medic. Hit a pressure plate of his own while rushing to render aid."

"Lord Jesus Christ."

Chris thought of Marty and his close-cropped red hair, his infectious smile, his solid preaching and teaching at the Main Post Chapel on Sunday mornings back at Campbell. He remembered all the Friday nights Chris and MaryAnn spent watching Marty and Casey with

their fraternal twins in the backyard of their house just down the road. Marty was the best of Chris's friends among the Chaplains in the Brigade. Casey had become a lifeline for MaryAnn during the pregnancy, and especially this summer since Caroline was born.

But Marty was dead.

Chris sensed this wasn't the end of the news. "Sir...my...I," he began, but stopped himself and shook his head.

"Chaplain, I know you're supposed to head home tomorrow." Swanson paused. "But you made an impression on Lieutenant Colonel Barlow at that marriage retreat in Nashville. He already called Chaplain Halley. He called me, too. He's insisting on you being the replacement. At least for the first few days while the dust settles."

"Sir, I already missed the birth of my firstborn," Chris blurted out. He felt the anger rising, the helplessness, the guilt. "Caroline. MaryAnn. Jesus. I can't tell her I'm not coming home this week, Sir," he stammered at the Commander. "Marty's my friend and I love him. I mean, I'm honored that I'm being asked, but I don't know how I can do this. I hardly know anyone in Second Battalion." He was ashamed at his pleading.

Swanson held his gaze and allowed him the moment, but then leaned forward in his chair. "Chaplain, I know this is a lot to process right now, so take the time you need in here to gather yourself."

Chris realized that even if he went home now, he would be wracked with guilt the entire time. The reunion with his family was already ruined: a pall had just been cast over the entire leave. He put his head between his knees. Grief, embarrassment, guilt, shame.

"Chris, let me ask you this." Swanson's tone was now almost tender. "What would you want Marty to do?" Swanson was tough, a classic senior infantry leader, and this was the

closest he had ever been to gentle with Chris over the past year. But Swanson was a powder puff compared to “Badass Barlow” in Second Battalion, just a few miles down Highway One. Chris knew he couldn’t say no. There was no way he could abandon his friend’s unit and look at himself in the mirror for the rest of his life.

Chris remembered the final Sunday night of block leave in May. The Colwin and Jenkins families had gathered for one last hurrah before wheels-up later that week. Chris was standing with Marty on his back porch by the grill, swapping Commander stories and wondering how they would change once they hit the ground in-country. Spatula in hand, Marty shook his head and lamented, “Second Battalion is like a Ranger unit that got lost in the Regular Army. Ruthless and lethal.” He flipped a row of the sizzling burgers. “But loyal, too.” He looked over at Chris. “Barlow’s nuts. But the guys? They’ll follow him anywhere.”

“What about you?” Chris asked.

“Do I have a choice?” Marty had grinned and turned back to the grill. He pressed the spatula down onto the first patty.

Now in the Commander’s office, Chris’s temples were throbbing. He looked at his watch and subtracted ten and a half hours. “What kind of place has a half-hour time zone?” MaryAnn had asked him the first time he called her this summer. Lord Jesus Christ, he realized, it was Sunday morning at Campbell. MaryAnn was probably at worship with Caroline. With Casey and the twins. In another hour they would all be heading off post to El Taco. The Colwin and Jenkins families had made it a weekly tradition this spring, then MaryAnn and Casey had kept it going all summer.

“Notifications, Sir?”

“Still pending. It hasn’t even been two hours.”

“Sir, my wife, she’s probably with Casey Jenkins. Oh my God.” Chris put the tips of his fingers over his eyes.

“Chaplain. Let the Rear D do its job. That’s all back there. You’re here. We’re tasking you with this because we trust you.”

Chris breathed. He straightened.

“I’m sorry, Sir. It’s a lot to take in.”

“When you get down to Firestone,” Swanson stood, “just remember your job is to offer hope, nothing more.”

Chris nodded and rose.

“God be with you, Chaplain.”

Bellamy followed Chris out of the silent TOC. It was completely dark now, a crescent moon having already sunk beneath the horizon and a spattering of stars offering only the faintest outline of the tents ahead.

“You alright, Chaplain?” Bellamy asked him in front of the chapel.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. I just need a minute,” Chris said. He made his way around the tent and sat down with his back against the sandbags at the far end. Ten meters ahead, the perimeter T-walls towered like an interlocking line of dark tombstones against an even blacker sky.

Chris felt empty and alone. Scared. Angry. Numb. Overwhelmed with grief for his friend, his friend’s wife, their children. His own wife, their daughter. The medic’s family. Second Battalion. His own Battalion. The insanity of this war. His insanity for wanting it. All I want is to make a difference, he had pleaded with MaryAnn so many times. To be with the

men while they suffer. To show them the love of Jesus. The light in the darkness. The peace that passes all understanding. The wisdom of the Cross that is foolishness to the world, but for those who believe it is the power of God. All the Scriptures he had quoted. All the lofty reasons and the rationales. All the nights spent studying. The hands held high in worship. The tearful testimonies to God's faithfulness. Did he really believe in all this?

Fourteen months of training at Fort Jackson and Fort Campbell had prepared Chris for nearly every death-related scenario except for this one. The Infantryman had his battle drills: React to Contact, React to Ambush, React to Indirect Fire, Enter and Clear a Room, Enter and Clear a Trench... The Chaplain had his: React to Dead Soldier, React to Dead Family Member, React to Dead Afghan, Conduct Memorial Ceremony, Conduct Ramp Ceremony... but none of the instructors ever bothered to mention "React to Dead Chaplain." It was too unthinkable. But now, halfway around the world from air-conditioned classrooms, somehow Chris was supposed to walk into a fighting outfit of eight hundred men and be able to explain why God would let their Chaplain die. Chris knew the questions would come, the accusation in their tone, the hopelessness in their faces. Or the stony-eyed avoidance of conversation altogether. The black cross stitched above Chris's nametape was no longer a sign of God's favor and hope.

Chris pressed the indiglo on his watch. There was no more time for anger, or self-pity, or fear, or even for prayer. It was time to move. The mission: task and purpose. That was the gospel truth now. He rose and returned to the sanctuary.

When Chris reentered his office-quarters, Bellamy had already started laying out the essentials. He stopped and said he hoped it was okay to get started.

"Thanks brother," Chris reassured him. "We don't have much time, do we?"

Together they stuffed the gear into Chris's assault pack. Hygiene kit, chamois travel towel, shower shoes. Portable speaker, iPod, headphones. Helmet, headlamp, night vision goggles. PT shirts, black shorts, running shoes. White socks, boot socks, brown t-shirts. Coffee mug, study Bible, journal. Extra batteries.

"Don't forget this, Sir." Bellamy reached under the desk for the canvas travel tote bag filled with Bibles, devotionals and tracts.

"Right."

"Let's get you to the PZ, Sir."

"Yeah, let's get this over with."

The gravel crunched under their boots. Faint thumps from the rotors were already growing louder in the distance.

The Blackhawk's tinny whine changed pitch as the pilots pulled back to ease the bird down into FOB Firestone. After the wheels bumped the ground, the blue-green glow of the dome light switched on and the crew chief slid the side door open for Chris. He unbuckled himself, shouldered his assault pack and stumbled onto the LZ holding the kit bag full of Bibles. The roar of the rotors was deafening. He rose into a crouching run towards the only form he could make out, the mottled gray of a shipping container against an otherwise black landscape. The rotor wash pushed him forward when the bird lifted off and faded into the night.

Chris thought he recognized the lone silhouette waiting against the backdrop of the connex.

"Gomez?" Chris asked through the ringing. He had forgotten his earplugs.

“Negative, Sir,” the wrong voice replied. “Sergeant Jackson, S3 Air.”

“Oh.”

Marty’s Chaplain Assistant, Specialist Hector Gomez, was probably 20 years old, somewhat short with lean muscles under light brown skin. He was one of the best distance runners in the Brigade and Marty had been the only member of any of the Unit Ministry Teams who could keep up with him for more than a mile. Gomez hailed from St. Paul, earning him the nickname of the “Minnesota Mexican” or “M&M” for short. Chris had been hoping to arrive at Firestone in time to link up with Gomez first, since he was the only person he really knew in Second Battalion other than Marty.

“Gomez and the Command Group are still at the ramp ceremony,” Sergeant Jackson said.

“Right, of course.”

“This way, Sir. I’ll show you to the chapel so you can drop your gear.”

