

ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC



A Novel

Eric Rudolph

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Memoir

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Abortion: The Irrepressible Conflict

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White Lies: Eugenics, Abortion, and Racism

Allocution and Statements

Allocution (Birmingham court)

Eric's written statement at his sentencing

Statement concerning the Centennial Park bombing

Writings are available at <http://www.armyofgod.com/EricRudolphHomepage.html>

Political Map



CHINA

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LEGEND

 International Boundary
 Provincial Boundary
 National Capital
 Provincial Capital

0 50 100 Km

1. PANJSHER
2. KAPISA
3. WARDAK
4. LAGHMAN
5. NANGARHAR
6. KUNAR
7. PARVAN
8. LOGAR

I am asked if it was worth it all the time. If that question had been posed before 2008, I would have said yes. We were there to seek vengeance on behalf of the nation and to ensure that [Afghanistan] would never again become a staging area for terrorists. We had the full support of the White House and the administration. ... If that question was posed after 2008, I would say no. When your government does not let you win a war in which men sacrifice the greatest gift they have to offer, their lives and health, then something is very, very wrong.

MAJOR RUSTY BRADLEY; U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES (ret.)
EIGHT DEPLOYMENTS TO AFGHANISTAN *

* Major Rusty Bradley, *Lions of Kandahar* (New York: Bantam Books, Trade Paperback Edition, 2015) 279

CHAPTER 1

Captain William Carson lay flat on the ground scanning the houses in the village of Yaka Chine with his NOD (night optical/observation device). The Afghan village of some thirty mud brick houses sat at the bottom of a deep gorge next to the fast-flowing Korengal River. From Carson's vantage on the steep slopes above, the village appeared to be deserted. No signs of life. No people. No farm animals, which was indicative because Afghans always slept with their farm animals in the house. Way below the village he could barely make out a lone campfire shining like the North Star against the black firmament of space. Carson's sixth sense was telling him that something was wrong. The absence of civilians was usually a sign that you were about to receive contact.

Carson checked his watch. It was 0130; time to move out. He pressed the mic on his PRC-148 inter-squad radio to check on communications. "Alpha 2, do you have comms up?"

"Negative, Alpha 1," Sergeant First Class Holverson responded.

"What about live-feed from Crosshair?"

"Negative on that one, too, Captain. We are in the dark."

For the past hour Sergeant Holverson had been trying desperately to restore communications with the TOC (tactical operations center) in Asadabad—with no luck. On top of that, their live-feed from the surveillance drone, call sign "Crosshair," had died too. Without comms or his eye in the sky, Captain Carson's team was blind.

Carson thought the blackout was only temporary, a result of the mountainous terrain. Already behind schedule, he ordered Sergeant First Class Cole to assume the point. The team descended the steep slope through thick stands of holly oak and giant cedar trees. They moved in single file, careful to maintain their footing in the loose shale. Each step threatened to dislodge a boulder and give away their position, or send a man tumbling down the mountain.

It was a "snatch-and-grab," as they called it. Intel said a Taliban commander named Ahmad Khan was hiding out in Yaka Chine, and Captain Carson's six-man team of U.S. Special Forces had to go in there and take Khan alive, if at all possible. He was reported to be in the house nearest the river, purportedly recovering from wounds suffered in a recent coalition airstrike. As a high-value target, Khan held information valuable to the intel boys at Bagram, who happen to be expert at squeezing information out of terrorists.

Recent rains in the Hindu Kush had turned the Korengal River into a raging torrent. Only way across was a rickety foot bridge about 400 meters up river. The footbridge consisted of rotten cedar planks strung together with ancient hemp rope. Master Sergeant Wolfe anchored a climbing rope to a nearby tree and tied the other end to the waist of Sergeant Cole. "Don't fall in," he said as Cole eased out onto the ancient footbridge. After reaching the far bank, Cole untied the rope and Wolfe pulled it back in. In that way the team crossed the river, one at a time, as the rest of the team provided security.

Once the team was safely across, Sergeant First Class "Doc" Emmet and Staff Sergeant Murphy peeled off from the group and made their way up to a copse of cedars overlooking the village. Murphy carried the team's M240B machine gun, which could fire over 650 rounds per

minute. It was a little heavier than most guns its size, but worth the weight. Doc had a suppressed SR-25 sniper rifle fitted with a night-vision scope. The pair would cover the team's movement to contact.

As the rest of the team made its way down river, they skirted small fields of corn and poppy that the villagers had terraced into the side of the mountain. Above the fields the terrain shot straight up 2,000 vertical feet. The locals called the massive, rugged mount Abas Ghar. It was the main infiltration route for Taliban fighters coming out of the tribal regions of Pakistan.

Carson's mission plan was simple. The team would breach the house nearest the river, extract the target to the LZ (landing zone), which was located about 200 meters up river, and there a Blackhawk helicopter, escorted by two Apache gunships, would pick his team up and fly them back to Asadabad.

But Captain Carson feared his team might be walking into an ambush. Yaka Chine was a perfect fish bowl. Intel said Khan may have four or five bodyguards with him, maybe a few women and children, which, if true, should pose no problem for six heavily armed Green Berets. But lately intel was notoriously wrong. Twenty Talibs hidden in the heights above the village would be able to deliver a world of hurt on his men. Wouldn't even need rifles, Carson thought, just roll rocks down on top of us.

The roaring river made it impossible to communicate except via the inter-squad radio, which resembled a walkie-talkie attached to a headset with a mic. The team halted just short of the village among a mass of boulders on the river bank. To their immediate front was a small field of chest-high corn.

"Alpha 3, are you in position?" Carson said into his radio mic.

"Roger that," Murphy answered.

"How's it look?"

"Empty. No movement in the village."

"Roger that. Stay alert, out."

Carson remained in the rear to coordinate the movement of the entry team, Sergeant First Class Cole was the breacher, followed by Sergeant First Class Holverson, and Master Sergeant Wolfe. The entry team tightened up, checking magazines, flipping safeties to the off position, readying for close-quarter combat. Like a human centipede, they moved as one, stealthily scaling the outer wall. On the other side was a small courtyard. They stacked up, one behind the other, suppressed M-4 rifles at the ready. Cole stuck a one-pound explosive charge to the heavy outer door and unraveled the detonation cord. Everyone flattened themselves against the wall of the house for cover. Cole squeezed the clacker repeatedly, sending 9 volts of electricity to the detonator. The door flew inward with a violent BANG.

Weapon at the ready, Holverson pushed through the doorway and headed for the left corner, followed closely by Cole who headed for the right corner, while Wolfe covered the pair. They moved deeper into the shadows of the room.

"Clear!" Holverson said.

“Clear!” Cole echoed.

The front room was cleared of any threat.

“Door!” Holverson announced. The two operators approached a locked interior door and stacked up against the wall alongside it. Repeating the same procedure, Cole placed another breaching charge over the door’s dead bolt. Then he hit the clacker.

Instead of the expected bang from the door, a massive explosion enveloped the entire mud brick house. The blast threw Wolfe flying ten feet through the air. Carson slammed against the courtyard wall, clutching his shattered eardrums. Debris the size of footballs rained down.

A booby-trapped enemy IED (improvised explosive device) had obliterated most of the target house. Carson’s premonition of an ambush had come true.

Deafened by the blast, Carson tried to get his bearings. The air was choked with dust. He scanned the smoking rubble for any signs of life. He saw movement. It was Wolfe.

“Wolfe! You alright?” Carson called. Wolfe walked in a daze, staring blankly at the place where the house once stood, looking for Holverson and Cole.

“Wolfe! Take cover!” Carson shouted. Wolfe was oblivious to Carson’s commands. His headset had been blasted away. His eardrums were shattered. He searched in vain for his two comrades. They were gone, obliterated by the explosion and presumed dead.

Suddenly an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) impacted the courtyard near Captain Carson. The ground shook. Rock fragments whistled past his head. A lone Soviet-era Druganov machine gun opened up from the heights above the village. The bullets produced a sickening *crack* as they came by Carson’s head. The sound was like that of a rubber band snapping against cellophane. The air was charged with lethal energy.

“Contact Front!” Carson announced. As if on cue, the entire mountain side belched fire at the Americans. Red tracer rounds arched down at Carson and Wolfe like Roman candles on the Fourth of July. The tracers whizzing past Wolfe’s noggin seemed to jolt him out of his torpor. He sprinted toward Carson’s position among the boulders along the river, bullets churning up dust in his wake.

The first objective in any firefight is to achieve fire superiority, to pin the enemy down so you can then move. From their over watch position, Murphy and Doc tried to gain fire superiority. Murphy’s M240 sounded like a jackhammer. He expertly probed the source of the Taliban tracers, peppering the gun positions with three-to-six round bursts. But the Green Berets were heavily outgunned. The Taliban turned their guns on Murphy and Doc and quickly gained the upper hand.

Carson assessed the situation. Getting up river to the original LZ was no longer feasible. They’d never make it with the Taliban in the high ground shooting down on them the whole way there. He turned to look back across the Korengal River as a possible avenue of escape. But he got a face full of red tracers. Taliban fighters had infiltrated in behind them. Carson’s team was effectively surrounded. They were receiving plunging fire from both sides of the gorge.

Trapped against the river, Carson concluded that their only option was to bunker up in the boulders and call for air support—if they could restore radio contact. First he had to reunite the separate halves of his team. Signaling Murphy and Doc on the squad radio, Carson and Wolfe

took turns emptying their magazines at the Taliban while their two comrades bounded back to the river.

The team rolled up into a tight hedgehog defense and prepared to fend off attacks from all directions. “Ammo count!” Carson yelled. “Scan your sectors! Conserve ammo!” Carson trained Doc and his SR25 sniper rifle on the heights across the river where Talibs were infiltrating down closer to the river’s edge. Smelling blood, the Muslim fanatics were brazenly exposing themselves in order to get a better shot at the American infidels. Doc’s night vision scope turned night into day. He began dropping the Talibs like falafels into hot grease.

The team’s communications equipment was useless. Their base at Asadabad lay 60 kilometers on the far side of a 10,000-foot mountain. Might as well be on the moon. Without comms they couldn’t call for air support. The American soldier enjoyed a tremendous advantage over his Taliban opponent due to his technological superiority. But without effective comms, that tactical advantage disappeared. The tactical situation reverted back to men slugging it out with rifles. With four Americans facing down fifty Talibs, the odds reversed dramatically. He needed CAS (close air support).

Carson retrieved his back-up satellite phone, which he always carried in his side pocket just in case. He might or might not get a signal directly to Asadabad, but he might be able to reach one of the other FOBs (forward operating base) in the area. Any unit could pick up his distress signal, he knew, and relay it back to Asadabad.

He dialed the number to Asadabad’s TOC, but got no answer. He tried Jalalabad, but it disconnected after the person answered on the other end. He tried one of the other numbers already programmed into the speed dial. A faint choppy voice came on the line.

Carson spoke deliberately into the phone. “This is Wolfpack 07, do you read me, over!”

“Roger that, Wolfpack 07. This is Romeo 62. How can I assist, over?” the voice said.

“What is your location, Romeo 62, over?”

“Location is FOB Garcia,” the voice said.

Carson recognized FOB Garcia. It was about 90 klicks to the north in Nurestan province, current home to a company of paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne. Carson wasted no time in delivering his distress signal. “*Broken Arrow!*” Carson announced. “*Broken Arrow!*”

The radio operator at FOB Garcia immediately acknowledged. “Roger that Wolfpack 07. *Broken Arrow!*”

“Broken Arrow” had a very specific meaning that any soldier in-country recognized. Broken Arrow meant an American unit was about to be overrun. Repeated on any frequency, it brought everything in the sector to a halt as ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) command shifted every available asset to the scene.

Carson then gave the radio operator at FOB Garcia the call sign and location of his commanding officer at Asadabad, along with two sets of grid coordinates: his team’s location, and the enemy’s location.

The radio operator repeated the coordinates back to Carson. Then he assured Carson that the machine was already in motion. “Hang in there, Wolfpack,” he said before the line went dead.

Gunfire from the slope above the village suddenly intensified. Murphy’s voice broke in on the radio headset: “Contact left! Contact left!” Several Talibs materialized out of the cornfield and rushed at the Americans, firing AK-47s from the hip—“ALLAHU AKBAR!”—yelling bloody murder. Staff Sergeant Murphy loosed a long sonorous burst from his M240. The 7.62 mm bullets slammed into the Muslim fanatics, and they fell like tin pins.

Carson crawled over to help feed Murphy a belt of ammo. He arrived just in time to confront another suicide attack. Out of the corner of his eye, Carson noticed Murphy shudder violently. He saw Murphy slump face-first into the ground.

“Murph! Murph!” Carson called. No response. He shook his body. Murphy was limp. Carson turned Murphy over on his back and saw his mouth gushing foamy black blood. “Doc, Murph’s hit!” he radioed.

A field machine gun, the M240 was the team’s most lethal asset. Carson couldn’t let the gun go down. He sidled up behind the machine gun and began the steady work of laying down a field of fire.

Doc, the team medic, arrived shortly and went to work on his wounded friend. Using his hands, he followed the blood trail back to a dime-sized hole under Murphy’s armpit. The AK-47 bullet had found a gap in Murphy’s Dragon Skin body armor and penetrated his lung. Doc put his ear to Staff Sergeant Murphy’s chest. He heard the low rattle. It was a sucking chest wound. Very bad. With each breath he took, Murphy was literally suffocating himself. Blood was slowly filling his lung.

Doc started an IV. Murphy’s lungs had to be decompressed. Doc quickly inserted a fourteen-gauge angiocatheter into the chest cavity to let air escape. Otherwise air would get sucked into the pleural cavity through the wound and collapse the lung until Murphy suffocated. It was a temporary patch though, enough to keep Murphy’s lungs partially functioning. If Staff Sergeant Murphy didn’t get into surgery within an hour, he’d be dead. Time was running out.

Doc kept pressure on the wound using the palm of his hand and spoke reassuringly to his friend. “Hang in there, Murph. Bird is on the way, man. You’re gonna be alright.” Warm blood covered Doc’s hands.

Captain Carson handed off the M240 to Wolfe and he returned to the SAT phone. A voice suddenly broke in on frequency.

“Wolfpack 07, this is Sniper 66. Come in, over,” the voice said.

“Go ahead, Sniper 66,” Carson said.

“Wolfpack, I will be on station in five mikes (minutes).”

After receiving the distress call “Broken Arrow,” ISAF diverted the AC-130 Spectre gunship to Carson’s location. Carson breathed a huge sigh of relief when he heard the call sign “Sniper.” For Sniper was the call sign of the Spectre gunship. Originally designed as a cargo airplane, the propeller-driven AC-130 had been hollowed out and converted into a flying arsenal. The plane carried two 20 mm Vulcan cannons, two 7.62 mm mini-guns, one stripped down 105

mm Howitzer cannon, and enough fuel to stay on target for 24 hours. At full blast, the AC-130 could fire some 50,000 projectiles per minute. In Vietnam, the troops called it “Puff the Magic Dragon” because at night its awesome firepower resembled a fire-breathing dragon. Though worthless against opponents armed with sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles, the slow-flying AC-130 is a nightmare to lightly armed guerrillas like the Taliban. To Carson and his beleaguered team of Green Berets, it was an angel sent from heaven.

Exactly five minutes later the AC-130 pilot came over the SAT: “Wolfpack 07, I am one plane on station. IR (infrared strobe) your position, over.”

“Roger that, Sniper66.” Carson stuck an infrared strobe light at the center of his perimeter. Invisible to the naked eye, the little strobe light would be visible from the sky to the pilot wearing night vision goggles.

Like some ancient prehistoric bird, the AC-130 gunship glided slowly through the gorge, its running lights doused. “We see you, Wolfpack. Coming around for another pass. Keep your people down, over.” The gunship made a wide arcing turn and flew back down the center of the gorge. As it passed over Carson’s position, the plane opened fire, vomiting streams of bright red tracer rounds into the slope above Yaka Chine. The aircraft began to slowly circle above the village just out of small arms range, raining fire down upon the Taliban. The mountainside smoked. The smell of cordite filled the air.

“RPG!” Master Sergeant Wolfe shouted into the radio. Two rockets impacted the boulders. Lethal shards of rock fragments whizzed past. “Captain, the Talibs are in the village... Those RPGs came from the houses over there,” Wolfe said. “I need support ASAP.”

The Taliban knew that the Americans’ restrictive rules of engagement prevented them from bombing houses out of concern for civilian casualties. As the AC-130 gunship continued to pound the heights around Yaka Chine, the Talibs took shelter in the houses. Approximately 50 fighters barricaded in the mud brick houses and fired at the Americans.

“Sniper 66, we have Talibs massing in the village,” Captain Carson said. “Can you put some ordinance on the houses nearest the river?”

“I’ll try to get clearance from Bagram,” said the Spectre pilot.

A few minutes passed, then an unfamiliar voice broke in on Carson’s SAT phone. “Wolfpack 07, this is Bagram JAG. I have a few questions before I can green light the CAS on the houses.”

A JAG (judge advocate general) was a military lawyer, a member of the JAG Corps. The Bagram JAG was Major Barry Sims. In the high-tech Bagram TOC, Major Sims monitored three large flat screens on the wall and a bank of radios. The screens displayed live-feed from dozens of surveillance drones and the radios connected him to every unit in Afghanistan. In an effort to avoid civilian casualties at all cost, ISAF had assigned lawyers like Major Sims, a specialist in the laws of land warfare, the job of reviewing requests for close air support and artillery fire missions. Before any pilot could release a bomb or any cannon cocker could fire his howitzer, he had to first receive the approval of JAG lawyers like Sims.

Major Sims spoke: “Wolfpack 07, we do not have live-feed of your location. So, I’m going to have to go through the protocol checklist. Do you copy?”

“Roger that,” Captain Carson said, as another RPG round impacted nearby.

“Wolfpack 07, are you taking hostile fire from the houses?” Major Sims said, reading from the checklist.

“Affirmative!” Carson had to shout above the den of explosions.

“How many PAX do you estimate?” By PAX, Sims meant suspected enemies.

“We’ve counted at least 50 muzzle flashes!”

“How far away are the PAX?”

“Thirty meters!”

“What are the PAX intentions?”

“They *intend* to kill us!”

“Alright, have you seen civilians in the village?”

“No! The village is deserted!”

“How can you be sure? Have you searched all the houses in the village?”

“At the moment, I’m being blinded by the muzzle flashes from enemy machine guns being fired at me from *inside* the houses!”

Two RPGs impacted in quick succession, and Carson pressed flat against the ground. The ground shuddered.

“Tell me this, Wolfpack 07,” Major Sims continued. “Are there any signs of children or women? Any farm animals present?”

Carson lost his patience. “Look, I have three men down! We are about to be overrun! If you don’t drop a bomb on those houses we are *all* going to die! Do you read me, over?”

“I’m sorry, Wolfpack 07. I can’t green light the CAS request, over,” Sims said.

Overhearing the conversation, the AC-130 pilot broke in: “Wolfpack, this is Sniper 66. If you can hold your present position, I’ll walk the fire in between you and the houses. It will be danger close, so keep your heads down. Hang in there, Wolfpack. The QRF (quick reaction force) is one hour out. We have two Apache gunships in route. ETA is 20 mikes, over.”

But Captain Carson and the surviving members of his team didn’t have 20 minutes. By now, Taliban fighters were massing on both flanks, preparing for an all-out assault on Carson’s small perimeter. Between them, the three healthy Green Berets had less than 300 rounds of 5.56 mm ammo and five fragmentation grenades, barely enough for five minutes in a serious firefight. They wouldn’t be able to withstand another assault like the one out of the cornfield.

Meanwhile, Murphy’s lungs were slowly collapsing. His eyes stared blankly into space. His throat emitted a raspy growl, what medics call the “death rattle.”

Unexpectedly, Murphy grabbed Captain Carson by the chest rack and pulled him down close enough so he could hear. “Captain,” Murphy said. “Captain, tell my wife that I love her.” Then he stopped breathing. Doc felt for a pulse. Then he straddled Murphy and began CPR.

“One-two-three-four. Come on Murph. One-two-three-four. Don’t die on me, man.” But nothing could save Staff Sergeant James Murphy.

Finally Doc had to acknowledge the futility of further effort. “Murph’s dead,” he announced over the team radio. The three survivors—Carson, Doc, and Wolfe—sat in stunned disbelief. Carson couldn’t let despair get a grip on his men. He had to keep them moving forward.

“Fall back on me,” Carson said.

The survivors huddled together at the river’s edge. Carson pulled them closer so everyone could hear him.

“Nobody’s coming for us! The QRF won’t get here till morning. If we stay here, we’ll die. Everyone drop your gear. Drop everything except your weapon and your CamelBak. Dump the water out of your CamelBak and reseal the lid.”

The CamelBak is a rubber bladder designed to hold a half gallon of drinking water. Emptied and resealed, the CamelBak would act as a flotation device.

Wolfe instantly surmised Carson’s intentions. “Captain, you’re not thinking about taking a swim!?”

“That’s right. We’re going down the river. Some of us might not make it. But if we stay here, none of us will make it. *Now GO!*”

“See you on the other side!” Wolfe shouted. He took one step and the river swept him away. Doc went next, followed by Carson.

CHAPTER 2

Growing up in Robbinsville, North Carolina, William Carson earned the nickname “Wild Bill” after attempting to jump his ATV over two pick-up trucks. He ended up breaking his collarbone in three places. If there was a lesson to be learned, Bill skipped the class. He limped away thinking he’d have made it over the trucks if only he had a little more speed when he hit the ramp.

The Carsons were blue-collar folks, salt-of-the-earth southern Baptists. Family legend said that Bill’s great great-grandpappy had fought alongside General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Bill’s father Zebulon worked as a lineman for Duke Power Company. His mother Martha took care of the youngins, of whom there were four besides Bill.

Bill’s reckless, carefree manner got him into plenty of trouble, not the serious sort, just your typical boyhood mischief. For Bill hadn’t a serious bone in his body. Bill figured that life was simply too short for solemnity.

Robbinsville, a small town on the border of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, was a slice of Mayberry in a post-counterculture America. People still ate meat and dated members of the opposite sex. In high school Bill played sports, fell in love with the captain of the cheerleading squad, and drank beer with his buddies when they could find someone old enough to buy it. Once the weather turned cold, Bill headed up Hanging Dog Mountain to hunt deer with his Uncle Jack.

Bill was closest to his Uncle Jack, a former master sergeant and survivor of three tours of duty in Vietnam. Bill loved listening to Uncle Jack tell war stories. Life was sweet for Bill, the all-American boy growing up in the Heartland.

Upon graduation, Bill decided to enroll in history classes at Mars Hill College. Zeb and Martha were proud. Bill would be the first in their family to pursue a college degree.

He did well in school. He was one semester short of graduation when his life changed forever.

September 11, 2001, began like most days for Bill. He headed over to Beamer Hall to do a load of laundry when he noticed a crowd of students gathered around the TV in the common area. Bill arrived just in time to see the second plane crash into the North Tower. Fire engulfed the top floors. Debris fluttered in the wind like confetti. Bill sat glued to the set for the next five hours. He watched as the people trapped on the upper floors of the Twin Towers jumped to their deaths to avoid the flames. He saw firemen rush into the doomed buildings only to be buried beneath them when the towers collapsed. It changed Bill. He witnessed a murder and lost his innocence. The veil of civilization was stripped away, revealing the jungle that lies underneath.

Bill became more serious after 9/11. When the president announced his intention to hunt down Osama bin Laden, the man who claimed responsibility for the attacks on 9/11, Bill decided to join the crusade. He wanted to do his part, like Uncle Jack did in Vietnam, and like his grandpa Frank did in WW II. Exactly a week after 9/11, Bill walked into an Army recruitment office in Asheville, North Carolina, and volunteered. The recruiter told Bill to go back to school. Bill was chagrined. “Isn’t there a war on?” he asked. “Don’t you need volunteers?” The recruiter said the Army needed officers more than enlisted men. Having just one more semester left to

complete his four-year degree, Bill should finish school and then come back after graduation. Then he could apply for Officer Candidate School (OCS). In less than a year, Bill could earn a commission as a second lieutenant, with his choice of assignment. That last part convinced Bill to go back to school. Choice of assignment to Bill meant combat duty in Afghanistan, where bin Laden was reputed to be hiding.

* * *

Second Lieutenant William Carson arrived in Afghanistan in the spring of 2004. He took command of a line platoon of “leg” infantry, mostly just kids fresh out of high school. Like Carson, they’d caught the patriotism bug and came to Afghanistan to get payback for 9/11.

Afghanistan had changed a lot in the three years since 9/11. Within months of the president launching Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. and its Afghan allies drove the Taliban and al Qaeda from power. Those who were not killed outright escaped into the Hindu Kush Mountains along the Pakistan border. Osama bin Laden was believed to be among them. The U.S. coalition erected bases near the larger cities. Bagram Airfield, a sprawling complex of runways and plywood B-huts (Barracks Hut) just north of Kabul, became the headquarters for the U.S. war effort.

In December 2001, the United Nations Security Council had created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help the Afghan interim government get on its feet and prepare for normal elections. Assisted by smaller contingents from various nations, the U.S. became the driving force of ISAF. The post-Taliban Afghanistan was scheduled to hold its first election in 2003. But then the situation changed.

The remnants of the Taliban, which had escaped into Pakistan, launched an insurgency against the interim government and its ISAF sponsors. The insurgency was in its early stages when Lieutenant Carson arrived. U.S. forces started to venture into the interior to contest the Taliban offensive. A lot of little firefights dotted the area. For the U.S. forces, tactics amounted to riding around in Humvees hoping to get shot at. If the soldiers got lucky, the Taliban would hang around long enough for the soldiers to kill a few. But mostly, the Taliban ran and blended into the local population, who for the most part supported the insurgents. The Taliban always seeded the area with IEDs (improvised explosive device), 20- to 30-pound charges of explosives packed with nails or ball bearings.

About a month into the deployment, one of Carson’s men, a kid named Paulson, tripped an IED. Blew both his legs off, leaving two ragged stumps. Wasn’t even enough flesh for a tourniquet to latch onto. Poor screaming kid bled to death before the medic could clamp off the arteries inside his groin.

Carson sat down that night to write Private Paulson’s mother a letter of condolence. Carson wrote four such letters that first deployment. Each one got a little shorter, more formal. Carson simply couldn’t find the right words. How do you tell a mother she’ll never see her son again?

It was frustrating, fighting an unseen enemy that shot at you from 500 meters away, then disappeared, leaving booby-trapped IEDs for you to step on. Just once Carson wanted to deliver the hurt rather than receive it. The real action in Afghanistan was up in the Hindu Kush where special operations troops were being infiltrated into Indian country to take the fight to the enemy. Carson decided that’s where he wanted to be.

Once his first deployment was up, Lieutenant Bill Carson volunteered for Special Forces (SF). He endured another three years of training at Ft. Bragg. The most intensive available in the military, the SF training program involved jumping from perfectly good airplanes, fast-roping from helicopters, as well as language courses in Pashto and courses in the history and culture of the various tribes of Afghanistan. He pushed his body and his mind to the limit of endurance. When he was finished, Carson earned the coveted Green Beret and membership into one of the world's most exclusive fraternities.

Special Forces was created at the beginning of the Cold War when NATO war planners expected the Soviets to invade Western Europe. In the event of an invasion, its mission entailed infiltrating small teams of commandos behind enemy lines to organize local resistance to Soviet occupation. The Green Beret's specialty is guerrilla warfare. He's both a teacher and a fighter. Operating without regular lines of support, the Green Beret must be able to "improvise, adapt, and overcome." He's a master of all the minutiae of small unit warfare.

In 2008, Carson was promoted to the rank of captain, which qualified him to command an ODA (Operational Detachment Alpha), commonly referred to as an A-Team. Designed to operate completely independent of the regular lines of support, the ODA imbeds itself in the native community to train, organize, and if necessary, lead indigenous troops. The ODA consists of a 12-man team commanded by a captain and a warrant officer. The rest of the team is made up of senior enlisted men, sergeants with a minimum five years of experience. Two senior sergeants function as the team sergeant and the intelligence sergeant. The remainder specialize in one of a handful of essential skills. Two sergeants for each skill, one senior, one junior. The two weapons sergeants are small arms experts. They maintain the team's rifles, machine guns, rockets, and mortars. The communications sergeants take care of the radios and the computers—keeping the team in contact with the right people. The engineering sergeants specialize in building things as well as blowing things up. The most highly trained medics in the military, the medical sergeants can treat anything from trauma wounds to tooth decay, and in a pinch can deliver a pregnant goat. In addition to their primary specialty, each man receives extensive cross-training on the other specialties, so if necessary, he can assume the role of a dead or wounded teammate.

During his much-needed down time, Captain Carson relaxed at the beaches off Cape Hatteras. There he fell in love.

He met Lydia Fulbright one day walking along the beach. She was collecting sea shells in a small plastic pail. Carson stopped to ask her about the shells. She proceeded to give him a detailed description of the various creatures that had once inhabited the calcified shells, their genus, species, and origins. Lydia impressed Carson with her knowledge, and even more with her beauty.

Lydia wore a black one-piece and a floppy straw hat. Gathered under the hat in a bun, her hair was the color of mahogany. Her eyes like two sapphires. Skin like precious alabaster.

In the course of conversation, Carson discovered that she was working on her doctorate in environmental biology at Wake Forest University. Both parents were college professors. Lydia planned to follow in their footsteps if her thesis was accepted.

As they spoke, Carson caught her stealing glances at his muscular physique. The attraction was mutual. When Carson asked her about the topic of her thesis, she said it was about the life cycle of the smelt. What exactly was a smelt, Carson asked? That was the right question to ask. While they sat on the shore watching the sun rise above the waves of the Atlantic, Lydia recounted the saga of the smelt.

Smelt, Carson learned, was a kind of bottom-feeding catfish indigenous to the Central Valley of California. About the size of your middle finger, the smelt had the unfortunate habit of getting itself sucked into the irrigation pumps that farmers use to water their crops in the valley. The slaughter was immense, Lydia claimed. The noble smelt was on the brink of extinction. Unless something was done quickly to save the smelt, the entire ecosystem of the Central Valley was in danger of collapsing. For the smelt was a vital link in the food chain. If the smelt disappeared, then so would the bass, which fed on the smelt, and the otters, which fed on the bass, and the bobcats, which fed on the otters. Next thing you know, California's Central Valley is an uninhabitable wasteland polluted by toxic pesticides and fertilizer runoff. At the heart of the problem were the evil farmers. Action had to be taken to shut down the farmers' evil irrigation pumps or the smelt was doomed. It was her life's mission, Lydia said, to save the smelt.

Captain Carson listened patiently, but he had to plead ignorance when it came to the environmental sciences. He vaguely understood that the Central Valley of California was our nation's primary source of fresh vegetables. Without irrigation, the farms there would be worthless, the land would revert to arid desert. America would forego cheap, fresh vegetables. It seemed insane to shut down our nation's best agricultural land over some bottom-feeding minnow. But he loved Lydia's passion. More importantly, he loved her pear-shaped breasts and the way her nipples poked through the sheer fabric of her bathing suit. Besides, he loved his country too. Where else but in America are earnest young ladies afforded the luxury to worry over fish? So Carson asked Lydia to dinner. There began a summer romance.

The young lovers spent weekends together. Carson finally popped the question. Lydia demurred. She said she didn't want to marry a man already married to war. Her parents, both rabid liberals and pacifists, raised her to hate everything about wars. Marrying a soldier not only violated her principles, it simply wasn't part of her well-planned life. But Carson wore her down. She surrendered at the altar shortly before Carson's second deployment. It would prove to be a turning point in his life.

CHAPTER 3

It was the spring of 2009.

The UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter carrying Carson began its rapid descent into Firebase Floyd. “Buckle up, Captain,” the pilot said over the radio. “We’ve taken a lot of fire on this LZ, so I’m coming in steep and fast. Unload your gear soon as we touch down, and get clear of the rotors.”

Carson gave the pilot a thumbs up. He tightened his seat belt and pressed his face to the window on the side door to get a better look at the country below. A green belt of vegetation cut through brown desert. Hugging the banks of the Arghandab and Dori rivers were grape vineyards, pomegranate groves, wheat, corn, and marijuana fields, mingled together with Afghanistan’s number one cash crop, poppy. Countless adobe mud brick houses and irrigation ditches. Beyond the rich farmland the terrain surrendered to the arid desert. Snow-capped mountains bracketed the valley. Locals called it Panjwayi. It was a rich agricultural district in Kandahar Province and the heart of the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

Descending fast, the Black Hawk flared up at the last second and settled upon a gravel helipad. Carson quickly jumped down. The crew chief unceremoniously pushed his kit bag out after him. Then the helicopter’s twin turbine engines roared and the bird lifted into the sky before Carson could clear the blades. As he watched the helo disappear behind the mountains, Carson was hit by a familiar smell. A mixture of flowers, wood smoke, and raw sewage—the unforgettable smell of Afghanistan.

At the edge of the helipad stood a bearded soldier dressed in 1980s desert camo. Forbidden to most U.S. servicemen, beards helped the Green Berets blend in with the Afghans for whom facial hair was customary. Carson, himself, had recently started growing a beard.

The soldier snapped a crisp salute; Carson returned it promptly. “Welcome to Firebase Floyd, Captain. I’m Master Sergeant Wolfe, your team sergeant.”

Captain Carson was assigned as a replacement commander for an ODA already operating in Panjwayi. Typically, members of an ODA spend months training together to build a rapport before deployment. But the ODA’s previous commander had been killed less than a month into the deployment, and rather than pull the entire team, JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) assigned Carson to the position.

Operating out of Firebase Floyd, named in honor of its previous commander, the team’s AO (area of operations) consisted of the lower Panjwayi Valley. The firebase was little more than a dusty compound surrounded by a HESCO wall and some concertina wire. (HESCO walls are essentially large wire baskets that are filled with dirt and stacked together to form barriers.)

A joint project between the U.S. and Afghan National Army (ANA), the American side of Firebase Floyd had a barracks and a TOC. Construction was makeshift: plywood and tin thrown together by unskilled labor, what the troops referred to as “bee huts” (B-huts). Metal shipping containers littered the base. On the east side of Floyd was the Afghan compound. Carson’s ODA was given the task of training and organizing the ANA in counterinsurgency warfare.

“Follow me, Captain.” Wolfe hefted Carson’s kit bag over one shoulder and headed to the barracks. The barracks were partitioned into several rooms, each with a bunk, a desk, and a chair. Captain Carson’s room had the added feature of a small refrigerator. “This is all yours, Captain. It’s not much. But then again, you’re not going to be getting much sleep around here anyway.”

Carson noted a framed photograph of a woman in her wedding dress on the desk. She had a big smile on her face, a bouquet of flowers in her hand. “Your wife?” Carson asked.

Wolfe took the photo and looked at it. “That’s Captain Floyd’s wife. His widow. I thought we got everything out of here. I’ll send it up to KAF later.” KAF was Kandahar Airfield, the site of NATO’s main base in southern Afghanistan.

Both men hustled over to the small TOC, which was empty except for a lone sergeant monitoring the radios. The TOC at KAF, which Carson visited before flying into Floyd, looked like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise in comparison. Here there were no large flat-screens or high-tech gear. The TOC at Floyd had a large topographical map of the AO on one wall, two laptops, tactical radios, and a coffee machine. Bare bones, thought Carson.

The soldier monitoring the radio spoke into the mic: “Wolfpack 08, this is Beastmaster 06. How do you read, over.”

“This is Wolfpack 08. Go ahead, break,” a voice squawked over the comm speaker.

“Find anything, Wolfpack?”

“Negative. A lot of signs that they’ve been through here. But no joy. Talibs are likely already in the valley by now, break.”

“Roger that. Return to base ASAP, out.”

Replacing the mic into its cradle, the soldier rose to greet Carson. “Sergeant First Class Emmet, but everyone calls me Doc. I’m your senior medic. Welcome to Panjwayi, Captain.”

Born in a nudist camp in northern California, Doc joined the Army primarily to piss off his hippie father. He never looked back. He loved the men more than the mission. And the men trusted him implicitly.

“Who was that on the radio?” Carson asked.

Master Sergeant Wolfe walked over to the large map on the wall. “That was the rest of the team. They’re about twenty klicks southeast of here, searching a few of the known ratlines the enemy uses to enter Panjwayi. They should be returning within the hour. How about a cup of coffee while we wait?”

“Love one. I take it black,” Carson said, his mind focused on ratlines, which were Taliban infiltration and escape routes.

Wolfe poured two steamy mugs of his own French roast and handed one to Carson, who sipped and smiled. “It’s good.”

Master Sergeant Samuel Wolfe handled the team’s intelligence as well as operations. Very much the opposite of Doc, he was a hard, intolerant man, slow to friendship. Half his life had been spent in the military, nearly all of it overseas: Yemen, Iraq I, Somalia, Iraq II, and now Afghanistan. Twenty years’ worth of bad food, little sleep, and constant danger had turned his

hair prematurely gray, made his knees rickety, and killed two marriages. Although he never understood women or money, he knew soldiers and could size a man up by the cut of his jib. He liked what he saw in Captain Carson.

“They say you’ve been in Panjwayi for a year,” Carson said, sipping from the hot mug.

“Two years, if you count the first couple deployments back in 2001 and 2002,” Wolfe said.

“I understand things have changed since the invasion—not for the better.”

Wolfe nodded. “I came in with the first teams. We worked alongside the Northern Alliance. After we swept the Taliban from power, it was just a matter of mopping up the last pockets of resistance. They sent our team down here to Panjwayi with a company from the 101st Airborne. Mission was fairly straight-forward: hunt down and destroy the Taliban in the valley. We accomplished that in a few months. By my second deployment you couldn’t find a Talib in the entire valley. So I was assigned elsewhere.

“Then in 2005, ISAF handed our responsibility for southern Afghanistan to NATO. The Brits and Canadians replaced our troops. Only a few SF teams stayed behind. The mission changed. No more aggressive search-and-destroy operations. SF assumed an ‘advisory role.’ All ops now have to be ‘led’ by the ANA—with us advising. All ops must now include a humanitarian component as well: things like digging wells and building schools.”

“The old ‘hearts and minds’ philosophy,” Carson interrupted.

“Exactly,” said Wolfe, “although the brass frowns upon that Vietnam-era phrase. The association with a lost war and all that. They call it ‘nation building’ these days. Call it what you will, it’s not working. As much as Washington wants this war to be over, the Taliban are just getting started. Over the past year they’ve reconstituted their forces in Panjwayi. Now they intend on retaking it. Only now we don’t have U.S. infantry backing us up. The Brits and Canadians are content to remain at KAF behind the HESCO walls and wire. And the ANA troops are not prepared for combat operations. Constant Taliban ambushes limit our ability to carry out our humanitarian assistance mission. Worse, the villagers are going over to the insurgents.”

“How many men and trucks do we have available, Sergeant?” Carson asked.

“Twelve Americans and four GMVs to patrol an AO the size of Rhode Island.” By GMVs, he meant Humvees.

“What can we expect from the ANA?”

“An undersized company, about 90 men,” Wolfe said.

“Training?”

“Half are proficient in basic weapons and tactics; the other half are just earning paychecks. We’re lucky if they show up for formations.”

“What’s the current strategic situation?”

“As I said, the Talibs have been moving men and weapons into the valley all winter. Intel estimates a force of 300 to 400 fighters. More arrive every week. The main infiltration route is across the Red Desert. Intel predicts a major offensive to retake Kandahar City this spring.

Kandahar City is the spiritual home of the Taliban movement. Panjwayi is the staging area for the offensive.”

“What types of weapons are the Talibs bringing in?” Carson asked.

“Small arms mostly: AKs, PKMs, RPGs, a few Katyusha rockets, some mortars. They’re also bringing in quite a bit of military grade explosives. They’ve set up a bomb-making factory somewhere in Panjwayi.”

“Quality?”

“Shaped charges, using both pressure plates and remote detonation. Their bomb maker has skills. Probably trained in Pakistan. Since February, he’s killed five ANA troops, plus Captain Floyd.”

Captain Carson helped himself to another cup of Master Sergeant Wolfe’s coffee. “How did they get Captain Floyd?”

Wolfe paused, recalling the events of that fateful day. “Well, command up at KAF mandates that we meet periodically with the village elders—part of our nation building mission. At first, we kept to regularly scheduled meetings. But after practically every meeting, the Taliban would ambush us on the way back to base. It got to where we could predict the exact time and location they’d hit us. So we stopped the scheduled meetings. Instead we’d show up unannounced, meet with one or two elders, and never, never use the same route coming back to base. That put a stop to the ambushes. That was SOP for half a year.

“Well, Captain Floyd came in on our second deployment. He decided to go back to the old way of doing things: regularly scheduled meetings and so forth. Said it was a matter of principle. ‘The Taliban can’t dictate our movements,’ he said. On the way back from our second meeting his GMV hit an IED. Killed him instantly. Badly wounded his terp and his driver. Bad day.” The word “terp” was shorthand for interpreter.

Gulping down the last sip of coffee, Carson washed the cup in the sink and hung it on the rack to dry. “If the Taliban come at us in force, can we hold this firebase?”

“Without our air support and the two howitzers over at Firebase Mitchell, we’d have a hard time staying here,” Wolfe said.

Carson scratched his stubby beard and walked over to the map. Using his index finger, he traced a circle around Panjwayi. “Is there much local sympathy for the Taliban?”

“This is Pashtun country, Captain. Ethnic Pashtuns make up the bulk of Taliban fighters. Old one-eyed Mullah Omar, founder of the movement, was born not ten clicks from here.

“That said, the Taliban were never very popular, even among Pashtuns. I mean who wants to live in the Middle Ages, right? Any illiterate farmer can see that we’re offering them a better future than the Taliban. But still there’s a reluctance to support us. Tribal culture. Blood is thicker than water. The locals have brothers, sons, and cousins fighting with the Taliban. Even though they do appreciate us digging wells and inoculating their kids for measles—doing all this humanitarian stuff—it’s important to not lose sight of the fact that we are invaders in their eyes. ‘Infidels.’ Afghans have a long history of fighting foreign invaders, going back to Alexander the Great.”

“Can we count on our ANA allies?” Carson asked.

“Many are ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, traditional enemies of the Pashtuns. The ANA commander Captain Dadullah is a Pashtun though, one of the good ones. He’s paid the price for going against his tribe. The Taliban murdered his wife and one of his sons.

“A word of caution, Captain, don’t take for granted the loyalty of the Afghans. It’s an open secret that the Taliban has spies among the ANA. Captain Dadullah may be loyal, but those around him may not be. Keep that in mind when sharing intel with Dadullah. One mistake can cost lives.”

The sound of engines reverberated through the TOC. Wolfe walked over to the door to look out. “The trucks are back,” he announced. Doc radioed KAF to report the fact.

Within minutes, the door swung open and in walked a procession of bearded soldiers wearing full chest racks and a fine layer of biscuit-colored dust. Noticing the strange captain at the far end of the table, everyone turned in deference and awaited formal introduction.

Wolfe spoke. “This is Captain Carson, our new team leader.” Wolfe then introduced the men. Carson stood and greeted each with a firm handshake. He made a few informal remarks, then dismissed the bulk of the team to do weapons maintenance. The one they called Murph stayed behind to debrief.

After removing his chest rack and pouring himself a cup of Wolfe’s French roast, Staff Sergeant James Murphy walked over to the large wall map. “We found a heavily traveled ratline leading from the Red Desert to the village of Siah Choy.” He traced the trail on the map with his index finger. “Lots of tracks, discarded water bottles, food wrappers.” His finger stopped moving. “About here, the trail goes cold. My guess is they were smuggled across the border from Quetta. Dropped somewhere in the desert. From there, they moved on foot, at night. Once they reached the Panjwayi, someone picked them up in a vehicle and moved them—probably to a safe house.”

Murphy was a broad-shouldered Irishman with red hair and a bushy red beard. He spoke in a thick Philadelphia accent.

Carson interrupted Murphy’s briefing. “How many fighters in that group?”

“Judging from the tracks, at least 30. They’ve been arriving in groups of 20 to 30 all winter. Estimates put their number at 300 in Panjwayi.”

“Where?” Carson asked.

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question,” Murphy said.

With the briefing concluded, Carson wanted to meet his Afghan counterpart before the day ended. The diplomatic aspect of his job entailed showing the proper respect to his Afghan host, Captain Dadullah. Wolfe suggested taking Doc along, as he and the Afghans had already formed a close rapport. Plus, Doc’s Pashto was better than the others.

Doc escorted Carson to the Afghan side of Firebase Floyd. Apprised of his coming, Captain Dadullah waited with a small entourage in front of his TOC. As the guest, Carson

attempted a proper military salute. But Dadullah dispensed with formality and embraced Carson in a bear hug.

“Greetings, my friend. Welcome to the Panjwayi. Come, let us drink chai together.”

Dadullah led the way. A big bear of a man, Dadullah wore a tiny camo hat on his oversized head and had skin as black as coal. Unlike the American TOC, which was set up for the business of war, Dadullah’s headquarters looked like any ordinary Afghan living room. A large Afghan rug covered the floor. On the rug was a large coffee table with great pillows arranged around it on the floor. In the corner, two Afghan soldiers prepared a tray of tea cups. Dadullah invited the Americans to sit. As Carson perched precariously on one of the big pillows, a soldier placed a cup of tea in front of him. Testing the cup with his fingers, he discovered it to be scalding hot. And filled with strong, black tea sweetened with enough sugar to bake a cake. One sip brought tears to his eyes; he’d never had such strong tea. He smiled and wiped the tears.

“I’m so happy to have the longbeards in Panjwayi,” Dadullah said. Afghans called the Green Berets “longbeards,” referring to their practice of growing facial hair. “There will be much fighting this spring, *Turan*. Together we shall kill many Talibs.” “*Turan*” was the Afghani term for “captain.”

“Are there many Talibs in the valley?” Carson asked, although he already suspected the answer.

“Their numbers increase every day, like goats,” Dadullah said. “Two years ago a Talib dare not stop to take a piss in my valley. Now they walk openly in the village bazaar.”

“Are your men prepared for a fight?”

“They have hearts like lions, *Turan*. But sadly, they have guns with no bullets.”

Doc interrupted in English and said to Carson, “Captain, during our last training cycle we blew through almost our entire allotment of ammo. The expected resupply has yet to arrive. Should be here any day.”

Carson turned to Dadullah. “I can assure you, Captain Dadullah, your men will have plenty of bullets. Soon as I return to my TOC, I’ll get on the radio to KAF.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Dadullah said, signaling to his orderly to refill the Americans’ cups with tea. Doc covered his cup with his hand and politely declined the proffered tea. Whispering in Carson’s ear, he said, “Captain, if you want to sleep tonight, I’d stop at one cup.” Heeding Doc’s advice, Carson stood up preparing to leave.

Dadullah held up his hand. “Before you go, I have something to give you.” He walked to his desk and unlocked the bottom drawer. “Here, *Turan*.” Dadullah held up a tactical wrist watch. Carson turned it over to read the inscription on its base: *Captain Gerald L. Floyd, Citadel ’99*. “My soldiers found it near where the captain was killed. You should have it.”

Carson thanked him for the watch and once again promised to resupply his company with ammo. He gave a traditional Muslim farewell of peace: “*Al salamu alaikum*.”

It was Carson's first "chai session." Part business, part leisure, the chai session was where things got done in Afghanistan. Carson was impressed by Dadullah. Forming a good relationship would make the job easier.

Before returning to the TOC, Carson wanted to tour the perimeter. The firebase sat on a slight plateau at the northern end of Panjwayi. At the southern rim of the perimeter, Carson and Doc climbed atop the HESCO wall. From there they could see the verdant Panjwayi valley in its entirety. The low humidity allowed visibility for 30 miles or more. Carson imagined Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan standing atop the same plateau. Little had changed since then. Except for the poppy. Fields of the pink and white flowers stretched along the Arghandab River.

"I don't suppose they're growing those flowers for the florist shops in Kandahar," Carson said.

"No, they grow poppy to make heroin," said Doc. "It's the cash crop in Afghanistan. Once the flowers mature in about another week, the farmers will go along and scrape opium tar from the petals. The tar is then rolled into balls. Then it's processed into heroin."

"Everyone here has their hand in the heroin racket, Captain. To the farmers, poppy is their primary source of income. Government officials receive bribes from the heroin producers—for looking the other way. Last year a provincial governor bought a 20-million dollar estate on Lake Como in Italy. He didn't get that on his salary, that's for sure. Worst of all, the Taliban relies upon heroin money to fuel its insurgency."

"Was it like this before the invasion?" Carson asked.

"Before we came here in 2002, Afghanistan produced around 70 percent of the world's heroin. Today, Afghanistan produces around 90 percent."

Carson shook his head in disgust, imagining the thousands of overdoses in America. "Our presence here has actually increased heroin production?"

"We've brought stability, something sorely lacking in this war-torn country. Stability is always good for business, even the heroin business."

"America's military is in effect acting as muscle for the world's biggest smack dealer."

"Gotta win their hearts and minds, Captain, even if it means looking the other way when it comes to the heroin trade."

Carson used the next few weeks to build relationships with his team members and with the Afghans. The Afghans were not ready for combat operations, Carson discovered. Most were illiterate farmers for whom modern weapons and technology were foreign. Carson suggested that Dadullah organize his best soldiers into a separate platoon, and build from there. Carson instituted better accountability for the NCOs, something sorely lacking. Dadullah at first resented Carson's changes. But as he watched his men improve from a ragtag into an actual fighting unit, he came to appreciate Carson's reforms. The separate platoon became a model for the other Afghan soldiers.

One obstacle to better cooperation with the Afghans was the language barrier. Carson quickly discovered that his Pashto, which he'd studied for a year at Ft. Bragg, was insufficient to

navigate the various regional dialects of Afghanistan. It took him a half hour to explain something that should take only a few minutes. He needed an interpreter, “terp” as they were called. Wolfe recommended Baz. Baz was a Hazara. Descendants of the Mongols who’d invaded Afghanistan in the 1200s, the Hazara were outcasts in Afghan society, and mortal enemies of the Taliban. Small in stature, Baz had the oriental features of his distant ancestors. He’d served as Captain Floyd’s terp and was riding alongside him when their truck hit the IED. Baz tried desperately to pull Floyd from the burning wreckage and received third-degree burns on both hands in the process. He was still wearing thick bandages.

There was a point at which everyone on the U.S. team knew that the Afghans were ready. It came at the end of a live-fire training exercise. In the past, the Afghans would celebrate any success by firing their weapons into the air, cowboy style. The lack of discipline drove the Green Berets crazy. After this particular exercise, the Green Berets waited for the sound of sporadic gunfire, but this time there was silence. The Green Berets held their breath as the Afghans formed up, cleared their weapons, and then marched back to the barracks. To look at Master Sergeant Wolfe, you’d have thought he’d just taught his son to ride a bike. Pure pride.

In late spring, Captain Carson decided to meet with a few elders in southern Panjwayi. He took his three functioning gun trucks, plus two of Dadullah’s trucks. After the meeting Carson planned to continue on through the southern end of the valley before circling back through the desert. The diversionary route should discourage any Taliban ambush on the return trip.

The column of trucks arrived in the village of Mushan shortly after dawn. It was market day and the village bazaar was beginning to fill up with traders and customers. The trucks idled slowly through the open bazaar. Heavily bearded men. Women covered head to toe in thick burqas. Barefooted boys driving herds of goats, each goat fitted with a tiny bell that made a tinkling sound. Carson had the impression of being transported in a time machine back to biblical days.

Carson took note of the people’s faces as he passed. Most were hostile, looks of pure hate. Except for the kids. They flocked around the gun trucks as the Americans dismounted. The presence of children was a good sign, Wolfe said. The Taliban rarely did anything with kids present. Doc had learned to always carry candy. He emptied his pockets of Jolly Ranchers and Reese’s Pieces.

Playtime over, Carson put the trucks in a defensive laager around the site of the meeting. “Cole, you take over watch at the east end of the market. Holverson, take the west end. Murph, you and the Afghans stay here.”

Meanwhile, Doc set up a small aid station beside Murphy’s gun truck. Part of SF’s mission involved providing medical care and immunization to the locals. The medics would treat minor ailments on the spot. For more serious conditions, Doc would issue a referral to the hospital at KAF. There, Afghans received state-of-the-art medical treatment free of charge.

Carson entered a long building off the bazaar. Dadullah and Baz and Wolfe accompanied him. The Afghan version of a city hall, it had a low ceiling made of rough logs. The dirt floor was covered by a stained rug. Three village elders were already seated around a low table.

Younger Afghan men stood behind them. A steaming tea kettle sat on the table. Upon being seated, the chai session began.

In accordance with custom, the eldest male held the most respect in the tribe and therefore did most of the talking. The Afghan word for elder is “*mesher*,” and Carson made sure to address the old man seated across from him as such.

“Every day the people come to me with complaints,” the elder said. “One say the soldiers at the mountain fort—your firebase—kill his goats. Another say your trucks destroy his poppy. You longbeards promised to pay for the things you destroy. The people of Panjwayi are poor. They cannot live without goats or poppy.”

The ancient man’s face was the color of bronze and had the texture of old leather. Gnarled and wrinkly, his two hands looked like hawk claws. His expression was pure contempt. Carson relied mostly on Baz for translation. The fact that a Hazara was brought into his presence seemed to intensify the elder’s hatred. The elder went on and on for half an hour, listing the grievances of the villagers.

Carson waited patiently for the old man to finish, and then spoke. “*Mesher*, we promised to pay for any damages to property. We intend to keep our promises. Make a list of the damages and we will pay.”

One of the younger men stepped forward and handed Carson a sheet of paper containing a long itemized list of damaged property. Carson handed it off to Wolfe, who gave Carson a wink. Carson suddenly felt like a mark who’d just been played. The *mesher* was well prepared to milk his cash cow.

Carson switched to the vital topic of cooperation. “When we came to Panjwayi, *mesher*, we promised to help your people,” Carson said. “In return, *you* promised to help us rid the valley of the Taliban. It works both ways, *mesher*. We cannot help you unless you help us.”

The elder ignored Carson’s argument and returned to the grievances. “The longbeards promised to build a school for our children. You promised to dig wells. You promised to bring electricity. But you have done none of these things.”

Carson concentrated on controlling his temper. “We cannot build a school when the Taliban murders our workers. We cannot dig wells or run power lines when the Taliban plants bombs on all the roads. *Mesher*, you must convince the people of Panjwayi to tell us where the Taliban are hiding. Once we defeat the Taliban we can dig your wells, build your school, and bring electricity to the valley.”

“There are *no* Taliban in the valley,” the elder said with a straight face.

“*Mesher*, you know perfectly well there are many, many Taliban in the valley,” Carson said. “One month ago Captain Floyd was killed by a bomb less than a kilometer from here. Last week IEDs killed three Afghan soldiers near Talukan. Who’s planting these bombs, *mesher*?”

The elder waved his hand dismissively. “When the Russian infidels occupied our land, they buried many mines. The mines continue to kill our people. The infidel mines killed your Captain Floyd.”

Carson was dumbfounded. “These are not Russian mines, *mesher*. These are IEDs made right here in Panjwayi by a Taliban bomb maker. Someone in the valley is sheltering the bomb

maker. I don't know why your people shelter the Talibs. They take your sons and give you nothing in return. Until we start working together, *mesher*, conditions here in Panjwayi won't change. Your people will continue to suffer."

With that final plea for cooperation, Carson stood to leave. Before exiting the "town hall," Carson had Wolfe count out \$3,000 in currency—the cost of "damages" done to livestock and heroin crops. One of the elder's assistants provided a receipt.

As they drove away from Mushan, Wolfe noticed the look on Carson's face. Exasperation—the Afghanistan look. "Cheer up, Captain. It only gets better."

"Is it always like this?" Carson asked.

"Pretty much."

"I think I'd rather have a few teeth pulled than talk to that old bastard again. I suppose if we investigated those damage claims, we'd find them to be bogus?"

"Completely."

"So this was a shakedown."

"A bribe, to be more accurate. Part of Washington's 'three cups of tea' strategy. We sit down with the elders, listen to their grievances, pay the money, and presto, we become the best of friends. Washington figures we have more money than the Taliban and therefore can buy the elders' loyalty."

"Is it working?"

"No. The Afghans see it as weakness. They understand that we are trying to purchase peace here without paying for it in blood. In Afghanistan, respect is purchased on the battlefield. Unless we ruthlessly crush the Taliban, the locals will never respect us. And if the locals don't respect us, they certainly won't listen to us."

On the outskirts of Mushan the column came to an abrupt halt. Carson poked his head out to have a look. Murphy's truck was riding point. His .50 cal gunner, a young sergeant named Donovan, had the heavy machine gun levelled at two Afghans standing in the middle of the road. "Za! Za!" he yelled, telling them to go. But the Afghans wouldn't budge. The taller one was shouting something, but Carson couldn't make it out.

Carson radioed Murphy. "What gives?"

"Captain, we got an old man and a kid up here. The old man says he wants to talk to someone in charge. What do you want me to do?"

"Stay put; I'm coming to you," Carson said.

Chambering a round in his M-4, Carson dismounted along with Wolfe and Baz. The trio made their way forward. The road was narrow and bordered on both sides by thick marijuana fields. Perfect place for an ambush, thought Carson. "Everyone stay alert," he warned. As Carson rounded the front of Murphy's Humvee he came face to face with the old man. The old man raised both hands and twirled around to show Carson he was unarmed. Baz patted him down while Wolfe held his rifle on him. "No suicide vest," Baz said. Clinging to the old man's leg was a child about eight-years-old. The child wore a traditional Afghan nightshirt, blue in color with

intricate gold embroidery. The old man's face was heavily bruised, his lower lip split almost in two. He spoke too rapidly for Carson or Wolfe to follow. Baz stepped in to do the heavy lifting.

"*Turan*, this ancient man comes from village much south of here. He is farmer. Boy is grandson. This ancient man say Taliban come to his house two weeks ago. Taliban say they need house. But this ancient man refuse to go. Taliban beat him much. Taliban beat his grandson. He forced to leave."

Carson found his story to be credible. But he needed more. "Ask him how many fighters came to his house."

The old man did some rough math on his fingers. "Twenty-five," he said in Pashto.

"Did he recognize the leader?" Carson asked.

Without hesitation, the old man spat out a name everyone recognized. "Ahmad Mafiz!"

Mafiz was reputed to be the top Taliban commander in southern Afghanistan. Despite all the intel on Mafiz, the Americans had little idea what he looked like.

"Ask him if he can describe Mafiz," Carson said.

The old man nodded at Baz's question. He rattled off Mafiz's features. Then he said a few words Carson recognized: "Mafiz is my shoe!" Being compared to one's shoe is a grave insult in Muslim culture, reserved for one's worst enemies. Carson and Wolfe liked what they heard. Here was the one piece of information they needed. If they could kill or capture Mafiz, it might help blunt the expected spring offensive.

Carson asked the old man if he'd be willing to come to Firebase Floyd for further questioning. He and the boy would be well treated, Carson promised. Without responding, the old man helped his grandson into the back of Murphy's gun truck, then climbed on board himself.

Back at Firebase Floyd, the ODA gathered in the TOC for Carson's briefing. Those who came early occupied the handful of metal folding chairs. The rest stood along the back wall. Wolfe covered the windows with black-out curtains. Then he switched on the overhead projector and inserted a satellite photo that showed a large mud brick compound in the middle of a pomegranate orchard.

Carson stepped forward and began. "This SAT photo was taken last year, but according to the old man who was roughed up by the Taliban, everything remains pretty much the same. The compound is about a klick east of the village of Siah Choy. 'Crosshair' has been up watching it for two days now. Live-feed shows a lot of vehicle traffic—coming and going. It also shows an antenna array recently installed on the east side of the compound. Now the old man says he didn't install it. I can guarantee you that whoever put that up isn't using it to pick up *The Bachelor*. He's using it to boost his SAT phone signal to communicate with Taliban units throughout Panjwayi.

"All intel points to this compound being Ahmad Mafiz's HQ for the expected offensive. If we're lucky, we can bag Mafiz and his entire staff before the offensive begins.

“The compound sits right on the edge of the Red Desert. The shortest route is due south, through the villages. But if we go that way, Taliban spies will likely tip Mafiz before we get there. The alternative is to circle due east through the desert. That way we avoid the villages. We stand a good chance of catching them by surprise.

“We’ll take Dadullah’s 1st Platoon, plus our four GMVs. This should give us 40 men total.”

Wolfe interrupted. “Two of our trucks went down after that little excursion to Mushan. Cole is working on them.”

“Any chance of getting a couple replacements?” Carson asked.

Wolfe shook his head. “Already tried, Captain. ‘No replacements available,’ was KAFs reply. We’re gonna have to make do with two trucks, or wait for Cole to work his magic.”

“Alright, I’ll prepare the warning order,” Carson said. “Doc, get over to Dadullah’s. Tell him to prepare his 1st Platoon. I’ll see what I can do about those two trucks.”

Once the briefing had adjourned, Carson headed over to the motor pool. This was a small section of Floyd where the Americans parked their GMVs and performed routine maintenance. The horrid terrain of Afghanistan was hell on motor vehicles. Routine maintenance often turned into major engine repair. Off to one side, a metal shipping container served as the tool shed. The two broke-down Humvees were in various states of disrepair. One with its hood propped open; the other with its front end up on permanent jacks. Two human legs protruded from underneath the Hummer.

Carson knelt down next to the truck. Noticing Carson, the man rolled out from under. He held a socket wrench. Head cleanly shaved, he had a bushy blond beard and arms coated in black engine grease.

“Howdy, Captain,” he said with a Texas drawl.

“How’s it coming?” Carson asked.

“Slowly. This one has a cracked head gasket. That one needs a new front axle. Luckily we have an old Hummer we can cannibalize.”

His full name was Sergeant First Class Clifford Cole. Cole served as the team’s senior engineer. Coming from a long line of west Texas roughnecks, Cole knew his way around any type of machinery and could build about anything. But Cole’s real passion was blowing things up. An expert with explosives, both military grade and improvised, Cole liked to joke that there were few problems that couldn’t be solved with a little high explosives.

“What kind of time frame are we looking at?” Carson asked.

“Two days, maybe three,” Cole said.

Like many Green Berets, Cole used smokeless tobacco. His lower lip was packed so full of Copenhagen, he looked like a squirrel stashing acorns.

As they spoke, another figure emerged from the shipping container. Carson recognized Sergeant First Class Ben Holverson. He carried a long metal object. “Did you tell the captain about the MK-19?” Holverson asked Cole.

“One thing at a time,” Cole said, shaking his head.

“The bolt is shot, Captain,” Holverson said. “Every other round jams.” He handed the bolt to Carson for inspection. The MK-19 is a large belt-fed grenade launcher that looks almost like a machine gun.

Holverson handled team comms. With his receding hairline and shaved upper lip, he reminded Carson of an old-west preacher. All he lacked was the wide-brimmed hat and black suit. He was quiet and humble, but in a scrap, fierce as a lion and deadly accurate with both rifle and pistol.

“It’ll take weeks to get a replacement for the MK-19,” Holverson said. “The Afghans used to have one. But they forgot to oil the thing. The action froze up.”

Each of the team’s four GMVs mounted a crew-served weapon on a Humvee frame. Three mounted the M-2 .50 caliber machine gun. Reliable and powerful, the “Ma Deuce” fires a bullet the size of your pinky finger and can penetrate an engine block. It’s a “direct fire” weapon system, meaning you have to see your target to hit it. But one GMV mounted an MK-19, which is an “indirect fire” weapon system. Looking like an over-sized machine gun, the MK fires tennis ball sized grenades at a rate of 70 per minute. If your enemy takes cover in a ditch or behind a wall, you simply elevate the muzzle of the MK and rain grenades down on their heads. The MK is a “force multiplier,” as they say. Without the MK, the team’s firepower was significantly reduced.

“Any suggestions?” Carson asked.

“Replace the MK with one of our M240s,” Holverson said.

“Okay. Go ahead and mount the M240, Sergeant. We’ll take along some extra AT4s in case we need to punch through some walls.” The AT4 is a disposable shoulder-fired missile designed to destroy armor, but it will also work on buildings and bunkers.

They had traveled less than five clicks off the main highway when word from the lead truck brought the column to a halt. Carson dismounted and climbed a nearby knoll for a better look. Scanning the terrain with his NOD, he saw Murphy’s team jump out of their truck. The snowy images fanned out in a tactical wedge, weapons at the ready, slowly approaching what looked like a small hut. The Green Berets communicated using hand signals. Their spacing was perfect, thought Carson. After clearing the hut, which was empty, Murphy gave the all-clear and the column of trucks started moving again.

The journey so far had been without incident. The convoy left Firebase Floyd at sundown, heading east toward the Pakistani border, hoping to keep the Taliban, with its many spies, guessing as to their true destination. After traveling 20 clicks, the convoy left the highway and turned south into the Red Desert. The last light of the day had faded to darkness. Headlights were doused. Drivers switched to their NODs. Everyone maintained radio silence.

The desert terrain was corrugated by deep wadis (the Arabic term for desert gullies). The column descended into a large north-south wadi. The walls grew progressively higher. Large rocks and standing water slowed their progress to a crawl. Carson worried that he’d chosen the

wrong route. He'd planned to hit Mafiz's compound at first light. But at this rate it could take three days to reach Siah Choy.

Known to the locals as Registan (Red Desert), the desolate region between the Pakistani border and the Panjwayi Valley was Indian country, the main infiltration route for fighters entering southern Afghanistan. Kuchi tribesmen had inhabited the desert for a thousand years. The Kuchis were known to be allies of the Taliban. In short, anything out here was likely to be unfriendly. The turret gunners stayed alert.

Murphy's truck rode point, followed by Cole, Holverson, and Carson. Four Afghan trucks followed the Americans. Unlike the Americans' armored Humvees, which could withstand the blast of smaller IEDs, the Afghans used unarmored Toyotas and Ford Rangers. Each mounted an M240 on the back. Watching the Afghans in his rearview mirror, Carson admired their courage, packed as they were into the beds of the unprotected trucks. One IED would wipe out an entire squad. Enough to pucker your butt. Stay in our tire tracks, Carson had warned them before departing from Floyd. If there were IEDs along the way, one of his Hummers would hit it first.

At around 0300 the column finally emerged from the wadis into open desert. Rolling sand dunes stretched as far as the eye could see. Through his NOD, the landscape appeared to be covered in green snow. Carson called a brief halt to check his compass heading and GPS, then the column gathered speed.

They had travelled another hour when Carson saw a black mass rising in the distance, like a rogue wave on a flat ocean. Kheybari Ghar, the staging area.

A peanut-shaped mountain, Kheybari Ghar rose about 1,000 feet above the desert floor. The column halted at its base. Wolfe walked back to the Afghans to instruct them to put their trucks in 4-wheel low. Carson sent Cole ahead on foot with a team of Afghans to sweep the mountain trail for IEDs. Then the trucks growled and groaned up the steep grade. At the top it flattened into a small plateau. On the other side lay the Panjwayi, still shrouded in darkness.

The trucks formed a tight laager in case of IEDs. Orders were issued not to stray away from the truck and to maintain noise and light discipline. Something always difficult for the Afghans, who liked to smoke at every stop.

Carson turned to Barry, the team's JTAC (Joint Terminal Attack Controller). It was Barry's job to call in air strikes and get the CAS they needed. "What about air support?" Carson asked.

Barry opened his small notepad and read from the list of available air assets. "KAF has a surveillance drone up over the target." Barry showed Carson the live-feed on his laptop. "Also, KAF has two Apaches, in case we run into trouble."

Carson smiled. "Finally, some honest-to-goodness air support."

After gulping down an MRE, Carson grabbed his team sergeant and his spotting scope and headed to the far side of Kheybari Ghar. A faint ribbon of sunlight draped over the eastern horizon. Dawn was fast approaching. The Leupold spotting scope enhanced the available light by several degrees. Panjwayi's rich vegetation contrasted with the stark brown desert. Carson could make out the target compound hidden in a pomegranate orchard. Typical Afghan construction, the compound's solid exterior wall surrounded interior apartments and a central courtyard. The

exterior wall was at least three feet thick, making it a formidable fighting position. Carson caught a glimpse of two figures on the roof. Lookouts, no doubt.

When Carson finished, he gathered his team around the command vehicle and spread the map out on the hood. He opened his laptop computer displaying the SAT photo of the compound. “Alright, we will use this road for our approach. The pomegranate orchards provide good cover. Two roads lead into the compound: one from the south, the other from the north. Holverson, your truck will set up a blocking position on the south road. Cole, yours will block the north road.” Carson pointed to the places where he wanted the trucks. “Don’t let anything get past you.”

Carson addressed Captain Dadullah. “Alright, your ANA 1st Platoon will lead the main assault on the compound—from the east. Mine and Murphy’s trucks will support your assault. See this low mud wall running parallel to the compound? That’s your first objective. The Talibs have at least two lookouts on the roof. Once we get within 200 meters, they’re going to have eyes on us. So move fast. Get your men behind the wall ASAP. From there we’ll be able to lay down a good base of fire on the compound.”

In deference to his Afghan ally, Carson waited for Dadullah’s input. The husky Afghan looked at the map for a minute. He liked the plan and nodded his approval.

“Alright, let’s mount up,” Carson said. “It’ll be daylight soon.”

CHAPTER 4

The Taliban machine gunner opened up when the assault force got within 200 meters of the compound. Bullets stitched across Carson's windshield like lethal hailstones. Carson instinctively ducked below the dashboard, but the thick safety glass stopped the rounds, or Carson's brains surely would've been blown all over the interior. Staff Sergeant Lister, the turret gunner, immediately returned fire. The heavy .50 caliber machine gun rocked the truck back and forth, raining hot brass down on Carson's head. Carson rose up just in time to see the bright red glow of an RPG rocket honing in on his Humvee. The rocket warhead passed Lister's head and exploded against the base of a pomegranate tree. In the driver's seat, Wolfe hit the accelerator to maneuver the truck out of the line of fire.

The walls of the compound were a solid sheet of fire. Automatic weapons fire poured from at least a dozen loopholes in the mud wall. RPG crews stationed on the roof loosed volleys of rockets with deadly accuracy. Most of Dadullah's assault force had already made it to the relative safety of the low wall that Carson had indicated on the map. But one ANA squad was still in the open, flat on their stomachs, bullets splashing in the dirt around them. If they didn't reach the wall and fast, they'd be cut to ribbons.

Wolfe maneuvered the Humvee in behind the mud wall, shielding its lower chassis from direct fire. Murphy's gun truck pulled in beside them. The two turret gunners went to work suppressing enemy fire from the compound, while Carson figured out how to get the trapped Afghans to cover.

Carson dismounted and went to find Dadullah, using the low mud wall for cover. Machine gun bullets snapped overhead, shearing branches and leaves from the pomegranate trees, smacking into the truck with a dull *thwack*. Carson passed ANA soldiers hunkered down behind the wall. Not one of them was returning fire. He found Dadullah reading a map.

"You have to get fire superiority!" Carson shouted above the din of explosions. "Get your men up and put some fire on that compound!"

Chastised, Dadullah and his NCOs went along the wall, physically lifting the men up by their chest racks and forcing them to fire their weapons at the enemy. The combined firepower of the turret guns and the ANA did the trick. Fire from inside the compound slackened.

Seeing an opening, Doc and the ANA medics sprinted to the trapped ANA squad. Four were badly wounded and had to be dragged to the wall. There, Doc assessed their wounds. One ANA soldier was shredded by RPG shrapnel. Another had a bullet lodged in his chest. After checking their vitals, Doc gave Dadullah a thumbs down on both. They were KIAs, nothing could be done for either. Without pausing, he moved on to the other wounded Afghans, checking their vitals, starting IVs, applying pressure dressings. He relayed the info to his junior medic, who in turn relayed it to the medevac helicopter already in-bound.

With the assault force in position, Carson now had the initiative. He returned to his radio and began to coordinate his forces. First he radioed Cole's truck, which was in a blocking position north of the compound.

"Wolfpack 09, request a sit rep, over," Carson said, asking for a situation report.

"This is Wolfpack 09, our sector is quiet, over," Cole answered.

“We need more firepower ASAP. Close up on our right flank and tie-in with ANA Third Squad. We count four RPGs on the roof of the compound. Take caution on approach, break.”

Cole acknowledged the order. Then Carson radioed Holverson’s gun truck, which was stationed on the road south of the compound, and ordered him to close up on their left flank. The weight of firepower from four GMVs should tip the balance their way. But more was needed. The absence of the MK-19 was felt right about now. The .50 caliber machine guns were tearing huge divots in the compound’s thick mud walls. But he required something with more penetrating power to punch through the thick walls.

Carson poked his head inside Murphy’s Humvee where Barry the JTAC was hunched over the radio talking to air operations of KAF. Carson had no idea how Barry could hear anything in the cab with Staff Sergeant Williams banging away on the .50 caliber. Carson pulled Barry’s Peltor ear muff aside and yelled. “We need those Apaches now!” Barry flashed him 15 fingers to indicate the minutes until arrival time.

Those AH-64 Apache gunships would certainly reduce the compound to rubble. But a 15-minute ETA was an eternity in a firefight. Besides, a 15-minute ETA often turned into an hour. By then, he’d have lost more men, and perhaps some of his trucks, to RPG fire.

Carson had an idea. Grabbing four AT4s off the back of the truck, he slung two over his shoulders and handed the other two to Murphy. “Follow me!” he said. They followed the wall, crouching down to avoid the Taliban machine gun rounds zinging over their heads. Carson’s heart pounded like a bass drum. Sweat seeped into his eyes. His heavy body armor was rubbing his shoulders raw. He was tempted to discard it right on the ground.

Where the wall ended, they came upon a large manure pile. Cole’s GMV was tucked in behind it, Staff Sergeant Donovan in the turret pounding away on the .50 caliber. The strong ammonia smell of manure almost knocked Carson on his butt. Seeing the pair approach, Cole dismounted. The three crouched down behind the Humvee.

“How do you stand it?” Carson asked, holding his nose with two fingers.