Even in the dark, Chris could tell that it wasn’t the same FOB Firestone he had visited in late June when he came to support Marty at one of his own memorial ceremonies. Several weeks in a Surge unit was enough to transform a barren swath of desert into a different world. Chris’s eyes began adjusting to the darkness and he realized the HESCO-lined LZ they were walking off hadn’t existed the last time he was was here. By the time they navigated the unfamiliar labyrinth of structures, containers and equipment, Chris had nearly tripped a half dozen times trying to avoid the sandbags, power cables and tent stakes in his path behind the sure-footed Sergeant. At last, Jackson held the front flap of the chapel open for Chris and together they ducked inside.

The fluorescent light was blinding. The white vinyl walls were sterile and the barren worship space was cleared except for a circle of metal folding chairs in the middle of the room. Chris squinted and dropped his bags in the entry vestibule. At the far end of the sanctuary, a makeshift altar sat in front of a wooden wall adorned only with a simple cross made from 2x4 wood. Lone silver nails protruded at the hands and foot. A jagged crown was fastened to the top: it had been fashioned out of discarded nails that were too bent from being poorly hammered to be properly used again. The altar was constructed from angled pieces of scrap wood that someone had artfully layered to form the oaken likeness of fire flames rising from the floor. Chris thought it seemed so fitting. Marty always tried to reveal the Gospel in ordinary things, even broken remnants that otherwise would have ended up in the burn pit.

“Quarters are in the back, Sir,” Jackson pointed at the door in the wall near the altar.

Chris nodded and picked up his bags. He made the short walk around the empty chairs. The only sounds were the boards creaking beneath his feet and the throbbing of his heartbeat. He pushed the door open to reveal the rear third of the tent, a hundred square feet at most, not unlike his own setup at FOB Crenshaw. It was the place his friend had left for a late afternoon foot patrol only a few hours ago. Chris stopped in the doorway and stifled tears. There was a cot with a green pillowcase at the head and a faded camouflage poncho liner blanket spread out neatly underneath. Beside the cot was a makeshift nightstand made from an MRE box. On top of the box was a family photo. In front of the frame was a leather wallet. Beside the wallet was a gold ring.

“Jesus, I can’t do this,” he whispered, still standing at the threshold. The bags were heavy in his hands. The world was quiet.

“Sir, let’s get you to the TOC so you can meet the XO.” Jackson was standing just behind him now.

“Roger.” Chris quickly sat the bags down inside the room and closed the door.

He followed Sergeant Jackson toward the darkness outside. Chris remembered Bellamy babbling in the breakfast line back at Crenshaw about how this was the last night of the Perseid meteor shower. Before Chris put his patrol cap on, he looked up at the stars and waited for a moment. Maybe there would be a sign.

Hope, and nothing more.

In the TOC, Chris met the XO, Major Burke, who took him around the room to briefly introduce him to the staff primaries. The S3, Major Swift, looked up from his computer and nodded at Chris, then put his lips to the lid of a makeshift plastic spitter and refastened the cap on the bottle. Over the S3’s shoulder Chris glimpsed the PowerPoint storyboard of the attack, the operational graphics for explosions on the satellite map image, red and yellow arrows, white bubbles with summaries of the actions taken by friendly and enemy forces. The banner at the top of the slide read OPERATION SMOKE AND MIRRORS.

“Gentlemen,” Chris asked the Majors, his eyes still lingering on the screen, “forgive me for asking, but why did Chaplain Jenkins go out with a Sunday foot patrol?”

“He insisted on it,” Major Swift said. “He said he hadn’t been out with Bravo Company in a while and he was worried about this Platoon ever since their first KIA last month. He knew they were still scared and he wanted to show them it was going to be okay.” Swift shook his head and spit again. “We finally let him because this patrol was just a

diversion for the main op tomorrow morning. There was a low chance of enemy contact.” Then he looked away, muttered “goddammit,” and turned back to the storyboard.

“The Boss and CSM will be back in a while, Chaplain,” Burke said, leading Chris toward the exit. “Gomez too. Get settled in and when they’re here, I’ll send Gomez for you.”

Chris sat on a metal folding chair in the middle of Marty’s chapel. There was no sound except the faint droning of the nearest generator. He counted the other chairs in the circle: twelve plus his own. Back home at Mount Zion, they had always called an empty seat the “Jesus Chair” as a reminder that He was always with us, even when we couldn’t see Him. Now the image was reversed, and Chris was the only one here, alone like Jesus on His darkest night, no disciples to keep watch with him and pray.

He thought of MaryAnn and Caroline. Casey and the twins. He looked at his watch. It was now well after midnight. Mid-afternoon back home. Soon the sun would be in the same place in the sky there as it was when Marty died here. It would probably be another day before the comms blackout would be lifted, since all primary next of kin had to be informed in person by pairs of death notification teams across the country. This included widows and parents. The medic who died trying to save Marty, Private First Class Ronnie Maven, was single but he had divorced parents who lived on opposite sides of the country. Chris read Maven’s emergency information form which the S1 had handed him in the TOC. There was a girlfriend. *Amanda*, Maven had written on the form in a distinctly different penmanship than the rest of his final wishes. *A girl to be loved*, Chris was surprised to remember the Latin translation of the name from his days at the parish school in Winchester. Chris prayed for all of them, but especially for Amanda. She wouldn’t get the courtesy of a notification team

since she wasn't a spouse. Instead, she would find out from whichever of Maven's parents or friends called her first. Or, God forbid, posted it on Facebook.

Chris briefly considered calling MaryAnn from the MWR phone sitting in the front corner of the chapel. He knew the line wasn't really shut off like the notice taped onto the receiver said. They must have found Casey by now. God willing, MaryAnn didn't go back to the house with her after lunch. But even if he called, what could he say to his wife? And what good would it do, anyway? The thought of hearing despair or anger in her voice was more than he could bear on top of his own sense of dread about the coming days. Months. Years. What had he been thinking, bringing his marriage and his future family into this war? The free healthcare, the gated community of living on post, the camaraderie and common purpose, the simplicity of being told where to be and when and what to wear, not to mention the tax-free incentive pay for serving in a combat zone: they had all come with a cost he had not counted, should have budgeted, could have avoided. Marty's death and Chris's ruined mid-tour leave were just the next payments on the mortgage he had taken out on his calling. For all those months and years he had spent hoping, praying and striving to get to this place, he had been so sure of God's leading. That it was for the glory of His Kingdom. But what if it had really been only about himself all along?

"Congratulations, Chris," he muttered. "And praise God. You got what you wanted."

There was a Spirit-filled country church in central Kentucky right now that could have used a thirty year-old pastor with a loving wife and a new little one to dote on.

Instead...

The hyper-arousal of the past few hours began to drain in the solemn silence of the chapel. Chris forced himself to return to quarters in the back of the tent. He rolled out his inflatable sleeping mat and laid his gear out on the hard floor.

Kneeling, he stared at Marty's empty cot.

Here was the only way to rationalize his mistake now, if that's what this deployment was: God had called him to this very place, this unthinkable moment in the War on Terror, to stand in for a fellow Chaplain who died on the battlefield. Chris felt a sudden twinge of pride at this thought. At being entrusted with a sacred and historic mission by Chaplain Halley. At being requested by Badass Barlow. At the thought that his peers from the Chaplain School at Fort Jackson would learn that it was him who had responded to the unthinkable on the front in Afghanistan. At the notion that they would pray for him with pity and compassion and maybe even awe.

Chris looked up at Marty's family portrait. Disgust swelled through his torso. He put his forehead down on the frame of his assault pack in ashamed exhaustion.

"Chaplain Colwin?"

Gomez startled him awake.

"M&M," Chris leaned back onto his aching knees and stood. "Brother, I'm so sorry."

Dark bags hung beneath Gomez's bloodshot eyes, but he managed half a smile in return.

"It's something, isn't it, Sir." He sighed. "The Command Group wants to meet you."

Chris looked at his watch. It had only been a power nap, thank God. "Roger." The haze of sleep dissipated. He looked at Gomez and said, "Let's get started."

Chapter Eight: MaryAnn

When I climbed on top of Chris the night before he deployed, I was trying to induce labor. I was scared and it was my last hope for keeping him home. But all it did was give him another memory of having his wife in his favorite position. One for the road, I guess.

I laid with him after, crying, praying for contractions and thinking: “Why is God letting this happen to us?” Then I remembered falling asleep in Chris’s arms, curled up against him in that barren dorm room after the first time we exploded together. That’s what he started calling it at some point. I should have never laughed the first time he said it. “Did I make you explode?” he still whispers sometimes when he’s not sure if I’m faking it. I always tell him yes. It’s important to him. For me it’s important to be the dutiful Christian wife, the pastor’s wife. I remember Mara Blevins pulling me aside at our wedding reception underneath that sweltering tent. She told me in a hushed voice, “No matter what, you’ve got to keep his eyes on you, honey.” Mara nodded over toward Pastor, who looked exhausted from the ceremony and the heat, and she shook her head. “And the only way to do that is to keep him busy at home. Do you hear what I’m telling you, sweetie?” she said. I laughed because I thought she was about to smile. But she kept that weathered face pointed straight at me wearing an expression that said there was no kidding.

I think the only thing that exploded that night in the dorm was my fertility. I can’t get rid of this sick feeling that the Lord is punishing me for all the times Chris and I made love before our wedding. I guess it serves me right. God finally gives me what I always wanted, this precious baby girl, and then He takes my Chris away. The Bible says that’s what He does, so I don’t know why I’m surprised about it.

Chris gives and he takes away, too. Or maybe I should say he gets and then he takes off.

Lord Jesus, I’ve never had depression like this. When it comes, it sucks me down into this hole where I can barely breathe. I have to look at Caroline and force myself to remember that she needs me to survive. Even when I’m not a mess, I’m afraid to talk to my PCM about

it because I don't know what the unit can see in my medical records. I don't want to embarrass Chris. The last thing he needs right now in Kandahar is to hear about his wife at Fort Campbell who has postpartum. Who can't go out in public without feeling like she's going to break down crying or have a panic attack. Or maybe who just doesn't know how to deal with Army life. I guess I need to just "suck it up" like Chris says the Sergeants always yell at their guys.

Thank God for Casey. She keeps me sane. All week, I look forward to that lunch with her after chapel. It's what gets me out of bed on Sunday mornings. It sure isn't the Praise and Worship, as bad as that must sound. But I do feel like I've earned some enchiladas and fellowship after a week of being miserable and then forcing myself to play the Happy Chaplain Wife in the pews. When we walk into El Taco I feel this weight come off my shoulders. Casey dumps a handful of quarters into the twins' hands and she sends them to the arcade in the back. Then she takes Caroline into her arms and listens to me. Casey is the only one who gets to hold her except for grandparents. And she's the only one who tells me I'm not a disaster. Who lets me share about my pain without judging me. I don't know how I'd be surviving this without her.

We're so glad that Marty and Chris have each other over there, too, even if they're in different parts of the OA. Is that the right term? Even after more than a year, I'm still lost on half the lingo. I spent so much time bedridden when I should have been at all the unit functions and getting to know people and learning more about the Army and our Battalion. But it always seemed like I was throwing up on the nights of the unit Coffees. Secretly, I was thankful when I had an excuse to miss. All they did at the last one I went to was sit around and gossip and drink wine. A couple of them were talking about the boob jobs they were

planning as deployment presents for their husbands. But there I was, sober and bloated as a houseboat. My skin was splotchy even in the dead of winter, but they were all perfectly manicured and made up. Almost all of them had been through a deployment before, and almost all of them were younger than me.

What do I have in common with anyone here? Whenever I'm around the enlisted wives at the FRG meetings, they see me as an officer's wife. It doesn't matter that I'm from a blue-collar family just like Chris, and just like most of their husbands. I wish they could see how much I want to connect with them, and how little I care about my husband being a Captain. But the officers' wives can sure tell I'm not really one of them. Even the down-to-earth ones, the ones who don't care that I didn't go to college, still act different around me because I'm the Chaplain's Wife.

The Chaplain Spouses Coffees are a little better than the unit ones, but even at those I always feel like the hillbilly preacher's wife. Most of the Chaplain Wives have a degree. I spent the years I would have been in college just getting my husband through his Bachelor's. Then we couldn't conceive and he got all wrapped up in this War on Terror dream and I busted my butt to put him through seminary. We've been poor until last year and now we have so much money you'd think I'd be happier, but things have only gotten harder since he came on active duty. So I try to connect with these Chaplain wives, I really do. They're sweet, for the most part. But other than Casey, I don't ever feel like I can really be myself. A couple of the wives seem to think they wear their husband's rank on their own collar. They probably don't mean to look at me like I'm stupid, but every conversation I'm praying I'll know what acronym they're using. Every day there's another term for me to learn, or another

agency on post I'm supposed to magically know about so I can refer the other wives in the unit to this resource or that program. How am I supposed to take care of so many other people when I'm overwhelmed as a new mother and still clueless as a new Army wife? The further along I got in the pregnancy, and especially now, it's like the Chatty Cathy part of me lost her Military ID and the MPs stopped letting her inside the gate.

The stress and the anxiety have been unbearable, especially after that godawful knot showed up. But Chris was so distracted with his men and the chapel and making sure that he and Bellamy were ready for combat, it's like he didn't have anything left for me. Then he was gone, and I had to face delivering our baby alone. Thank God there weren't any complications with Caroline. I'm ashamed to admit that I secretly hoped something bad enough would happen to me that Chris would have to come home. At least my parents were able to come down when I went into labor, and it was nice having them for a few days to help me transition home. But then Chris's lovely mother started calling and so I had to find a way to let her visit too. She was already angry because I didn't invite them to be there for the birth. At least she brought Stan when they came the week after my parents left. Stan reminds me so much of Chris. When he held Caroline the first time I burst into tears and my heart broke because I wondered if Chris was going to make it until the middle of August for his leave. Teresa actually put her hand on my arm and I let her.

Karen Swanson checked on me when I got home from BACH, which was really nice of her. She and Leila Hardin brought flowers from the FRG and they offered to set up meals for us so I wouldn't have to cook. But Teresa was there and of course she had to say something. And of all the things, she said, "No thank you, ladies, we've got her covered."

Karen looked offended, so I jumped in and said we would be happy to have the meals and thanked her. Teresa shot me this look while she was holding Caroline. I was so embarrassed. Teresa has no clue how important it is that Karen and I get along this year. Leila, too. It was so awkward. They told me again how beautiful Caroline is, then they handed the casserole and the cake to Stan and me. I waved bye from the porch and smiled but I was so angry I thought I was going to faint. Teresa and I didn't speak for the rest of the day. Thank God Stan was there. I don't know how he does it with her.

Of course Teresa also wanted to know where and when she could go to Mass on post. There was this tone like, "They *do* have Mass here, right?" I was prepared for her, though. I gave her the flyer with all the services but she still seemed miffed that there was only one Mass during the deployment. I even offered to introduce them to Father Dan, the civilian priest who comes on post for Mass since the only Chaplain priest is deployed. I met him at the Commissary by chance when we were checking out and he smiled at Caroline. When I asked him about Mass for my in-laws, he gave me his card and said he hoped they'd come. I thanked him and thanked God, too. But when they got back afterward, all Teresa could talk about was how Caroline needed to be baptized. I held myself back and told her as politely as I could, once again, that we don't do infant baptism in our tradition. As soon as I used that word, I knew what was coming next. "Well, there's *Sacred* Tradition," she snapped. I looked at Stan and he closed his eyes softly as if to say, "I know, just let it go."

Sometimes I find myself not caring about anything anymore. Anyone except Caroline.

Of course I don't mean that. I care about Chris, and I want him home. Only another three weeks and he'll be here. Then I can watch him hold our baby girl for the first time. I

can see her look up at her Daddy for real, not just the pictures I put up for her on the laptop that she won't take her eyes off of. I'm so scared that once he leaves, she'll think he doesn't love her anymore. That she made him run away. That he would rather be halfway around the world getting shot at than holding her. What will that do to her in the long run? I know she's just a baby and she can't really understand that right now. But deep down, I worry that she will.

Already the Battalion has lost six guys this summer. Six. We haven't made it three weeks without losing someone. That's why Chris couldn't even call until Caroline was almost a day old. He was out at one of the farthest outposts, the COPs or whatever they call them. He said he was as far as anyone could be from the headquarters. It was where the first KIA happened and he was out there ministering to the guys when Caroline was born. They didn't have any phones, he said, only radios. They were going to fly him back to FOB Crenshaw right away to call me but there was a big sandstorm and it took them a whole day to get him in a helicopter and back to a phone. "Couldn't they just drive out and get you?" I asked. "No," he said, "we were on a hilltop at the edge of this huge desert where the sands shift so much, sometimes the trucks can't get there either." Why in the hell did I agree to this? I didn't say that part, of course.

Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking, a teenage girl who loved Jesus but fell in love with a boy and followed him instead. Chris is a good man and I still love him. He's the father of our daughter and the leader of our family. He loves Jesus and he's trying hard to serve Him, so I shouldn't be bitter because that's what I always said I wanted in a husband. But how can I feel anything but forsaken and alone? Chris didn't even try to stay home, and I understand why. "Mission First." But what's the first mission? Chris didn't even ask Colonel

Swanson or Chaplain Halley. All I really wanted was for him to show me that he wants Caroline and me more than this damned deployment. Then I could blame the Army instead of him. This is so selfish of me, I know, because the all his soldiers need him too. But there are so many of them, he can't meet all their needs. At least he could try to meet ours.