“I grew up in Texas, Captain,” Cole said. “Smells like home to me.”

Noticing the AT4s, Cole discerned their intentions. “Wanna blow something up, Captain?” As one of the most commonly used light anti-tank weapons anywhere, the single-shot AT4 is used to disable or destroy vehicles and fortifications.

Carson nodded. “Where’s the best spot to set up?”

Cole scratched his bald head, thinking. Taking a long swig of water from his CamelBak, he pulled a tin of Copenhagen from his side pocket. He tapped the tin against his knee and opened the lid. Pinching a gob of the pungent black snuff, he packed his lower lip full, from cheek to cheek. The jolt of nicotine seemed to accelerate his thought process.

Cole waved them over to the edge of the massive manure pile. He pointed to a large rectangular-shaped mud brick building. “See that? Farmers use it to dry grapes in the fall. There’s dozens of holes built into the walls for ventilation purposes. Perfect loophole for either a machine gun or a rocket launcher.”

The grape-drying hut had a perfect vantage of the compound, but to reach it they'd have to cross 20 meters of open ground. Cole spotted the problem. He removed two smoke grenades from his chest rack. First he wet his thumb with saliva and stuck it in the air to gauge wind direction. Then he pulled the pins on the grenades and tossed them one at a time against the base of the grape-drying hut. "Give it a minute," he said. He'd sensed the wind direction perfectly. The smoke formed a solid wall and slowly drifted across the open space. Carson and Murphy sprinted.

Once they reached the grape-drying hut, Carson led the way around the tall structure to the side door. The door was a simple slab of warped lumber. As he reached for the door to push it in, Carson felt a tug on his shoulder. Murphy hand-signaled potential booby traps. He scooted past Carson to examine the door frame. In the lower left corner he spied a strand of thin wire. He showed it to Captain Carson. Then he used his Leatherman tool to carefully snip the wire. Easing the door ajar, Murphy indicated the IED concealed under a clump of hay. Carson gulped.

Carson made a closer examination of the infernal device. Contained in an old Prestone anti-freeze jug, the IED consisted of about 15 pounds of ammonium nitrate and nails for shrapnel. Carson finished neutralizing the device by removing the blasting cap.

"Thanks, Sergeant," said Carson. "Almost got us both killed."

"Just need to slow down, Captain," Murphy said with a wink. "It's no secret—the Taliban love to booby trap doors."

The interior was dark except for thin shafts of sunlight penetrating the ventilation holes. Murphy eased up a flight of steps to the second floor loft. Dried grapes crackled under foot. Murphy peeked through one of the holes along the south wall. He was level with the compound's roof. The compound was less than 50 meters away. From his vantage, Murphy counted eight fighters on the roof—one PKM machine gun and four RPG tubes. The RPG gunners took turns launching rockets at the American Humvees behind the mud wall. The impact of rockets was tearing large gaps in the wall. Any second now they might score a direct hit on the trucks.

Retrieving a small pill box from his side pocket, Murphy dumped several yellow ear plugs into his hand and offered two of them to Carson. "The back blast in here will blow out your eardrums, Captain. Stuff a couple in your ears."

"Glad you thought of that," Carson said.

After inserting the spongy plugs in his own ears, Murphy flipped the safety off on his AT4, stuck its muzzle halfway out of a ventilation hole, and fired. Carson watched the missile bore a clean black hole the size of a grapefruit in the compound wall, exploding in the interior. The explosion collapsed a ten-foot section of roof, sending three fighters tumbling down. Murphy was right about the back blast. The concussion inside the tight space shook the log rafters overhead, and the hut filled with choking dust. Murphy quickly discarded the one-shot launcher and grabbed his fresh one, firing into the compound about five meters to the right of the first impact. Similar effect.

Carson's turn, he stepped forward with his first launcher, ready to fire. As soon as he poked its snout in the ventilation hole, he was greeted by a hail of machine gun bullets. One round impacted his chest and sent him sprawling on the floor, clutching his stomach. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer and hit him in the chest. Breathless, he reached up under his

body armor expecting to pull back a handful of blood. But his Dragon Skin body armor, which he'd so recently wanted to shed, had stopped the lethal round from penetrating his heart.

The surviving fighters on the compound roof had pinpointed the origin of the first salvo of rockets and redirected their fire at the upper floor of the grape-drying hut. Rounds penetrated the vents and ricocheted off the interior walls. The two Green Berets bounded down the flight of steps to the ground floor where the exterior wall was thicker at its base.

Carson found a vent from which he could survey the situation. The Taliban PKM gunner still concentrated his fire on the upper floor loft. Carson quickly aimed the AT4 and fired—WHOOSH—the PKM gunner disappeared in a cloud of smoke and fire.

Half the compound now lay in ruins. The rubble poured black columns of smoke, possibly from diesel fuel that had been stored inside. Carson glassed the compound with binoculars, looking for movement. Suddenly a break in the cloud developed and Carson caught sight of a man who matched Mafiz's description. Unarmed and surrounded by a group of fighters, he wore a black vest and a black turban, clothing typically associated with higher ranking Taliban. The behavior of his bodyguard reminded Carson of drones protecting their queen. Ahmad Mafiz, Carson said to himself. No sooner had he identified Mafiz than the group disappeared into the thick pomegranate orchard west of the compound.

Wolfe, who was monitoring the live-feed, broke in on the team frequency. "All Wolfpack elements, the Talibs are bugging out. Exfil route is due west, over."

"Roger that," Carson said. "I have eyes on the enemy. I count two dozen. There's a large irrigation ditch 50 meters west of the compound. That's their probable avenue of escape."

"What are your orders, Captain?" Wolfe asked.

Carson hastily put together a plan to trap the fleeing Taliban. "Sergeant Wolfe, there's a road that runs parallel to the ditch about 100 meters south. Do you see it on the SAT photo?"

"Affirmative."

"Alright, link up with Holverson. Put your three trucks down that road. Cut them off before they reach Siah Choy. I'll be coming up on your six o'clock with Dadullah's trucks shortly, out."

Carson and Murphy climbed aboard Wolfpack 09. "Hit it, Sergeant Cole!" he said. Cole reversed out of the manure pile, clumps of the noxious substance clinging to the bumper. They stopped briefly to confer with Captain Dadullah. The Afghans had brought up their Ford Rangers and were beginning to celebrate their victory over the Taliban. Some were already brewing tea over a small fire and dancing. In tribal warfare, simply holding the field of battle is sufficient to declare victory. The modern way of closing with and destroying the enemy is foreign to tribal warriors. Carson upbraided them in halting Pashto. "The battle isn't over. We have the Talibs on the run. But we must pursue them and finish them now, or we'll only have to fight them later."

Dadullah reinforced Carson's message. He played upon their manhood. The Afghans begrudgingly dumped out their tea kettles, muttering curses under their breath. They filled their empty magazines with fresh ammo.

Leaving Cole and Doc behind with two ANA squads to secure the compound, Carson loaded Dadullah's two remaining squads on two of the ANA trucks and raced to link up with Wolfe. The Ford Ranger, lacking sufficient spring support, bounced along the rutted track like a farm tractor. Dust hung above the road, a sign that Wolfe had come this way. They drove through fields of waist-high corn. To the north, Carson could make out the line of trees marking the irrigation ditch where Mafiz had disappeared. Siah Choy was less than a klick away. If the Talibs reached the village, they'd surely melt into the local population.

The Ford Ranger had rounded a slight bend in the road when Carson spied his three GMVs queued up in a line of battle. Wolfe was dismounted and kneeling beside the left rear of Wolfpack 07, the command truck. Soon as he saw the two Ford Rangers approaching, Wolfe held up his right hand—HALT—then he formed his hand into the shape of a pistol, like a child, and inverted it—ENEMY CLOSE. Suddenly an enemy machine gun opened up from the irrigation ditch. Red tracers sliced through the new corn like an invisible scythe. One round penetrated the Ford Ranger's passenger side door and rattled around the interior and finally embedded in Dadullah's left foot. He let out a high-pitched *yelp*.

What you do in the first seconds of any firefight often determines whether you live or die. What Carson did was reach over Dadullah, open the side door, and push him into the ditch beside the road. Then Carson jumped down on top of him. A few Afghans in the truck's bed followed Carson's lead and lived. Those that remained in the truck died.

After staunching Dadullah's wound, Carson low-crawled over to Wolfe and the GMV. The American Humvee, being armored, survived the initial fusillade. The turret gunners, all experienced warriors, stayed behind their guns to return fire. Wolfe was firing the truck's door-mounted M240. As usual, Barry the JTAC was talking to someone on the radio about air support, but as usual there were no aircraft in the sky. Carson tugged on Barry's shoulder to spin him around, shouting, "Where is my CAS?! Those Apaches should've been here 15 minutes ago!"

Barry signaled in-bound choppers. Carson snatched the mic from Barry's hand. "This is Wolfpack 07, come in. I need CAS right now. Please identify, over."

"Wolfpack 07, this is Gunmetal 13. We are two Apaches coming in from the southeast on a 155-degree azimuth. We are six klicks out from your location. Request current ground situation, break."

"Gunmetal 13, ground situation is bad. We are five GMVs one klick east of the village of Siah Choy. We are taking heavy fire from large enemy force who occupies east-west irrigation ditch approximately 100 meters north of my location. Expect ground fire on approach, over."

"Roger, Wolfpack. We are coming in for a marking pass, break."

Carson set down the mic and snatched two large orange panels from under the driver's seat, and handed one to Barry. Kneeling down behind the truck, they held the panels up toward the sky. Carson heard the *whomp whomp* of helicopter blades pounding the dry air. As soon as the Taliban saw the gunships, they opened up. The Apaches banked sharply and made a wide circle to the east.

"We see you, Wolfpack 07. Where do you want it, break?" the Apache pilot said.

"Unload everything on the irrigation ditch. Bring it in danger close, over."

“Roger that, Wolfpack. Danger close. Get your people down. Next pass we’re coming in hot, break.”

“Danger close” is a term used in emergencies when troops are about to be overrun. It means that the soldiers calling in the air strike will possibly be hit with the bombs and rockets he’s calling in. The slightest mistake by the pilots can end up killing their own troops.

Carson ducked down and heard the gunships approaching from out of the east. *Good pilot*, Carson thought. *He’s putting the sun at his back*. The first four 2.75-inch rockets hit the irrigation ditch—*thump thump thump thump*—sending up a shower of sparks that drifted over Carson’s Humvees. The ground shuddered under his feet like an earthquake. The Apaches banked hard, trailing a swarm of red tracers.

After exhausting their rockets, the gunships made strafing runs with their 30-mm cannons. The 30-mm cannon sounded like a giant zipper opening up in the sky. Carson raised himself up over the hood of his truck to view the carnage. Nothing remained of the trees that once shrouded the irrigation ditch, just shredded stumps sticking up like broken popsicles.

A lone RPG rocket shot straight up in the air, missing the gunships by a mile, and fell harmlessly in the cornfield. A Taliban gunner firing at the lethal sky in desperation, perhaps. The awesome firepower of the Apache was something fearful to behold. As an infantryman himself, Carson felt pity for any ground powder caught underneath that infernal machine.

The lead pilot broke in on Carson’s frequency. “Wolfpack 07, we are coming out. Winchester.” The word Winchester meant that he was out of ammunition. He continued, “Returning to KAF to rearm and refuel. The bad guys have broken up into smaller groups. Appear to be headed toward the village. Stay safe, Wolfpack, out.”

Once the choppers flew away, Carson assessed the damage to his column. The American Humvees were running low on .50 caliber ammo, but were otherwise unscathed. Dadullah’s two Ford Rangers had taken the brunt of the Taliban fire. The unarmored trucks were riddled by bullet holes. The one Carson had been riding in looked like Bonnie and Clyde’s death car. Carson was lucky to be alive. Two ANA soldiers weren’t so lucky. Their broken corpses lay in the bed of the truck.

Carson helped Dadullah into the back of Wolfpack 07 and pumped an ampule of morphine into his thigh.

The destroyed ANA trucks were unceremoniously pushed into the ditch to clear the roadway.

While Carson helped to get the column moving, Wolfe sat in the front seat monitoring the live-feed on his laptop. Piloted from a console in Nevada, the surveillance drone was circling high above the battlefield, streaming high resolution video on the ISAF network. At its lowest resolution, the Taliban fighters on the ground looked like cellular organisms under a cheap microscope. They’d already reached the outskirts of Siah Choy. Focusing in on the largest group, Wolfe enhanced the resolution. Immediately, the black and white images took definite humanoid shape. Even though he couldn’t identify faces, Wolfe could make out their style of clothing.

“See anything?” Carson asked, peering over Wolfe’s shoulder.

Wolfe opened the laptop wider so Carson could see the screen. “Take a look at this guy. One in the middle. Black vest. Black turban. Gotta be our boy. Look how the others are protecting him.”

Carson needed only a second to identify him as the same guy he’d seen scrambling out of the burning compound. “Ahmad Mafiz,” he said.

The group protecting Mafiz suddenly halted before a large building with a dome-shaped roof. A door opened. They appeared to be conversing with someone inside. Less than a minute later everyone went inside. The door closed.

Carson immediately punched the grid coordinates of the building into his GPS and plugged it into the laptop. Up popped a detailed satellite photo of the building and its surrounding environs. He relayed the coordinates to KAF. KAF promised air support—in 20 minutes. But Carson didn’t have time to wait and risk Mafiz escaping.

Wolfe zigzagged the big American Humvee to the front of the column and accelerated up to speed. Carson rode shotgun and busily relayed orders to the other trucks. The plan, he said, was to surround the building and take Mafiz down. When the column entered Siah Choy, the streets were empty despite it being the busiest time of day. Always a bad sign. The inhabitants had been warned that a gunfight was in the offing. Carson told his turret gunner to stay alert for snipers. “Sergeant Lister, watch the rooftops. Anyone takes a shot at us, light ‘em up.”

Carson’s truck skidded to a halt 75 meters from the target building. The tail of the column sped past him to take up positions covering the main intersections around the building. Murphy and Donovan were to lead the entry team, consisting of Dadullah’s two squads. Dismounting, the entry team took cover in the doorways along the street. The double door on the side of the building appeared to offer the easiest entry point. Murphy had taken the two remaining AT4s to blow the doors in.

Until now, no one in the area had taken a shot at the Americans and the ANA soldiers. But Wolfe knew the calm always came before the storm.

Before rendering his AT4 operational, Murphy radioed Carson. “Wolfpack 07, we are in position. Ready to breach. Give me the word, over.”

Carson was about to give the order when a familiar voice squawked over the team radio. “Wolfpack 07, this is Bulldog 06. Come in, over.” The voice belonged to Lieutenant Colonel Zimmerman, Carson’s battalion commander. Carson was surprised to hear from Zimmerman, who commanded several ODAs in Kandahar Province. Carson was aware that Zimmerman was likely monitoring the battle from his TOC at Kandahar Airfield. Any engagement involving 30 or more Taliban fighters was bound to attract attention up the chain of command. But Zimmerman usually allowed his team leaders a great deal of latitude when it came to field operations.

Carson acknowledged the transmission. “Go ahead, Bulldog 06, over.”

“Wolfpack 07, stand down. I repeat, stand down, over!” Zimmerman said.

Carson was puzzled by the order. “Bulldog 06, I request clarification, over.”

“Target building is a mosque. Do *not* assault that building. Do you read me, Wolfpack?”

“Bulldog 06, the building contains suspected high-value target, over.”

“I don’t care if Osama bin Laden himself is in that building! You will *not* assault a mosque, Captain. Do you copy, over?”

“I copy, Bulldog. Standing down,” Carson said, slamming the mic down on the floorboard.

Having overheard the transmission, Murphy and the entry team returned to the vehicles, their faces crestfallen. One by one the other GMVs acknowledged the new stand-down order. Before leaving the village, Carson had the column cruise slowly past the mosque, daring the Taliban to open fire, thus giving him the excuse he needed to reduce that place to rubble. But the Talibs refused the bait. Mafiz knew the Americans’ rules of engagement better than the Americans did.

Back at the compound, the last medevac was flying out to KAF. Carson helped the Afghans load the four body bags containing their KIAs. *Was it worth it?* he asked himself. *I don’t know anymore.*

Two weeks later, Lieutenant Colonel Zimmerman flew into Firebase Floyd to congratulate Carson on the recent victory. The Army hailed Siah Choy as a great success, proof that its counter-insurgency strategy was working—despite the fact that Ahmad Mafiz was allowed to escape. Zimmerman wanted to decorate a few of the team members with CIBs (combat infantryman badges). He’d brought along two reporters from *CNN* to film the awards ceremony. Carson’s ODA lined up in formation beside Dadullah’s Afghans. Zimmerman pinned a CIB on sergeants Donovan, Lister, and Williams. The American and Afghan flags flapped in the desert wind in the background.

At the conclusion, Zimmerman pulled Carson aside for a private chat. “Captain, I just want you to know that it wasn’t I who ordered the stand-down at Siah Choy. If it was up to me, I’d have given you the green light to drop a thousand-pounder on that mosque. The order to stand down came from JSOC. And JSOC received the order from the Pentagon. The new administration thinks it can fight this war by rules of engagement drawn up at Berkeley. The politicians believe that if we attack the symbols of Islam, it will alienate ‘moderate’ Muslims. As if we had much support from moderate Muslims to begin with.

“Look at it this way, Captain. Had you gone ahead and toasted that mosque, those beany-headed *CNN* reporters standing over there would be in Siah Choy right now taking pictures of the ruins and the dead bodies. Instead, we got ‘em out here taking pictures of you guys for a friendly story. It’s a trade-off. We have to keep the liberal press on our side. Understand? We’ll get Mafiz another day.”

Carson saluted and watched as Zimmerman and his party of reporters flew back to the world where things like political correctness made sense. Out here, he knew it got people killed. With victory in sight, he’d had to stand down, leaving his enemy to fight and kill another day. How many more Americans, how many more Afghans would have to die before he caught up to Mafiz again? These were questions the partisans of political correctness never had to wrestle

with. To Carson, a half victory was no victory at all. Better not to waste American lives fighting half wars.

Carson was on his way back to the TOC when an ANA soldier came running toward him. Out of breath, the soldier struggled to get his words out. Someone had been wounded, the soldier said. Someone desperately needed medical assistance. Where? Carson inquired. The front gate, said the shocked ANA soldier.

Carson first hurried over to the TOC where he found Doc restocking his kit bag with fresh IVs and pressure dressings and morphine ampules. "Doc, you're needed at the front gate. Bring your bag." The two Americans jogged to the front gate. Carson's first thought was a sniper attack, as the firebase was under constant sniper fire from the surrounding villages. Drawing near the gate, Carson noticed a group of ANA soldiers huddled outside the wire. Seeing Carson, the ANA soldiers in the concrete tower opened the gate to let the Americans through.

Pushing his way to the center of the huddle, Carson was confronted by a small child seated in the road. The boy's face and chest were black with dried blood. The boy emitted a cry like that of a wounded animal.

Doc knelt down to examine the boy's wounds. Tilting his head up revealed two black empty holes where his eyes should've been.

"This wasn't an accident, Captain," Doc said. "Someone cut the boy's eyes out. See this? The wound has been cauterized with fire."

Carson was horrified by the diagnosis. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Don't know, Captain."

Carson turned to the ANA sergeant-in-charge. "Where did the boy come from?" he asked.

"*Turan*, this boy came here with him," the sergeant said, gesturing toward the gate tower. There was a smallish figure leaning against the wall, face in hands, sobbing. Carson recognized him as the old man he'd met on the road outside Mushan, the old man who'd given him the intel on Mafiz. The blinded child was his grandson. Both had left the firebase shortly after the Siah Choy raid. Carson hadn't seen either one since.

Carson offered the old man a bottle of water. Then he sat down. Baz arrived shortly to help translate. Carson asked him, "What happened to the boy, *mesher*?"

Baz spoke to the old man and reported back to Carson. The old man said he and his grandson Ali had gone to live with relatives in Ghariban after leaving Firebase Floyd. A week later the Taliban came in the night. Dragged his family out of their beds. Held guns to their heads and threatened to kill everyone unless the old man confessed to helping the Americans. So he confessed, hoping to spare his family, and expecting to be shot. But the Taliban had other ideas. They said death was too easy for the old man, he with one foot already in the grave. They took Ali his grandson and held him down and cut out his eyes. The blinded boy would serve as an example of what happens if you cooperate with the infidels.

"Who did this?" Carson asked.

"Ahmad Mafiz," the old man said.

Doc inserted an IV in the boy's arm and bandaged his wounds. The ANA brought up an ambulance. Doc cradled the boy in his arms and lifted him into the back of the ambulance. The old man climbed in and the ambulance drove away.

Once again Carson felt the tug of frustration rising up inside. He didn't know what he was doing in Panjwayi. He wanted out of the 'hearts and minds' business. The complicated role of warrior-diplomat-humanitarian didn't suit his personality. He wanted to be a warrior, to fight a known enemy, to never look at another blinded child again. He wanted a straight-forward mission.

For his sins, they gave him one, brought it to him like FedEx.

In early July, Lieutenant Colonel Zimmerman arrived at Firebase Floyd carrying an RFF (request for forces). Any unit in-country could put in an RFF, usually for personnel possessing a unique skill set. For example, if a battalion of regular infantry needed special operators, then whatever branch of the service with available operators (SEALs, SF, Marine Recon) would dispatch them posthaste. This particular RFF was for a team of operators to travel to Kunar Province and hunt down a particularly troublesome Taliban commander named Ahmad Khan.

Zimmerman first let Carson review the RFF. "This one has your name written all over it, Captain. Do you want it?"

"Yes, sir," Carson said.

"Good. Pack your stuff. You leave today."

Carson and his team boarded a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at 1330 hours, bound for Kunar Province. He was taking roughly half of the original 12-man ODA, what they call a "split-six." The split-six is a tactical operation squad. Even though Special Forces' primary mission entails training and preparing indigenous personnel to fight, the ODA also doubles as an elite tactical unit capable of performing a variety of DA (direct action) and SR (surveillance and reconnaissance) missions. For the upcoming mission, Carson chose the senior members of the team: Wolfe, Doc, Murphy, Cole, Holverson, plus Baz the terp.

The large cargo helicopter was flying into the eye of the storm. Kunar Province, a mountainous region bordering Pakistan, was the scene of heavy fighting between coalition forces and insurgents.

Kunar Province had always been known as Afghanistan's Wild West. The people who lived there had never even seen a tax collector or a government official until the American Army arrived. For time immemorial, the village elders were the only recognized authority. The locals lived in mud-brick houses built into the sides of steep cliffs to save space for the terraced fields of corn, wheat, or poppy. Holly oak studded with sharp prickly leaves dominated the lower slopes. Above 8,000 feet, the forest gave way to giant cedar trees. The locals cut the huge cedars and skidded the logs down to the valley floor on luge runs greased with cooking oil. In the spring, when the snow melt turned the rivers into torrents, the cedar logs are floated down to the Pech River valley and sold to criminal timber syndicates.

The Chinook landed at Asadabad Airfield. Built by the Soviets in the 1980s, the mid-sized base sat at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Carson's Green Berets were greeted by a frenzy of activity on the ground. The base was on high-alert. Apache gunships buzzed the perimeter like angry insects. Four big 105 mm howitzer cannons fired at intervals, their long barrels elevated in the direction of the snow-capped mountains to the east. A platoon of Army Rangers, their faces pointed for war, were perched on their large rucksacks beside the tarmac, waiting for the Chinooks to fly them to some distant battlefield.

Carson was met by a young lieutenant who escorted the team to the TOC. Asadabad's TOC was a beehive of activity under the hot summer sun. Soldiers, stripped to their T-shirts, sat at a long table monitoring laptops and three large flat screens. Some handled supply requests while others coordinated airstrikes and artillery fire missions. The battle captain hovered over their shoulders passing and receiving instructions, orchestrating the symphony of war.

Carson's men were hustled into the planning and intelligence room. The door closed behind them. A full bird colonel and a brigadier general stood before a large topo map of Kunar Province. The colonel stepped forward to shake Carson's hand.

"I am Colonel Eastman. This is General Barton, from JSOC at Bagram." The general nodded. "If you will, Captain, please bring your team sergeant over to the map and we'll get started." The others took chairs along the wall.

Colonel Eastman's S2 (intelligence officer), Major Fanning, delivered the briefing. Fanning was tall and pale and almost completely hairless. His only striking features were his expressionless black eyes.

He spoke in a flat monotone. "A little background. Here in Kunar Province the insurgents receive the bulk of their fighters and supplies from Pakistan. The ratlines originate in the tribal region and snake through the Shuryak, Waynot, and the Korengal valleys. The villages along the ratlines act as rest stations and arms depots. For the past year, the Taliban has been preparing an offensive against the Pech Valley, which is the major corridor in Kunar Province." While saying this, he pointed at the tribal region, which is territory in Pakistan where the Taliban has sanctuary.

"For the most part, the locals are sympathetic to the Taliban, which makes getting intel on the insurgents' movement difficult. One of our key assets was the handful of paid informants inside the villages. Over the past year we were able to intercept a lot of material based on tips from our informants. But last month we lost all of our informants."

"Lost?" Carson interrupted.

"Executed, to be exact," Major Fanning said. "The local Taliban commander, a man named Ahmad Khan, cut their heads off in front of the entire village of Aliabad."

"Who's this Khan?" Carson asked.

"Khan is a mid-level commander. Has about 300 fighters. He's been implicated in several recent IED attacks on convoys in the Pech that killed 20 U.S. marines. He's one nasty dude.

"We tracked Khan to a small village in the Shuryak Valley. The night of June 27, we sent in an SR team of four Navy SEALs to watch him and, if possible, take him out. But we lost radio

contact with the SEALs soon after their insertion. The high ridges in there block radio transmissions.”

Fanning pointed to a spot on the topo map. “We’re still piecing together what happened, but the SEALs were about right here when we lost radio contact. The mountain is called Abas Ghar. The next morning, they were set up in a hide when three Afghan goatherds discovered their position. The Afghans were unarmed, so under the ROEs, the SEALs had no choice but to let them go. The team then changed locations, hoping to throw off potential pursuers. Unfortunately it didn’t work. The goatherds ran straight to Khan, whose men quickly tracked down the SEALs and surrounded them with an estimated force of 100 to 150 fighters.

“The battle raged all afternoon of June 28, spilling down off the high ridges toward the valley floor. At 1420 hours the SEALs briefly restored comms using their unsecured SAT phone. The team leader was on the line just long enough to send us a brief distress message: ‘My guys are dying out here ... we need help.’ Then the line went dead.

“Asadabad immediately dispatched an 18-man QRF in a CH-47 Chinook. The Apache gunship escort had been called elsewhere so the Chinook went in unprotected. Upon the approach to the LZ, the Chinook took ground fire from RPGs, received a direct hit and went down. There were no survivors.

“One SEAL from the original SR team did manage to escape the encirclement on Abas Ghar. Despite being severely wounded, he was able to crawl over six kilometers to this village here, called Sabray. The locals agreed to give him sanctuary. Apparently the Pashtuns have a custom about sheltering strangers.”

Carson interrupted again. “The custom is called *lokhay warkawal*. Anyone who comes to your doorstep asking for help must be cared for, regardless of the cost to the community.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Major Fanning said. “Anyway, the Taliban didn’t take kindly to the villagers protecting an American soldier. They surrounded Sabray and demanded that the villagers hand him over. The villagers refused. Thankfully, the Rangers were able to rescue the SEAL before the Talibs overran the village.

“Since then, we’ve been pounding the area pretty hard with both air and arty. Khan’s fighters have mostly scattered. Some have slipped back across the border. The rest have melted into the local civilian population. On July 8, ‘Prophet’—radio intercepts of enemy communication—picked up Khan’s tracks in a village called Chichal. B-52 bombers dropped two laser-guided bombs on the compound, killing several Taliban, plus 17 civilians. Initial reports indicated that we’d missed Khan by mere minutes. But a couple days ago, ‘Prophet’ said we got him. He’s wounded, not dead. Too critical to move across the border to Pakistan, Khan is recovering in the village of Yaka Chine, at the head of the Korengal Valley.”

Major Fanning slid away from the map and allowed Colonel Eastman to take the floor.

“Captain Carson, we need you to go in there and get Khan.”

“Capture, or kill?” Carson asked.

“Capture him if possible,” Eastman said. “The media is all over us for the 17 civilians killed at Chichal. Dropping another laser-guided bomb on him while he’s hold-up in that village

is no longer an option. Besides, Khan is a real player in the Taliban hierarchy. He's a high-value target. Take him alive."

"What kind of time frame are we working with?" Carson asked.

"Your team goes in tonight," Eastman said.

"Tonight?" Carson's voice carried an obvious note of concern.

"Any longer and we risk letting him slip away."

"Expected opposition?"

Colonel Eastman deferred to Major Fanning, who spoke up. "SAT photos indicate no large concentrations of Taliban in or around Yaka Chine. Most of Khan's fighters have dispersed. He may have four or five bodyguards with him."

Carson asked, "Can we expect any support on the ground?"

"Your team should be sufficient," Colonel Eastman said. "You will have a platoon of Rangers on QRF here at Asadabad. Plus two Apaches on standby. If we go in too heavy, it might spook Khan."

Throughout the briefing, Master Sergeant Wolfe had been silently scanning the SAT photos and the topo map. Now, with Carson's permission, he spoke: "Where exactly did you drop the SEAL team on the night of June 27?"

Colonel Eastman again deferred to Major Fanning. Fanning stepped forward and pinpointed a place on the topo map. "They fast-roped from a helo about right here."

"Where exactly did the second Chinook carrying the 18-man QRF go down?" Wolfe asked.

"Same general location ... Terrain in there limits our options of landing zones. Everything is either straight up, or straight down."

Wolfe's face grew pensive as he stared at the map in silence. But he asked no further questions.

Colonel Eastman interrupted the silence. "Alright, gentlemen. Take these maps and these SAT photos. Get some chow and some rest. Be back here at the TOC at 1900 hours."

On the way out of the TOC, Carson and Wolfe exchanged looks. Carson detected the concern on his team sergeant's face. "What are you thinking, sergeant?"

"About those goatherds. The Taliban use goatherds and kids as scouts because they know our ROEs prohibit us from shooting unarmed civilians," Wolfe said.

"You're thinking those goatherds were up on that mountain looking for those four SEALS?"

"Exactly. The Talibs probably spotted that helo make the insertion in the night of June 27, and sent those goatherds up there in the morning to search for them. When they located the SEALs and surrounded them, they sent another group of fighters to stake out those few LZs up on Abas Ghar. They waited in ambush for that second helo with the QRF to arrive."

"They were lured into an ambush," Carson completed the thought.

CHAPTER 5

Captain Carson struggled to get his head above water as the current swept him downstream. He stroked hard but couldn't break the surface. When he thought he could hold his breath no longer, he resigned himself to death. But then the river miraculously released its grip, allowing his lips to break the surface. He took a deep breath, vacuuming in a quantity of river water in the process. He coughed uncontrollably, expelling what little precious oxygen he had in his lungs. But he was alive.

The Taliban in Yaka Chine had known they were coming. The mission went fine until the Green Berets walked into a booby-trapped house where Ahmad Khan was supposedly hiding. Holverson and Cole were killed in the blast. Then all hell broke loose with Taliban fire surrounding them. Carson watched Murphy die, not two feet away from him. The arrival of an AC-130 Spectre gunship gave him hope. Soaring high above like a fire-breathing dragon spitting red tracer rounds, it promised to save him, Wolfe, and Doc. But then the Taliban took shelter in the village, and the JAG lawyer refused an airstrike against the village.

The Korengal River was their only escape. Still coughing, Carson managed to keep his head above the torrent of water, hoping to spot Wolfe and Doc.

The river ahead narrowed into a series of rapids with sharp rocks jutting up from the bottom. Carson's right boot wedged between two rocks and his forward momentum turned his ankle, dislocating it from the socket. He screamed in agony, but no one heard.

Propelled end over end through the rapids, he washed out into a pool and slammed face-first against a large boulder. His momentum halted, Carson bear-hugged the slippery boulder. The river rushed past him. A couple deep breaths renewed his strength. Finding a handhold, Carson pulled himself out of the water to the top of the boulder.

He saw no signs of Wolfe or Doc. Both had jumped into the river seconds before him and should've passed through the same set of rapids. He scanned both banks for a strobe light or for any movement, but there was nothing. He had to reckon with the probability that neither one had made it.

It was still dark, though dawn was fast approaching. From atop the boulder he could see the flashes of explosions on the heights around Yaka Chine. The AC-130 Spectre gunship was still engaging targets. Unaware that their prey had fled, the Taliban continued to direct their fire on the rock outcropping along the river's edge. The body of Staff Sergeant Murphy lay among those lonely boulders. It troubled Carson that he had to leave him behind. Though already dead and beyond caring, the creed stated that you 'never leave a man behind.' It was a sacred trust that every American soldier enters into upon induction into the Army. Captured, wounded, or killed—every man could rest assured that he would not be left behind on foreign soil.

Once the adrenaline slowed, the pain in his ankle redoubled. Reaching down, Carson traced the femur all the way to the ankle. He could feel that the foot was cocked all the way on one side, the ankle horribly dislocated. Tapping his last reserve of strength, he pressed the ankle flat against the boulder and the foot popped back into the socket. Carson emitted an animal cry.

He had no idea how far he'd travelled. He estimated about five minutes in the water, which should put him about two clicks down river, near the village of Aliabad. Here is where Ahmad Khan had executed those informants. Not a good place to find yourself stranded.

The boulder Carson was perched on was situated mid-stream. Water rushed past him on both sides. He was in a pickle. If he jumped back in the river with his broken foot, he'd likely drown before he reached shore. On the other hand, if he remained on the boulder with sunrise approaching, he'd be a sitting duck to any Taliban sniper lurking about. At times like these, there's nothing you can do but pray. Carson rarely prayed. But he did this morning. And God answered his prayer by sending him an angel of protection.

Carson recognized its distinct outline in the heavens above. It was "Gunmetal," call sign of the AH-64 Apache gunship, America's avenging angel to terrorists worldwide. "Thank you, Lord," Carson said breathing a huge sigh of relief.

Gunmetal spotted a group of Talibs gathering on the bank and poured fire and brimstone down on their heads. Some attempted to hide from Gunmetal's wrath under the boulders. But Gunmetal's 30-mm cannon ripped through the solid granite boulders like they were butter. There was nowhere to hide, and the Talibs died like rats.

Carson fumbled inside his jacket for the infrared strobe to signal the pilot, though he was sure he'd already been spotted. The pilot acknowledged Carson's signal anyway by tilting his rotors from side to side. Soon another Apache appeared in the sky, and the two gunships began flying a large circle around him. The two angels watched over him till daylight.

The Korengal Valley slowly filled with light. A thin fog blanketed the river. Even with the two gunships circling over him, Carson felt very exposed. Any moment, he expected an AK-47 round to tear his head off. Carson was debating whether to jump back into the river when he saw a UH-60 Black Hawk descend from the sky. The medevac chopper came to a hover 25 feet above Carson. The crew chief then released its rescue basket from the side door. The helicopter's powerful down draft spun the basket wildly. Carson reached out to grab it but the thing nearly took his head off. Ducking down, he waited for it to come back around again, then he snatched it cold with both hands. He hurriedly strapped himself in and was lifted to safety. The medevac banked and climbed out of small arms range.

Once safely aboard, Carson wasted no time in getting a headset from the crew chief so he could talk directly to the pilot: "I STILL HAVE PEOPLE DOWN THERE! Three KIA! Two MIA!"

The pilot came on the radio: "We found your two MIA earlier this morning. Farther down the river. They're alive and well. Being medevacked to Bagram. Army Rangers are sweeping Yaka Chine as we speak. Don't worry, Captain, they'll find your KI ... your men. Nobody gets left behind."

After a half-hour flight they were over Bagram Airfield, NATO's sprawling complex north of Kabul. From the air it looked like a vast vehicle park in the middle of the desert: rows of Humvees and MRVs and B-huts and shipping containers. Every bit of it was flown over in C-17 cargo planes or trucked over the Khyber Pass in one of the greatest logistical feats in history.

The medics at the helipad strapped Carson to a gurney and wheeled him to the intake. His wounds weren't serious enough to require evacuation to NATO's main medical facility in Ramstein, Germany. They put a cast on his right ankle and sent him to recover in one of the medical B-huts near the base's motor pool.

Carson was there for a few hours when the other survivors of his ODA joined him. He was overjoyed to see Doc and Wolfe. All were pretty banged up but otherwise intact. On his way down river, Wolfe had reached up and snagged a footbridge south of Aliabad. Doc got sucked into a whirlpool farther downstream and nearly drowned, but managed to swim to shore.

"Thought we lost you back there, Captain," Wolfe said.

"I decided to stick around for a little while and bring Khan in myself," Carson joked.

Always the sensitive one, Doc made no attempt to conceal his feelings with humor. He embraced Carson. "I'm glad you're alive, Captain."

"What can I say? You guys can't get rid of me," Carson answered smiling.

An awkward silence followed as each man wondered who should be the first to mention those they'd left behind. It was Carson who spoke first. "I guess you guys know, they recovered the bodies of Murphy, Cole, and Holverson."

Wolfe shook his head violently. "No, they didn't tell us diddly squat! It's all hush-hush; like that bogus mission. JSOC is keeping a tight lid on this. They ordered us not to talk to anyone."

Doc spoke, "It's good to hear they got our men out of there. I know Murphy's wife pretty good. I'll call her soon as I can."

Wolfe interrupted. "Captain, I told you something didn't smell right about that mission. Didn't I tell you?"

"Yes, Sergeant, you did," Carson said.

"Holverson had a sister somewhere," Doc continued, "but I can't remember whether she lives in Minnesota or North Dakota."

"Those bastards set us up!" Wolfe sneered. "Just like they set up those SEALs!"

"Cole's mother and father live near Waco," Doc said. "I got their address and phone number somewhere. They'll probably want to hear from you too, Captain."

"Who set us up?" Carson asked Wolfe.

"I wonder if the Army has already contacted their loved ones," Doc said.

Wolfe turned to Doc. "Stop it with the morbid crap, Doc. They're dead. We know that. Now we gotta find out why."

"There is no *why*," Doc said cryptically.

Wolfe scoffed at Doc's philosophical interjections. "They're gonna ask me 'why' I put my foot in your ass if you don't stop with the funeral arrangements!"

Doc walked away to his bunk and sat down, opened a book and read like nothing had happened. Wolfe shook his head and returned to the conversation. "The Taliban were waiting for us, Captain. How did they know we were coming?"

"I don't know, Sergeant," Carson said. "But I promise you, I will get to the bottom of it."

There commenced three straight days of debriefing carried out by two CIA officers, all-day sessions lasting well into the night. Their objective was to get at the truth through sheer exhaustion. But the Green Berets had nothing to hide.

They told the same story over and over again. Carson found the process to be highly irregular. Normally the commanding officer of the operation or his S2 would do the debrief. Why weren't Colonel Eastman and his S2 present?

On the fourth day a brigadier general from JSOC visited their personal quarters. Carson recognized him as the same general who'd attended the war conference at Asadabad the night of the raid on Yaka Chine.

"How are you feeling, Captain?" the general asked in a deep southern accent.

"Fine, sir," Carson answered.

"My name is General Barton. I'm operations officer at JSOC. You may remember me from Asadabad. First, let me say I'm sorry for the loss of your comrades. Second, I want to commend you for your actions that night. The decision to jump in the river saved what was left of your team. Intel estimates a force of between 100 and 150 fighters were closing in on your position. Had you elected to stay, your entire team would have surely perished. I'm recommending you for the Silver Star, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," Carson said.

Carson expected the general to leave after his little pat-on-the-back speech. But he stood there for a few awkward moments, as if debating with himself whether to continue. Finally, he spoke. "Captain Carson, we believe your team was led into an ambush."

Carson stole a glance at Wolfe, whose look said *I told you so*.

"Led into an ambush, sir?" Carson asked.

The general perched on the edge of an empty bunk. "Those Taliban radio intercepts that placed Ahmad Khan in Yaka Chine were likely staged. The target house was also booby trapped in advance with at least 100 pounds of dynamite. The fighters were already in position waiting for your arrival that night."

"Who did this?" Carson asked.

"We don't know," General Barton said. "Could be one of the terps, or one of the ANA officers at Asadabad, or at Bagram. Somebody is feeding high-level intel to Khan. Which is why we are conducting your debriefing here at Bagram using CIA officers."

The general un-scrolled a topo map of Kunar Province onto the table and continued. "Khan's most recent successes have emboldened the Taliban to give him more fighters and more

weapons. Khan's next play will likely be for the villages in the Pech Valley. Before he builds up enough force, ISAF plans to construct a series of firebases and outposts in the remote valleys. This is part of Washington's new 'take and hold' strategy. The work will take about six months to complete. For the work to be successful, it's imperative that we capture or kill Khan's mole. That's where you come in, Captain.

"I'm offering you the mission. You can pick your own team. You can work out of any of the firebases being built in the valleys. You will have access to CIA intel from my shop at Bagram, plus all the S2 stuff from battalion level on up. It's strictly voluntary. What do you say, Captain; want some payback?"

"Absolutely ... I mean, yes sir," Carson said without hesitation. Doc and Wolfe quickly volunteered, too.

"Glad to have you on board," the general said. "As of 1900 hours, you are all on sick leave. Take an entire month for that foot to heal. Be back here in the fall and we'll get started."

Carson boarded a giant C-17 cargo plane for the 17-hour flight to Ft. Bragg. It would be the first time seeing Lydia since their short honeymoon on Cape Hatteras six months earlier. Carson anticipated a return to normalcy—if only for a month.

Lydia met him at the airfield in her tiny Toyota Prius. The first kiss was awkward, felt almost like two strangers meeting for the first time, and in a sense it was. The war had changed Carson in ways he hadn't imagined.

Lydia noted the obvious physical changes. "Wow, that beard is out-of-control," she said, grabbing handfuls of scruff in each hand.

"I look like ZZ Top," Carson said.

"I was going to say bin Laden."

"Glad you didn't," Carson smiled.

"How's the ankle?"

"Another month, it will be good as new," Carson said.

It was over an hour's drive to the tiny apartment in Chapel Hill where Lydia had been staying while finishing her doctorate at Wake Forest.

He wrestled with his thoughts while she drove them away from the airfield. Tension had been building up inside Carson for months. The constant pressure of responsibility, of always showing strength before his men, was exhausting. He needed to talk to someone, and who better than his wife.

"I don't know what I'm doing anymore," Carson blurted out.

"What do you mean, Bill?"

"The war. Being a soldier. The whole thing doesn't make sense. The new administration is asking us to fight this war with one hand tied behind our backs. The rules of engagement are

being further tightened, when they were too tight to begin with. While the enemy attacks whenever and where he chooses, we now have to consult a lawyer before we can drop a bomb.

“And guys are getting killed because of it. I nearly lost my entire team because I couldn’t convince a JAG lawyer to okay an airstrike. Next week I attend Sergeant Murphy’s funeral. He was my weapons sergeant. A good man. Married with two kids. I don’t know what to tell his wife. The truth? The truth is that her husband would be alive today if I had been given the green light to bomb that village. People have no idea what’s going on over there ... maybe it’s better that way, I don’t know.”

Glancing over at Lydia, he noticed that she wasn’t really paying attention. “Am I overwhelming you? I’m sorry to unload like this.”

“No, it’s not that,” Lydia said. “I just have other things on my mind. I’m sorry, Bill. I should be a better listener.”

“What’s wrong?” Carson asked.

“Well, the lower court has rejected our injunction against the California Department of Agriculture to have the irrigation pumps shut off. We’re filing an appeal with the 9th Circuit. But there’s no telling how that will go, either. These past three months have been so stressful.”

“You’re talking about the smelt? That’s what has you so stressed out, trying to save that bottom-feeding minnow from those evil irrigation pumps?”

Lydia fixed him with an icy stare. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that. I’ve dedicated my life to saving the smelt. Now, at this critical stage of the struggle, I would appreciate a little support.”

Carson apologized, but the damage had been done. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

The ruckus in the Prius set the tone for the next two weeks. Making love to Lydia strained them both. Carson couldn’t concentrate, and Lydia just lay there, doing her best imitation of a dead smelt. A week into Carson’s leave, things came to a head.

Wake Forest was holding a black-tie dinner to honor its new doctoral candidates. Spouses were invited. At the appointed hour, Carson showered and donned his dress blue uniform, decorated with ribbons and the lightning flash of the Special Forces regiment. Just putting on the uniform filled him with pride, in his individual accomplishments but more so in the country he served. Despite its many shortcomings, he loved his country dearly and was honored to wear its uniform.

Entering the room, Lydia took one look at the uniform. “Oh honey, please don’t wear that *thing*.”

“Why not?” Carson said, taken aback by the suggestion.

“We are attending a formal at the university. Some of the faculty might be offended. The university doesn’t even allow R.O.T.C. on campus.”

“Why would they be offended?”

“It’s just that ... well, they’re opposed to the war. They might say something.”

“They have the right to do that because of men in uniform like me.”

“Oh, don’t start spouting jingoistic clichés,” Lydia laughed.

“Military service is not a cliché.”

“You know what I mean. I’m sorry, Bill. But a lot of people don’t see the war the same as you do.”

“How do they see it?”

“As just another example of American imperialism: a rich, white capitalist country imposing its will on a poor third-world country.”

“We invaded Afghanistan because the Taliban regime was harboring Osama bin Laden, a madman who murdered 3,000 U.S. citizens.”

“That’s naïve, Bill. Nine-eleven was just a convenient pretext to start a racist war whose real motive is to enrich the former vice president and his friends at Halliburton.”

Carson fumed. “Three of my friends just died fighting for your freedom, not for Halliburton!”

“Honey, I know you mean well. But politicians use people like you. They exploit outdated concepts like patriotism in order to fool gullible young men into fighting wars whose real motives are racism and greed.”

“So you think I’m a fool?”

“No. I think you’re a decent person. But you need to educate yourself.”

Carson couldn’t wait to get back to Afghanistan. His mind had entered a strange, disjointed place. When he was in Afghanistan, he wanted more than anything to get back to the world, to his home, to Lydia. But now that he was home, all he could think about was returning to the bush. Things made sense over there; he knew who the enemy was and what needed to be done. It was only the rules of engagement that didn’t make sense.

He left a few days early in order to attend Staff Sergeant Murphy’s funeral in Pennsylvania. Murphy was laid to rest at the Gettysburg National Cemetery. The section holding Civil War soldiers lay a little ways up the hill. Carson thought Murphy would’ve appreciated being buried next to history. He was always talking about military history, quoting some general or another.

After the funeral, Carson accompanied the widow Kathy back to her home in Drexel Hill, just outside of Philadelphia. The couple had two boys, Matthew and John. Neither was old enough to know what was going on. Kathy told the boys to go play while the adults talked in the living room. Finding a seat on the sofa, Carson noticed that he was surrounded by pictures of her late husband. One with Murphy standing beside Cole and Holverson was taken before the Siah Choy raid when the team was all together in Panjwayi. All three would be dead within a month of the photo being taken.

A beautiful strawberry blonde, Kathy sat across from Carson. He'd rehearsed what he wanted to say on the drive up. But as he started talking, Kathy's eyes began to tear up. It occurred to him that she'd heard enough speeches. He decided to let her do all the talking, or not.

"The Army won't tell me anything about how Jimmie died," Kathy blurted out. "Only that he was killed, along with Cole and Holverson, during a classified mission."

"You deserve to know the truth," Carson said. "I'd like to help, if I can."

"How did it happen?"

Carson paused to collect his memories. "We were supposed to capture a high-value target in this village one night. The entire village was empty. When we got there, Cole, Holverson, and Wolfe entered the target house. The whole house blew up. Killed Cole and Holverson instantly. Within seconds of the blast we were taking heavy machine gun fire from the ridges above the village. Must have been over a hundred Taliban up there. I ordered everyone to fall back to the river. The Taliban followed us and took positions in the houses of the village. The men fought like lions, especially your husband Jimmie. He really saved us firing that M240. It was the second time your husband saved my life.

"We blew through our ammo really quick. Taliban were all around us. We had nothing left to throw at the bastards except rocks. Then I tried to call in an airstrike on the Taliban positions in the village. But Bagram refused my request. Said the potential for civilian casualties was too high. I tried to tell them there were no civilians in the village. But they wouldn't listen. That's when your husband was ..."

"How did Jimmie get shot?" Kathy asked.

"He was wearing his body armor. But somehow a bullet found its way between the Kevlar panels."

Kathy started crying. She grabbed a tissue to dry her eyes. "Was he in pain? Did he suffer?" she asked.

"No. It was quick," Carson lied. He dared not tell her the truth, that her husband had slowly drowned in his own blood.

"Did he say anything before he died?"

Carson didn't need to lie this time. "He did. Just before he passed away, he reached up and whispered in my ear: 'Tell Kathy that I love her.'"

Kathy smiled through her tears. "Thank you for that, Captain."

"I'm happy to be of service."

Kathy asked him to stay for dinner, but Carson declined. He had to catch a flight out of Fort Dix for Bagram. On the way out the door, she asked him to wait a second. She went into a bedroom and returned shortly holding something in her right hand. Prying open Carson's hand, she placed a crucifix in his palm and closed it. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I'll pray that the blood of Jesus protects you, Captain."

Before boarding the C-17 back to Afghanistan, Carson stopped at a little convenience store outside of Monmouth, New Jersey, to buy some snacks for the long flight. The store clerk noticed his uniform and asked where he was headed.

“Bagram Airfield,” Carson said.

“Where’s that, Iraq?” the clerk asked.

“Afghanistan.”

“You guys ever catch that guy who did 9/11? What’s his name, Saddam Hussein?”

“Osama bin Laden,” Carson corrected.

“Right, bin Laden.”

“We’re still searching,” Carson said.

“Well, good luck. And thank you for defending our freedoms,” the clerk said.

During the 17-hour flight, Carson had a lot of time to think. He was troubled by the disconnect between the troops and the people at home. Half of the latter seemed convinced that the war was some kind of imperialist plot to dispossess a poor third-world country. The other half waved Old Glory and thanked us for “defending our freedoms,” but barely knew who bin Laden was and couldn’t care less.

Carson had to admit that his own opinions about the war had changed since 9/11. What had started out as a clear, unambiguous mission to remove the Taliban from power and hunt down bin Laden had somehow evolved into “nation building,” a mammoth project to turn a polyglot collection of medieval tribesmen into a functioning democracy. Given 50 years, maybe it was feasible. Maybe. But Washington’s will to continue this war will exhaust itself long before then. Is it worth the cost in American lives to pursue a futile mission? Carson wasn’t so sure anymore.

Despite the politician’s unrealistic strategy, Carson had an unwavering commitment to his men. For the war to have any meaning at all, the men who’d died at Yaka Chine had to be avenged. That much he was sure of.

Carson found a pallet of MREs in the back of the plane and removed a few boxes to make room for his sleeping bag. He unrolled the sleeping bag and crawled inside, stuffed two ear plugs in, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 6

As the sun climbed above the snow-capped peaks of the Hindu Kush, a caravan of camels slowly made its way up the steep mountain trail, the animals groaning under the weight of their heavy packs. It was spring of 2010, nine months after the deadly Yaka Chine operation. Springtime is the so-called “fighting season” in Afghanistan, and in preparation for their annual offensive, the Taliban caravans came about every day, carrying supplies to fighters inside Afghanistan. This day, Carson’s team of six Green Berets lay in wait beside the trail.

“Alpha One, I see five camels approaching the pass,” Wolfe whispered into his PRC-148 squad radio. “They’re about 800 meters out, over.”

“How many men, Alpha Two?” Carson asked.

“Looks like three altogether. Two carrying AKs. One unarmed, over.”

“Roger that, Alpha Two. Keep your eyes out for stragglers, out.”

The men of Wolfpack 07 lay in ambush waiting for the caravan to enter the narrow mountain pass. Wolfe and Williams were posted out on the right flank about 200 meters. Doc and Baz covered the left flank. Carson and Lister and Donovan were stationed in the center—the “kill zone.”

At a thousand feet above the timberline, there was little cover among the bare rocks and snow. The snow was mostly melted. But a thick snowpack still clung to the north slope which received no direct sunlight. The men shivered and waited in the gathering daylight.

The plan was to neutralize the two armed Taliban and take the third back for interrogation. Both targets had to be taken out simultaneously, which called for precision timing and marksmanship. Armed with SR-25 sniper rifles mounted with 32-power Nightforce scopes, Staff Sergeant Lister and Staff Sergeant Donovan remained motionless above the trail. As the caravan entered the pass, Carson started calling the play.

“Acquire your targets,” Carson whispered. “Lister, you take the lead guy. Donovan, take the trail.”

The two snipers tracked their targets in the crosshairs of their scopes.

“Green,” Lister said, indicating he had a good sight-picture of his target and was prepared to fire.

“Red,” Donovan said, indicating the opposite.

“Green,” Lister repeated.

“Green,” Donovan said, as his target came into the clear.

Both snipers having acquired a good sight-picture, Carson counted down: “One—two—three—Execute.”

The two Talibs fell simultaneously as 7.62 mm rounds tore through their bodies.

“Nice shooting,” Carson said.

The lone survivor ran back down the trail, abandoning the camels in the pass.

“Alpha Two, be advised, one Talib coming your way,” Carson said. “Move fast. Take him alive, if possible, over.”

“Roger that, Alpha One,” Wolfe said.

As Wolfe and Williams moved down to the trail to intercept the fleeing Talib, Carson and the assault element searched the dead bodies and the camels for contraband and intelligence. Carson cut loose the camel’s packs and picked through the stuff. There were boxes of detonators, handheld radios, RPG rounds. But most of it consisted of medical supplies, something sorely needed by the Taliban. The interdiction was a small victory.

Grabbing a pill bottle of antibiotics, he showed it to Donovan. “You see these labels? All of it comes from Pakistani hospitals.”

“Ain’t that a bitch!” Donovan said. “Our ‘loyal allies,’ the Pakistanis. Think we ought to lodge a protest with the United Nations?”

“Like spitting in the wind, Sergeant,” Carson said. “Alright, police up some samples for intel. Burn the rest. Shoot the camels.”

The contents of the caravan were piled up next to the trail. Donovan pulled four thermite grenades from his rucksack and arranged them atop the pile of Taliban contraband. The last grenade had a 20-minute fuse attached. Donovan screwed a suppressor to the end of his SIG P225 pistol. Placing the muzzle behind the ear of a camel, he pulled the trigger. The big beast fell like a redwood tree. Dust rose when it hit the ground. He quickly dispatched the others.

Carson called Lister over. “As the new guy, I’ll let you do the fun part.”

“Thanks, Captain,” Lister said, a note of sarcasm in his voice. He rolled up his sleeves, unsheathed his knife, and sliced open each camel’s belly. The guts spilled out onto the ground. The warm entrails smoked in the cold mountain air. Then began the inspection process. As the Taliban sometimes concealed sensitive messages inside the animal’s bowels, each had to be searched thoroughly. Gagging at the awful smell, Lister proceeded to search the entails for hidden balloons. “Oh Jesus! The sacrifices we make for our country,” Lister moaned. “I should at least get a Purple Heart for this one, Captain.”

Just then Wolfe and Williams arrived with their captive in tow. “No Taliban! No Taliban!” he kept repeating in broken English. Ignoring his protestations, Donovan placed the captive’s hands behind his back and secured them with Flex cuffs.

“No Taliban! No Taliban.”

Donovan jammed a rag in the Talib’s mouth and wrapped duct tape around his head to hold the rag in place. That would keep him silent during the forced march. Lastly, Donovan attached a small leash to the Flex cuffs to prevent the prisoner from running away.

“All Wolfpack elements, we move in one mike,” Carson announced over the radio. “Alright, Donovan, light it up.”

Donovan pulled the plunger attached to the time fuse leading to the thermite grenade. In approximately 20 minutes the grenade would ignite, incinerating the pile of contraband to ashes.

The team marched up a ridge that dog-legged to the south, away from the trail. Doc and Lister covered the team until it filed past, then they fell in the rear.

The team followed the crest of a ridge for about one click, until it gradually narrowed to a knife's edge with 1,000 foot drop-offs on both sides. Thick morning fog choked the valleys below. To Carson, it felt almost like they were walking in the clouds.

Up ahead, the landing zone consisted of a small flat spot about the size of a parking space. The sound of a CH-47 pounding the air echoed from the valley below. Like a giant beetle, the Chinook ascended out of the fog bank accompanied by two dragonfly-like Apache gunships. The Chinook alighted perfectly on the landing spot, its wheels only inches from the edge. The rear ramp lowered and the team boarded. The chopper flew away.

For the past few months, Carson's reconstituted split-six team had been operating from Camp Democracy. Headquarters for a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, Camp Democracy was situated next to the fast-flow of Pech River. Small outposts placed on the heights surrounded the base to discourage snipers from taking pot shots at the Americans. The base contained about 20 B-huts plus a M.A.S.H. field hospital, and three 105 mm howitzers, which kept everyone awake nights. Nothing like a howitzer blast to loosen your bowels at 0200 hours in the morning.

Since the disastrous ambush of 2009, the Army had started building dozens of firebases and outposts in the remote corners of Kunar Province. By stationing troops next to the villages, they hoped to deny the Taliban control over the population. Manned by a headquarters company, Camp Democracy controlled the upper Pech River valley. The battalion's three line companies manned outposts in the Korengal Valley to the east and the Waygal Valley to the north. The smaller outposts had as few as 20 men.

It didn't take long for the Army to discover that its "take and hold" strategy had unintended consequences. The strategy called for taking control of territory and holding it with fixed outposts. However, the smaller outposts offered inviting targets to the Taliban. Rather than reducing enemy activity in Kunar Province, it actually increased. Ahmad Khan knew that wiping out an entire American platoon, or even a squad, would be a propaganda bonanza. Consequently, he concentrated everything on trying to overrun one of these remote outposts.

The fighting in Kunar was reminiscent of trench warfare in the First World War. Infantrymen, hunkered down behind muddy HESCO walls, engaged in daily firefights with Taliban fighters situated on a neighboring ridge a few hundred meters away. When soldiers left the outposts to patrol, they were invariably ambushed. At night, the troops were rocketed and mortared. By late 2009, upwards of 70 percent of all sorties in Afghanistan were against targets in Kunar Province.

Carson's team had a couple B-huts of their own at the back of Camp Democracy. To replace the men killed at Yaka Chine, Carson had recalled three junior sergeants from the original ODA still in Panjwayi. Murphy's replacement was Staff Sergeant Lister, another wild-as-hell Texan and one hell of a sniper. Staff Sergeant Donovan replaced Holverson on comms. He was a surfer from the beaches south of Los Angeles, the resident lady's man whom the married members of the ODA lived through vicariously. Staff Sergeant Williams replaced Cole

as engineer sergeant. A quiet mid-western farm boy of 27 years, he was the team's youngster. Something about growing old causes men to pick on the younger guys. Thus it was with Williams. But Williams took the constant ribbing in stride. He sensed that it came from a place of insecurity, the subconscious impulse of diminishing virility in extremely virile males.

Carson's team operated independently of the battalion chain of command. Which very much irked the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Martin Harris. Harris was a pig-eyed fat man with a double chin that quivered when he talked. He had the curious habit of sniffing his armpits for the presence of unwanted body odor. He'd come over to the infantry from supply in order to punch his ticket to his final post behind a comfortable desk in the Pentagon. His sole purpose for being in Afghanistan was to complete a requisite combat tour without a negative efficiency report. He loathed Carson and had the sinking suspicion that Carson's bearded Green Berets would be the cause of that negative efficiency report.

To Carson, Lieutenant Colonel Harris represented everything wrong with the U.S. military: fake warriors, plastic patriots, insurance salesmen in combat fatigues. Carson rarely attended intelligence briefings at the battalion TOC, but when he did, he made sure to wear his roughest combat fatigues, which would invariably launch Harris into one of his lectures on military decorum.

Major Michael Fanning, the battalion S2, usually gave the briefings at Camp Democracy. This was the same Major Fanning who'd briefed Carson before the disastrous Yaka Chine raid. In the months since, he'd been reassigned to Camp Democracy. Carson remembered his black eyes and pink, hairless flesh. He reminded Carson of a rosy, smooth china doll. Fanning and Harris made the perfect couple. Both were what the frontline soldiers called "Fobbits," fake warriors who never left the safety of the FOB.

Fanning's intelligence was usually worthless. Carson relied on General Barton's S2 shop at JSOC for big-picture intel. For the local situation, he relied on informants and the interrogations of Taliban prisoners. These sources put Khan just across the border in the Pakistani tribal region. Khan's mole was believed to be an Afghan terp working in one of the FOBs of Kunar Province. But there were dozens of terps. Carson believed his best chance of bagging both Khan and his mole was to follow the couriers that passed messages between them. As Taliban radio communication was insecure, Carson knew that vital messages got passed by couriers via the ratlines that crossed the mountains. For months his team had been ambushing Taliban supply caravans in the hope of capturing one of Khan's couriers.

* * *

Donovan stripped the suspected courier to his underwear and shackled his wrists to an aluminum bar that was bolted to the plywood table. Donovan then gathered up his clothes and took them into the other room. Carson let Baz conduct the interrogation while he observed.

"What is your commander's name?" Baz asked.

"No Taliban," the courier said.

"Where is Ahmad Khan?"

"I don't know anyone by that name."

“Why did you cross the mountains with a Taliban supply train?”

“I am innocent farmer from tribal region. I was on my way to Asadabad to buy some goats when Taliban attacked me. They steal my money. Force me to lead camels across mountains.”

The courier’s clean, soft hands and trimmed beard belied his story. Baz asked him a series of questions that any mountain farmer could answer. After listening to the courier’s replies, Baz waved Carson into the other room.

“*Turan*, this man lies. He’s no goatherd. He is Pakistani—from Islamabad, I think. Taliban for sure.”

Carson agreed. In the past he’d have shipped the suspect down to Bagram Detention Facility and let the agency boys squeeze him for intel. But that practice ended with the election of the new president. On January 22, 2009, a couple days after his inauguration, the president signed an executive order ending the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program. All Carson could do now was ask the Taliban courier a few questions before cutting him loose. Under the new rules put in place by the new administration, suspected insurgents could be held for no more than 72 hours. After that, they had to be released—back to the battlefield. Carson had to resort to more creative solutions.

Back in the interrogation room, Carson tugged on his left earlobe. This signaled to Baz to turn up the heat. Baz grabbed a box of AK-47 rounds that had been taken from the caravan and slammed it down on the table.

“What’s this, food for goats?” Baz yelled. “Where is Ahmad Khan? I know you are Taliban.” Baz’s eyes inflamed with hate, something that couldn’t be faked. Carson knew if it ever came to that, he could count on Baz to go all the way. One sign and Baz would start carving pieces off the Taliban courier. But not today.

The courier sobbed and cried, but Carson noted that his eyes were as dry as the desert.

“No Taliban,” he repeated, looking at Carson for mercy. “I swear by Allah that I don’t know this man, Ahmad Khan.” He repeated his tale of having crossed the mountains to buy goats. Baz pulled a Taser from his waistband and held it against the courier’s throat. Playing the “good cop,” Carson rushed to hold Baz’s arm back and pretended to scold the terp about the Geneva Convention and Abu Ghraib. Their act went on for half an hour, long enough for the glue to dry.

Carson finally said, “Look Baz, maybe he *is* just a farmer. We’ve got no reason to hold him.”

“*Turan*, I swear this man is bastard son of Taliban whore,” Baz performed.

Carson shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. I’m cutting him loose.”

On cue, Donovan entered stage right and placed the courier’s clothes on the table. The courier’s eyes lit up. Donovan keyed open the courier’s handcuffs and told him in Pashto to get dressed.

Carson and Donovan then escorted the Taliban courier out to the front gate. They told the baby-faced corporal on guard duty to let him through. The corporal first had to call and get the okay from Lieutenant Colonel Harris. Harris confirmed the order, as he’d been instructed to do

by General Barton. Once outside the wire, the Taliban courier clasped his hands behind his back and assumed a steady gait in the peculiar fashion of Pashtuns. About 50 meters out, he turned his head for a brief second and gave Carson a slight smirk.

“Think he bought it?” Carson asked.

“Yep, I think he did,” said Donovan. “See that look he gave us?”

While Baz and Carson had been conducting the interrogation, Donovan was busy in the next room inserting GPS tracking beacons in the unsuspecting courier’s clothes. One beacon in his belt, another inside the sole of his left sandal. The length of the interrogation was determined not only by the need for Baz and Carson to put on a good act, but by the time needed for rubber cement to dry.

“How long will we be able to track him?” Carson asked.

“Months. Lithium batteries are fantastic,” Donovan said with glee.

“Great,” Carson said. “I’ll see you back at the B-hut. I got a phone call to make.” As Donovan walked away, Carson pulled the SAT phone from his side pocket and followed the road next to the HESCO wall on the southern perimeter of Camp Democracy where reception was best. As he did every Sunday afternoon, he dialed the phone number of his wife Lydia. Since Carson’s medical leave in July, the young couple had spent a brief two weeks together over the Christmas holiday. Once again they argued, mostly about the war and Carson’s never-ending deployments. Before returning to Afghanistan, Carson promised Lydia that this deployment would be his last. But Lydia didn’t believe him.

It was morning in North Carolina when the phone rang on the night stand next to Lydia.

She wiped her eyes and answered. “Is that you, Bill?”

“Good morning,” Carson said.

“And good afternoon to you. How are things on the other side of the planet?”

“Great, really great.”

“You sound different. More upbeat than usual.”

“We’re making progress, for a change.”

“I’m glad ...”

“Look, Lydia, I want to say something. I know we didn’t part on the best of terms during my last leave. And I’m sorry. I realize that you oppose the war, and that’s okay. What am I fighting for, if not your right to oppose the war?”

“That’s okay, Bill. I should be the one to apologize for the abysmal way I treated you.”

“I’m glad we put that behind us. When I get home I’ll make it up to you.”

“When are you coming home?” Lydia asked.

“Soon, I hope.”

“We’ll be waiting for you with open arms,” she said, a sly tone in her voice.

“We? Who’s we?”

“Me and the baby.”

“Are you kidding me!?”

“You’re going to be a father, Bill Carson.”

Carson could barely contain his excitement. He pumped his fist in the air. “Boy or girl?”

“You know that bicycle we were looking at?”

“The boy’s bike?”

“Congratulations, you’re the father of a boy.”

Carson cupped his hand over the phone and let out a mighty *YAALP!* Two soldiers passing on the road stopped to see if anything was wrong. Carson waved them on. “I’ll be a great dad... you’ll see...I’ll see about getting us a bigger house once I get back. And... and...”

“Don’t get in a hurry, Bill. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“How many months?”

“Six months. And a lifetime after that.”

Carson noticed the satellite signal starting to drop, as satellite signals were wont to do in the mountains of Afghanistan. “I’m going to have to go, honey. Signal’s dying. But I’ll be home soon. Hopefully before the baby comes...”

“Be safe,” she said.

“Always.”

“And start thinking about boys’ names.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

On his way back to the team hut, Carson felt like he was walking on a cloud of air, absolutely elated at the prospect of becoming a dad, when he spotted out of the corner of his eye a strange figure shadowing him. Carson ducked in behind some shipping containers and waited. The figure came around the corner, and Carson stepped out to confront him.

“Captain? Captain William Carson?” the figure stammered.

“What do you want?” Carson said, sizing up the strange figure.

“My name is Jerry Frankel. I’m a reporter with *Rolling Stone* magazine.” Sweating profusely, Frankel stood no taller than five feet six inches and wore a ridiculously oversized tactical vest and a Kevlar helmet. Under the weight of all that armor, he reminded Carson of one of J.R.R. Tolkien’s dwarves in *The Lord of the Rings*, ready to do battle with Lord Sauron’s army of Orcs.

Stifling a smile, Carson said, “What can I do for you?”

“Rumor has it you’re running a snatch-and-grab operation along the border. They say you are close to capturing Ahmad Khan. I think it would make a good story, that is, if you’re willing to talk about it?”

“No,” Carson said.

“I realize your mission is classified. Everything you tell me is strictly off-the-record. No names.”

Carson had never trusted the news media. Too often its coverage of the war was slanted. Reporters seemed to focus on the setbacks rather than the successes. They searched obsessively for evidence of war crimes committed by U.S. forces, but ignored completely the incredible sacrifices being made daily by American soldiers on behalf of the Afghan people. Nevertheless, the media had volume, if not integrity. Its loud voice could be useful. Carson had an idea.

“I got a story, if you’re interested,” he said. “Understand, if you mention my name I’ll deny it.”

“You have my word of honor.”

Carson laughed at the mention of “honor.” But he proceeded anyway. “Ever heard of the ISI?”

“Sure. The Inter-Service Intelligence. Pakistan’s version of our CIA.”

“Correct. Did you know that the ISI is training and supplying the Taliban?”

“I’ve heard rumors. Nothing concrete, though. Do you have any proof?”

“Got a whole shipping container full of proof. Wanna see it?”

“Absolutely,” Frankel said, his eyes lit up.

Carson led Frankel to a shipping container behind the team hut. Carson then opened the solid steel door, revealing a small mountain of contraband. Carson gave Frankel a guided tour: “All this was seized from Taliban supply caravans coming across the border. What you see here are samples, a small fraction of the loads we’ve seized over the last three months. The rest was destroyed on-site. Those boxes over there contain medical supplies. Labels trace back to companies that supply the Pakistani military. These right here are state-of-the-art night vision goggles. Again, supplied exclusively to the Pakistani military. Chinese SKS rifles, blasting caps for IEDs, Katyusha rockets—tons of it coming across every day.”

“How do you know it was the ISI who supplied this stuff to the Taliban?” Frankel asked incredulously.

“Taliban prisoners tell us ISI runs several training camps in the tribal region. Satellite photos confirm the intel. Sorry you cannot see the photos. Trust me, the camps are there. The ISI trains them to shoot, to build IEDs, and then it sends them across the border to kill Americans.”

“That’s incredible,” Frankel said. “Since 9/11, Washington has been telling us that Pakistan is our ally in the fight against the Taliban. Washington sends Pakistan about one billion dollars every year in appreciation for helping us.”

Carson completed the thought. “And Pakistan turns right around and uses that money to train and equip the Taliban. American taxpayers are, in effect, paying for the bombs and bullets that are being used to kill and maim their own sons and daughters.”

CHAPTER 7

“We found him,” General Barton said.

“Where?” Carson asked.

“In the tribals.”

“What happens now?”

“Drones will take him out within 24 hours.”

Carson’s strategy of low-jacking Taliban couriers had finally paid off. Satellites tracked the couriers back to Torkham Khel, a dusty little border village in the tribal region of Pakistan. Khels are sub-tribes of Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. SAT photos zeroed in on a stack of hobbit houses built into a sheer cliff. Agency informants even managed to snap a few photographs with telephoto lenses from a half mile away. The analysts concluded it was Ahmad Khan.

“Just hear me out, General,” Carson said. “Khan’s successes over the past year are due to his mole here in Afghanistan. The mole is therefore more valuable than Khan. If we drop a bomb on Khan, the trail to the mole goes cold. The Taliban will replace Khan within a week. But there’s an alternative. If we can capture Khan alive, he might lead us to his mole. My team can get in there and get out within 24 hours.”

General Barton thought about it for a moment. “It’s risky. While Khan is in Pakistani territory, he’s officially off-limits to our ground forces. If you get caught inside Pakistan the Army will have to disavow your actions.” Barton was referring to the inconsistent rules of engagement when it came to Pakistan. Officially, Pakistan territory was off-limits to all U.S. forces—air, sea, and ground. Unofficially, the Pakistani government turned a blind eye to the CIA’s targeted drone strikes against al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. But Pakistani blinders didn’t cover U.S. ground operations. Any U.S. soldier who stepped onto Pakistani soil was liable to end up in a Pakistani prison.

Carson argued, “Sir, all of our work up to this point has gone toward uncovering the mole ...”

“You’re not hearing me, Captain. If the Pakistanis *catch* you, the Army will disavow your actions. In the meantime, it seems those SAT photos need some tweaking. I’ll postpone the drone strike 48 hours. Do you read me, Captain?”

“Loud and clear, sir. Forty-eight hours.”

Ahmad Khan hurriedly scribbled a note to his ISI handler in Islamabad before turning in for the night. A single gas lantern cast grotesque shadows on the walls of the tiny room. The traditional Pashtun mountain hut smelled of goat dung and urine from animals housed in the apartment below. Its floor of compacted dirt resembled uneven tile. Khan had spent the day inventorying Islamabad’s latest arms shipment. Khan noted several discrepancies: dynamite instead of the requested plastique explosives, nails for shrapnel instead of the requested ball bearings, and cheap Chinese knives instead of the German blades that Khan coveted. The difficulties of running a terror campaign with inferior weapons was something the bureaucrats in

Islamabad didn't understand. During his last beheading he had to stop twice to sharpen the knife. Twice. It was embarrassing. Damn bureaucrats didn't have to deal with such problems sitting behind their comfortable desks, thought Khan.

A heroin dealer and part-time imam at Kabul University in the 1990s, Khan had joined the Taliban during the Afghan Civil War. He quickly earned a reputation for brutality and intelligence, and as a consequence rose quickly through the ranks. When the Americans invaded, Khan took command of fighters along the border in his native Kunar Province. Fighters under his command were the first to deploy effective IEDs, which killed 20 U.S. Marines in 2005. His legend grew when his group nearly wiped out a platoon of the U.S. military's elite Navy SEALs and Captain Carson's team of Green Berets in the summer of 2009.

The lantern started to gutter as it ran low on fuel. Breathing the noxious lantern fumes on top of the goat dung in the tiny room brought on a skull-crushing headache. Khan rubbed his aching temples. He needed fresh air.

He doused the lantern, then removed the thick blanket that covered the window. Looking out at the black night, Khan noticed a pair of yellow eyes staring back at him. Strange, he thought. Moving closer for a better look, the eyes suddenly lurched forward and bit him on the neck. Electricity shot through his body and he collapsed on the floor, writhing in pain. Two figures burst through the door. Both wore Pashtun garb and carried AK-47 rifles. Khan initially thought that these were Najbullah's fighters here to settle old scores. For years, Khan had been feuding with Najbullah, another Taliban commander, for control of the heroin trade in Kunar.