The nights here are so quiet and Caroline is such a sweet baby, she sleeps so well. All summer I sit and watch her for hours until I finally fall asleep in the rocking chair beside the bassinet. Every night I pray she'll wake up and keep me company. I've tried to ask Jesus to be with me but He feels so distant now, like He's on the bright side of the world with Chris when it's dark here.

I know I could kill some of the next three weeks by going home, but then I'd have to spend an equal amount of time with Teresa and I just can't. Anyway with all these deaths I don't feel like I can leave the unit alone. I have to be here to help with the bereavement however I can. So far all six of the guys who've been killed were single except one whose wife was in California. But I'm so scared that if we lose a married guy whose wife lives here, I'll have to go with Karen to sit with her after the notification team finishes telling the wife that her husband is dead. I've got a newborn, so I know they probably wouldn't make me do it, but I am the Chaplain's Wife after all, and isn't that what we came here to do? Give people comfort and hope when it seems hopeless? But how can I do that when I'm barely able to keep going myself?

Last week, the Division held the July Eagle Remembrance Ceremony. It was one of the most beautiful and awful things I've ever seen. All those pictures, all those rifles with the helmets on top. The dog tags dangling down above the boots got me the most though. Something about the emptiness, all those families crying for the empty spaces. But here's my

baby sleeping in the stroller next to me and my husband is still over there. He may not ever get to see this little girl and she may never get to see him. When Taps played I thought I was going to throw up. Caroline started crying, thank God, and I used the heat as an excuse. I whispered to Karen I was sorry, I had to go. She just smiled and nodded. Her makeup was perfect. Her expression was just the right balance of sadness and strength. Ever since that night I keep thinking, "How has she been doing this every other year since 9/11?"

I hope Chris gets a new vision when he sees Caroline. God knows I'm not his dream anymore. Maybe I never was.

Chapter Nine: The Last Time I Was Happy

“I don’t even want to hear it,” Morrow said from his cot.

“Sergeant, I’m not missing a mission out here for sick call.” Jeremy was standing between his own cot and the one where Jorg had slept until three weeks ago. It was still empty. On the other side of Jeremy’s cot, Goot was doing the rucksack flop on the floor, reading his latest hardcover, *The Imperfectionists*.

“It’s not sick call, dumbass.” Morrow looked up from his latest issue of *Maxim*. “It’s a follow-up order from Doc Hall. Last time I checked this ain’t a democracy.”

Jeremy muttered “fucking bullshit” under his breath.

“What’s that, tough guy?” Morrow put the magazine down. “Your back’s fucked up, Sergeant Judd. So get it fixed or I’ll fuck you up even worse, alright?”

Jeremy stared back, then said, “You know that’s some fucked up logic, right?”

Goot snickered behind his book. Morrow glared at him, then turned his scowl back at Jeremy. They waited. Suddenly the lines on Morrow’s forehead disappeared. His face stretched into a disarming smile. It was the first one Jeremy had seen since before the blast that killed Bravo Team.

“Look, J.J., get your ass up there, get checked out, then steal some shit from the DFAC on your way back. We’re almost black on Rip-Its.”

Jeremy grinned. “Roger, Sergeant.”

The follow-up turned out to be bullshit as predicted. Ever since he had hopped a wall the wrong way during a foot patrol in early July, Jeremy’s lower back occasionally seized up when he torqued it a certain way. He had hidden it successfully until it happened in front of

Captain Kinsley while Jeremy was carrying water cans across the COP one morning in late July. The C.O. had immediately ordered Jeremy to see the Battalion Surgeon the next time he was at FOB Crenshaw, which happened to be the day before the mission that killed Jorg. Jeremy never liked going to Crenshaw anyway – he despised all things “Battalion” – but now the thought of passing through that front gate, in or out, made him shudder. So when all Doc Hall did this time was bring Jeremy into his office at the Aid Station, have him do some basic movements and fill in a few bubbles on a standard form, Jeremy had to stifle his fury. He had been ordered to leave his men for this?

Now, with an entire evening to kill before his convoy back to COP Stallion in the morning, Jeremy followed Morrow’s order and managed to lift a case of energy drinks from the cooks’ storage connex behind the chow hall. They weren’t Rip-Its, but Jeremy figured Morrow would appreciate the brand name – “Pit Bull” – and Goot would appreciate that they were made in Great Britain, just like all those novels he was always reading. Jeremy slipped the case of black cans under his poncho liner on his cot in the open-bay transient tent where the Battalion had graciously parked him for the night.

He was hungry, so he went back outside to the chow line. A gray F-15 arced silently across the blue sky toward a target somewhere to the south. Jeremy wondered which unit was out right now, which sector they were patrolling, which grape rows were being walked. He thought of his guys for the fiftieth time since leaving them a few hours ago. All around him, the headquarters and support pukes were jaw-jacking about the usual Battalion-level bullshit: this memo and that meeting, how the Air Force girls they saw at KAF in May were hotter than any Army chicks they had ever seen, and how someone heard there’s a secret Salsa Night up at Brigade this Saturday. Jeremy’s fists were clenched. When he heard some fat

fuck complaining about barbecue and burgers getting old, he stormed back to the transient tent. The guys in Alpha Company hadn't eaten anything but mermite slop and MREs for the past three months, and he'd be damned if he'd get the luxury of a hot meal because of a fucked up back that was his own fault. He sat by his assault pack and fumed.

A boisterous pair of civilian contractors in khaki cargo pants across the tent headed out for chow. Jeremy now found himself alone on his cot. He pushed away the memory of Raechel. Dismissed his Mom and Big Sis. There weren't any generators nearby and the quiet of the early evening lulled him to lay back for a minute, which he allowed himself because he knew his guys were probably doing the same in between guard shifts back at the COP.

He startled awake when the contractors roared back in, laughing about some stupid shit they'd just seen on Facebook in the MWR tent. Jeremy wiped his eyes and looked at his watch. He had been out for three hours. Still hungry, he retrieved his rifle and headed out into the night in search of an MRE, and maybe the MWR. He knew he should probably reach out to his Mom and Katie again. After the comms blackout from the Bravo Team mass casualty, he had only sent them a quick note to let them know he was unharmed. There just wasn't any more room on his shoulders for their grief and worry on top of his own and his Team's.

Since losing Raechel 100 days ago, it seemed like there was some new weight every week. His back injury didn't help, but at least there was Naproxen for that. The rest of it would be compartmentalized until further notice thanks to General Order Number One, no alcohol. Mid-tour would be a temporary relief, but that wasn't until after Thanksgiving. 100 more days. But even then, Jeremy knew all the alcohol in Central Ohio wouldn't numb the agony and rage of being 20 minutes away from the apartment where Raechel was fucking her new boyfriend. All summer long, Jeremy had considered asking to be allowed to not take

mid-tour, but especially after his attempt to avoid this appointment, he knew the response he would get from Morrow. Besides, at this point he didn't think he would survive another 100 days anyway.

A search inside the vacant DFAC tent yielded only some cold succotash and a few heels of stale bread. Jeremy forced it all down with half a cup of lukewarm dregs from the coffee container. Back outside again in the pitch-black night, Jeremy followed his headlamp toward the MWR tent, but the line was out the door and he was relieved of the temptation to partake in another privilege without his men. It also absolved him of the guilt he felt for not talking to his Mom or Katie. He knew they needed to hear his voice, and he wanted to hear theirs too, but even more than the fear of feeling their pain was the thought of releasing his own. The last place he wanted to lose control of his emotions was the goddamned MWR tent, especially at Battalion in front of these spoiled fucks. Maybe if there was a private calling cubicle like the ones he'd seen back at KAF, he could force himself to face them. But out here, it was just the standard bank of a dozen phones and computers, all three feet away from each other with no partition. Not exactly the best setup for processing your emotions.

Jeremy remembered the Battalion Commander's words the afternoon Jorg died: "You've got the rest of your lives to deal with this..."

Fuck it, he thought, I'll deal with it later.

Jeremy returned to the transient tent and found the civilians joking and playing Spades on an unopened case of MREs. Fucking assholes. He decided to get the hell out of there and go for a run, clear his head. Maybe find a quiet corner of the FOB to be alone for a little while and by the time he got back it'd be past these idiots' bedtime. He took off his ACU blouse, changed into his pair of PT shorts and exchanged his boots for shoes. With a

headlamp to carry in one hand and his rifle in the other, he emerged from the tent and trotted toward the nearest HESCO barrier wall. He began running counterclockwise on the alternating dirt and gravel surface along the perimeter.

“Go fast, turn left,” he remembered Jorg joking when they used to make this kind of run together late at night out at COP Stallion. “This place is like Bristol,” Jorg said on the first night they ran the tight loop around the cluster of Company tents and the tiny, dust-filled patch that served as a makeshift motor pool.