Khan pleaded with them. "Don't kill me. Please, by Allah, don't hurt me." One figure bent down and put a gloved hand over Khan's mouth and held a Taser to his face. The Taser's twin electrodes sizzled and glowed yellow in the dark. *The creature with yellow eyes*, Khan thought. The figure whispered in Pashto, "Move quickly. Keep quiet. If you try to escape or make noise, I'll cut your throat."

The ominous figure then gagged Khan. He turned Khan over and secured flex-cuffs on his wrists behind his back. Lifting Khan to his feet, he said, "Move."

Outside, Khan tripped over the corpse of his bodyguard Shinsha. *A lot of good he did me*, thought Khan. *The sack of crap didn't even get off one shot*. The figure in front attached a leash to Khan's neck and pulled him along like a dog. Once past the last house in the village, they veered up the steep ridge to the trails that led to the Afghan border. Khan stumbled and fell and pretended to injure his leg. The dark figure bent down and zapped Khan in the throat with the Taser. Pain shot down Khan's spine and he screamed. His muffled cry was barely audible through the gag. "I can kill you right here," the figure said. "Makes no difference to me." Khan quickly hopped to his feet and resumed the pace, the leg injury miraculously healed.

As Khan's eyes adjusted to the dark, he noticed that two more figures had joined the small column. There were possibly two more way up front. And walking fast, too fast for Pashtuns, he thought. They carried AKs and spoke Pashto. But Khan had noticed something when he'd fallen to the ground feigning a leg injury. The dark figure wore western hiking boots, not standard Taliban sandals. *These are not rival Taliban*, thought Khan. *These are Americans*.

Back at Camp Democracy, Wolfe and Baz prepared Khan for interrogation. He was stripped. His wrists were shackled to a pulley anchored in the ceiling, by which he could be raised and lowered and forced to remain standing. Two 1,000 Watt floor lamps were trained on him. Next to him was a field hospital gurney. A stack of towels. A water hose. The accoutrements of coercion.

Aside from the moral arguments against torture—which are the same as those against war itself—the pragmatic arguments against such techniques is that they don’t work. The subject only tells you what you want to hear in order to make the pain stop, the critics contend. But this ignores the incredibly successful track record of experienced interrogators when using such techniques. The French commandos in the late 1950s basically dismantled the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front) using little more than waterboarding and sleep deprivation. Such techniques work if the information being sought can be verified: the location of a cache of weapons or, in Khan’s case, the identity of his mole.

Khan wasn’t worried, though. Although naked as a baby, he wore a smug expression on his face. He was thinking how lucky he was for not being abducted by Najbullah’s men, for surely he’d have died a slow, painful death. The Americans, on the other hand, were pussies. Their new president, he knew, had issued a moratorium on “enhanced interrogation techniques.” America had its Abu Ghraib. All these torture props were merely for show, thought Khan. After they finished their little charade, they’d have to send him down to Bagram, where he’d be released after three days, free to return to jihad.

What Khan didn’t know was that he was already supposed to be at Bagram by now. As soon as he landed at Camp Democracy, Captain Carson had radioed General Barton and told him Khan was in custody but had suffered a “head injury” during the extraction. It wasn’t safe to move him for at least 72 hours. General Barton went along with Carson’s “diagnosis,” as long as Carson understood the unwritten rules of the game he was now playing. If shit started rolling downhill, all of it would land in the lap of the man holding the dog collar, one Captain Carson. Carson had three days to get the information he needed. After that, the CIA would come to fetch Khan. And he’d better not have a mark on him.

Carson couldn’t care less about the president’s moratorium on enhanced interrogation techniques. To Carson, the Taliban commander was fungus. He tortured women and children. He murdered Murphy, Cole, and Holverson, and countless others. He didn’t wear a uniform like any legitimate combatant, and posed as a civilian, scorning the accepted laws of warfare. Thus he forfeited his rights under any recognized treaty of war. Even under the Hague and Geneva conventions, unless both sides abide by the rules, the laws do not apply. That is why spies, who do not wear a uniform and do not identify themselves as combatants, are excluded from the protections normally afforded to prisoners of war. Under both conventions, spies who are captured can be summarily executed. Khan likewise had no protections and was subject to the penalty for spies. As far as Carson was concerned, anything more than a bullet in the head was pure charity for the likes of Ahmad Khan.

With Baz doing the translating, Carson explained the ground rules to Khan. “Let me tell you what’s going to happen here Ahmad. I’m going to ask you a question. Give me the right answer and I’ll send you down to Bagram. Give me the wrong answer and I’ll hurt you. And I’ll go on hurting you until you give me the right answer. Understood?”

“Now, the question: What is the name of your mole? In June of 2009, your fighters ambushed a team of SEALs up on Abas Ghar. Then they shot down an American helicopter. A couple of weeks later, your fighters ambushed a team of Green Berets at Yaka Chine. Who tipped you off about these operations?”

Khan muttered something under his breath that Carson couldn't quite make out. He looked over at Baz.

“*Turan*, it's an old Pashto saying. He tells you to ‘go hump a goat’.”

“Alright,” Carson said. “Lay him out flat on the gurney.”

Donovan released some slack in the pulley. Lifting Khan up like a log, Wolfe and Baz strapped him to the gurney so that his arms, legs, and head were completely immobilized. Then the gurney was reclined at a 45-degree angle so that Khan's feet were elevated above his head. In this position, the water would efficiently work its way into his nasal passages. Baz held a towel over Khan's face and pulled the end down hard. Wolfe poured a steady stream of water over Khan's face using a hose while Carson timed the “pour” on his wrist watch.

“Waterboarding,” as it's called, works by producing the sensation of drowning in the subject, a primal fear in humans. As the water saturates the towel, it works its way into the mouth and nostrils and eventually the lungs. The longer the “pour,” the more horrifying the experience. Naturally the subject tries to hold his breath to outlast the pour. The trick is to pour beyond the point at which the subject can hold his breath, but not so long as to actually drown him. Too long, and you have to interrupt the process to resuscitate the subject.

The CIA's old protocol for waterboarding limited its interrogators to 20- to 40-second pours followed by a short interval of unimpeded breathing. Waterboarding sessions were to last no more than 20 minutes, one session per day. But Carson intended to repeat the sessions around the clock until Khan began cooperating.

After several pours Baz lifted the towel and water bubbled from Khan's mouth and nostrils. He hacked and coughed uncontrollably. Carson bent down next to his ear. “Give me the name!” But Khan remained silent. “Again!” Carson directed. Baz wrapped Khan's face and Wolfe poured. This time, as Baz lifted the towel, Carson saw terror in Khan's eyes. He knew then he had him. It was only a matter of time. But Carson had very little time. Given a month, he'd surely break him. But three days? He wondered.

“Give me the name!” Carson repeated after each 20-minute session. At this point Khan became unresponsive, not resisting so much as on the verge of unconsciousness. Carson signaled Donovan, who unstrapped Khan and hoisted him back up to the ceiling. Doc checked his vitals. He shook his head. Then he smacked Khan across the face and broke an ammonia capsule under his nose. Still no response. “Give him a half hour,” Doc said.

Once he recovered his senses, Khan went back under the water again, and again. The six-man team worked in four-hour shifts—four men on, two off, without let up.

On day two Khan started talking. He named a couple of terps, neither of whom could have been the mole as neither worked in Asadabad at the time of the Yaka Chine raid. Khan was stalling for time, pointing fingers at loyal terps to protect the traitor. Carson had a shorter list of

terps and ANA officers who might have access to classified material. When one of their names came out of Khan's mouth, Carson would stop the process—but not until then.

On day three General Barton called to ask, "How's Khan's 'head wound' coming, Captain?"

"Still critical, sir. But he's close to 'recovery'."

"How close, Captain?"

"Two more days, General," Carson said. "Give me two more days, and I'll get him 'healed'."

Time was running out. Carson had to either turn up the heat on Khan, or somehow persuade him to give up the mole voluntarily. He conferred with the others to get their feedback.

He poured a cup of coffee and leaned back in his chair. "General Barton has given us two more days," Carson said. "After that, we have to send him down to Bagram. Any suggestions?"

Donovan spoke first. "We should keep on going. He's ready to crack. I can see it in his eyes."

"I second that motion, Captain," Lister said.

"Me too," Williams chimed in.

Baz mentioned blow torches and pliers. Carson let his suggestions pass, as anything more than waterboarding was likely to leave scars.

"What about you?" Carson said looking at Wolfe. Up until now Wolfe had remained silent.

"I know I'm gonna sound like a liberal, but I think you should try to talk to him," Wolfe said. "Look, he's not your typical religious fanatic. He's a heroin dealer, right. He beds whores. He smokes."

"So, what are you saying?" Carson asked.

"Bring him some food, some clean clothes, a pack of smokes," Wolfe said. "Try to make a deal with him. I say he gives him up. He'll give you the mole's name."

"I agree," Doc said. "Try a 'little tenderness,' as Otis Redding would say."

Carson thought for a moment. "Alright. We'll try it your way. But if he doesn't talk we're gonna really turn up the heat." Baz smiled at this last comment.

Doc hurried over to the chow hall and got together a plate of roast beef and rice, dates, a can of Coke, and a pack of Kool cigarettes. Dressed and seated across from Carson and Baz, Khan greedily devoured the rice and roast beef. He sipped from the Coke can, which he clutched against his chest as if he feared someone might try to take it from him.

While Khan ate, Carson talked. "Good, isn't it? I'm going to be honest with you, Ahmad. We're going to keep this up until you give us the name. Here is your one and only opportunity. Because if we go back to the water, we're not going to stop for any more meals. Eventually everyone breaks; it's just a matter of time. One day. One month. It's simple biology. Tell us his name and it stops right now. We'll clean you up. Send you down to Bagram tomorrow."

Khan's eyes never left the plate of food in front of him. Scarfing the last grains of greasy rice, he quickly lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

"Why are you protecting this guy?" Carson asked. "Believe me, he'd give you up if he was seated where you are now." Carson became angry at Khan's nonresponsive demeanor. Shoving his chair back, he jumped to his feet. "Or, I can always take you back in the other room and hang you from the ceiling!"

At this, Khan finally looked up in exasperation. It was the look of a broken man. "No!" he began. "Sit down. Please, sit down." Khan took a couple more drags on his cigarette. "I don't know where he's stationed, or what he looks like. But he works for the Americans as an interpreter. His cousin is one of my couriers in the Korengal Valley."

"What is the name of the mole?" Carson repeated.

"Muhammad Rashid Haq," Khan said finally.

"Is he attached to a headquarters company, or a field company?" Carson asked.

"Headquarters."

"How does he send you the intel?"

"He passes it to his cousin. Then it's brought across the border to me."

"What form of intel does he send you? Handwritten in cyphers?"

"Thumb drives."

"From the ANA?"

"U.S."

The information hit Carson like a bombshell. "Let me get this straight, your mole has been sending you thumb drives containing U.S. Defense Department intelligence?"

"Yah," Khan said.

* * *

Major Michael Fanning hated his reflection in the mirror: protruding Adam's apple, broad shoulders, hairy legs. Fanning especially hated his male genitalia. Despite the image staring back at him, Fanning believed that he was in fact a she, a woman trapped inside a man's body. Fanning felt like telling the whole world about it, yet he was forced by army regulations to keep it a secret, even though he didn't know why.

When he was growing up in rural Ohio, Fanning had never heard the term "gender role," a word that defined the way he was supposed to behave in public just because he'd been born with male anatomy. Because of his male anatomy, Fanning was pressured by society to look, act, and talk like a boy. Because of his body, his parents had given him a boy's name. But Fanning wanted none of it, not the boy's name, not the masculine gender role, least of all the male anatomy.

Deep down Fanning believed he was a woman. It was true, he didn't have a vagina, or a uterus, or breasts—none of the physical attributes of a woman. But he longed to be a woman, he

craved the pleasure of acting like a woman, he sought every opportunity to dress like a woman, and for Fanning that was enough to be a woman. His whole life Fanning felt trapped inside a man's body, like a prisoner languishing in the cruelest kind of solitary confinement. He savored the chance moments when he could escape his body, if only for a few hours.

Fanning checked the door a second time to make sure it was locked. Even though it was his time off, in a war zone he was on call 24 hours a day. He then walked over to the sink and moistened a washcloth and cleaned his arms and legs, scrubbing so hard his skin turned pink. Taking a razor, he shaved his entire body from head to toe. Once rid of the hated male body hair, he resembled a six-foot infant, pink and hairless. Next, he wrapped his genitals in duct tape like a burrito and pasted it to his scrotum. This created a smooth, feminine appearance. The makeup took longer to apply. Fanning liked it thick. He thoroughly enjoyed the process, pasting on false eyelashes, experimenting with lipsticks to find the right shade to match his latest dress. Fanning kept a long blond wig stashed in the bottom of his footlocker. Made of real human hair, it cost him a small fortune. He painstakingly brushed it out before slipping it over his bald head. "Now there you are," Fanning said to himself in the mirror, his voice a shrill falsetto. "You sexy bitch." Fanning then donned a sheer red dress and a pair of red Prada pumps. He twirled before the mirror for final inspection. To his horror, he noticed a slight bulge in the sheer fabric of the red dress. He fought the urge to vomit. Disgusted by the sight of his Johnson, he reached under the dress and yanked hard on the duct tape burrito. He emitted a sharp cry. But now he could no longer spot the bulge. To Fanning, the pain was worth it.

Once the painstaking makeover was complete, Fanning grabbed his iPod and brought up Lady Gaga's "Poker Face." Oh how he loved Gaga. He didn't know how he'd ever make it through this war without Lady Gaga.

Fanning was lost in the magical sounds of Gaga when a loud knock at his door brought him back to reality. Fanning pulled the iPod earbuds from his ears.

"Major Fanning, sir, we have a situation at the TOC," a voice called through the door. "Lieutenant Colonel Harris needs you."

"What is it?" Fanning yelled, lowering his voice two-and-a-half octaves.

"Sir, Captain Carson and his men have sealed off the ANA barracks. They're conducting a search of the place. Apparently they have arrested one of our terps. Sir, you need to get over to the TOC right away. Colonel Harris has asked for you."

"Be right there," Fanning said, stripping off his dress and angrily putting on his fatigues.

Muhammad the mole was in the middle of his evening prayers when Carson and the team burst through the barracks door with guns drawn. "*Al salamu alaikum*," Carson said. Lister and Williams fanned out on either side of Muhammad, their M-4s trained on his torso.

Still in the kneeling position, Muhammad ignored the intrusion. How dare these filthy infidels interrupt him during prayer? Continuing to pray—"Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar"—Muhammad pressed his forehead to the floor in traditional Muslim posture. The position was most appropriate for what was about to happen. Wolfe placed his knee on the back of Muhammad's neck, pressing his face into the prayer rug. Wolfe then stretched him out flat and

searched him for weapons. He zip tied Muhammad's wrists behind his back, issuing some instructions in his ear. "Stay put, Hajji. We're going to search your pad. Hope you don't mind."

Carson had recognized the name "Muhammad Rashid Haq" as soon as Khan had said it. True, just about every other Afghan male is named "Muhammad." But this particular Muhammad had been on Carson's radar for some time. He currently functioned as Lieutenant Colonel Harris's primary terp, which put him close to battalion level S2. And at the time of the Yaka Chine raid, he was stationed at Asadabad. Two months earlier, Carson had wanted to low-jack Muhammad, but Harris wouldn't permit it. Now he had the goods on him and the backing of General Barton if Harris tried to intervene.

Carson's team quickly took control of the barracks, shoving the other terps and ANA officers outside. Muhammad's B-hut was located in the ANA section of Camp Democracy. Ordinarily, Carson would've needed the ANA's permission before entering one of their barracks. But there was little doubt in Carson's mind that Muhammad would've slipped off the base had the proper channels been followed.

Carson and Wolfe searched Muhammad's footlocker thoroughly, pouring his clothes and personal effects onto the floor. They cut open his mattress and pillow and the soles of his boots, looking for hidden compartments. But they found nothing.

"It's gotta be here," Carson said. "We've looked at everything though."

"Not everything," Wolfe said, pointing to an oversized Koran on top of Muhammad's footlocker.

Carson looked at the fat Koran, its thick cover decorated with highly ornate Arabic calligraphy. Like every U.S. serviceman operating in a Muslim country, Carson had been trained to treat symbols of Islam with a deference bordering on iconolatry. Mosques and Muslim cemeteries were strictly off-limits, which encouraged the insurgents to use them as sanctuaries and arms depots. But real reverence was reserved for the Koran. And Allah have mercy on the poor G.I. caught desecrating a Koran because the U.S. government would have none.

Moving the Koran to the bunk bed, Carson examined it carefully, as if it was a ticking time bomb. "See how thick the binding is? That's not normal." Unsheathing his knife, Carson slowly sliced open the binding to reveal a small hidden compartment containing a thumb drive. "Jackpot," he said, holding it up for display.

"I demand to speak to Captain Carson!" said a loud voice at the door where Williams was standing guard. It was Major Fanning, and he was pissed. While the team had been searching the barracks, an ANA officer had run over to the American TOC to protest Carson's blatant violation of procedure. Lieutenant Colonel Harris sent Major Fanning over to halt the search while he got on the horn to General Barton.

Carson waved Fanning through the guard. Noticing Muhammad in flex-cuffs on the floor and the Koran cut open on the bunk bed, Fanning turned bright red and started hyperventilating. He barely managed to speak. "Colonel Harris orders you to halt this illegal search. This is Afghan property ... you have no authority ... you have no right!"

"Talk to General Barton," Carson said flatly.

“Colonel Harris is on the phone with him as we speak,” Fanning said, still gasping for air.

“Good. Then he should know that I’m doing my job. So don’t interfere. Is that clear, Major?”

Fanning stormed off, warning, “You haven’t heard the last of this!”

Carson gathered up the evidence. He put a black bag over Muhammad’s head to conceal his face before leading him outside. On the way back across the base, they were shadowed by Major Fanning. Alongside Fanning was the *Rolling Stone* reporter Jerry Frankel, scribbling in a small notebook as he walked.

“Who do you have under there, Captain?” Frankel called. “Is he a Taliban spy?”

But Carson didn’t answer. Once inside their B-hut, Wolfe and Donovan cuffed and shackled and placed Muhammad in the room with Ahmad Khan. Muhammed took one look at Khan and his face turned ghostly white. Although the two had never met face-to-face, Khan and Haq seemed to know who the other one was instantly. Wolfe said to Muhammad, “Betrayal is a bitch.” Doc, who’d been guarding Khan, now had another prisoner to look after until the CIA arrived to pick them both up in the morning.

In the team’s operations room, Carson fired up his laptop to have a look at Muhammad’s thumb drive. Wolfe and the others looked over his shoulder like school boys stealing answers off a test. What Carson saw just about knocked him over. Operations orders, after-action reports, logistics, intelligence estimates for almost every unit in Kunar Province. The password on the thumb drive had been disabled. *Only someone with direct access would have that capability*, thought Carson. This goes deeper than just some terp pilfering second-hand intelligence.

Major Fanning lay hidden among the shipping containers behind the B-hut watching Captain Carson through the small window. Dark moonless night. Cold. The smell of sewage from the nearby village assaulted Fanning’s sensitive olfactories. *How I loathe this place*, thought Fanning. *Its dust, its god-awful smells*.

The crunch of gravel under boot heels froze Fanning against the side of the shipping container. Two soldiers materialized out of the darkness. Hidden in the shadows, Fanning remained invisible. He watched as they passed, then resumed his sentinel.

He came prepared. He wore an NOD over one eye and carried an AK-47 rifle along with several Chinese grenades. Except for the American-made night vision, the weapons were contraband confiscated from Taliban detainees and untraceable back to him. Fanning drew back the bolt on the AK-47 and guided it slowly back forward to seat a round in the chamber. He tapped the bottom of the magazine with the palm of his hand to ensure that it was seated properly. He checked his wrist watch. *Any minute now*, he said to himself.

After examining the thumb drive, Carson radioed General Barton at JSOC. “Mission accomplished, General. Khan eventually gave up the mole. The mole is a terp here at Camp Democracy by the name of Muhammad Rashid Haq.”

“Great job, Captain,” General Barton said. “Did you get the goods on him? Other than Khan’s confession, what evidence do you have?”

“Found a computer thumb drive hidden in his personal property. Apparently stolen from inside the battalion TOC. It contains a complete S2 rundown on Kunar.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“Surprised me, too.”

“A U.S. Defense Department thumb drive?”

“With the password disabled.”

“Wow! How do you think he managed to get that?”

“Don’t know, sir,” Carson said. “I’ll let you figure that one out.”

“What about Khan? Still breathing, I hope.”

“He’ll make a full recovery. That ‘head wound’ appears to be healing fine. Not a scratch on him.”

“Excellent,” General Barton said. “I’ll be up there tomorrow morning. Have Khan and Muhammad ready to go. And the thumb drive. And pack up your team, Captain. You guys have earned a long R&R.”

“Thank you, sir,” Carson said, then returned the mic to its cradle.

For the first time since Siah Choy, Carson felt like he’d truly accomplished something. Watching Mafiz walk away that day convinced Carson that Washington’s long-term strategy of nation-building would ultimately fail. The only thing left worth fighting for was the moral satisfaction of ridding the planet of the likes of Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq. Today the civilized world was a little safer with two less scumbags in it. Carson was proud.

That evening, the entire team gathered in the TOC to celebrate. Donovan handed out sodas. (Regulations forbid U.S. service members from drinking alcoholic beverages, even on American bases, because imbibing alcohol offends the scruples of Muslims.) Carson lifted a bottle of Dr. Pepper in toast: “Here’s to a job well done. And here’s to the fact that we will be hoisting Budweisers this time next week instead of this piss water. As of Sunday, we are on leave! Whoah?”

“Whoah!” the men shouted and drank.

As Lydia’s due date approached, Carson had promised to check in at least once a week. But with everything that had happened, he’d missed his last phone call. So Carson retreated to his quarters with his SAT phone. He dialed Lydia’s number, fully expecting to accept his punishment with humility.

“Hello stranger,” Lydia answered, ribbing him for his tardiness.

“Sorry I haven’t called,” Carson said. “It’s been real hectic around here lately.”

“That’s alright, Bill. I’m just happy you’re safe.”

Carson breathed a sigh of relief at having dodged a lecture on marital responsibility.
“Good. You sound tired. Been getting much sleep?”

“None at all. My whole body aches. My ankles are swollen. All I want to do is eat.” Her voice trailed off into weeping.

“Hey ... hey come on now,” Carson said, wracking his brain for something to say that might console her.

“I’m just ready to get this baby out of me, Bill. I’m so fat,” she continued to cry.

“But honey, we’re having a beautiful baby boy, a little gift from God.”

“Oh God, if I hear another speech about the joys of childbirth, I think I’ll murder somebody.”

“How can I cheer you up?”

Lydia continued. “I’m giving birth while the planet is dying. Human beings are destroying the planet, and I’m bringing another one into the world. It makes no sense, Bill.”

“Well, I’ll be coming home soon. Does that brighten your day a little?”

“I thought you had three months left.”

“We’ve had some real success lately. They’re going to reward me by cutting short my deployment.”

“How nice! How soon before they send you back to Afghanistan?”

“Never, I hope. I promised you that this would be my last deployment. When I get home, I’m going to request a stateside assignment. Maybe a training post at Ft. Bragg’s Special Warfare School. That way I can be close to you and the baby.”

“That’s great! You don’t know how happy that makes me.”

“That’s my new job, making you happy. I’m going to put this damn war behind me, and you and I will then save the smelt. How’s that? You and I together, working to save that famous fish of yours?”

Lydia chuckled. “But the smelt are almost extinct, Bill.”

“Honey, I’ve been trained to defuse a bomb blindfolded. I think I can save a catfish.”

“You always have a way of cheering me up.”

“I’m gonna do more than that when I get home.”

“Promise?” Lydia asked seductively.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“I love you, Bill.”

“Love you too, honey.”

Suddenly, a powerful explosion racked the B-hut, choking dust loose from the cracks between the plywood. Sounded like an artillery round impacting outside, thought Carson.

“What was that?” Lydia asked, marked concern in her voice.

“Oh, nothing,” Carson said, searching for some excuse. “I dropped the phone, that’s all.”

“You sure? Sounded like a bomb.”

“Everything’s fine. Look, baby, I gotta go. Love you. Kiss the baby when he comes.”

Carson hung up the phone before Lydia had a chance to respond.

Carson hurried outside where the team was already gathered. All heads were turned in the direction of the front gate, where a column of thick black smoke rose into the night sky.

Automatic weapons fire erupted in a *crash*. The distinctive jackhammer sound that an AK-47 makes on full auto could mean only one thing. Camp Democracy was under attack.

CHAPTER 8

Before his arrest, Muhammad had managed to smuggle out one last message to his Taliban courier. High Priority: “Eagle [Khan] held at Camp Democracy. AQ53.” The last part referred to Carson’s B-hut number. The Taliban responded expeditiously. Loading a Toyota Tacoma with 1,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, a suicide bomber crashed the truck into the front gate of Camp Democracy. The blast killed five gate guards outright and tore a 50-foot hole in the HESCO wall. Ten Taliban fighters, their chest racks loaded with ammo and carrying three RPGs, stormed through the breach determined to release Ahmad Khan, or die trying.

Rear-area bases like Democracy contain mostly support troops—medical, supply, administrative—none of whom were much good in a scrap. In order to man the many outposts in the remote valleys of Kunar, Democracy had been denuded of combat troops. Since the Taliban rarely hit American bases with anything more than the occasional Katyusha rocket, the attack took the perimeter security completely by surprise. Once past the perimeter guards, the only troops standing in the way of the Taliban suicide squad were Carson’s Green Berets.

Carson heard footsteps running toward him out of the darkness. Wolfe drew down on the unknown figure with his M-4. As he came into view, the figure yelled “Friendly! American Friendly!”

Carson reached out and grabbed him, stopping him in his tracks. “What’s happening, soldier?”

The man was hysterical. An MP working perimeter security, he managed to say, “Suicide bomber... hit the front gate. Everyone’s dead except me. Taliban are inside the wire. They’re right behind me and aren’t stopping for shit.” He jerked free of Carson’s grip and disappeared into the darkness.

“Gear up!” Carson said. The Green Berets ran back inside the B-hut to grab their chest racks and M-4s. They filled their racks with extra magazines and extra grenades. “Wear your NODs. Chances are they’ll be coming in blind. Lister, load up the M240. You and I will set up along the road that follows the HESCO wall past the Humvee park. Wolfe, take the rest of the guys. Circle north around their flank. Try to drive the Talibs south against the HESCO wall, where Lister and I will enfilade them. Doc, stay here. Guard the prisoners. Keep the comms up. Make sure battalion knows we are out there. I don’t want to get shot at by my own people. Alright, move out.”

AQ53 lay about 200 meters west of Democracy’s front gate, nearest the HESCO wall that formed the south perimeter. To Carson’s ear, it sounded like the Talibs were working their way toward him using the B-huts and shipping containers for cover. Employing a classic flanking maneuver, Wolfe’s element would drive the Talibs out of the B-huts and against the HESCO wall where Carson and Lister’s M240 machine gun would enfilade them.

Carson found two Humvees facing east. Perfect, he thought. He put Lister’s M240 there. Searching the beds of the GMVs, he found four spare tires and stacked them in front of the gun. Not the best frontal cover, the tires were better than nothing. The M240 had an unobstructed field of fire along the road that followed the HESCOs.

Carson used his NOD to scan the road for movement. Nothing. He could hear AKs firing in the B-huts just north of the road, interspersed with grenade blasts. The Talibs were apparently clearing packets of resistance as they moved west.

“Alpha Two, come in, over,” Carson whispered into his radio headset.

“Go ahead, Alpha One,” Wolfe responded.

“Are you in position?”

“Roger, Alpha One. I am just north of the supply huts.”

“Do you have eyes on them?”

“Negative. Sounds like they’re still clearing B-huts.”

“Wait till they come up on the supply huts. Then hit them hard in the flank. Push them to me, over.”

“Roger that, Alpha One, out.”

Minutes passed in anxious silence. Carson was beginning to think the Talibs had turned in another direction when all hell broke loose. The sound of M-4s and Williams’s SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon) firing the 5.56 mm on full auto let Carson know that Wolfe had caught the Talibs by surprise. The one-sided firefight progressed across Carson’s front. He wanted to radio Wolfe but knew he was busy killing Hajjis. *Let him work*, Carson told himself. Lister and Carson waited patiently for the rats to scamper into the trap.

One Talib rounded the corner of the hut nearest Carson. He was followed by four more, all heavily armed and running toward Carson and Lister.

“Wait,” Carson whispered in Lister’s ear. “Wait till they clear the last hut and get into the open.” The Taliban warriors ran hell for leather, seeking cover among the Humvees. They had no idea they were running down the barrel of a 7.62 mm machine gun.

“FIRE!” Carson commanded. Lister’s 10-round burst killed three outright, their broken bodies collapsed in the orange dust. The two survivors darted to the right and ran for the HESCO walls. There they burrowed into an abandoned .50 caliber bunker built into the HESCO wall. On the other side of the wall were stacks of rolled concertina wire. *No way out*, Carson thought. The Talibs had trapped themselves.

Carson noticed red tracers coming from the far side of the B-huts. It was Wolfe’s element closing the trap shut. To prevent a friendly fire incident, Carson radioed Wolfe: “Alpha Two, I see your tracers. We are 50 meters west. Hold your position. Keep the Talibs from heading back to the front gate. We are closing up on your right flank, over.”

“Roger that, Alpha One. Copy, you are closing up on my right flank,” Wolfe radioed.

Carson and Lister trotted across the open space, past the dead Talibs on the ground. Carson paused long enough to grab one of the Talib’s RPG tubes and two rockets. They joined Wolfe and the others who were busy keeping the trapped Talibs pinned down. A fighter would periodically raise his AK-47 above the HESCO wall and fire randomly in the direction of the Green Berets. Bullets slapped against the sides of the plywood B-huts with a dull thud.

Carson handed the RPG to Lister: “You’re the weapons sergeant. Do you remember your RPG training?”

“Like it was yesterday, Captain,” Lister said.

“Dig’em out of there,” Carson instructed.

Sliding a rocket into the RPG’s tube, Lister locked it into place with a metallic *click*. He took aim at the abandoned .50 caliber bunker—WHOOSH—the rocket barely had time to arm before impacting the bunker—BOOM—throwing dust and debris back at the Special Forces troopers. “Hit’em again,” Carson instructed. Lister fired the last rocket at the same spot to similar effect.

As the dust settled, Donovan and Wolfe crossed the road to clear the bunker. Each one emptied his magazine into the destroyed bunker. Wolfe and Donovan finally entered the bunker and pulled the bodies out onto the roadway and lined them up beside the others. “Be sure to check them for S-vests,” Wolfe instructed. “Can’t be too careful.” S-vests were suicide vests.

“Is that all of them?” Carson asked Wolfe.

“Believe so,” Wolfe said. “We killed five back by the supply huts. Five more right here. Ten dead Talibs. That’s good hunting, Captain.”

“Any friendly casualties?” Carson asked.

“Baz was hit,” Wolfe said. “Williams is with him about 50 meters back.”

“How bad?”

“Belly wound. He’ll live, but he needs to be stabilized. All our IV bags are back at the B-hut.”

Carson issued orders. “Wolfe, radio Doc and tell him to bring his medical bag down here ASAP. Also, get comms with battalion TOC. Tell those idiots what’s happening out here. Lister, I want you to go back to the B-hut and guard our prisoners. Make sure they don’t go anywhere.”

Major Fanning waited patiently for the right moment. Just as he expected, the Green Berets had moved to intercept the Taliban attack, leaving behind a skeleton force to guard the two prisoners. Nothing he couldn’t handle, he thought. He stalked through the shipping containers, AK-47 at the ready. Suddenly, the front door swung open. Fanning froze. The lone Green Beret left behind to guard Khan and Muhammad emerged carrying a medic’s bag. After locking the door behind him, he ran off in the direction of the battle. *Leaving his two prisoners unguarded*, thought Fanning.

Fanning placed the muzzle of his AK flush against the door’s dead bolt and fired a single round. The door shuddered on its hinges. He twisted the knob and the door opened as pieces of the shattered lock clattered on the floor. Fanning headed straight for the team’s operations room. He saw a laptop on the table in front of the topo map. A chair sat before the laptop. Web gear containing a holstered SIG P220 pistol was draped over the chair. The name on the gear read “Captain Carson.” Fanning lifted the laptop to reveal a thumb drive plugged into its portal. He examined it closely and discovered the tiny X he always scratched into his thumb drives. *Easy enough*, he thought.

One more task.

Fanning entered the rear room. First thing he saw was Muhammad, blindfolded and chained to a bolt in the wall. Fanning slid his thumb under the rag used to blindfold Muhammad and yanked it down so he could see.

“Michael!” Muhammad exulted, a huge smile on his face. “Allah be praised!” He lifted the chain’s padlock ready to receive the key that would release him.

But Fanning stepped back one pace. “Did you mention my name? Did you say *anything* about me?”

“Michael, I never tell,” Muhammad pleaded. “You are my friend. Here, open the lock. The longbeards will return soon. Please.”

Instead of a key, Fanning levelled the AK-47 at Muhammad’s head. Reacting instinctively, Muhammad threw up his hands in front of his face, as if to block the bullet. “No!” he cried. Fanning then lowered the rifle. He had a better idea.

Fanning returned to the operations room and snatched Carson’s pistol from the web gear. He chambered a round and hurried to the rear room. He shot Muhammad through the forehead. Muhammad slumped forward, the weight of his body held up by the chain. Blood bubbled from his wound. Eyes wide open. Life draining away.

Ahmad Khan, who’d been sitting quietly under his blindfold, now began to pray. Fanning shot Khan once in the head, cutting short his plaintive cry to Allah.

Fanning hurriedly returned Carson’s pistol to its holster. Closing the front door behind him, Fanning then evaporated into the night.

The attack on Camp Democracy had come as a complete surprise to the Fobbits. The first sounds of gunfire caused them to take immediate shelter, and they didn’t emerge until it had stopped. They came out after to gawk at the dead Talibs lined up on the ground.

“You’d have thought this firebase was deserted 20 minutes ago,” Wolfe mused aloud. “Now look at it.”

Doc arrived with his bag and went to work on Baz. Lieutenant Colonel Harris pushed his way through the throng. He was looking for someone’s ass to chew. Locking eyes on Captain Carson, the flabby martinet lit into him, double chin aquiver. “Captain Carson,” he said, “you’re responsible for this!”

“How’s that?” Carson said.

“Don’t know yet. But when I do, I’ll have your bars. Ever since you came here we’ve had nothing but trouble: detaining high-value prisoners in an unsecured building, arresting my best terp, and now this. I’ll have your commission, Captain. Count on it!” Harris did an about-face and retreated to his air-conditioned TOC.

Shrugging off the rude interruption, Carson went back to work. He checked Baz’s status. He inquired when the M.A.S.H. unit would be back up and running. He coordinated with the

platoon on perimeter security to secure the site of the original breach. Donovan, who took over comms from Wolfe, approached Carson with a message. The urgency shown on his face.

“Sir, Lister is on the radio,” Donovan said.

“Go ahead, Lister,” Carson said.

“Sir ... Captain ... you gotta get back here right now,” Lister said, his voice strained.

“What’s wrong, Sergeant,” Carson said impatiently. “Spit it out!”

“Khan and Muhammad are dead. Both have been shot in the head.”

Upon entering the B-hut, Carson cautioned everyone not to touch anything. Carson examined the bodies. Eyes like saucers, Muhammad had a look of surprise frozen on his face. Thick coagulated blood dripped from his chin and pooled on the plywood floor. Carson caught a faint whiff of cordite in the air. “You smell that? Burnt powder.” Pointing to the blood on the floor, Carson said, “Takes seven minutes to bleed out. Muhammad here is still dripping. This happened just minutes ago.” Carson turned to Doc, who had stepped in from the door. “I have to ask, they were alive when you left here?”

“Yes, sir,” Doc said, surveying the carnage in disbelief. “I locked the door behind me. Took me two minutes to reach you at the vehicle park.”

Carson turned to Lister. “And you found them like this?”

“Affirmative,” Lister said.

Wolfe added his thoughts. “There is no way any of those Hajjis got past us.”

Entering the operations room, Carson noted that the screen saver on his laptop was still on, which is how he’d left it. But the thumb drive was gone. Carson turned the laptop over to show the others. “How would any of those Hajjis have known to grab that thumb drive?” he asked. The others wore puzzled expressions on their faces.

Carson returned to the front room. He waved the others to come see something that had caught his eye upon first entering the hut. “Look at that front door,” he said, pointing at the shattered dead bolt. “An amateur would’ve fired directly into the tumblers, jamming the lock every time. This guy fired one shot into the bolt itself, sheering it off clean. Whoever did this had training.” Carson paused to collect his thoughts. “Whoever did this was already here on the firebase *before* the attack. Waiting. Waiting for the Taliban attack to draw us away from the hut. So he could get in here and grab the thumb drive and silence the only witnesses that could identify him. Muhammad wasn’t the mole. He was a messenger boy. The real mole is still out there.”