“Jorg,” Jeremy had breathed out as they ran, “you must be the only Swedish motherfucker alive who likes NASCAR.”

“So what?” Jorg replied. He picked up the pace. “You must be the only country-ass motherfucker who doesn’t.”

“Slow down, asshole,” Jeremy panted. He didn’t have enough breath to protest that he wasn’t from the country, just the edge of it.

“Catch up, Little Man,” Jorg taunted over his shoulder. The spot of his red flashlight bounced wildly in front of him. “And goddammit, my name is *Danish*,” he called out as he sped away into the darkness.

Now, Jeremy ran faster, fueled only by his anger and the grief, his own red flashlight illuminating the emptiness in front of him, strange tents passing to his left, a never-ending wall of hulking gray HESCO stacks gliding away behind him on the right. The only indication of where he was on the FOB was the glow of the ECP, its bright floodlights shining outward at the T-wall chicane and the barbed wire, the signs in Pashto and Dari that only a handful of the Afghans or Americans could read, the pockmarked asphalt of Highway One and the inky gloom of the grape rows and wadis beyond.

Jeremy failed to find a secluded spot on the first lap, so he made another trip around the FOB. On his fifth or sixth lap, just around the time that he started to lose count and finally stopped caring about how much he had done or how fast he had done it – when he felt the pleasant burn of lactic acid and the synchronization of breaths with steps and the satisfaction of forward motion for its own sake – Jeremy noticed a figure crouched behind one of the tents near the chow hall. Whoever it was, the guy had clearly seen better days. All Jeremy could make out at the edge of his flashlight's glow when he ran by was a man burying his face in his hands. It looked like he was crying, but Jeremy couldn't tell for sure. He lumped the anonymous troop in with the fobbit fucks of the chow hall and the MWR tent, but when the figure remained crumpled in the same place lap after lap, Jeremy felt an unexpected twinge of compassion. After all, hadn't he himself set out to find a place where he could be alone? Who was he to judge this fellow soldier?

A few laps later the figure disappeared. Jeremy slowed to a trot and then a stride. The rhythm of the run kept his feet moving. He walked one more lap around the FOB to cool down. For a few hundred meters, Jeremy's mind was blank behind the temporary bliss of the endorphins. His shoulders felt light. The hunger was gone. There was the familiar weight of his rifle, his fingers curled around the bezel ring between the magazine well and the barrel. He was simply a soldier out for an evening walk. It was the first time that he didn't have anywhere to be, or anyone to look after, since block leave in May.

Back now at the point where he had seen the soldier sitting alone, he cut between the tents and discovered this was the Battalion Chapel. He had seen it across the FOB a few times over the summer, but never had a reason to make the hundred meter walk in this direction from the DFAC. Now, even though the temperature was still above 80, Jeremy felt

a chill from the sweat. His legs turned heavy. He was tired again but he craved solitude more than sleep. Maybe the chapel was worth a look. He made sure no one else was around and ducked through the flap.

Only one of the fluorescent bulbs strung up along the side walls was lit. In the dim light, Jeremy rummaged through the rat-fucked remnants of care packages strewn on a set of shelves near the entrance. The only things left were a handful of Jolly Ranchers and a half-eaten package of corn nuts mixed with mouse shit. "Way to stay classy, Crenshaw," he muttered. No matter. All he cared about right now was being alone.

Jeremy took a seat on the nearest wooden pew. There was an "Order of Worship" sheet sticking out beneath the bench in front of him. He skimmed through the scriptures and hymns from the Sunday evening worship service held last weekend. There was a Psalm and a Gospel reading. One of the songs was "Where He Leads Me." Jeremy scanned the lyrics and laid the sheet down. There was a peace in this place, and it wasn't just the silence.

Jeremy put his rifle beneath the pew and sunk his face into his hands. How was he going to make it to mid-tour? Quitting wasn't an option; he wouldn't leave his men. But Jesus Christ, it felt like he was doomed. Ever since Easter, it seemed like things started heading downhill and they were only getting steeper. The worst part was that he had tried his best and shit was still falling apart. He did everything he could to salvage things with Raechel, but she was dead to him now. And Jorg was dead, too, because he hadn't taken the lead on that convoy. He would never forgive himself for either failure. He hung his head down to his knees.

The same fucking memory resurfaced from Iraq. What little Jeremy had slept in the past three weeks, he had been dreaming about it again. It was the spring of 2008. Jeremy was

a SAW gunner. There was this kid who always stood right in front of him in formation, another Private. His name was Joseph but everyone called him Josie. One night when the Platoon had guard duty for the FOB, Jeremy woke up from a two-hour nap for the worst shift, midnight to 0400. By the time he would get back to his rack, there wouldn't be enough time to really get any rest before first call, so he knew he had at least 22 hours ahead of him. Already exhausted from the previous day's patrol, he grabbed his gear and trudged toward the HESCO-walled perimeter under the stars. He was ten minutes early. Right on time, like a good Private should be. He thumped his can of Copenhagen and climbed the stairs to the tower. Just outside the door, he stopped to put the plug in his lip. Inside, he heard the Sergeant of the Guard – it was Staff Sergeant Perkins, Jeremy's Squad Leader – talking to the soldier behind the machine gun. Jeremy knew by the kid's nasal Wisconsin accent that it was Josie.

Josie was telling Perkins that he'd been having a bad feeling lately, like something bad was about to happen. Jeremy peeked around the sandbags and saw their silhouettes against the dark desert floor spreading out to the horizon. Perkins told Josie that it's a normal feeling, that he should try and not worry about it, that he should just stay focused on the mission, and all that stock shit a good leader says even though he knows damn well he struggles with the same things himself. Jeremy sensed by the silence that Josie wasn't comforted at all. But Josie still said what every good Private says: "Roger, Sergeant." He was scared, but deep down by that point he'd learned just like Jeremy had that when it's your time, it's your time. There isn't anything you can do about it.

A week later Josie was dead. At the memorial ceremony, Jeremy could tell it was taking every ounce of strength Perkins had to keep his shit together and not break down

crying in formation. It wasn't even his fault that Josie died; he wasn't even in Perkins's Squad. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was a freak thing. The RPG hit Josie's turret and the blast went through the little slit in the armor by his machine gun and then between the tiny gap in his side plates and into his abdomen. A one in a million shot, nothing anyone in the world could have done to stop it. But Perkins took it hard. He took the weight of it on his own shoulders. He was probably telling himself if only he had said something different – just one syllable different that night in the guard tower – maybe the butterfly effect would have put Josie an inch to the left or right on the Platoon's patrol that next week.

Jeremy knew he couldn't stop what happened with Jorg. But like everyone else, he always told himself that he could. Just like Josie, he tried, he hoped, he prayed, he cursed, he put one foot in front of the other knowing that every step could be his last. And now, especially after Jorg's death, Jeremy couldn't shake the feeling that he was counting down the steps until he would be gone, too.

Alone, Jeremy stared at the bare wooden wall at the front of the sanctuary. Beside the small makeshift altar, he saw a Crucifix laying on the floor against the wall like an elongated X. Then he noticed an open foot locker in front of the Crucifix. Curious, he went forward to peer inside. Nestled among a variety of colorful vestments, there was a small golden chalice, some clear sleeves of tiny white wafers and an unopened bottle of red wine. Jeremy had never stolen even a pack of gum in his life, but there was a sudden urge to take the bottle and sneak it into the transient tent and use his empty stomach and lack of tolerance to his advantage for an actual good night's sleep. He dismissed the notion immediately, but it scared him that he had even considered it. Not that stealing communion wine and violating General Order Number One would be the worst thing he'd ever done. No, there would

always be that other night in Iraq, the one with the dead boy. But he succeeded in holding that memory down and resolved that the night's reverie was over. It was time for bed.

When he turned to retrieve his rifle, he noticed a sign saying "Chaplain Office Behind Altar." The image of the boy started to surge back and Jeremy hesitated. What good would it do to talk to the Chaplain? He seemed like a good guy, but what would he know about anger – the kind that was more like boiling rage – or the guilt that came with killing children on accident and the thrill of killing men on purpose?

Chaplain Colwin startled Jeremy when he opened the door and peered around it with wide eyes. A look of relief came over his face when he recognized Jeremy. "Hey, Sergeant." He smiled now and came around the door and into the sanctuary.

"Oh, hey Chaplain. Sorry if I disturbed you."

"Not at all, Jeremy."

Jeremy frowned. "Sir, how do you know my first name?"

"Well, I pray for you."

Jeremy's face flushed.

"I pray for everyone in the Battalion," Chris quickly said. "Sorry, I go down the religious preference roster once a week and lift all of you up to the Lord one at a time. It helps me remember you when I'm out at the COPs," he paused, "or, in here."