Major Fanning slipped into the officers’ barracks through a side door and made it to his room without being noticed. He locked the door behind him. He left the light off. In the confusion caused by the attack on Camp Democracy, his absence from the TOC would go unnoticed, for a while. But he had to put in an appearance soon. He quickly removed his blood-spattered clothes and boots and stuffed everything into a large Hefty bag. He washed his hands

and face and used a towel to dry off, and then he stuffed the wet towel into the Hefty bag with the other items. On his bunk was a clean, dry uniform already laid out. He hurriedly dressed and slipped on a new pair of boots.

Ready to resume his role as the efficient Major Fanning, he grabbed the Hefty bag of evidence and slipped out the door. On the way over to the TOC, he disposed of the Hefty bag in the chow hall trash. Sirens still sounded from the front gate. Apache gunships buzzed the perimeter.

Before entering the TOC, Fanning checked himself in the reflective glass of a GMV. Everything looked squared away, except for a tiny black spot high on his left cheek. Wetting his finger with a little saliva, he wiped it off and examined his finger in the light and saw that it was blood. *A drop of Muhammed's blood*, perhaps, he thought to himself. He slid the finger in his mouth and sucked it clean. It tasted salty.

Why a person betrays his country is a question historians have pondered for millennia. Some do it for ideological reasons, like Kim Philby and Alger Hiss. Both were convinced communists who volunteered to work as Soviet spies while inside British and American intelligence. Others like John Anthony Walker, a Navy Chief Warrant Officer who spied for the Soviet Union, did it for cold hard cash, or in FBI Agent Robert Hanson's case, diamonds. Then there are those like Major Michael Fanning who act from personal motives.

The only person Michael Fanning hated more than himself was his father. Colonel "Fighting Joe" Fanning had been a highly decorated career officer. Michael's mother Ruth had been a cocktail waitress in Clarksville, Tennessee, when she met the colonel during one of his R&Rs from Vietnam. The colonel never spent much time at home, and when he did Ruth and he fought constantly, mostly over the colonel's drinking and philandering.

Without a good and consistent male role model, Michael grew up idolizing his mother Ruth. When he was eight-years-old he started wearing her clothes around the house. One time the colonel caught Michael wearing one of Ruth's evening gowns and he never let the boy forget it. After that, the colonel needled the confused boy with names like "momma's boy" or "Nancy Drew." It was the colonel's way of trying to toughen Michael up and make a man out of him. It had the opposite effect.

For her part, Ruth adored her only child Michael, despite knowing that something was seriously wrong with the boy. It was hard to tell exactly what it was, but Michael seemed to lack basic human emotions. While capable of displaying obsessive concern for his mother, Michael seemed not to care a lick about anyone else. There was the time he poisoned his neighbor's dog simply for barking at him, but seemed incredulous when Ruth scolded him for it. Then there was the time at his grandfather's wake when Michael laughed uncontrollably at the sight of the old cadaver's clunky shoes. Ruth thought his reaction odd, but not malicious. At every turn Ruth protected Michael, and Michael reciprocated with adoration.

Although the colonel's first love was the Army, he adored Ruth. She loved him back, which Michael never understood. To Michael, his father was an interloper who showed up every now and then to bully him and harass his sainted mother. Michael longed to be rid of the old monster for good so he could have Ruth all to himself.

In high school Michael took up football, not because he liked football (he actually loathed it) but because playing football was a way to spite the colonel, to show him that his son wasn't a "momma's boy" after all. The colonel's genes passed on to his son, if not his temperament, for Michael excelled at both football and track and field. After graduating, Michael went on to West Point—again to spite his father. Commissioned in the Intelligence Corps, he rose so quickly through the ranks that even "Fighting Joe" was impressed. No more "momma's boy," the colonel treated Michael like one of the fellas. But Michael was never one of the fellas, and he never forgave the colonel.

Soon after the colonel retired, he developed acute diabetes. Ruth came to care for the old warrior. The colonel did his best to make amends for the years of neglect, and the couple finally reached an accord for the first time in their long, tumultuous marriage. But not Michael. The years of bullying could never be forgiven. With the colonel mostly bedridden, his opportunity for revenge now presented itself.

One day while Ruth was out grocery shopping, Michael, who was home on leave, spiked the colonel's insulin with adrenaline and then stood there by his bedside to watch him die. As the old warrior's heart began to flutter, he reached for the LifeAlert on the bedside table. But Michael pushed it out of arm's reach. The colonel's eyes widened in disbelief. "Why?" he gasped.

Savoring every last moment, Michael leaned forward to whisper in his father's ear. "The poison you feel coursing through your veins right now is courtesy of your momma's boy. Rot in hell, you old bastard."

After murdering his father, Michael felt like a weight had finally been lifted off his soul. He could finally be himself. To wit, he had no real reason to remain in the military. For he hated the military almost as much as he hated his father. The Army's policy of "Don't Ask Don't Tell" forced him to hide who he truly was. On duty he was the efficient Major Fanning. But on weekends he'd transform into his true self, "Michelle the Dancing Queen" of Atlanta's drag bars.

But on the flip side, the Army gave Michael power. He loved power. In the civilian world he was nothing more than a garden-variety drag queen, but in the Army he controlled the lives and destinies of thousands. Based on his intelligence reports, battalions were deployed, airstrikes were called in, lives were held in the balance. That kind of power could be used to right what he considered to be historical wrongs done to marginalized groups like the LGBT community to which he claimed membership. Today the American military was an institution upholding homophobia, racism, and sexism, Fanning believed. But the winds were a changin'. On the horizon were gay rights and transgender rights. A new 'Rainbow Nation' was rising and with it a new rainbow military. After much thought, Fanning decided to stay in and greet the dawn of the Rainbow Nation.

Going into his second deployment to Afghanistan, Fanning began a sexual relationship with a young terp named Muhammad. At first it was a casual affair like dozens of others that Fanning had enjoyed. It was 2008, near the end of the Bush W. administration. Under constant pressure from the LGBT community, "W" was expected to overturn "Don't Ask Don't Tell" and thereby remove the last obstacle to LGBT persons serving openly in the armed services. But instead, the president left it in place.

The president's decision embarked Fanning on a course of action he'd been contemplating for some time: to use his position as an intelligence officer to help put an end to W's racist war on terror. By doing so, Fanning believed he was putting himself on the "right side of history." Jihadists, after all, were just another marginalized group.

In the course of conversation, Muhammad let slip that one of his cousins, who happened to live in the Korengal Valley, acted as a courier for the Taliban. Fanning volunteered his intelligence resources. At first it was just a few helpful bits of information, enough to help the insurgents avoid what Fanning had come to believe were illegal U.S. airstrikes. Fanning's treason progressed to providing Muhammad with thumb drives containing the latest intel for units operating in Kunar Province. With these thumb drives, the Taliban were basically able to listen in on the Americans' council of war.

Things started to unravel when Captain Carson's team arrived at Camp Democracy. Fanning thought he'd disposed of the Green Berets at Yaka Chine by tipping off the Taliban about the hunt for Ahmad Khan and then deliberately changing the radio frequencies just before the operation. Here they were, back from the grave, so to speak. Despite the blackout surrounding Carson's mission, Fanning discerned its true purpose when Carson started asking questions about Muhammad, Fanning's lover and co-conspirator.

Fanning had no intention of spending the rest of his life in Leavenworth. So he told Muhammad that he was finished, no more thumb drives, no more contact. But Ahmad Khan, Muhammad's boss, had other plans. He'd come to depend upon Fanning's thumb drives. They were in fact the source of all his successes. As his legend soared, so also his power within the Taliban organization. No way was he going to give up the sorcerer's stone.

Khan threatened to kill Muhammad's entire family if he didn't keep delivering the thumb drives. Muhammad in turn threatened to expose Fanning. Finding himself between a rock and a hard place, Fanning's first thought was to dispose of Muhammad. But he couldn't be certain that Muhammad hadn't already revealed his identity to Khan. Khan needed disposing of, too. But how. Then like a bolt out of the blue sky, Captain Carson solved Fanning's dilemma by bringing Khan straight to him.

From Muhammad, Fanning learned of Khan's disappearance and apparent capture. After sifting through flight logs, he surmised that Khan hadn't been transferred to Bagram Detention Facility yet. This meant that Khan was still being held at Camp Democracy, most likely in Carson's B-hut.

Fanning had Muhammad alert the Taliban about Khan's location. The local Taliban commander, a fanatical supporter of Khan, agreed to attempt a rescue. Fanning had provided the Taliban with a detailed map of Camp Democracy.

Ostensibly a rescue operation, Fanning planned to use the Taliban attack as cover to get in there and dispatch Khan before his comrades could reach him. He'd dispose of Muhammad later.

But the entire plan was thrown into jeopardy before it even began. Khan's cracking under interrogation wasn't part of Fanning's calculation. The newly elected president's moratorium on enhanced interrogation techniques had put Fanning's mind at ease on that score. When Carson's men show up in Muhammad's barracks, Fanning panicked. It was only a matter of time before

Carson squeezed Muhammad like a sponge and every last filthy secret came spilling out, including his own identity.

But that's all history now. Fanning had eliminated Khan and Muhammad, made it appear that Carson did the shooting, and now had the thumb drive. Not bad for one night's work, Fanning thought.

CHAPTER 9

The corpses of Khan and Muhammad were still warm when there came a loud knock at the door of AQ53. Wolfe opened a small crack in the shattered door to reveal a pair of pig eyes belonging to Lieutenant Colonel Harris. Harris was flanked by a squad of nervous-looking MPs. “Where’s Captain Carson?” Harris asked.

Carson materialized from the interior. “What can I do for you, Colonel?”

“You can stand aside and let us search this hut.”

“Why do you want to search *this* hut?”

“We have a report of an illegal killing.”

“From whom?” Carson asked.

“It’s not important *whom*! I am the commander of this post and I want to search this hut. That’s all the reason I need, you insubordinate son of a bitch!” Flecks of spit shot from the corners of his mouth when he spoke. His face turned beet red.

Carson was trying to hold off Harris as long as he could. It was imperative to preserve the integrity of the scene until General Barton got there. Whoever had reported the “illegal killing” was likely the mole, but Carson wasn’t sure Harris knew that. The mole was close. But if Harris opened the case to the Army’s bureaucracy, focus would shift to Carson and his men and away from the mole. The trail would go cold. Carson responded, “I just got off the phone with General Barton. He’ll be here in the morning. He’s bringing with him a team of investigators from Bagram.”

Harris turned to the young sergeant in charge of the squad of MPs. “Sergeant, arrest Captain Carson and all of his men. If they resist, shoot them.”

The sergeant turned to Carson, the look on his face a mixture of fear and indecision.

“Sergeant, don’t look at him! I gave you an order. Arrest them!” Harris said. The sergeant nervously reached for his sidearm.

Faced with a choice between fighting fellow Americans and surrender, Carson opened the door. “Don’t pull your weapon, Sergeant. We’re coming out peacefully.” The MPs politely but nervously received the Green Berets’ weapons as they filed out the door. The MPs then marched them over to the TOC.

General Barton arrived aboard a Chinook helicopter at around 0800 hours. He was accompanied by a team of CIA agents from the SAD (Special Activities Division). Lieutenant Colonel Harris intercepted them at the helipad and escorted them to the TOC. He said the base was on lockdown. He wouldn’t let them anywhere near AQ53. Nor would he let Barton talk to Carson. Instead, he forced Barton and his team to listen to a 15-minute harangue.

“Ever since Captain Carson arrived at Camp Democracy, there’s been nothing but problems. He has a total disregard of military procedure. No respect for rank or authority. Never has he shown me the respect deserving of my rank.” Harris insinuated that Carson was somehow responsible for the night attack on Camp Democracy. “Everyone knows about the illegal

detention of Taliban suspects in an unauthorized facility. Now he has apparently kidnapped, tortured, and murdered two Afghans. To top it off, he has desecrated a Koran! I won't put up with it. Not while I'm the CO of this post.

"That's why this morning, after discovering that little house of horrors Captain Carson set up, I called General Marks at Army HQ. He agreed with me that the Army CID will take charge of the investigation. With all due respect, General, this matter is now out of your hands."

With the case now in the hands of the CID (Criminal Investigations Division), Barton knew he was powerless to stop what was about to happen. Charges would likely be filed. The media would get hold of it. Then the politicians would pick it up and run with it. The circus was coming to town. He'd warned Carson about the dangers of stepping off the reservation. Now the proverbial shit was rolling downhill. Regrettably, it was time he stepped aside.

While the CID processed the scene at AQ53, Carson and his men cooled their heels in a holding cell next to the TOC. The small cell was normally used to temporarily hold Taliban detainees before sending them down to Bagram Detention Facility. A pimply-faced MP fresh out of high school guarded them with an M-4. To pass the time, Donovan did tai chi while the others sat and watched.

"This is bad, Captain," Wolfe said. "Harris will do everything he can to pin this on us. He has friends in high places to make it stick."

"Don't worry, Sergeant," Carson said. "General Barton is a good man. He's got our back."

"Sir, you don't see the handwriting on the wall. Soon as we stepped across that border into Pakistan we were on our own. Someone like Barton doesn't get to the rank of general without knowing how to survive in an army run by bureaucrats like Harris. I'm afraid he's going to cut us loose, Captain."

"He's right," Donovan chimed in without interrupting his tai chi forms. "Situations like this, it's always the Harrises who survive, while the stand-up guys are forced to fall on their swords."

Lister agreed with Donovan and suggested they get their stories straight. "Might help if everyone's on the same page."

"Everything is already out in the open," Carson said. "When they get us down to Bagram and question us, just tell the truth."

"The truth?" Lister said. "The waterboarding and everything?"

"They're searching the B-hut right now, Sergeant," Carson answered. "The more we try to hide, the guiltier we look. Tell them we waterboarded Khan, but we didn't kill him."

"Which brings up the real question," Wolfe said. "Who did kill Khan and Muhammed?"

"That is the question," Carson mused aloud.

Doc, who'd been silent up to this point, finally spoke up. "I'm sorry, Captain. I thought the prisoners were secure."

"Not your fault," Carson said. "You did what you were ordered to do, that's all I can ask of you."

Staff Sergeant Williams, the newbie, said, “Whatever happens, you can count on me, Captain. If they hang you for this, they’re gonna have to hang me alongside you.”

The others agreed. All resolved to stick together come what may.

In the long gray dusk the Green Berets boarded a CH-47 Chinook for the 20-minute flight to Bagram. A squad of MPs accompanied them. Although officially not under arrest, it was pretty clear things were moving in that direction. General Barton and his retinue caught a later flight, sending word to Carson that he’d try to see him at Bagram and not to worry, everything would be straightened out in due course. Wolfe gave Carson his now familiar *I told you so* look. But Carson had faith in General Barton, and in the Army for that matter. No way will the Army get all bent out of shape over the killing of a couple of scumbags like Khan and Muhammad. That’s what Carson thought.

They landed on a side runway at Bagram and were driven to a portion of Bagram Detention Facility that had once held high-value targets in the CIA’s now defunct Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation (RDI) program. Here is the “black site” where Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was held before being sent to Guantanamo Bay. Carson found it ironic that he was being taken to the same cells that had once held the terrorists who’d planned the 9/11 attacks.

Carson and his men were strip-searched and relieved of their uniforms and issued OD green jumpsuits. (OD is short for Olive Drab, the basic U.S. Army color.) They were assigned single cells and kept isolated from other detainees. They received no mail, no phone calls, no debriefing, no visits from General Barton. Locked down 24 hours a day, the men passed the time exercising and playing chess.

To play chess, they communicated through the plumbing. Using a roll of toilet paper, they’d evacuate the water from the pipes by forming a tight seal against the sink drain and then blowing really hard. With the water gone from the pipe, they could talk into the pipe and be heard by the others.

They used condiment packs of catsup and jelly to paint crude chessboards on the concrete floor. Pieces were fashioned out of toilet paper and water.

As with most things cerebral, Doc was something of a chess aficionado. He taught the others basic king-pawn openings like the Ruy Lopez, the French opening, and his favorite, the Sicilian Defense. The men were no match for Doc. Even when he removed one of his rooks from the board, no one could best the wily Californian. To take his mind off more serious matters, Carson threw himself into the game, devouring Doc’s lessons. After finishing his exercises in the morning, Carson would “blow out” the sink and play chess with Doc.

During their daily chess games Carson got to know Doc better. Their talks ran from religion to politics.

“You grew up in California, right?” Carson pried.

“Actually, I was born in a nudist colony in Arizona,” Doc said. “Hippie parents. Later, my father moved us to California. Me and my older sister Colleen, that is.”

“And your mother?”

“My parents practiced free love, so they never married. After I was born, Jacqueline, my mother, moved to India to practice transcendental meditation. She told my father that domesticity was holding her back from ‘enlightenment.’ We used to get the occasional letter. But around 1990 we stopped receiving those.”

“Still in touch with your father?”

“Sure, I write every now and then. Visit him on leave. All the acid he dropped back in the 1960s has made him somewhat scatter-brained. Nearly impossible to hold a conversation with him. Only thing keeping him from living on the streets is the money I send him every month.”

“And whatever happened to your sister?”

“Colleen moved to Seattle back in the early ‘90s to be part of the Grunge scene. She started using heroin. Got hooked. In 1992 they found her body floating in Puget Sound. She was 22.”

“Man, I’m sorry about that,” Carson said, aghast at the scale of familial woe.

“Not your fault, Captain,” Doc said. “Just part of growing up in my generation.”

Sadly, such stories were common among his urban and suburban peers, Carson realized. The cultural rot that had destroyed Doc’s family was just beginning to reach rural communities like the one where Carson grew up. OxyContin and meth addiction were then reaching into Appalachia like an epidemic.

Carson finally asked a question he’d wanted to ask Doc since Panjwayi. “How is it that the son of hippies joins the Army and becomes a Green Beret? Here you are helping Haliburton despoil the poor natives of Afghanistan out of their natural resources. Shouldn’t you be chained to a redwood tree somewhere?”

Doc laughed. “I guess I’m a rebel, a nonconformist. Slowly, I came to the realization that everything I’d been taught growing up was a lie. The so-called ‘counterculture,’ which is actually the dominant culture today, is a lie. My screwed up family is proof.”

“So you decided to join the Army? I’ll bet that put a crimp in your dad’s hash pipe.”

“He refused to speak to me for three years. He thought I’d been kidnapped by the CIA and brainwashed.”

“Well, the CIA certainly did one hell of a job because you’re the best medic I’ve ever seen.”

“I try.”

“Do you pray, Sergeant?” Carson asked, changing the subject.

“No. I’ve never been able to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with the idea of a personal God.”

“Why do bad things happen to good people,” Carson said, paraphrasing the theodicy question.

“Remember that little kid we found outside Firebase Floyd? His eyes gouged out. Face covered in blood.”

“How could I forget?”

“I think a lot about that poor kid. Gives me nightmares. Why do kids like that get tortured, while some evil bastard like Ahmad Mafiz ends up dying in bed. Doesn’t make sense. If God couldn’t prevent it from happening, then He is not all-powerful, as the theologians tell us. On the other hand, if He could’ve stopped it but chose not to, then God is not good.”

“God has given us the freedom to choose good or evil. Some like Mafiz choose to blind children. Others like you choose to heal children. But without freedom we are not truly human beings.”

“I agree. We have free will, and as a result there is evil in the world. I can accept that. But how does free will jibe with a personal God, one that answers prayers and performs miracles? I mean, the whole purpose of religion is to form some kind of personal connection with God. Believers undergo Baptism and take Communion in the hope of connecting with God. They pray with the expectation that their prayers will be answered. In other words, God is expected to sometimes suspend the laws of nature and override free will to answer prayers and perform miracles. If we are to believe the evangelical, God is a constant presence in their life. ‘He walks with me and He talks with me,’ as they sing on Sunday morning. But this kind of God raises serious questions that never seemed to have occurred to the evangelical. Like why does God answer some prayers but not others? Why does God perform miracles for trivial reasons but ignores the cries of others in dire circumstances? Are we to believe that God saves the supplicant from bankruptcy but ignores the pleas of an innocent tortured child? No. I cannot accept that God is a bigot. Either we have free will and the world is what we make it, or God is a fiend who makes sport of our suffering.”

“I don’t know why God allows innocent children to be tortured,” Carson said. “But I have to believe in His plan. I have to believe that there’s a purpose to all this suffering. Life makes no sense otherwise.”

“Maybe you’re right, Captain. Maybe God is up there pulling all the strings. But I can’t see it. Look at our own situation. We are good soldiers. We did our duty. But the Army is surely going to hang us out to dry to satisfy the likes of Colonel Harris.”

“Have faith, Sergeant.”

Doc paused before announcing his next move on the chessboard. “Rook to Echo-one, checkmate.”

After looking at his board, Carson saw that there was no escape for his king. “Alright, Doc. I concede.”

There was likewise no escaping the unrelenting stupidity of military bureaucracy. After five weeks in the detention facility, the MPs appeared in front of their cells one morning carrying six sets of handcuffs and leg chains. The men were led out of their cells, searched, cuffed at the legs and at the hands, chained about the waist, and the handcuffs were secured to the waist chain. They were marched single file to a video conferencing room where a JAG prosecutor in Washington, D.C., appeared on a large flat-screen TV. Charges were read. As the pistol used to kill Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq belonged to Carson, he was the only one to face

murder charges. The rest faced lesser charges, including torture, accessory to murder, and desecration of a Koran. All pleaded not guilty.

The men were promptly escorted to the tarmac of Bagram Airfield. After several weeks of seclusion, their senses were deluged by the thick, strong smell of aviation fuel, the roar of a giant C-17 taking off. Groups of soldiers and airmen stopped and stared at the procession as the Green Berets waddled like ducks in their leg chains. They filed up the rear ramp of a C-17 and were locked in tiny individual cages. The chains and handcuffs were left on. The flight plan called for a short stopover at Ramstein Airfield, then on to Ft. Bragg for trial. The mood was somber. Finally, Donovan broke the oppressive silence. “Guess this means no ticker tape parade.” Everyone laughed.

CHAPTER 10

The mob encircling the U.S. consulate in Peshawar, Pakistan, boiled like an angry sea. Thousands of bearded men, fists clenched, shouted in unison: “Death to America! Death to the crusader!” At the center of the mob an imam held up an American flag. The mob clawed at it, trying to rip it. One man produced a BIC lighter and set the flag afire. The mob shouted with even greater fervor: “Death to America! Death to the crusader!”

Only a handful of private security contractors were on hand to protect the consulate, covering its front gate and patrolling the wall that surrounded the half-acre compound. The white stucco structure dated to the Raj era and, therefore, lacked the security features of a modern government building. U.S. Ambassador Ben Steubens and his assistant Sandy Vanderhouten were barricaded inside. Steubens had been on his SAT phone all morning with the main embassy in Islamabad pleading for security reinforcements. Steubens insisted the situation was out of control. The mob would surely overrun the consulate if he didn’t get a couple of squads of Marines ASAP.

Through her deputies, the Secretary of State Hillary Stimpson instructed Steubens to stay put. Relief was on the way, but under no circumstances was his security detail to provoke the protestors. It was merely a “spontaneous demonstration” and would eventually blow over. She insisted that Steubens remove the ammunition magazines from the contractor’s M-4 rifles to “prevent an accidental shooting.” We don’t want to “inflame the situation,” Stimpson argued.

Moments after hanging up the phone, Steubens heard what sounded like a jet plane taking off, followed by a loud BOOM. Steubens, a former Marine Corp officer, recognized the distinctive sound of an RPG rocket. Dashing to the window, he saw smoke enveloping the main gate where the rocket had impacted. Through the smoke came a wall of bearded humanity, armed with knives and clubs mostly, but a few carried AK-47s. Another RPG impacted the stucco wall only a few meters away and knocked Steubens on the ground. He lost consciousness.

When he came to seconds later, the mob was upon him. A filthy bearded imam stepped forward with a machete. Steubens instinctively raised his hand to protect himself, but to no avail. The imam came down hard with the machete, slicing off Steubens’ right hand and embedding the long blade in his neck. A moment of pain released Ambassador Steubens from this veil of tears.

Sandy Vanderhouten, hiding under a desk, was dragged out kicking and screaming. Dozens of hands groped her womanhood. She pleaded for her life, but to no avail. The filthy bearded men took turns raping her, then the imam cut her throat with the machete.

Like a pack of hyenas, they tore the Americans’ bodies limb from limb. The imam grabbed up Ambassador Steuben’s severed head and impaled it on the point of his machete. He ran back into the square in front of the consulate and danced with the head, to the delight of the mob. Steuben’s dead face, his mouth black and agape. The bodies of the other Americans were similarly dismembered and the pieces parceled out like party favors to the mob. The consulate was then put to the torch. The mob of Muslim fanatics danced and shouted: “ALLAHU AKBAR! ALLAHU AKBAR!”

The source of the conflagration in Peshawar was an article that had appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine under the by-line of Jerry Frankel. Entitled “Murder at Camp Democracy,” Frankel’s 8,000-word article spun a lurid tale of “war crimes” in the mountains of Afghanistan. Cast as the villain, Captain William Carson was characterized as a “vicious Islamophobe” who became obsessed with proving a connection between the Pakistani ISI and the Taliban. Frankel cast Ahmad Khan as just an “innocent imam” known for his “charitable work with children and widows.” After becoming convinced that Khan was actually a Taliban commander, Carson’s A-Team kidnapped Khan from his home in Pakistan and transported him back to Camp Democracy where they tortured him for three days straight. To make the pain stop, Khan did what most normal people do under torture, he told the Green Berets whatever they wanted to hear. Among those Khan identified as a Taliban agent was an “innocent” ANA terp named Muhammad Rashid Haq. Carson and his team then searched Muhammad’s quarters, in the process slicing open a Koran, but “found no evidence” to support Khan’s accusation. To cover up their “horrible crime,” Carson ordered both men to be shot. But before they could dispose of the bodies, they were “caught red-handed” by the ever vigilant Lieutenant Colonel Harris.

Legendary journalist Dan Mathers called Frankel’s article a “stunning indictment of America’s war on terror.” *The New York Times* praised Frankel for exposing “Islamophobia in the ranks.” From the front pages of every major western newspaper, it spread to *Al Jazeera* and onto the Internet and Islamist websites. By the next morning, U.S. embassies and consulates around the globe were besieged by mobs of filthy bearded men. Peshawar, where Ambassador Steubens and his staff were murdered, was the worst hit. The embassy in Cairo took mortar fire that killed two Marine guards. The embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, was besieged by an angry mob for a week, until a team of SEALs managed to evacuate its staff to the *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan* waiting offshore in the Indian Ocean. The embassy was then burned to the ground. In all, some 300 people had been killed in the riots, including 10 Americans.

Carson’s “desecration” of the Koran, described in vivid detail by Frankel, was the fuel that fed the Muslim rage. The deaths of Khan and Muhammad seemed of lesser importance. To Muslims around the world, cutting open that Koran was an assault upon their religion. Their rage was directed at Captain Carson, whom they dubbed the “Crusader of Carolina.” Effigies of Carson, decorated appropriately in a green beret, burned from Jakarta to Amman.

Attempting to diffuse the crisis, the president addressed the world. The first African-American to hold our nation’s highest office, the president had been elected on a promise to bring “hope and change.” Part of that change entailed dismantling his neo-con predecessor’s foreign policy since the 9/11 attacks. The president believed the decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq was not only a strategic blunder, but it resurrected the ghost of America’s ugly racist imperialist past, harking back to earlier invasions of the Philippines, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Vietnam.

A former law professor at Harvard, the president was a progressive of the type that blames America for all the world’s woes. He believed that terror attacks like those of 9/11 were understandable responses to America’s economic exploitation of poor third-world peoples. And if we are to prevent future attacks, America must send reparations in the form of economic aid to places like Iraq and Afghanistan instead of smart bombs and troops.

The president took his place behind the podium outside the Oval Office. The audience of mostly obsequious liberal reporters grew silent as the anointed one prepared to speak. “Like all of you, I’ve been watching the tragic events around the world unfold with a heavy heart. It saddens me to see our embassies and consulates burning, people dying. First, my heart goes out to the families who’ve lost loved ones. Second, I can assure you that everything is being done to secure our remaining embassies. Lastly, I must address the underlying cause of this crisis.

“I too was horrified when I saw people in Peshawar dancing in the streets with the severed head of Ambassador Ben Steubens. I knew Ben for many years. He was a dear friend. But we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that none of this would’ve happened if an American soldier in Afghanistan hadn’t desecrated the holy Koran. In a larger sense, none of this would’ve happened if American soldiers had never set foot on Afghan soil. Lest we be too quick to blame ‘Islamic extremism,’ as many on the other side of the aisle are doing, we must look inside ourselves for the original sin committed in the name of our own religion. A thousand years ago Christian Crusaders invaded the Holy Land and massacred countless innocent Muslims. For centuries, the Inquisition hunted down those whose only crime was worshipping according to the tenets of their Islamic faith. As Christ said, ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.’

“For the victims of the riots, I can promise swift justice. Captain William Carson, the man responsible, will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Moreover, I have ordered all military personnel to undergo further sensitivity training. Emphasis will be placed on the handling of sacred objects, such as the holy Koran. Through continued vigilance, we shall root out the sickness of Islamophobia and make certain this never happens again.”

* * *

Carson and his men were held in Ft. Bragg’s Detention Center. This was a windowless box near the base’s sewage treatment plant. The smell of sewage infiltrated the air conditioning and filled the box with a constant odor like that of a used Porta-Jon. Separated from the rest of his team, Carson had an entire cell block to himself. The typical day began at 0600 when the cell door opened for him to exit the cell, and the door closed behind him. They kept the cell block at refrigerator temperature. Carson was issued only a T-shirt and underwear and a thin orange jumpsuit. Locked out of his cell for the entire day, Carson was forced to keep moving to stay warm. He exercised. Burpees, sit-ups, squats, lunges—he kept up a steady pace until the cell door buzzed open at 1530 hours and he climbed into his bunk and curled up under the wool blanket.

It was a week before Carson met his legal team. The legal visit took place in a tiny airless cubicle about the size of a broom closet. A stainless steel picnic bench took up much of the space in the room, barely enough space to seat three people. His legal team consisted of two military defense lawyers. A squat elderly man, Lieutenant Colonel Elgin Landcaster was an old hand called in on tougher cases like Carson’s. Assisting him was an intelligent black First Lieutenant named Wyatt Washington. Washington sat quietly taking notes while Landcaster did all the talking.

“What can you tell me about the case?” Carson asked.

“I can tell you the Army wants to hide and heel you to a barn door,” Landcaster said in a Southern drawl. “Cases like this, they usually offer us a deal up front. Get you to plead guilty to a lesser offense to avoid the hassle and expense of a public trial. But in your case, the

government *wants* to go to trial. It wants to make an example out of you. JAG's pushing for the maximum, life in prison. The new administration is putting a lot of pressure on the Pentagon to get it. The president has to showcase his political correctness bona fides before his upcoming apology tour through the Middle East. You're to serve as his scapegoat, to heap the nation's sins of Islamophobia upon."

"What about my men?"

"The government wants to use them against you. As we speak, JAG lawyers are offering them complete immunity in exchange for their testimony against you. That's why they put you on this separate cell block all by your lonesome."

"My men won't testify."

"Don't count on it," Landcaster said. "I've been doing this for nearly 20 years. Believe me, there's no honor among thieves."

Carson's eyes burned through Landcaster like two laser beams. "My men are soldiers, not 'thieves.' They'll never testify against me. You can *count* on that."

Landcaster realized his mistake. "I apologize, Captain. Poor choice of words. I meant no disrespect. Just trying to cover all the bases. We gotta be prepared for every possibility." He quickly shifted subjects. "To represent you effectively, we need to know the whole story. The more you tell us, the better. I understand that your missions were classified. The DOD has issued us the necessary clearance to handle classified material." Landcaster showed Carson the necessary credentials. "As I understand it, you were assigned to JSOC. Is that correct?"

Carson laid it all out for Landcaster: The ambush at Yaka Chine; the mission to uncover the mole; Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq; the thumb drive in the Koran; the diversionary attack on Camp Democracy; the discovery of the bodies of Khan and Muhammad. Every gory detail. For two hours, the two lawyers listened with rapt attention, pausing occasionally to jot down a few notes.

When it was over, Landcaster gathered his thoughts before speaking. "I'm in awe, Captain. I've spent over 20 years in the Army, but never once heard a shot fired in anger, as they say. Hell, I probably couldn't shoot a man standing 10 feet in front of me—if I had to. Makes you think about why they hand out uniforms to pencil pushers like me. This country ought to give you a medal rather than trying to put you in prison.

"But I'm going to be real honest with you, Captain. Assuming your men testify to the fact that you weren't anywhere near the team hut when Khan and Muhammad were killed, we stand a good shot of beating the murder charge. But that still leaves the lesser charges: unauthorized entry into Pakistani territory; kidnapping and torture of Khan; and false arrest of Muhammad. These are serious charges that carry sentences of up to 25 years. Since the government has a real hard-on for you, they're gonna make some of that stuff stick.

"But, and don't take this the wrong way, if we can show that you were acting under orders, or even with the implicit knowledge of your superiors, it will mitigate the sentence considerably."

"Shift the blame upstairs?" Carson asked.

“No, just spread it around a little,” Landcaster said. “Let the generals share some of it. You shouldn’t have to take all the blame for something you were ordered to do.”

“I went into that op with my eyes open.”

“What about this General Barton?” Landcaster asked.

“What about him? You have the paperwork. He was JSOC’s operations officer.”

“Did he have knowledge of the Pakistan operation, or the waterboarding of Ahmad Khan?”

“No. I made the decision to enter Pakistani territory. I made the decision to waterboard Khan.”

“You do realize that if we don’t subpoena General Barton, the prosecution won’t call him either, which means we lose the opportunity to cross examine him. Instead, the government will rely upon his submitted affidavit. I have his affidavit right here. Would you like me to read it to you, Captain? He describes you as an ‘outstanding officer,’ but he denies any knowledge of the Pakistan operation or the subsequent waterboarding of Khan. He’s effectively leaving you holding the bag, Captain.”

Carson looked at Landcaster for a minute. “Well, Colonel, I’ve been doing plenty of push-ups. I think I can hold it.”

Landcaster gathered his papers and placed them in a fine leather briefcase. He stood up to leave. “Okay, Captain, I’ll do the best I can for you. You deserve that much.”

“Before you go, can I ask a favor?” Carson said.

“Certainly.”

“My wife Lydia. I’ve tried calling her, but no answer. Has the Army put some kind of block on our communications?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But I’ll check if you’d like.”

“Can you try to contact her? Tell her I need to talk to her? She’s pregnant, you see. Due any day now. I’m worried that something has happened with the pregnancy.”

Carson hurriedly scribbled Lydia’s cell phone number and her address on a Post It and handed it to Landcaster.

“I’ll find her,” Landcaster promised.

It took a few days for First Lieutenant Washington to track Lydia to her parents’ home in an exclusive gated community outside of Chapel Hill. She’d been hiding there from the media due to the intense coverage surrounding her husband’s case. She declined to come to the door. Washington spoke briefly with her father, Professor Fulbright. He informed the young lieutenant that his daughter was under a great deal of stress. But when things calmed down, she promised to visit Carson at the first opportunity. Landcaster relayed the happy news to Carson. Carson was elated.

He couldn’t wait to see his wife, to see his son for the first time. They had planned to name the little boy George, after Carson’s granddad. With the wretched conditions of Carson’s

confinement and the uncertainty of his fate, it was thoughts of Lydia and little George that sustained him. He hoped Lydia would bring George with her when she visited, or, if not, at least bring pictures of the little guy. He wondered whether George had inherited his mother's good looks and dark sapphire-blue eyes. And whether George might one day become a soldier, maybe a colonel or general. Little George had the whole world ahead of him; there's no telling what he could become. Just thinking about that brought Carson hope and joy.

Visiting day came exactly a week later. Awakened early, Carson was strip-searched and shackled and led to the visiting room. Here was a row of tiny cubicles, each no bigger than a closet. He was locked inside a cubicle. A thick Plexiglas partition separated his side of the cubicle from the visitor's side. He sat there for about an hour staring at the empty cubicle. He was beginning to wonder if she'd show at all, when suddenly the door flung open and there stood Lydia. Her stomach was flat, delivered of the child she once carried. Her hair was gathered into a ponytail. She wore jeans and a baggy green sweater. Eyes puffy and bloodshot, like she'd been crying. Her overall appearance was slightly disheveled, Carson noticed. He invited her to sit. He pointed to the phone hanging on the wall. Lydia lifted the phone off its hook and put it to her ear.

"How was your trip?" Carson asked, obvious excitement in his voice.

"Fine, Bill," she said.

"Looks like you haven't been getting much sleep."

"Very little."

"Motherhood will do that. Newborn babies have no fixed schedule, I hear. How is our George? Keeping you up all night, I see."

At this, Lydia instinctively turned away, as if she couldn't bear to look him in the eyes. Carson grew concerned.

"What's the matter, Lydia?"

"I don't think I can do *this* anymore."

"Do what?"

"This ... our marriage."

"What are you saying?"

"I want a divorce," Lydia said, the words dropping like a bombshell.

"Why?"

"Doctor Hirsh said I shouldn't explain why. He said I should affirm my truth and move on."

"Who the hell is Doctor Hirsh?"

"My therapist."

"To hell with Doctor Hirsh. I'm your husband. I deserve to know why."

Lydia started crying. Her hands shaking, she fished inside her purse for a tissue to dry her eyes. “You don’t understand how hard it has been for me. Since you were arrested, reporters have followed me constantly. *CNN* has this giant satellite truck parked out in front of my apartment. My friends barely speak to me. My job at the university is now in jeopardy. I had to take a leave of absence. I had to move back in with my parents. And we were just beginning to make real progress in the courts to save the smelt. It’s been horrible. I just want it to be over.”

With much difficulty, Carson suppressed his anger. “You’ve had it hard!? Half my team was wiped out. Now I’m accused of a crime I didn’t commit.” Lydia responded with more tears. Carson tried to calm things. “Look, I realize it must be difficult for you. But it will get better. My lawyer said I have a good case. When I’m acquitted, all this will go away. Things will go back to normal.”

“I’m sorry, Bill. It’s too late. I’ve already filed the paperwork. My lawyer will be contacting you shortly.” Lydia stood up to leave.

“Wait. What about George?” Carson pleaded. “Are you filing for sole custody?”

“*That* won’t be an issue.”

“Why not? He’s my child, too. I want to raise my son, to have some part in his life. I’m begging you, Lydia, please don’t try to take my son away.”

“The pregnancy was terminated last week. So you don’t have to worry about child support or things like that.”

“I don’t understand. ‘Terminated’—what does that mean? Did you have a miscarriage?”

“I had an abortion,” Lydia said matter-of-factly.

“But ... but you were eight months pregnant. How’s that possible? Was there a problem with the pregnancy?”

“No. The pregnancy was fine.”

“That’s gotta be illegal! You can’t abort a perfectly healthy baby in the eighth month of pregnancy.”

“*It* was done under the medical exception. I was just so stressed out. I couldn’t sleep. My lower back ached. My ankles looked like two grapefruits. I became so depressed. I just had to get that *thing* out of me. So my father referred me to a clinic in Boulder, Colorado, that performs late-term abortions.”

Carson was in complete shock. “Last month, when I talked to you on the phone, he was our son. We named him George. We talked about painting his bedroom blue. Now he’s a ‘thing.’ Don’t you realize what you’ve done?”

“It’s my body; it’s my right,” Lydia said proudly.

Carson glared at her through the Plexiglas. “No, it’s not your body. It’s our son that you murdered. That’s what *it* is.”

CHAPTER 11

Carson took his seat at the defense table and adjusted the microphone in front of him to the appropriate level. He nonchalantly glanced around the courtroom searching for a friendly face but was met by a sea of hostile stares. He spotted Jerry Frankel, the *Rolling Stone* reporter, seated three rows back. The smug little prick smiled at him. Directly to Frankel's right sat the pig-eyed Lieutenant Colonel Harris, obviously chomping at the bit to take the witness stand against Carson. As Carson had predicted, his teammates had rejected JAG's offer of immunity. To reward their integrity, honesty, and loyalty to Carson, the government charged each as accessories to murder. They sat stoically beside Carson.

The trial was expected to last about a week. The JAG prosecutor, an ambitious female major named Cynthia Markenson, planned to call a total of 22 witnesses. Colonel Barksdale, the military judge, presided over the general court martial, which consisted of an equally illustrious assortment of field grade officers. Representatives of the mainstream media took up several rows in the packed courtroom.

Major Markenson spent the first three days spinning a web of lies about Carson's ODA, described repeatedly as a "rogue unit" that operated outside the bounds of the regular chain of command. Calling one witness after another, she delineated the events leading up to the night of April 23, 2010, and the deaths of Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq. Harris spent three hours on the stand relating the events that took place at AQ53 on the morning of April 24. Head of the CID team that investigated the killings, Captain Barlow described the evidence collected in his search of AQ53. Most damning to Carson was the pistol used to kill the two detainees.

Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster did his best to poke holes in JAG's case. His cross-examination of Harris impressed Carson, who'd thought little of the cynical old lawyer up till then. Harris looked cowardly and incompetent when he was forced to admit that he'd been hiding under his desk in the TOC during the Taliban attack on Camp Democracy on the night of April 23. He therefore had no way of knowing who killed Ahmad Khan or Muhammad Rashid Haq.

When it came time for the defense to present its case, each member of the OTA took the stand to testify to the fact that Captain Carson was nowhere near B-hut AQ53 when the murders took place. Finally, it was Carson's turn to take the stand. For months, Landcaster had tried to talk Carson out of taking the stand. He warned Carson of the potential dangers. "Markenson," he said, "is ruthless." And under cross-examination, Carson might say something to undermine the defense. "It's not worth the risk. Our best bet is to attack the government's evidence and hope at least one member of the court martial understands the meaning of reasonable doubt." Landcaster insisted the murder charge wouldn't hold up. But if Carson got up on the stand, anything could happen.

But Carson insisted on testifying. In his mind, he and his men had done nothing wrong. They weren't guilty of murder or any other crime. To Carson, the trial was political correctness run amok. He'd acted no differently than other commanders in Afghanistan, being forced to fight a ruthless enemy under rules of engagement crafted by Harvard law professors. Since his court martial consisted of soldiers like himself, Carson thought they'd understand these things if he had a chance to explain himself.

As Captain Carson took his seat in the witness box, the courtroom hushed.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Captain Carson, you have been awarded some of our nation's highest military honors. You received the Silver Star for your actions on the night of July 7, 2009, near Yaka Chine, Afghanistan. In fact, a few of the members of your team were decorated in the same action.

CAPTAIN CARSON: That's correct.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: If you would, Captain, can you please describe the events of that night?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Our team was assigned a snatch-and-grab operation. We were to capture a high-value target, a man named Ahmad Khan who was believed to be hold up in a village called Yaka Chine.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: But things didn't go according to plan.

CAPTAIN CARSON: No, they didn't. The house where he was believed to be hiding was booby trapped. Two of my men were killed upon entry. Shortly after that we came under heavy small arms fire from the heights around the village. We fell back to the river. But the enemy quickly had us surrounded. They tried repeatedly to overrun our position. We were able to beat them back. When our ammo finally went black [exhausted], we escaped by jumping in the river and floating downstream.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Your brief account doesn't do the story justice. This was one hell of a battle. Your small team fought off a Taliban force estimated to be around 100 to 150 fighters. The firefight raged for almost an hour, during which time you were repeatedly denied close air support because of the potential for civilian casualties. Intelligence later confirmed your account, which is that there were no civilians in Yaka Chine that night. You lost half your team for lack of proper air support. But through your quick thinking, you managed to save the other half, for which you were decorated with a Silver Star.

CAPTAIN CARSON: I did my job.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: There is a lot of secrecy surrounding the battle of Yaka Chine. The whole story still hasn't come out. It was an intelligence failure. The intel you received before the insertion put a force less than six-to-ten Taliban in the village—bodyguards for Ahmad Khan, who was believed to be wounded. How is it that you stumbled into a force of 150 fighters?

CAPTAIN CARSON: They were there waiting for us.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Explain that. How did they know you were coming?

CAPTAIN CARSON: The Taliban had a mole at the FOB at Asadabad, passing information to Ahmad Khan.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Subsequent to the ambush at Yaka Chine, JSOC tasked you with uncovering this mole. Your team worked out of Camp Democracy. Your command was kept separate from Lieutenant Colonel Harris's battalion for

reasons of security. Therefore, the government's assertion that you ran a "rogue unit" that operated outside the chain of command is unfounded?

CAPTAIN CARSON: That's right.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: How did you eventually manage to identify the mole?

CAPTAIN CARSON: We figured the easiest way to uncover the mole was to capture Ahmad Khan first. So we started placing GPS tracking devices on suspected Taliban couriers. Then we waited for them to lead us to Khan. Took a few months, but we eventually located Khan over in the tribal regions.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: What do you mean by 'tribal regions'?

CAPTAIN CARSON: It's a territory in Pakistan where the Taliban has sanctuary.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Tell us about Ahmad Khan. The government has attempted to cast him as a peaceful imam.

CAPTAIN CARSON: He had been an imam before he joined the Taliban in the 1990s. He rose through the ranks to become a mid-level commander with about 300 fighters. He was a personal friend of Osama bin Laden. He brought in a lot of money for the Taliban by smuggling heroin. He's what we call a werewolf.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Explain that term, "werewolf."

CAPTAIN CARSON: A monster. In addition to the 50-plus Americans, he'd killed several thousand Afghans and Pakistanis, often in very horrific ways. He was very fond of maiming people: plucking out eyes, cutting off limbs, boring holes in knee caps with a cordless drill. Go to the refugee camp on the Pech River; it's filled with his victims.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: What did you do after you located Khan?

CAPTAIN CARSON: We went in and got him. Took him back to Camp Democracy and questioned him about the identity of the mole.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: During that interrogation, did you use methods that are now prohibited by the DOD? I'm speaking of enhanced interrogation techniques, or EITs.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes, we subjected Khan to waterboarding.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Explain waterboarding.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Basically, you pour water in a subject's face until he gets tired of having water poured in his face and he tells you what you want to know.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: The CIA used the same technique in its RDI program until it was shut down by executive order on January 22, 2009.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Correct.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Does waterboarding cause any permanent damage?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Did Khan eventually identify the mole?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes. The mole was an interpreter named Muhammad Rashid Haq. He was assigned to battalion HQ at Camp Democracy.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: He was Lieutenant Colonel Harris's terp.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Correct.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Were you able to locate Muhammad Rashid Haq?

CAPTAIN CARSON: We found him at his quarters in the ANA barracks at Camp Democracy.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Besides Muhammad Rashid Haq, what else did you find while searching his quarters? Any evidence that he was a Taliban spy?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Upon searching his personal property, we discovered a thumb drive hidden inside the binding of a Koran.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: You had to use a knife to cut the thumb drive out of the Koran's binding.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Did you deliberately desecrate the Koran, as the government contends?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: What did you do after discovering the thumb drive?

CAPTAIN CARSON: We took Muhammad Rashid Haq and the thumb drive to the team B-hut, AQ53. I then examined the thumb drive on my laptop.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: What did it contain?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Operations orders, intelligence reports, after-action reports, et cetera, for about every unit operating in Kunar Province.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Did Muhammad Rashid Haq have security clearance to possess that thumb drive?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: How did Muhammad Rashid Haq acquire the thumb drive?

CAPTAIN CARSON: My first thought was that he stole it out of the S2 shop. But the password was disabled. So even if he had stolen it, he'd have needed help to get past the password. Short answer, I don't know how he acquired that thumb drive.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: It was at this time that the base came under attack. A suicide bomber hit the front gate, killed five MPs. A team of 10 Taliban fighters entered Camp Democracy. What happened next?

CAPTAIN CARSON: My team responded. We killed all the attackers.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Did the HQ company assigned to Camp Democracy

help beat back the assault? Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Harris testified that he was hiding under his desk. Who else besides your ODA helped defend Camp Democracy?

CAPTAIN CARSON: As far as I know, my team was the only unit that responded.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: During the attack, you left Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq unguarded for a few minutes.

CAPTAIN CARSON: We needed everyone to come up in formation that night. Doc, our medic, was left to guard the two prisoners. But one of our men went down wounded. I radioed Doc to bring his kit bag ASAP. During this time the prisoners were left unguarded for a few minutes.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: When you got back to the B-hut, what did you find?

CAPTAIN CARSON: The door had been breached. Both Khan and Haq were shot dead. The thumb drive was missing.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: Did you kill Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

Landcaster quietly resumed his seat. The court's positive reaction to Carson reassured Landcaster. Maybe Carson was right after all, Landcaster thought. Maybe honesty is the best policy—in this case anyway.

Hopping out of her chair, Major Markenson could barely contain her excitement. She thought Carson had made a serious blunder by taking the stand and she intended to take full advantage. A petite woman in her late 30s, Major Markenson had never married. Although not a lesbian, she had developed an intense hatred of men over the years. In her 15-year career, she'd endured countless slights from male colleagues. Nowhere were such sexist attitudes more pronounced than in the all-male world of special operations. To men like Captain Carson, the very idea of a "woman warrior" was an oxymoron. She hated them for it, with their beards and their Copenhagen and their macho attitude. How she relished the rare opportunity to neuter one on the witness stand.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Captain Carson, are you the commander-in-chief of the U.S. armed forces?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Then who gave you the authority to define your own rules of engagement?

CAPTAIN CARSON: I acted in the best interests of my men.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Whose orders were you acting under when you violated Pakistani territory?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Mine.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Last time I checked, the State Department lists Pakistan as our closest ally in the war against the Taliban insurgency. So, whatever possessed you to invade an allied country and kidnap one of its citizens?

CAPTAIN CARSON: To the bureaucrats in Washington, Pakistan is an ally. But to the troops in the field, Pakistan is an enemy. When someone helps the people trying to kill you, that person is not your ally no matter what some bureaucrat says. Pakistan is in fact the number one ally of the Taliban, not the U.S. Pakistan provides the Taliban sanctuary in its tribal regions. There, the Pakistani ISI maintains several training camps. ISI agents train Taliban fighters, equips them, and then sends them across the border to kill American soldiers. And when we go after the Taliban, they slip back across the border into Pakistan, where our rules of engagement prohibit us from pursuing. It's a lethal game, and Washington has forced us to play with a losing hand.

MAJOR MARKENSON: So you decided to write your own rules of engagement?

CAPTAIN CARSON: I did the best I could to protect American lives.

MAJOR MARKENSON: After abducting Ahmad Khan from his home in Pakistan, you flew him back to Camp Democracy. There you tortured him for three days. Is that correct?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No, it's not. We subjected Khan to waterboarding and sleep deprivation. These are the same EITs approved by the Justice Department under the previous administration.

MAJOR MARKENSON: But not approved by the current administration. On January 22, 2009, the president issued an executive order prohibiting the use of EITs such as waterboarding and sleep deprivation. Were you aware of this executive order?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes.

MAJOR MARKENSON: But you chose to ignore it, just like you chose to ignore Pakistani sovereignty?

CAPTAIN CARSON: The prohibition on EITs made no sense. Again, I did what I thought was in the best interests of my men.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What do you mean, "it made no sense"?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Let me illustrate my point. Back when I was stationed in the Panjwayi Valley I called in an airstrike on a group of Taliban fighters hiding in an irrigation ditch. A couple Apache gunships worked them over with their 30-mm cannons. The 30-mm cannon fires a projectile about the size of a tennis ball at a cyclic rate of 1,000 rounds per minute. When we went to check the ditch after it was all over, it looked like the scrap pile in a butcher's shop—arms, legs, heads—the bodies had been shredded. But the airstrike was perfectly "legal," according to the accepted rules of engagement. But had I captured these Talibs and poured a little water up their noses, I'd have been charged with a war crime. To me, that makes no sense.

MAJOR MARKENSON: So you decided on your own which rules to follow and which ones to ignore?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Then why did you choose to ignore the president's executive

order on waterboarding?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Ahmad Khan had the blood of over 50 Americans on his hands. At that time he was receiving classified intelligence from a spy inside Camp Democracy. Had I sent Khan down to Bagram Detention Facility, as per policy, he'd have gone back to Pakistan to continue jihad. His spy would've remained in place. More Americans would've died. It was vital that I uncover Khan's mole.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Which justified waterboarding Khan?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes!

MAJOR MARKENSON: Let me paraphrase the president's statement given as part of the executive order outlawing EITs. Please point out which parts don't meet with your approval, Captain. The president said that the war on terror is a "war of ideas," a conflict of "freedom versus tyranny." And in this war of ideas, America must remain on the "right side of history." Our "core values" are what separates us from the terrorists. Using torture compromises those core values, the president said. What do you think of the president's argument, Captain?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Sounds like it was written by someone who knows nothing of war.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What makes you say that?

CAPTAIN CARSON: War is not like a college debate, where the best argument wins. War is an existential struggle, and the side that wins is the one with superior violence and will. And what separates America from the terrorists is not a set of abstract values, it's soldiers like those serving in Afghanistan. If the president doesn't give us the support we need, then the war will be lost.

Major Markenson's case against Captain Carson was clear and compelling. Captain Carson's actions demonstrated a pattern of insubordination and misconduct. Yet the more she attacked him, the more the court martial, composed entirely of combat officers, seemed to like Carson. It was obvious that they too had experienced similar frustrations as Carson. Nevertheless, the major continued.

MAJOR MARKENSON: While you were torturing Ahmad Khan, you claim that he identified Muhammad Rashid Haq as a Taliban spy. Had you ever come across his name before that time?

CAPTAIN CARSON: A few months earlier I'd asked Lieutenant Colonel Harris for permission to question Muhammad. Muhammed was the chief terp at Camp Democracy. Lieutenant Colonel Harris denied my request. That was the end of it until Ahmad Khan identified him.

MAJOR MARKENSON: After Khan identified Muhammed, did you ask Lieutenant Colonel Harris for permission to search Muhammad's quarters?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Upon searching Muhammad's quarters, you claim to have discovered a thumb drive containing classified U.S. intelligence. You then took

Muhammad and the thumb drive back to your B-hut, AQ53. You claim that you reviewed the material on the thumb drive. Did anyone else review the material?

CAPTAIN CARSON: My team sergeant, Wolfe.

MAJOR MARKENSON: At this point Camp Democracy came under attack. Democracy is a fairly large base and has never come under direct assault from a ground force. Based upon the time and place of the attack, do you think it likely that the Taliban intended to try to free Khan?

CAPTAIN CARSON: That would be my estimation.

MAJOR MARKENSON: How did the Taliban know that you were holding Ahmad Khan?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Muhammad likely tipped them off. Though I still don't know how he discovered that we had captured Khan.

MAJOR MARKENSON: But you wanted to prevent the Taliban from freeing Ahmad Khan?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes.

MAJOR MARKENSON: The Taliban nearly succeeded. As you testified, your team was basically the only thing standing in their way.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Correct.

MAJOR MARKENSON: You managed to defeat the Taliban attack. When you returned to AQ53, both Khan and Haq were dead, you claim. The mysterious thumb drive was missing.

CAPTAIN CARSON: Correct.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Who do you think killed Khan and Haq?

CAPTAIN CARSON: I don't know.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Is it possible that one of the Taliban fighters slipped past your team and killed Khan, the man you say they were attempting to free?

CAPTAIN CARSON: No.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Do you admit that it was your pistol that was used to kill Khan and Haq?

CAPTAIN CARSON: Yes.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Who pulled the trigger?

CAPTAIN CARSON: I don't know.

MAJOR MARKENSON: I think you do. I think you pulled the trigger. I think you developed an irrational obsession with Ahmad Khan, stemming from the death of your men in Yaka Chine. Your obsession led you to violate the territory of an allied country. It led you to kidnap and torture a Pakistani citizen. Once Khan was in your custody, no

way were you going to let him go. The attack on Camp Democracy threatened to release Khan. Rather than risk that happening, you put a bullet through both Khan's and Haq's heads.

CAPTAIN CARSON: That's not how it happened.

MAJOR MARKENSON: You've already confessed to kidnapping and torture. Why stop there? Why not confess that you murdered both men? Come on, Captain, tell me what a bleeding heart liberal I am. Tell me why only badass Green Berets like yourself are qualified to make the tough decisions. Tell me why you needed to kill Khan and Haq, both of whom were chained to a wall when you shot them. Tell me, Captain Carson!

But Captain Carson refused to take the bait. He sat stoically. Markenson was forced to conclude her cross-examination without the Perry Mason moment she'd hoped for. Colonel Barksdale scheduled closing arguments for the morrow. The court adjourned.

Going into the final day, Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster anticipated a favorable verdict. A complete acquittal was probably too much to hope for, but he was confident the murder charge wouldn't stick. Even though Major Markenson had wounded Captain Carson badly, she couldn't deliver the coup de grace. The officers that made up the court martial had served in Iraq and Afghanistan and had experienced similar frustrations in applying unrealistic rules of engagement to battlefield conditions. They obviously responded to Carson's candor.

Colonel Barksdale called the court to order. Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster was shuffling his papers preparing to deliver his closing statement when Major Markenson dropped a bomb shell.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Colonel Barksdale, I'd like to call a rebuttal witness.

LT. COLONEL LANDCASTER: I object! We were not given notice of this witness, Colonel.

MAJOR MARKENSON: This witness came forward only this morning. His evidence directly contradicts the defendant's testimony. Under the rules, such rebuttal evidence can be admitted.

Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster and Major Markenson approached the bench to confer with Colonel Barksdale. Their conversation was indecipherable but obviously heated. Colonel Barksdale broke up the scrum by pointing for Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster to resume his seat.

COLONEL BARKSDALE: I will allow the rebuttal witness's testimony. But you had better keep your witness on a tight leash, Major Markenson. If he veers off track, I will strike his entire testimony.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Thank you, Colonel. The government calls Major Michael Fanning.

Decked out in an immaculate blue uniform, Major Fanning glided through the courtroom as if supported by a cushion of air. He slid into the witness box and brushed a piece of lint from his blue jacket. He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher provided.

Doc scribbled something on his legal pad and passed it to Carson. On it, he'd written this:

Then entered Satan into Judas ... And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them. (Luke 22:24)

MAJOR MARKENSON: Major Fanning, you were stationed at Camp Democracy from November 2009 to May 2010 as acting Third Battalion S2. Your commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Harris. Is that correct?

MAJOR FANNING: Correct.

MAJOR MARKENSON: During your deployment at Camp Democracy, did you have occasion to work with Muhammad Rashid Haq?

MAJOR FANNING: Yes. He was our battalion terp.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What kind of soldier was Haq?

MAJOR FANNING: The finest terp in the battalion.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Was he trustworthy?

MAJOR FANNING: Completely.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Did you ever suspect that he might be a Taliban spy?

MAJOR FANNING: Never.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Did you ever have occasion to work with Captain Carson while you were at Camp Democracy?

MAJOR FANNING: Yes.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What kind of soldier was Captain Carson?

MAJOR FANNING: Arrogant. Slovenly. No respect for authority. A vicious Islamophobe.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What do you mean by "Islamophobe"?

MAJOR FANNING: He made no attempt to conceal his hatred of Muslims.

MAJOR MARKENSON: During your intermittent contact with Captain Carson, was Muhammad Rashid Haq ever a topic of conversation?

MAJOR FANNING: Frequently.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Is it safe to say that Captain Carson had an obsession with Haq?

MAJOR FANNING: Yes.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Why do you think he had an obsession with Haq?

MAJOR FANNING: In my opinion, it was because Muhammad was a devout Muslim. During his down time at Camp Democracy, Muhammed taught the Koran to a small study group. The group consisted mostly of ANA soldiers, but a few American Muslims attended as well.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What did Captain Carson think of Muhammad's study group?

MAJOR FANNING: He tried to shut it down. Captain Carson equated Islam with extremism. He expressed concern that Lieutenant Colonel Harris was allowing Muhammad to organize a Taliban cell right under our noses.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Did Lieutenant Colonel Harris agree with Captain Carson's concerns?

MAJOR FANNING: To his credit, Lieutenant Colonel Harris dismissed Captain Carson's concerns as paranoia.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Captain Carson testified that he asked Lieutenant Colonel Harris for permission to interrogate Muhammed as a suspected Taliban spy. But Lieutenant Colonel Harris refused that request, too. Shortly after this in February of 2010, you and Captain Carson had a conversation concerning Muhammad. Is that correct?

MAJOR FANNING: It was more like a tirade. Captain Carson was furious that Lieutenant Colonel Harris refused to let him interrogate Muhammad. He said that Harris was "putting the entire base in danger." Captain Carson was certain Muhammad was a Taliban spy. Given the opportunity to question Muhammad, he'd definitely "get it out of him" he said.

MAJOR MARKENSON: When Captain Carson said he'd "get it out of him," how did you interpret that?

MAJOR FANNING: That he intended to torture Muhammad.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Why did you reach that conclusion?

MAJOR FANNING: There were rumors going around Camp Democracy that Captain Carson was using prohibited interrogation techniques on detainees. I, myself, heard screaming emanating from Carson's B-hut, AQ53.

Fanning lied with absolute conviction, thought Carson, watching the performance. He was brilliant but inhuman. Animal eyes staring through a human mask.

MAJOR MARKENSON: What else did Captain Carson say during that tirade?

MAJOR FANNING: Captain Carson said that if he ever did get his hands on Muhammad, he'd never let him go. He specifically referred to the president's revised rules on the handling of detainees which under normal circumstances required releasing them after 72 hours. He said the detainees at Gitmo, who've "shown a complete disregard for the laws of warfare," were being "given ACLU lawyers." They were getting "three hot meals and playing soccer on the beach." Captain Carson said it was an "insult to the men and women who've given their lives in the war on terror." He said he had his own "detainee program." He called it "Program 45."

MAJOR MARKENSON: What did Captain Carson mean by Program 45?

MAJOR FANNING: When he said it, Captain Carson made his hand into the shape of a pistol. I took it to mean that once Captain Carson was done interrogating a detainee, he shoots them instead of sending them through the proper channels. Captain Carson, it

should be noted, carries a .45 caliber SIG SAUER pistol.

MAJOR MARKENSON: Did you report this conversation to your superiors back in February 2010?

MAJOR FANNING: No. At that time, I interpreted Captain Carson's remarks as mere bluster. You hear that kind of thing all the time in a war zone. It was only after the events of April 23, 2010, that I began to suspect that Captain Carson had murdered Muhammad. Captain Carson's testimony on the stand yesterday confirmed my suspicions. I felt I had to come forward.

"Liar! Traitor!" All heads turned toward the defense table where Captain Carson stood upright. His years of training couldn't contain the emotional outburst. Face enflamed, his words poured out like lava. "It was you!? Traitor!" The sudden realization that Fanning, an American, was the source of the intelligence leak to the enemy was too much to bear. That an American could be the source of the thumb drives was something that had never occurred to Carson. It shattered him.

And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. (Matthew 10:36)

Colonel Barksdale slammed his gavel down on the bench. "Order in the court! Order in the court!" he shouted. "Captain Carson, get control of yourself. I will not tolerate such outbursts in my courtroom."

Wolfe hooked his thumb inside Carson's belt loop to hold him fast, or Carson surely would have charged the witness box to strangle Fanning on the spot. The sudden downward pressure seemed to awaken Carson. Wolfe guided him back into his seat. At that very moment, Carson's soul died inside his body. Only the husk of a man remained.

Some in the courtroom thought they noticed a smile cross Fanning's otherwise impassive face. But years of practice had taught him to hide his emotions behind a mask. Not so with men like Carson, and men like his father. Fanning knew it to be their weakness. Like their deeds, they wore their emotions on their sleeve. Men for whom Duty, Honor, and Country is a creed worth dying for. Such principled men recoil before the malicious lie.

Fanning had maneuvered like a bull fighter. His lies were like lances, each pricking the bull, agitating and weakening the animal, drawing blood, wearing him down for the sword thrust to the heart. From his peripheral vision, Fanning could see Carson rocking and fidgeting and ready to burst. When Carson leapt to his feet, Fanning puffed up elated, but not enough to be noticed. Plenty of time later to celebrate his triumph. For now he trained his plastic face to mimic the expression of surprise at the indecorous outburst.

Fanning's testimony proved fatal to Carson's cause. The jury, which had seemed willing to listen to Carson's brutal honesty, now saw him as just a brute. Verdict: guilty. Colonel Barksdale, feeling intense pressure from Washington, sentenced the men to the maximum. Wolfe, Williams, Lister, Doc, and Donovan were sentenced to 10 years in prison. Captain Carson received a life sentence. All the men were stripped of their rank and received a dishonorable discharge.

For the benefit of the media, Carson was made to rise from his chair at the defense table while two MPs handcuffed and shackled him before the courtroom. His teammates rose in unison and saluted. Carson was moved by the gesture. Fighting back tears, he went to return the salute, but the handcuffs prevented his arm from reaching high enough. "It was an honor to serve with you men," he said. He was led away to prison.

CHAPTER 12

Carson was hustled aboard a transport plane and flown to the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. A plain white prison van awaited him on the tarmac. The plane taxied to a halt alongside the van and three MPs escorted Carson from the rear of the plane and lifted him into the side door of the van. As they drove to the far side of the base, Carson looked out the window at the bleak winter landscape of western Kansas. Bare trees inhabiting the dry river bed beside the road were silhouetted against the gray sky, and the trees were black against it. In the distance, the prison rose from the flat expanse of brown grass, something alien and unnatural.

Bounded by glittering concertina wire, Leavenworth was divided into two complexes: the much older original prison and a newer state-of-the-art correctional facility. Built between the world wars, the original prison had three cell blocks emanating from a central control hub and was surrounded by an ancient stone wall studded with guard towers at strategic locations. It was known for decades as “The Castle.” Much of it lay in disrepair, the prisoners long since transferred across the street to the newer lock up—except for one cell block that the commandant had reserved for disciplinary cases and the occasional political prisoner, like Captain Carson.

The prison van stopped just inside the wall and the side door slid open. “Out!” the MPs shouted. Carson’s leg chains made it difficult to negotiate the first step. Two MPs stepped forward and looped their arms inside his and lifted him to the ground. Carson was confronted by a mountain of flesh. “Welcome to The Castle,” the mountain said. “I’m Sergeant Akbar, the sergeant of the guards.”

Sergeant Mustafa Akbar stood every inch of six feet five inches tall and weighed at least 260 pounds of solid muscle. Born Cedric Johnson, he never knew his real father. His formative years were spent in and out of reformatory schools. By his 18th birthday he seemed destined for a life of crime. Then one day while walking down the street, he met a young man dressed in a suit and bow tie. He introduced Cedric to the teachings of the “Honorable” Elijah Muhammed and the Nation of Islam. The Nation gave Cedric a new name and a new sense of purpose. The Nation taught him to focus his hate on the “white power structure,” said to be responsible for all his woes. By joining the U.S. army, Akbar, like other Nation of Islam followers, sought to replace “white power” with “black power.” At The Castle, he found the perfect venue to indulge his sadism.

Carson was taken to a small room and locked inside a small cage. A gaggle of guards stood in a semi-circle around the cage. Carson felt like an animal in the zoo. One guard stood to the side recording everything with a small camcorder.

Akbar cracked a big smile, revealing a row of gold capped teeth. “Strip out,” he said. Carson removed his clothes and placed them between the bars and he stood stark naked in the cage in the cold. “Open your mouth ... lift your tongue ... run your fingers through your hair ... fan your ears out with your thumbs.” Carson complied with the standard strip-search instructions. Then came the final humiliation. “Turn around ... bend over ... spread your ass cheeks and cough ... Alright, get dressed.”

Carson dressed in the brown jumpsuit provided. He was handcuffed again and escorted down a dimly lit corridor. Lights flickered. Paint peeling from the walls hung in long tongue-like

strips. Overhead, black water dripped from rusty pipes and collected in large standing pools. Carson splashed through the stagnant-smelling water in a pair of flimsy flip-flops.

The little procession turned a corner and came to a halt before an opaque Plexiglas window. A faceless voice spoke through a small vent in the window. "Name, rank, and serial number." Carson gave the appropriate information and a steel door to the right buzzed open, sounding like a can opener.

Carson entered a small cell block. Akbar opened the first cell and shoved Carson inside, locking the door. He opened a small slot in the door and had Carson stick both arms through so he could remove the handcuffs. Being dinner time, one of the guards stepped forward with two plastic food trays and handed them to Sergeant Akbar. Opening the lid on one of the trays, Akbar coughed up a gob of phlegm and let it drip from his lips into the food. Then he closed the lid and passed the two trays to Carson. "Bon appetite, Captain," he said laughing.

After the guards left, the cell block was quiet. Carson had the impression that he was alone in the cell block. A lone 40-watt bulb hidden behind a corroded metal grate in the ceiling cast a weak orange light. It took several minutes for his eyes to adjust to the low-light conditions.

The old timers called them "box car cells." No windows. No natural light. Walls made of steel plating held together by large rivets. The unfinished concrete floor was coated in a century's worth of urine and feces, seaped into the pores of the concrete and impossible to get out. The smell was overpowering, like being locked in a Porta-Jon in July in Mississippi.

Carson placed the food trays directly under the light and examined the contents: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, a pear, and Akbar's spit. He used a plastic spork to negotiate around the spit. The meatloaf tasted rubbery. Probably not even any "meat" in it at all, thought Carson. The green beans consisted of the end cuttings, some with stems still attached. Carson grabbed up the pear, hoping for some enjoyment in the otherwise tasteless fare, only to discover that it was green and hard enough to shatter a car's windshield. Carson choked the food down with water from the sink. The water tasted rusty. The obsolete pipes were likely installed during the Harding administration. He lay back on his bunk and tried to get some sleep.

He had just drifted off to sleep when he heard a voice. "Hey, Captain." The disembodied voice was distant and faint. Carson thought he must be dreaming, or about to receive some revelation from an angel. He sat up on his bunk to listen. "Hey, Captain, come to the air vent above your sink," the voice said.

Carson rose and strode to the toilet bowl. Standing on the bowl, he located a small ventilation duct in the wall above the sink. "Where are you?" Carson asked.

"I'm in the cell directly above you," said the voice. "I heard you come in earlier. We've been waiting for you."

"I thought I was all alone in this cell block; it's so quiet."

"Oh, they're here. They're all around you. Waiting. Listening."

"Waiting for what?" Carson asked.

"For the fun to begin. I run this cell block. It's my little battleship, you might say. And you just climbed aboard—without my permission."

“And who might you be?”

“The name’s Lieutenant Clifford Kenndall.”

Carson recognized the name. His was a notorious case out of Ft. Hood, Texas. In the summer of 2007, local cops started pulling the bodies of teenage girls from the nearby Rio Grande River. All had been raped and tortured before being strangled to death with a length of 550 parachute cord and then dumped naked in the river. Police could never identify a suspect until one morning motorists on Interstate 35 spotted a nude girl running alongside the highway. The courageous young lady led police to a crude underground shelter beneath a garage. The garage belonged to Lieutenant Clifford Kenndall, a motor pool officer stationed at Ft. Hood. Kenndall had kept the girl captive for almost two weeks, during which time she suffered indescribable torture. One day, after Kenndall went to work, she managed to get free of her restraints and tunnel through three feet of dirt to daylight.

“I’ve heard the name,” Carson said with disdain.

“You may have heard the name, but you damn sure don’t know me. You will, though.” Kenndall’s voice trailed off in laughter.

Carson found a roll of toilet paper underneath his sink. He snapped off two squares and wadded them into little balls and stuffed one in each ear. He lay back on his bunk and shut his eyes. The voice was gone. Drifting off to sleep. He felt droplets of foul-smelling liquid peppering his face. He rushed over to the sink and washed his face and dried it with a towel. Then he searched the ceiling for the source of the noxious substance—whatever it was. He could barely make out a thin jagged trail of brownish liquid originating from a prominent crack. The trail ended above his pillow. Must be a busted sewer pipe, he thought. This prison has got to be at least a hundred years old.

Then Carson heard laughter coming from the ventilation duct above the sink. “Gas, gas, gas!” Kenndall said. He was mimicking the standard military warning given in case of a chemical attack. Soldiers are then supposed to don their protective gas masks. But in prison, “gas” has an altogether different meaning. “Gas” is the term for a mixture of urine and feces the inmates use to toss on guards or fellow inmates.

“Hey, Captain, take cover! You’re under ‘gas’ attack!” Kenndall shouted as he poured another cupful of “gas” into the crack that dripped into Carson’s cell.

On cue, the entire cell block erupted into laughter. Inmates started banging on the steel walls and rattling their cell doors. *I’m in a mad house*, Carson thought. The racket lasted all night. They were still banging when the cell block door grinded open and the morning shift started serving breakfast. Carson’s tray slot opened revealing the smiling gold teeth of Sergeant Akbar.

“Did you sleep well, Captain?” Akbar said jokingly. “We have coffee and croissants and hot towels.”

* * *

Entering the White House through the West Gate, Colonel Fanning was greeted by three Secret Service agents who X-rayed his personal effects and compared his ID against a list of official guests of the president. Issued a plastic pass, Fanning took a seat in the West Wing

lobby. With a half hour to kill before the scheduled press conference, he viewed the various portraits of past presidents that hung on the walls. Here was Gilbert Stuart's famous rendering of George Washington. The high forehead, the patrician's nose, the cavalry sword. Dressed in the stockings that were the style in his day. For generations, visitors to the White House had filed past the iconic image of the Father of our Nation, in awe of the great man. But to Colonel Fanning, Gilbert's portrait was nothing more than fascist hagiography. Over there hung a portrait of presidents Andrew Jackson, victor of the Battle of New Orleans, and William Henry Harrison, "Tippecanoe," as he was known for his victory over Chief Tecumseh. Nothing more than Indian killers and slave owners, thought Fanning. Surveying the whole lot, he dismissed America's presidents up to the present as one long procession of wealthy racist white men, better off rotting in the grave.