"Oh. Okay." Jeremy relaxed his shoulders. He remembered the awful 12-mile foot march in the freezing rain last winter when Chaplain Colwin came running up the middle of the formation behind First Squad. Jeremy heard one of the guys behind him asking the Chaplain what the hell he was doing out there, but instead of getting offended, he just rolled with it and said, "Well, Jesus embraces the suck. So I don't really have a choice,

now do I?” The guys all thought it was pretty badass. Even the ones who hated church were talking about it later that night back in the Platoon bay.

“So, Jeremy, what brings you up here to scenic FOB Crenshaw?” Chris glanced around the sanctuary and held up a hand when he said it, as though gesturing toward the grandeur of their present domain.

“I had a follow-up with Doc Hall today for my back. I threw it out on a patrol last month and he wanted to look at it again. I’m headed back down to Stallion tomorrow morning.”

“And? Are you good to go?”

“Of course, Sir.” Jeremy stiffened.

Chris shifted and said, “Sorry. All I meant was, did Doc say you’re okay?”

Jeremy relaxed again and said, “Yeah, he said I’m fit for duty.”

“Good.” Chris waited, then asked, “Don’t take this the wrong way, Jeremy: but what are you doing here? I mean, in this chapel? At,” he looked at his watch, “2300?” He smiled.

Sharing your feelings was unofficially outlawed in the infantry, but Jeremy had been around long enough now to know that every guy in the unit feels something; he just wouldn’t admit it unless he was drunk or alone with his girl. Jeremy’s Battalion Chaplain in Iraq – what was his name? That guy had been nice enough, but he was never around except for the memorials. This Chaplain, though, always came out to visit. He even went on patrols.

Jeremy sighed and stared down at the floor. “Well, Sir,” he began. “I was really just looking for a place to be alone. I was out running earlier and I saw you out behind the

chapel. At least, I think it was you. Once you were gone I stopped and ended up wandering in here.”

“I saw you running by,” Chris said. “I mean, it was dark and I wasn’t sure who you were, but I had this feeling like I knew whoever it was.” Then he added, “You were hauling ass, brother.”

Jeremy looked surprised. “Sir, did you just say ‘ass?’”

Chris laughed. “Yeah, well, I figure it’s in the Bible – you know, the parts with donkeys – so I can probably get away with it. I’m sure God has bigger fish to fry than sinners like me using the a-word.”

“I’d have to agree, Sir.”

Chris noticed the Crucifix laying against the wall on the other side of the altar. He looked alarmed and went to pick it up. “Bellamy,” he muttered and shook his head. “I told him to clean this all up after Mass.”

Chris carefully laid the Crucifix on the altar.

“You’re Catholic, Sir?” Jeremy asked.

“Oh, no. No. Well, not anymore. I was born Catholic but I wasn’t saved until I was seventeen.” He backed away from the altar, still staring at the Crucifix. “The Division priest was here earlier tonight for Mass. He’s gone already.”

Jeremy didn’t know how to respond, so he just stood there feeling awkward.

Chris sat down on the far front pew and squirmed a little. “So, you saw me behind the chapel, huh?”

“Yes Sir.” Jeremy sat down on the opposite pew, the one by the foot locker.

“You saw me crying, then?” Chris’s face was serious.

Now Jeremy shifted uncomfortably and stalled. He was surprised by the question and embarrassed for his Chaplain. He never expected an officer, even the Chaplain, to admit something like that. “Well Sir, like I said, I didn’t know for sure it was you, and I couldn’t tell if you were crying.”

Chris said, plainly, “That’s the spot where I go when I can’t deal with this place.”

Jeremy nodded. “I don’t have a spot like that at the COP, but I probably need one.”

“You mean ‘The Stallion Jack Shack’ isn’t enough of a refuge?” The question came with a wry smile.

Jeremy was taken aback. “Sir, I didn’t think you knew about that...” He blushed.

“How could I not?” Chris laughed. “You guys put a sign on it, brother – and thank God you did – because I thought it was the latrine the first time I visited you guys this summer. I was halfway inside when I saw the sign and realized what was actually in there. I closed my eyes and spun around trying to run out but I tripped. I only saw a couple pictures, but it was way more female skin than a married man should see! I’ve been asking for forgiveness ever since.”

Now they both laughed.

“Listen, Jeremy, I’ll make you a deal.” Chris’s face grew serious. “How about you tell me why you’re really here and I’ll tell you what I was crying about?”

Jeremy’s smile faded. “Okay, Sir. It’s a deal.”

“Good. Let me guess. It’s about Jorg, right?”

Jeremy felt the heaviness return. “Yeah. But that’s not all of it, Sir.”

A Blackhawk approached and roared over the tent. The canvas walls trembled and even the foot locker rattled slightly on the plywood floor. The helicopter hovered toward the LZ on the far side of the FOB and this gave Jeremy a moment to collect his thoughts. After they could hear again, he told the story about Raechel and the breakup.

“So, have you talked to her since we deployed?”

Jeremy shook his head.

“Wow. Has she reached out to you?”

“I don’t know, Sir. I don’t check my email.”

Chris studied Jeremy’s face.

Jeremy shifted and said, “Okay, Sir, now it’s your turn.”

“I was hoping you’d forget.”

Jeremy grinned. “Team Leaders don’t forget anything, Chaplain. We aren’t allowed.”

“Fair enough.” The lines returned to Chris’s face. He stared over at the foot locker.

“You don’t have to, Sir,” Jeremy offered, “if you don’t want to.”

“A deal’s a deal, brother. You can’t let me off that easy.”

Chris then told Jeremy about his past week spent covering Second Battalion in the aftermath of Chaplain Jenkins’s death, but he left out the part about his mid-tour being delayed. He hadn’t been superstitious until this summer: now he found himself routinely not saying or even thinking certain things for fear of them coming to pass.

When Chris finished the story, he sighed and said, “Well, there you go.”

Jeremy had been listening quietly, watching how Chris's face strained as he described the week. "Dang, Chaplain. That's some heavy sh-, stuff."

"Not any heavier than what you've been carrying. Chaplain Jenkins and I were close, but he wasn't my best friend, and I didn't watch him die. You've been dealt a lot tougher hand than I have, and whenever I feel sorry for myself like when you saw me crying behind the tent tonight, I try to think about how good I have it in comparison to you guys on the line. I have nothing to complain about. I have no right to ever whine."

"Yeah Sir, but you've got an entire Battalion to take care of. All I have are three Joes."

"They're not Joes. I mean, I know what you mean. I'm just saying, they're your family. I'm not as close to everyone in the Battalion as you are to Jorg and the guys in your Squad. It hurts when I see our guys getting wounded and killed, but it's not as hard as what you've experienced."

Jeremy considered this, but then said, "Chaplain, I see how you love people. I saw it in your eyes when you came to see us behind the TOC after we lost Bravo Team." Chris broke eye contact again, but Jeremy pressed on, "I saw it at the ramp ceremony, too. When we were carrying Jorg towards you, I saw you looking at me and your lips were moving. I knew you were praying for us."

"Yeah, I was," Chris whispered.

"I know the Commanders love us because we're their soldiers, but with you it's different. It's like, if I met you off-post and I didn't know you were a Chaplain and you didn't know I was a soldier, I feel like you would still care about me anyway."

Chris was embarrassed. “Thanks, brother.” He gave a weak smile. “Jeremy,” he then said, his expression and tone shifting back toward the formal, “I’m going to ask you something, and at first it’s probably going to sound a little strange, but I want you to trust me on this, okay?”

Jeremy nodded and said, “Shoot.”

“You’ve told me a lot about the heavy things in your life this year. So before you leave this chapel tonight and go back to the COP tomorrow, I want you to tell me about the last time you were happy.”

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“Just think back to the last time you remember not being worried about anything.” When Jeremy still didn’t respond, Chris added, “At peace with yourself and the world.”

Jeremy furrowed his brow and looked at the Crucifix.

“Don’t make me pull rank,” Chris joked.

“If you insist, Sir.” Jeremy fidgeted. “So no shit, there I was...” he began. “Sorry, Sir, I shouldn’t cuss in here.”

“It’s okay,” Chris smiled. “You’re starting it like a good Army story.” He motioned for Jeremy to continue.

Jeremy grinned and went on, “So, there I was, on a flight back to Nashville from Christmas leave last year.”

“Remind me where you’re from.”

“A little town near Columbus, Ohio. I was having a drink by the gate and there were these girls, these bachelorettes, a group of four good-looking blondes and this *beautiful* girl with long brown hair. They came bouncing into the bar, all dolled up in

these matching glittery white t-shirts they had obviously decorated themselves. The bride had a golden tiara and everything.”

“Nice.”

“Right, yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. I mean, I was with Raechel at the time – she and I were great and everything back then – but I couldn’t help looking at these girls. They were gorgeous.” Jeremy stopped when he saw his Chris’s raised eyebrows. “Oh, sorry, Sir, maybe I shouldn’t be telling this story.”

“No, no, not at all. Keep going. It’s like my old man always told me: ‘I’m married, I ain’t dead.’”

Jeremy laughed. “Well, the girl with the brown hair was clearly the fifth wheel, even though she was the best-looking one. I was thinking, ‘Damn, how is *that* girl not the bride?’”

“So, did you talk to her?” Chris leaned forward.

“Well, not right away,” Jeremy continued. “Remember, I’m happily engaged with my girlfriend at the time. Okay, not exactly engaged. And maybe not exactly happy, I don’t know. I actually had the ring in my pocket when all this happened. Raechel and I had been talking about getting married since I got home from Iraq the year before. I took the ring home on block leave thinking I was going to propose but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“Wow. Why?”

“Sir, I thought you wanted to hear the happy stuff.”

“Right, right. Sorry. Keep going.”

Jeremy's face brightened. "Okay, so I'm watching these girls chanting and downing their shots, and all these Friday afternoon fuckwads in their suits are cheering along and looking them up and down. After two weeks of parties on campus with frat boy douchebags, I was like, 'I can't take any more of this civilian shit. I'm leaving.' So I headed for my gate. I could have gotten on first but I can't stand being crammed in a plane with civilians. It was on Southwest with the open seating and I always board last so I don't have anyone behind me."

"I get that."

Jeremy nodded. "But then the bachelorettes walked up, and they were all laughing and chatting and they took the open spot in line just ahead of me. They smelled amazing in the jetway and the brunette was right in front of me."

"So did you talk to her or not? Come on, man."

"I'm getting there, Sir." Jeremy laughed and held up his hands. "I followed them down the aisle and the blondes all paired off in a row near the back, but they put their carry-ons in the aisle seats. The brunette gave them this look like, 'Are you serious?' But then she took it in stride and slid into a window seat in the row behind the blondes. In that moment I felt like I understood her. For a second I thought about taking a seat in her row, but instead I just kept going all the way to the back where I like to sit anyway. Ever since Iraq I like to see everything in front of me.

"So I just stared out at the tarmac listening to my music. After takeoff, I traced the roads out to the horizon where my hometown is. I was thinking about Raechel. But after we passed 10,000 feet, here comes the brunette, kind of wobbling her way back toward the latrine. She's holding the top of the seat backs to steady herself and I can't tell if it's

the alcohol or the heels or both. I look away and press my forehead against the window and stare out at the thunderheads on the horizon. A couple minutes later, I hear the lavatory door click open and I feel this little bump through the seat. There she is, bending forward in the middle of the aisle messing with one of her shoes. She's almost doubled over and her hair is falling down around her face and she's got her hand on the armrest of the aisle seat. Then she turns her head and puffs her hair away through the side of her mouth. She smiles at me with these huge brown eyes and this perfect olive skin.

“‘I hate heels,’ she says and I laugh. Then she sits down in the aisle seat to let the stewardess go past but she stops and asks us what we want to drink, so I order a Budweiser. I pull out my ID and my credit card, then I hear myself say, ‘And whatever the lady wants.’ The stewardess gets this big smile and Ashley – that’s her name, by the way – Ashley has this surprised look. So I say, ‘Come on, give a soldier a good memory to take with him before he goes to Afghanistan.’ I know it’s a cheesy play, but they both smile and then Ashley orders a vodka and cranapple and I’m thinking, ‘What the hell are you doing, man?’ But then I thought, ‘What the hell?’ and I just went with it. We talked the rest of the flight.”

“So, did you end up asking her out or something? I’m confused. I thought you were still with Raechel when this happened?”

“That’s why I almost didn’t even mention it, Sir.” Jeremy looked away. “I felt like I was cheating on Raechel, even though nothing happened. I didn’t even ask for Ashley’s number, although now I wish I would’ve. I’d been with Raechel for so long that even talking to another girl for a few minutes felt like some kind of betrayal. Obviously it was just half an hour of flirting. But now that I’m not with Raechel anymore I still find

myself thinking about Ashley all the time. I wonder what she's doing and if she would even remember who I am."

Chris nodded and rubbed his chin. He let the story sink in and then said, "Jeremy, don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think that was the answer I was looking for."

"What do you mean, Sir?"

"I mean, I asked you to tell me about the last time you were happy. And it sounds like that was a happy memory, but you weren't really happy when it happened."

Jeremy stared down at the floor.

"This Ashley girl seems like she was just a temporary distraction from what was going on with Raechel. I want you to tell me about the last time you were truly happy."

Jeremy frowned. "I don't know, Sir." He pondered the question, rubbed his palms together slowly, continued avoiding eye contact. "I guess I'd have to think about it." The silence was long enough that Jeremy felt uncomfortable.

"Maybe it was something with Raechel?" Chris prompted. "A special moment?"

Jeremy sighed. "Sure, there were lots of moments with Raechel. I loved being with her." His eyes went soft for a moment, then hardened as he refocused. "But now I don't know if I was ever truly happy with her," he added. "Not after I joined, anyway."

"Tell me more about that."

Jeremy fidgeted but answered, "She just wasn't cut out to be an Army wife, Sir. I should have known at the end of basic training when she looked so uncomfortable in the stands. We did the Pass In Review at graduation and when they called 'Eyes Right,' I found her up in the bleachers sitting next to my Mom and sister. She wasn't smiling or anything. I always tried to forget that moment. I focused on how she smiled later on when

we went out to eat. But looking back now, I see how she was only playing along. It was only a matter of time.”

“Maybe she was playing along because she loved you,” Chris offered. “I mean, the Army is a lot for a teenage girl to take in. It was hard enough for my wife at age 30 when I went to Chaplain School. We were only seventeen when we started dating. There’s no way we could have understood the Army when I graduated. Heck, we don’t understand it now!” He chuckled. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you. Keep telling me about Raechel.”

Jeremy shook his head. “Sir, I don’t think that’s going to answer your question either, because now I look back and see our relationship was only what I hoped it was, not what it really was.”

“So, when were you really happy?”

Jeremy was surprised when his eyes suddenly welled. “Probably when my Dad was still alive,” he said just above a whisper. “He died of lung cancer when I was a sophomore.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah, we were super close.” Jeremy blinked hard. “I was the son he had always wanted, and out of nowhere, there I came fourteen years after my Big Sis Katie was born. In every picture with me, my Dad has this gigantic smile on his face.”

Jeremy stopped.

“Honestly, he was my best friend. But he died.”

Another long pause.

“He left me alone.”

There was thumping in the distance from an artillery fire mission.

“I still miss him all the time,” Jeremy continued quietly. “My favorite memory is the time he saw me at this JROTC ceremony at my high school the spring before he died. The Commander gave me the ‘Most Improved Cadet of the Year’ award. It was this wooden plaque with an engraved plate on it, and even though I knew deep down it was some cadet bullshit that didn’t really mean anything in the real Army, I was so proud. I’d been working my ass off all year to get in shape. And I knew my Dad was so proud of me. After it was over, he put his arm around me in my Class As and he smiled with me for a picture on the gym floor. My Mom was smiling big behind the camera, and Katie was practically bawling.”

Jeremy looked up at his Chaplain. “I think that’s the last time I was happy, Sir.”

“Thanks for sharing that with me.”

“You’re welcome, Sir,” he mumbled and wiped his eyes. “Thanks for asking me to share it.”

“Now, I want you to try to go back to that memory when you can, okay? I know it’s emotional and you’ve already got so many things to deal with every day, but maybe when stuff gets heavy out at the COP, you can go back to that gym floor with your family. Even if it’s just for a minute at night before you fall asleep.” Chris waited until Jeremy looked up at him and added, “Don’t forget about the happy.”

Jeremy nodded. “Okay.” His smile dissolved. Then he said, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Tell me about the last time *you* were happy.”

Chris blinked, then smiled formally and sat up straight. He looked at his watch.

“Listen, brother, it’s almost midnight and I have to finish packing.”

“Where are you headed next?”

Chris averted his eyes and stood. “Just a big trip.”

“Mid-tour already, Sir?”

“Yeah.” Chris looked at the floor, the phony smile still spread across his face.

Jeremy squinted. “Aren’t you excited?”

“Of course. I’m just –” Chris rubbed the back of his neck, “– I’m afraid of jinxing it. That’s why I didn’t mention it earlier.”

“I didn’t think Chaplains were superstitious.” Jeremy was aiming for playful, but it came out serious.

Chris dropped the smile and met Jeremy’s eyes. “We’re not supposed to be. I was just one night’s sleep away from it when the news about Chaplain Jenkins came, six nights ago, right here,” he pointed toward the door to his quarters. “I was supposed to fly the next morning. That’s why I came out here when I heard your footsteps. I thought you were my assistant coming to tell me someone else was dead.”

“Jesus,” Jeremy whispered. He stared at Chris. “You’re telling me they delayed your mid-tour so you could cover Second Battalion?”

Chris nodded.

“Sir, that’s messed up.”

Chris shrugged. “I signed up for this. I knew the risks.”

“Still, though,” Jeremy shook his head. “For what it’s worth, I’d be paranoid, too.”

“Thanks. I mean, once he was dead, it would have ruined mid-tour anyway, even if they let me go. It was either the memorial here or the funeral back there. And honestly, I don’t know if I could have handled that. Better to take care of Second Battalion and feel like I was doing something to help. Besides, the Jenkins Family has a lot of people to help them back there, including my wife and –”

Jeremy waited, leaned over into Chris’s gaze. “And who, Sir?”

Chris’s eyes welled. “Never mind.”

“Come on, Sir, if you’re leaving for mid-tour in the morning, maybe you should just get it off your chest.”

Chris wiped his face and continued staring at the floor. “My daughter. Caroline.”

“It’s a great name,” Jeremy smiled. “Nice ring to it,” he added. “Caroline Colwin. She your only?”

Chris nodded.

“How old?”

“Thirteen weeks,” Chris whispered.

Jeremy’s eyes got wide. “Sir, was she born after we left?”

Chris didn’t move.

“Holy shit, Chaplain. You’ve had a hell of a summer.”

“Yeah. You could say that.”

There was another distant rumble from artillery.

“I can tell you the next time I’ll be happy,” Chris finally said toward the altar. “When I hold my little girl and kiss my wife. Even if it does get spoiled by everything this summer.” He sat back down, covered his eyes and muttered into his palms, “This

year.” He dropped his hands, turned away, and whispered. “This decade.”

Jeremy heard it. He wasn’t sure whether to keep going, but found himself leaning forward and saying quietly, “I don’t want to pry, Sir, but that sounds pretty heavy.”

Chris turned back and blinked a hopeless grin, exhaled, shook his head. “You want to know the last time I thought I was happy? It was when I swore in. The day I put one hand on the Bible and raised the other. MaryAnn was standing right there beside me. She had her arm in mine when I took the oath.”

“You thought you were happy?”

“Yeah,” Chris almost snorted. “It was my thirtieth birthday. I remember thinking, ‘Jesus started His ministry when he was thirty.’ It felt symbolic.” Chris rolled his eyes. “Then God led Him straight into the desert where He was tempted for forty days. I forgot about that part.”

Jeremy smirked. “And it didn’t get better for Him after that, did it.”

Chris shook his head again. “Nope, sure didn’t.”

The silence returned.

“Okay. So if that’s not it, then maybe you need to go back further,” Jeremy pressed.

Now Chris laughed. “Jeez, brother. You’re a tough counselor.”

“Just returning the favor, Sir,” Jeremy grinned. “You’ll thank me later.”

Chris sighed. “I think about my wife becoming a mother. And how I want her to really enjoy motherhood. My Mom and I used to get along so well, but now we’ve grown apart. I miss having that relationship with her, that connection. And I guess I’m afraid of losing that with my wife, too. At some point in my childhood, my parents stopped liking

each other, so maybe I'm afraid that's going to happen with MaryAnn, too. Especially after all the drama of the past year and a half since I joined the Army. Does that make any sense?"

"Absolutely, Sir." Jeremy hesitated again. "But maybe you can tell me more about why you're afraid?"

Chris considered the question. "Well, the night I told my parents that I was going to a Bible college instead of one of the schools they were hoping for, my mother completely flipped out on me."

Jeremy smiled. "My Mom tried to talk me out of the Army a thousand times. I know it broke her heart, especially after Dad died and I enlisted anyway."

Chris nodded. "Well, I crushed my mother's heart when I left the Church. This summer I've been thinking about how many hours my mother and I spent kneeling at the living room couch praying the Rosary every night after supper. My Dad would sit in the recliner and pretend to pray along with us, but usually he just fell asleep. Mom and I would go through the Decades, the Mysteries – sorry, those are what the Rosary prayers are called – and I can still hear the cadence of her voice as she said the Hail Marys. By the time I was in middle school, I swear I'd be laying in bed with it echoing in my head."

"I'm not Catholic, but it sounds like she loves God and she loves you, Sir."

"She does. Both. Definitely."

"But you said that changed?"

"Yeah, it did. Well, not us loving each other. But our relationship. Once I was out of Catholic school, I had this new freedom. By the end of my freshman year, and especially once I was driving, I started finding excuses not to pray with my mother. I

know it hurt her, but I just started to rebel against the whole religion thing. I didn't think I needed God. But then I got saved and it all boiled over that night when I told her about Bible college and MaryAnn. She launched into me and I lost it. I got up to leave and she was still yelling at me across the living room. I kept going through the front door but she followed me outside. I was getting into my car when she shouted at me from the porch --" Chris stopped. His lip quivered and he intoned his mother's words with a finger stretched out toward the altar, "Fine. If that's what you really want, then go to hell!"

Jeremy held his breath.

Chris dropped the finger and exhaled. His shoulders sagged.

"That's pretty rough, Sir."

Chris shrugged it off with a wave of his hand. "It happens in families. I've seen way worse as a pastor. Our brokenness is nothing compared to a lot of the people I've counseled and ministered to in our congregation back home. And here, too. The Battalion's full of broken relationships, broken lives. My drama pales in comparison."

Jeremy protested. "Sir, there you go again. You're human too. Right?"

"Of course, but I'm supposed to cope better than everyone else. I'm the pastor. The Chaplain. I mean, if I can't keep it together, then what good is my faith?"

"I don't know." Jeremy considered this. "Maybe you're supposed to have some bad stuff happen so you know what it feels like out here in the pews."

Chris blinked. The kid had a point.

"And anyway, Sir, I think we got sidetracked again. You started to tell me about some happy stuff in there about you and your Mom. Before you guys hurt each other."

Chris thought for a minute. "Looking back, I guess those prayers with my parents

in the living room were special, even if I hated them at the time. And even if my last Hail Mary was almost half a lifetime ago.” His eyes wandered back toward the open box of vestments in front of Jeremy. “But probably the happiest day I remember as a kid was my First Holy Communion. I had been praying and studying for that moment for what felt like an eternity. Of course, when you’re eight years old, even a month feels like forever.” He smiled. “But especially after my First Confession, I felt this sense of anticipation. I’d been waiting to receive the bread my whole life. Every week at Mass, our family would go forward and kneel at the rail to receive Communion, but the priest or deacon would pass over me with a quick wave of his hand with the sign of the Cross to bless me. As I got bigger, if there was a visiting priest who couldn’t tell how old I was, he would start to offer me the Host. But my mother would shake her head and cover my mouth with her hand. The priest would bless me and keep moving on. I just wanted to be a part of what everyone else was doing, you know? I wanted to eat that bread. Of course, now I don’t believe that the bread was actually the Body of Christ, but at the time I did. I was taught that in order to be a part of the Church, you had to be in Communion. And I wanted to belong. My mother showed me a purpose that was bigger than school, bigger than sports, bigger than anything else. Even bigger than our family. It became my life and I wanted to eat that bread because then I knew I would be a part of something way bigger than just me.”

Chris stopped and breathed. Jeremy signaled he was still listening.

“So finally, it’s my First Holy Communion, and I’m all dressed up in my special suit they had bought me, and I’m kneeling there at the rail with my parents, right between them, and the priest came down the line and I could feel myself shaking, I was so nervous

and excited. My mother looked over at me, all teary-eyed, and she smiled. Even my father put his hand on my shoulder. Then the priest gave the Eucharist to my mother and he turned to me and smiled. He held up the wafer. I saw the imprinted cross on the bread by his fingertips. Then he said, 'The Body of Christ.' I said, 'Amen,' and opened my mouth and he put it on my tongue," Chris mimed the motion. Jeremy nodded.

"While I chewed, I was thinking, 'Jesus tastes waxy and stale.'" He chuckled. "But I was so happy. The priest moved to my father and then we all made the Sign of the Cross and walked back to our pew. I felt like I accomplished something. Like I was special to God and my family, even though I was just doing what I was told. Like what just happened was somehow going to make a difference in the world. I don't know how an eight year old boy thinks and feels all those things, but I did."

"Kids are smarter than we think, Sir."

"Yeah." Chris sighed.

"Now all you have to do now is go back to that memory when things get heavy over here," Jeremy said. "Or back home."

Chris nodded and stared at the altar.

"Just go back, Sir. Back to that bread, between your mother and your father."