The last portrait Colonel Fanning came to was that of the current president, the lone person of color on a wall of white faces. Fanning had a special reverence for "The One," as Oprah Winfrey once called him. For the contrast with past presidents wasn't only racial, but rather philosophical. A true son of the Left, the president's father had been a member of Kenya's communist party. His mother was a hippie. His mentor was Frank Marshall Davis, formerly the chief propagandist for the American Communist Party. Here was the president of the new Rainbow Nation that Fanning always dreamed about. For the first time he felt proud to wear his nation's uniform. Glancing back at the portraits of America's past, Fanning couldn't help but smile. He imagined those old gray men rolling over in their graves. He couldn't wait to greet the great one in the flesh.

Presently, a presidential aide arrived to escort Colonel Fanning to a small anteroom. There stood the President of the United States of America. Fanning swooned, for the president was even better looking than he'd imagined.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Colonel Fanning," the president said, extending his hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. President," Fanning said, shaking his hand firmly.

"Have you been briefed on the particulars?" the president asked.

"I have, Mr. President," said Fanning.

The small procession then entered the Rose Garden where a gathering of reporters and dignitaries stood waiting. Colonel Fanning, along with the secretary of the Army, stood to the president's left while the vice president flanked him on the right. A hush came over the assembly as they prepared themselves to receive the word of the president. He began in a monotone he always used when warming to a particularly important subject.

"For some time, I've been contemplating ways to move our military forward. Overturning 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' was a good first step. Today, we take the next step. I'm proud to announce the creation of a new multi-pronged initiative to promote diversity within the armed forces. First, I've ordered new mandatory diversity training for all service members. Second, I'm creating a new Rainbow Review Board whose mission will be to root out prejudice within the ranks. Third, I'm issuing new guidelines to help transgender soldiers and sailors and air persons make the transition to their preferred gender. Lastly, I've ordered all branches of the armed forces to institute a system of quotas to better reflect the diversity of our Rainbow Nation."

There was loud enthusiastic applause from the mostly liberal press corp. The president motioned with his hand that he'd like to continue, and an immediate hush fell over the completely unbiased reporters. Some even went down on bended knees.

The president spoke: "In this job I occasionally get the opportunity to honor true heroes. Today, I'm proud to introduce you to one, Colonel Michelle Fanning. And I'm proud to appoint Colonel Fanning to head the new Rainbow Initiative. I'm sure she will discharge her duties faithfully and to the best of her ability." The president turned to Fanning, who rose to acknowledge the thunderous applause.

Since the trial, Fanning had come out as America's first transgender officer. For his "courage," he was immediately promoted two grades to full bird colonel. Changing his name to Michelle Fanning, he'd begun a regimen of female hormones and started dressing like a woman. For the White House visit, Fanning wore a standard female dress blue uniform, black pumps, and his favorite blond wig. Fanning had started to develop small "breasts," but his protruding Adam's apple exposed the lie.

The president then opened it up to questions from the press. Reporters' arms shot up in anticipation. The president usually selected a representative of the mainstream liberal press, like *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*, but by mistake he chose one from *Fox News Channel*.

"Mr. President," the reporter said, "from the outline I've been given, this new initiative will cost the taxpayer several billion dollars. Many retired generals and admirals have described this Rainbow Initiative as a waste of precious resources. Given the various threats America now faces around the world, they say that money would be better spent on actual military matters. After a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq and 5,000 dead Americans, we are no closer to victory. Far from it. All U.S. troops are out of Iraq. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard and ISIS are replacing our troops. In Afghanistan, the Taliban captured yet another province last week. Yet, you intend to remove all remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan before you leave office. Mr. President, wouldn't the money allotted to this Rainbow Initiative be better spent on keeping troops in Afghanistan, or equipping our soldiers with weapons?"

The president interrupted. "Seven years ago, I ran on a promise of 'hope and change.' That wasn't just a campaign slogan. Our institutions must change. That includes our military. When I assumed office, I set out to do just that. First, I ended the horrific CIA Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation program. Second, I began the process of ending my predecessor's so-called war on terror, which is actually a war on Muslims. Third, I began to diversify our armed forces. I overturned 'Don't Ask Don't tell.' Next, I integrated women into all branches of our armed forces, including combat units. Now I'm proud to create the Rainbow Initiative. Its purpose will be to root out the last vestiges of hierarchy and exclusion in the military."

The same reporter began his follow-up question before the president had a chance to move on to his favorites with *The New York Times*. "Excuse me, Mr. President, but isn't the military by its very nature hierarchical and exclusive?"

"Not my military!" the president said emphatically.

The reporter from Fox News kept going. "Mr. President, this new Rainbow Initiative includes 100 million dollars for sex change operations. With that same money you could equip a

squadron of Apache helicopters. Don't you think scarce resources should be spent defending the nation rather than mutilating the sex organs of confused individuals?"

The president glared at the reporter. Part condescension, part disgust, it was a look he'd cultivated back at Harvard when he taught constitutional law to graduate students. He'd give "the look" whenever someone said something that offended his acute sense of enlightenment. It typically presaged a lecture delivered in his halting monotone. The liberal reporters understood the cue and put down their pens and prepared to receive the oracle of truth.

"The defense of our great nation," the president began, "is *not* measured in the number of aircraft carriers or helicopters we have; it's measured by the extent to which we remain faithful to our core values. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ...' Immortal words imparting a sacred trust to future generations. Denying transgender service members sex change operations would violate that sacred trust. It would deny them the full measure of equality."

Now the president moved on to his favorite reporter—"Jim," whom he referred to by his first name.

"Mr. President," the reporter said, "your new initiative involves 'ridding the military of intolerance to LGBTQ individuals.' What exactly does this entail?"

"Good question, Jim," the president said. "It entails exactly that: There's no place in our military for racists. If you are a member of the Ku Klux Klan or the Nazi Party, our ranks are closed to you. Anyone found to be holding such obnoxious opinions is immediately discharged. The same will apply to homophobes."

The reporter continued with a follow-up. "Mr. President, as you know, many officers and enlisted men and women still practice antiquated versions of Christianity. Christianity is quite explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality. How do you intend to deal with these reactionary elements? Will you require them to renounce their beliefs?"

"I'm a Christian," the president claimed. "My Jesus teaches me to love everybody, including my lesbian and gay sisters and brothers. Service members who cannot accept their LGBTQ comrades as completely normal and equal in every way will have to find work in the private sector. It's that simple. Service members found to be holding homophobic opinions will be dishonorably discharged."

* * *

Prison is a series of routines. In the prison where Captain Carson was being held, inmates spent up to 23 hours a day in their cell. Recreation: one hour in a single cage. Meals: three a day, served in plastic trays through a slot in the door. Laundry: once a week, which invariably came back smelling like a wet dog. Razors: two times a week. Inmates could read up to eight books in the cell, but the poor lighting made reading difficult.

Carson's was a segregation unit. Housed in separate cells, inmates spent their time working out or sleeping or "fishing." To fish, they tie a small weight to the end of a length of yarn or string and slide it under the door to reach adjoining cells. In that way food and coffee and homemade wine ("hooch") is traded.

For Carson, the loss of his freedom was the hardest part. Prison robs you of the day-to-day decisions that most people take for granted. Prison infantilizes you, forces you into abject dependence on petty tyrants for the most basic requirements.

What Carson hated about prison, his fellow inmates found most attractive. What they feared most was the responsibility that comes with freedom. Incapable of functioning in the adult world, they preferred the structure provided by the penal state. Most had come from horrible circumstances. Carson might have even felt sorry for them if not for the fact that they were always trying to harm him in one way or another. Unable to assault fellow inmates directly due to the lockdown conditions, they resorted to using noise, spit, or “gas.” Some were masters at weaponizing human waste. Standard “gas” called for an even mix of poo and pee. Placed in a shampoo bottle, they’d squirt it at one another through the bars, or pour it through the cracks in the ceiling into the cells below. One guy dried his own feces, powdered it, and disguised it inside coffee packets, which he then traded to another unsuspecting inmate during a fishing expedition.

Sergeant Akbar’s relationship with the inmates was like that of a tyrannical father. Akbar coddled those who willingly became his snitches. He referred to them as his “children.” His children received extra food trays and the few orderly jobs. Conversely, inmates like Captain Carson, who carried themselves with any degree of dignity or self-respect, were singled out for harsh treatment: late night shakedowns, doctored food, mail that came two months late. It was as if Akbar needed to somehow prove to himself that inside every human being was a cringing worm willing to do anything to survive, because deep down inside, Sergeant Akbar was himself a cringing worm. Every coward is a sadist, and every sadist is a coward. They are two sides of the same psychological coin.

* * *

General Barton stuck his face up to the fan to let the air wash over him. But other than dry the sweat on his brow, the fan did nothing to alleviate his discomfort. The temperature outside hovered around 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The small office fan did little more than move hot air from one side of the room to the other. He checked the two windows. Both were already wide open.

“Sergeant Humphries!” Barton called.

A young soldier with a high-and-tight haircut appeared in the doorway. “Yes, General.”

“Sergeant, I’m fixin’ to die of heatstroke if I don’t get some air in here. Any idea when they’re gonna get around to fixin’ that damn air conditioner?”

“I put in a work order. I call them at least two times a day, General. They keep telling me they’ll be here at the soonest opportunity. It’s Friday, General, so I doubt they’ll come today.”

“This makes the second time this month that the air conditioner has gone belly up.”

“Don’t know what to tell you, sir. This building is at least 70 years old. And that air conditioning was probably installed during the Johnson administration.”

“What about gettin’ me something cold to drink?”

“Refrigerator’s down, too, sir.”

“Did today’s mail come? Or is the post office down, too?”

“On your desk, sir,” Sergeant Humphries said, pointing to a small stack of mail among the several stacks of papers cluttering General Barton’s desk.

“Didn’t even see it.”

“That’s not surprising. Would you like me to help organize that desk, General?”

“No,” the general said, a note of irritation in his voice. “Everything’s exactly where I want it.”

Sergeant Humphries stepped out for a moment but returned carrying a glass of water in one hand and a small white tablet in the other. “Time for your blood pressure medicine, sir.”

Barton hated the little white pills. They made him groggy and, in this heat, light-headed. He begrudgingly snatched the pill from Sergeant Humphries’ hand and popped it in his mouth and chased it down with a little water. “Oh, Lordy, that water is warmer than goat’s piss,” he said.

Humphries went into the front office while Barton sorted the mail on his desk. One large brown envelope bore an Alexandria, Virginia, postmark. The return address read Global Dynamics. This was a drop box for old friends still in the agency. Barton had been expecting the package for months. He zipped it open and emptied its contents on his desk. It contained four still-frames from a surveillance camera. Although a bit grainy, the picture quality was good enough to identify the individual in the photos. “Gotcha!” the general exclaimed.

General Barton quickly slid the photos back inside the envelope and hurried out the door. “Sergeant Humphries, I’m going out. Be back Monday,” he said as he passed by the sergeant’s desk.

“But General, what if General Dicks calls? What do I tell him?” Sergeant Humphries pleaded on behalf of Dicks, the base commander.

“Tell that brown-noser to get stuffed.”

Barton’s career had taken quite a detour since the incident at Camp Democracy. As Carson’s CO, Barton was questioned repeatedly by the CID. Asked about the parameters of Carson’s mission, Barton obfuscated. When pressed, he said it entailed capturing high-value targets along the Pakistani border. When confronted with a series of radio intercepts that suggested that he knew about Carson’s mission to cross the border into Pakistan to snatch Ahmad Khan, Barton developed amnesia. For his sins, the Army banished him from the prestigious JSOC. He was exiled to the pine barrens of Ft. Benning, Georgia. There he occupied a tiny office in a converted WW II barracks counting beans and bullets for a training brigade, fighting the boredom and the heat.

Last time he’d been at Ft. Benning was the summer of ’69, when he was a young second lieutenant going through Ranger school. The heat damn near wasted him, and he was only 24. Now, at 62, the heat brought on a heart condition, for which he swallowed tiny white pills three times a day. He hated the pills.

His career effectively over, General Barton had few reasons to remain on active duty. Most career officers in his position would've retired a long time ago. Collect a healthy pension and spend the rest of their days playing golf; that's what retired generals did. But Barton never saw the point of beating the hell out of a little white ball with a club. So he stayed, not only because he hated the idea of retirement, but because he thought he could still right the wrong that had been done to Captain Carson. He'd have testified at Carson's trial if he thought it would've done any good. But once the media and the politicians got involved, he knew it was a forgone conclusion that Carson would be found guilty. There were other avenues to justice, though. Even an exiled general has pull in the Army. Over his 30-year career, he'd developed a network of friends, one of whom was Major General Martin O'Malley, the commandant at Ft. Bragg. O'Malley also happened to be the general officer that would review Captain Carson's appeal when it came up next month.

Barton and O'Malley had started together in the 101st Airborne Division. One day in 1969, O'Malley's platoon stumbled into an NVA (North Vietnamese Army) ambush in the A Shau valley. Outnumbered and outgunned, O'Malley's platoon faced certain destruction. He radioed for help, but no units were available except for Barton's platoon. Together they were able to extricate their wounded and turn the tables on the NVA. Every year since, on September 16, the day of the ambush, O'Malley would send his friend Barton a bottle of 12-year-old single malt. But Scotch is an inadequate exchange for a life. It was time for Barton to call in the favor for the ass-saving exercise in the A Shau valley all those years ago.

The two old warriors met at the Tar Heel Motel outside Fayetteville, North Carolina. Dressed in his "civies" and wearing thick sunglasses, O'Malley had no idea what to expect when he knocked on the door of room 206. Barton had told him nothing over the phone, other than to be at a certain place at a certain time. O'Malley agreed without hesitation. Barton opened the door and looked past O'Malley to see if he'd been followed. Satisfied, he whisked O'Malley inside and closed the door.

The dimly lit room had a worn look, like old clothes. The smell of disinfectant masked the odor of decay. An old analog television aired *The Price Is Right*. On the table, a bottle of Scotch sat next to an ice bucket and two plastic cups.

"Been a long time, Frank," General O'Malley said, removing his shades to have a better look at his old friend. "What's it been, three years?"

"Something like that," General Barton said, grasping O'Malley's hand in a firm shake. "Like a drink?"

"Sure, why not? I'm off-duty."

"Neat?"

"That's right. No ice."

Barton filled two cups with Scotch and handed one to O'Malley. O'Malley took the cup and sipped from the edge. "Good stuff," he said.

"How's Jenny?" Barton asked.

“Fine, as a matter of fact. She had that bout with breast cancer a couple years back. Thank God we caught it early. It hasn’t come back. And you, Frank? How you getting along since Bea passed on?”

“Got this problem with my ticker. And my prostate is the size of a baseball. Other than that, I can’t complain. Gettin’ old, but you know.”

General O’Malley paused to take another sip of Scotch. “I gotta tell you, Frank, being here is making me a little nervous. I feel like any minute a couple Columbian coke dealers are going to pop out of the bathroom with a chainsaw and start interrogating me about the location of the YAO. What am I doing here? Why not just come by my office? You know I run the whole base, right?”

“Captain William Carson,” Barton said abruptly.

“I was afraid that’s what this was about. You know I can’t discuss his case.”

“He’s innocent.”

“The murders were committed with his pistol, Frank.”

“He didn’t pull the trigger.”

“Look, I realize Carson served under you. You’ve always been loyal, Frank. But this one is a slam-dunk.”

“His entire team testified that he was nowhere near their B-hut when Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq were killed.”

“They’re being loyal, Frank, just like you.”

“There’s more to it, Martin.” Barton retrieved the brown envelope from a brown attaché case and placed the four photos in front of O’Malley. “Tell me if you recognize the person in the pictures.”

O’Malley put his glasses on. The grainy surveillance photos showed what appeared to be a tall blond woman purchasing something at a department store counter. O’Malley held the photos up to the light. He could clearly make out an Adam’s apple on the “woman” in the photos. “It’s a man dressed as a woman. That’s Colonel ‘Michelle’ Fanning,” O’Malley mused aloud.

“That it is,” Barton chimed in.

“So, what am I looking at? Is he purchasing a pair of panties from Victoria’s Secret?”

“When Captain Carson identified Muhammad Rashid Haq as his mole, he found a thumb drive containing sensitive DOD intel among Muhammad’s personal property.”

“That’s Carson’s story. But the thumb drive was never recovered.”

“Let’s assume for the sake of argument that Carson is telling the truth. A very short list of people at Camp Democracy could’ve had access to that thumb drive. Muhammed is not one of them. As S2, Fanning was one of the few with access. He worked closely with Muhammad. Before Camp Democracy, they worked together at Asadabad. Both were there at the time the SEALs were ambushed in the summer of 2009. Both were there when Carson’s original team was ambushed. Both of those enemy actions were believed to be assisted by inside information.”

“It’s circumstantial, Frank. I mean, come on, Fanning is a fruitcake, but he’s an American. I just don’t buy him handing over secrets to the Taliban. What proof is there that Fanning and Haq’s relationship was anything but professional?”

Barton handed O’Malley another vanilla folder from the attaché case. “That’s the inventory of the property seized from Muhammad’s locker by CID, the morning after he was killed. Notice item twenty two.”

O’Malley read aloud from the list: “Watch, Rolex, sport.”

“That’s a \$5,000 watch,” Barton said. “How’s a Hajji terp, who makes \$2,000 a year, buy a watch like that?”

“Maybe he stole it,” O’Malley ventured.

“Only 10,000 of that model of watch were sold in 2009. I had our friends at Langley track down where that watch was sold. The serial number matches a watch sold at Key’s Jeweler in Columbus, Ohio, May 3, 2009. Turns out, Fanning was on leave during that same time period. His mother lives nearby. Those photographs in front of you are from store surveillance taken May 3, 2009.”

“Okay, maybe Muhammad stole the watch from Fanning,” O’Malley said. “Happens all the time.”

“Read the inscription on the back of the watch,” General Barton said, flipping to the appendix in the back of the property list.

O’Malley read it to himself: *To Muhammad. Love Always. F.*

“They were lovers,” Barton said.

“A traditional Muslim with a homosexual lover on the side?”

“Very common in Muslim societies. It’s only the partner who assumes the ‘female’ role in the relationship who suffers social ostracism. Here in Afghanistan they have a custom called *bacha bazi*—boy play. Powerful elders in the tribe basically keep boy sex slaves.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’re saying Fanning was passing TOP Secret intel to Muhammad his lover, but when Carson got too close, Fanning snuck into AQ53 and killed Khan and Muhammad and grabbed the thumb drive on the way out?”

“It’s diabolical,” Barton said. “I didn’t believe it myself, until I looked at the evidence.”

O’Malley said, “You know, I served with his father, ‘Fighting Joe.’ Meanest son of a bitch I ever met. But a damn fine soldier. Wonder what he’d think of his son?”

Barton shook his head. He watched O’Malley’s expression to see if the information was having any effect. After downing the last of his Scotch, he made his final pitch. “Think about it, Martin. Fanning was the key witness at Carson’s trial. Carson would’ve walked home on those lesser charges. But then Fanning shows up out of the blue as a rebuttal witness and Carson goes to prison for life. Fanning needed the murder charge to stick to Carson, or else questions would’ve persisted about who really killed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Rashid Haq, if not Carson. No, Carson had to go to prison to obliterate the trail of evidence leading back to Fanning.”

O'Malley drained his cup and stood up to leave. "I must admit, after reading Fanning's testimony, I had my doubts. What are the chances that Captain Carson, gung ho Green Beret, takes some cross-dressing S2 into his confidence, brags to him about wanting to shoot Muhammad? Makes no sense."

"Fanning is lying, Martin," Barton said. "Fanning is lying."

"You do realize that if I overturn Carson's conviction, my career is over, Frank. This Fanning is the president's golden boy, or 'golden girl.' He's untouchable."

Barton became visibly angry. "The question is are you going to let an innocent man rot in prison just so you can get that third star." Barton knew which buttons to push. Attacking a soldier's honor was the big one. O'Malley was always a better politician than Barton, which is why he'd been promoted over Barton. But deep down, he was an honorable man. "So, what are you going to do, Martin?"

O'Malley ignored the question. He walked to the door and turned. "It was good to see you, Frank." He opened the door and walked out.

Barton smiled. For he knew O'Malley's answer—without hearing a word.

* * *

One evening, Sergeant Akbar shoved an envelope through Captain Carson's door slot. Contrary to prison policy, which protected legal correspondences from scrutiny, the envelope had already been opened.

Sergeant Akbar smiled mischievously. "Looks like your wife is divorcing your racist ass. Good for her. I wrote down her address. I'm gonna drop her a line, see if she wants to hook up with a real man. That alright with you, Captain?" He laughed.

But Carson didn't react, he wouldn't give Akbar the satisfaction. After Akbar walked away, he sat on his bunk and read through the papers just in time before lights out. Lydia had gone before a judge to get a hardship divorce. The judge had granted it without comment.

After the light in the cell went out, the bulb sizzled and popped as it cooled. Carson placed the divorce papers in the plastic tub provided to protect his property from the periodic "gas" attacks. He lay down on his bunk and pulled the blanket up over his face. But he couldn't sleep.

Four months had passed since his conviction, and the effects of solitary confinement had begun to set in. The walls felt like they were closing in. Periods of intense noise followed by absolute silence made him hypersensitive to sound. Repetitive noise was the worst. Incessant drumming on the metal walls was a kind of Chinese water torture, the sound, instead of drops of water, gradually drilling a hole in his head. He tried stuffing tissue in his ears, he tried wrapping a blanket around his head, but nothing worked. He even contemplated rupturing his ear drums with a sharpened pencil, but changed his mind at the last minute. At other times, the cell block was deathly quiet. His cell felt like a capsule floating in outer space, its thin skin the only thing protecting him from oblivion. Then some wretched noise would puncture the skin of the space ship, and his psychological vortex spun out of control.

Carson's sensitivity to sound led to insomnia. To fight the insomnia, he exercised. Every day he did a workout routine that would've wasted an Olympic athlete. He exercised four hours

in the morning and four more hours in the evening. By supper time he was drenched in sweat and drained of energy, his body craving rest. But he still couldn't sleep through the night. He'd nod off for two hours and then awaken to spend the remainder of the night staring at the black ceiling.

The Special Forces had taught him to "improvise, adapt, and overcome." But living in a cell the size of a bathroom leaves little room to improvise. After a while, a paralysis sets in, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, of being at the mercy of forces beyond one's control. Carson's usually sharp mind dulled. He began to doubt his own senses. He lost the ability to process information rationally. As a result he developed acute paranoia.

Carson became convinced that Sergeant Akbar was poisoning his food. But as he had to eat to stay alive, each bite was taken thinking that he was doing irreparable damage to his body.

The few letters he received from his family in North Carolina were his last lifeline to the outside world. Though he cherished the letters, he often found himself searching through their contents for ulterior motives. The most innocuous comment, filtered through the prism of his paranoia, became a nefarious attack upon his integrity. When he responded, he often times had to rewrite the letter to edit out the crazy paranoia. Every letter home was the last, in his mind. He'd say something offensive and that would be it, they'd never write back. He thought it was only a matter of time before everyone abandoned him.

Nights were the worst. At night the demons would come. Carson would see the face of Fanning, those black doll's eyes. This would spin the wheels in Carson's mind for hours. After Fanning, the pig-eyed Lieutenant Colonel Harris would put in an appearance. Then General Barton, who to Carson's way of thinking had abandoned him, too. Every night it was the same inventory of resentments, the same line-up of knaves.

Eventually his thoughts would turn to Lydia, always to Lydia, for hers was a betrayal more intimate than the others. He'd have made a good father. But the bitch had taken that from him. Such a horrible death his son had suffered. He imagined the "procedure" in every detail. A late-term abortion is like a normal birth up until the last horrible second. The doctor—no, the butcher—had induced labor but then maneuvered George into the breech position so that he'd emerge from the womb feet first. Just as George's head was about to exit the birth canal, the butcher plunged a pair of scissors into the back of his head. Then the bastard used a vacuum aspirator to suck out George's brains. It's what they call "safe, legal, and moral reproductive choice" in this country. Had George's head accidentally slipped out of the birth canal before the bastard stuck the scissors into the base of his skull, they'd have called it murder. The hypocrisy was disgusting. What must it have felt like, Carson wondered, when the scissors lunged into the back of George's head. To be murdered by your mother on your birthday.

The worst part about Lydia's abortion was he had helped her do it. Carson remembered the words of that store clerk in Monmouth, New Jersey, words he'd heard a hundred times before: "Thank you for defending our freedoms," the clerk had said. It used to fill him with a sense of pride whenever he heard those words. Now he could only feel disgust. For one of those "freedoms" he'd been fighting so hard to protect was the right of every woman to an abortion. He'd been an unwitting accomplice in the murder of his own son.

But Carson never lost hope. Some part of him still clung to the belief that America still had some goodness left in it. Its institutions may be corrupted, but good individuals still labored in the service of the Founders' dream. Eventually he'd be vindicated, he believed.

Lieutenant Colonel Landcaster usually hated his visits to Leavenworth, but on this cool summer morning, he was smiling inside. Soon after checking in, he was led to the visiting room where Captain Carson sat waiting. It had been a few months since he and Carson had any contact.

Landcaster was taken aback by Carson's haggard appearance. Dark circles under the eyes, deep furrows etched in his forehead. Carson appeared to have aged ten years.

"You're looking good," Landcaster lied. "Been awhile. How have you been, Captain?"

Carson looked away briefly, apparently not in the mood for small talk. Landcaster understood this reticence. Carson surely hated trying to explain prison life to outsiders. You cannot explain life on land to a fish.

"How did the appeal go?" Carson said abruptly.

"Alright. Let's skip the small talk. Good news, Captain. Your murder conviction has been overturned."

Carson's overcast eyes lit up like a sun flare. "That's great news!" he exclaimed. "How ...? What?"

"You can thank our system of military justice for that one. Civilian appellate judges can consider only questions of law. But in the military appeals process, the reviewing general officer can reconsider the facts of the case. The reviewing officer, General O'Malley, dismissed Major Fanning's testimony. He overturned the murder conviction."

"Does this mean a new trial?" Carson asked.

"No. The government doesn't want a new trial. It fears a repeat of the riots that occurred last time around. The government wants to put this whole episode behind it. The sooner the better."

"Do I get my commission back?"

"Afraid not," Landcaster said. "Unfortunately, General O'Malley upheld the torture charge. Which means time served and a BCD," he said, referring to a Bad Conduct Discharge. "But you get to go home."

"And go through the rest of my life with people believing I dishonored my country?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. That's the best I can do."

CHAPTER 13

Bill Carson sat with his back to a hemlock tree, a Remington 870 across his lap. He scanned the gloomy woods for movement. Carson could hear a gang of Jakes working its way down into his hollow. The early morning sun painted the higher ridges in light. But darkness still filled the deeper hollows. The adolescent turkeys gobbled at intervals, competing with one another for dominance.

Uncle Jack Carson was about 10 meters behind his nephew armed with a cherry-walnut box caller. Both hunters were camouflaged from head to toe, not a patch of skin showing. They blended into the spring landscape like two chameleons. The strategy was for Uncle Jack to use his box caller to lure the turkeys in closer, and Carson would use his shotgun to shoot one or two.

As light filled the hollow, the forest came alive with the sounds of songbirds, a chorus of chirps and screeches and whinnies. Gnats suddenly appeared and hovered around Carson's face. The camo netting that covered his head held the bloodsucking insects at bay.

His backside ached from sitting on the ground. But he dared not move a muscle. The Jakes were close now. Any movement might give away his position. He told himself not to stare at the trees. Concentrate on the open space in between the trees. That's where you catch movement. It was just a flash, a brief glimmer of iridescent feathers against the light green backdrop of sassafras. Above the cacophony of songbirds, he could hear the turkeys shuffle: *shirr shirr shirr*. Turkeys make a distinctive sound, a three-note shuffle as they scratch away the top layer of leaves in search of insects and acorns. Carson strained his ears. He heard it again: *shirr shirr shirr*.

Uncle Jack began his call on cue. He scraped the walnut paddle slowly over the cherry box, coaxing out a *yelp-yelp-yelp-yelp*, reproducing the mating call of the female turkey. Like tripping a switch, the young male turkeys responded with a series of gobbles. The Jakes were in a stand of white oak trees about 50 meters out.

The inexperienced hunter is tempted to overdo the call. He'll grind away on the box caller expecting them to walk right to him. Instead, he ends up scaring them off. Playing hard-to-get works as well with turkeys as it does with humans. Uncle Jack waited a full ten minutes before calling again. His second call triggered another round of lusty gobbles. The randy Jakes were hooked. Now all he had to do was reel them in.

The turkeys gradually drifted in Carson's direction. He saw them flitting between the trees. He slowly raised the shotgun to his shoulder and got ready to fire. Two large, healthy Jakes came to within 10 meters. Their eight-inch beards indicated that they were at least two-years-old.

Carson pursed his lips and made a little *puck* sound. This was a warning call in turkey speak. The turkeys froze and craned their long necks skyward, searching for the source of the warning call. The perfect posture for a head shot, leaving the precious breast meat uncluttered with 9-shot. When the blast hit the turkey, its long neck whipped to the ground like an inflatable tube dancer in a stiff wind. The other Jake jumped straight up in the air, flapping his huge wings furiously in a futile attempt to get airborne. Carson emerged from under the hemlock boughs for a better shot. He fired once and the big bird dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He flapped like crazy and raised a small cloud of leaves and dust and feathers. Rushing forward,

Carson grabbed the turkey by its long neck and gave it a good yank—*pop*—and the bird's neck snapped like a twig. It was over.

The rush of excitement released a flood of endorphins in Carson's brain. The euphoria was something he hadn't experienced since Afghanistan. Hunting always recharged him.

Since his release from prison, Carson had been living in a rundown trailer close to his parents' place near Robbinsville, North Carolina. The only memory he had of leaving Leavenworth was the surge of fresh air outside the prison walls—that, and the gratifying look of dismay on Sergeant Akbar's face.

His father had experienced a stroke while Carson was in prison. His mother devoted most of her time to caring for the old man. Carson occasionally visited his brother John, who owned a small roofing company in nearby Bryson City. John and his wife and four small boys lived in town. Carson, having fallen in love with chess, enjoyed teaching the boys to play. Because of his criminal record, Carson had a hard time finding a good-paying job. But then again, good-paying jobs were scarce in Appalachia even for those without criminal records. Carson worked part-time filleting trout at a local fish farm. On weekends he helped his brother John roof houses. In the idle time, he drank.

Like a lot of men who go off to war, Bill Carson never really came home. His body returned, but his mind was still in the Korengal Valley. He drank to dull the memories.

"Nice birds," Uncle Jack said, admiring the size of their long, stringy beards.

"Real nice," his nephew said. Taking a length of string, Carson tied a noose at each end and slipped each noose around the neck of a turkey. Then he lifted the pair over his shoulder. Uncle Jack gathered up Carson's shotgun and the two men headed up the trail.

The trail followed a large creek through thick rhododendron. Up ahead the thicket gave way to open meadow and fields of newly planted corn and potatoes. Further on, a small pasture contained a few heifers. The heifers followed the hunters along the fence line, hoping for a treat. Uncle Jack's cabin lay ahead among a stand of tall white pines.

Uncle Jack and his beloved wife Dolores had lived for many years in Waynesville, where Jack had earned a good living as an electrician at the Champion Paper plant. Once their two daughters were grown and married off, the couple had planned to retire to their native Snowbird Mountains. Before they got the chance, Dolores passed away from cancer. Jack moved back to Snowbird alone. Having inherited a prime parcel of land about a mile from the old Carson homestead, he built a small two-room cabin of pine logs that he milled with a chainsaw. Surrounded on all sides by national forest, Jack's 300 acres had no phone service or electricity. The land could be accessed only by a rough Jeep track.

Carson had always thought it ironic for an electrician to live in a cabin without electricity. But it wasn't as if Jack had a problem with electricity per se. He just didn't want any strangers on his property. Even the power company's meter reader violated Jack's sense of privacy. He'd planned on setting up a hydro-electric generator using the creek as the propulsive force. But after

a while, he got used to living without electricity and eventually came to prefer it. Not having a television around helped him sleep nights, he said.

Jack collected a small veteran's pension and earned a little spending money collecting ginseng root from the forest. For the rest, he subsisted on staple crops, cattle, and hunting. Jack believed man was by nature a hunter. A man who didn't hunt was half a man to Jack.

"How about you do the cleaning and I'll do the cooking?" Uncle Jack said.

"Alright," Carson answered. "Want me to skin them or pluck them?"

"Skin them, of course."

Most folks pluck a turkey in order to save its skin, which helps keep the moisture in during the cooking process. But plucking is a waste of time to the true woodsman. Carson had learned to skin turkey before he was 10-years-old. He hanged the two birds by their necks side by side. Then he unsheathed his knife and went to work. First, he made a shallow cut around the elbows and knees and neck and snapped the legs and wings and severed the remaining tendons. The tail was cut off. Second, he inserted his thumb below the neck and proceeded to pull the skin off like a sock. Once the skin was removed, he sliced through the thin abdominal wall, careful not to puncture the intestines, which would contaminate the meat. He worked his fingers inside the abdomen and loosened the entrails, which dropped out onto the ground. Lastly, he severed the neck and washed the birds thoroughly in cold water.

"Ready?" Uncle Jack said from the porch.

"Cleaned and ready to cook," said his nephew.

Jack took the two carcasses to his small kitchen where a cookstove was already warming up. He carefully removed the turkeys' breasts. After wrapping them in raw bacon, he placed them in a baking dish and covered the dish with tin foil. Once the wood-burning stove reached 350 degrees, Uncle Jack rolled back the damper and placed the baking dish inside before closing the door.

"It'll take a while to cook," Jack said. "Let's sit out on the porch. Gonna be too hot in here with that stove burning. I got some coffee brewing. Wanna cup?" Carson said yes.

The two men retreated to the porch. Jack had a couple of ancient rocking chairs that looked none too sturdy. Carson went to sit down. Jack cautioned. "Easy when you sit down, Nephew. I can't vouch for the structural integrity of that there chair. You must might end up flat on your backside."

By then the sun was high in the sky, its brilliant rays penetrating the boughs of the white pines. Three does and a large buck had begun to graze in the pasture alongside the heifers.

Carson pointed to the deer. "Sure is a lot more game around here. More than I remember."

"Well, Nephew, if you increase their food supply, you'll increase their numbers," Jack said, sipping from the lip of the coffee mug. In his mid-sixties, Jack Carson stood slightly taller than his nephew. Gray hair and bushy gray beard, he looked like a skinny Santa Claus in camouflage.

"Has the game warden given you any guff about feeding the deer and turkeys?" Carson said, referring to the half-dozen or so feeders Uncle Jack had set up around his property.

“They don’t like it, that’s for sure. I told them the feeders are for my goats.”

“You don’t have any goats.”

“They don’t know that.” He laughed.

Carson had grown up idolizing his Uncle Jack. His own father (Jack’s brother) was distant and cold. So young Carson looked to his Uncle Jack for a role model. Because Jack and Dolores had had two girls, Jack was only too happy to assume the role of father figure to his nephew. Jack taught Carson how to hunt, fish, and how to read a map and compass. How to survive in the bush with nothing but a sheath knife and flint. When Jack told war stories from his three tours of duty in Vietnam, Carson ate it up. At the age of 12, Carson announced his intentions of one day becoming an Army Ranger like his Uncle Jack.

But ever since Carson joined the Army, the two had grown apart. Uncle Jack had never approved of his nephew joining the Army. Not because Jack was a pacifist, nor because he was anti-American. Jack loved his country, just not its government. Vietnam had destroyed his faith in “the system,” as he called it. Jack’s convictions had only hardened over the years.

When his nephew had come to him in the days immediately after 9/11, brimming with patriotic fervor, ready to sign up, Jack tried to talk him out of it. Carson got angry. He called Jack a hypocrite. For hadn’t Jack always taught him that Duty, Honor, and Country were values worth fighting for? Our country was under attack and it was his duty to defend it, Carson told Jack. Jack tried to explain that loving one’s country doesn’t always require loyalty to its government, sometimes it requires the opposite. Carson wouldn’t hear it. He signed up as soon as he finished college.

They didn’t speak to one another for three years. If Carson came home on leave he rarely took the time to visit Uncle Jack. There was the one time Carson brought Lydia to Snowbird shortly after their wedding. Carson dragged her over the steep mountain trail to see Jack. She bitched the whole way. Afterward, she said, “Why did we have to go visit that miserable old man?” Eventually Carson stopped going as well.

But shortly after his release from Leavenworth, Carson made the long trek over the mountain to see his uncle. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey of repentance for the long absence. Seeing his nephew for the first time in nearly four years, Uncle Jack thought he was looking at himself in the mirror 40 years ago, stepping off the DC-10 from Saigon. The same eyes, thought Jack, eyes that had witnessed horrors that haunt a man for a lifetime. He embraced his nephew like Lazarus back from the dead.

“I really appreciate you taking me hunting,” Carson said. “It’s been a while since I had that much fun.”

“My pleasure, Nephew. I must say, I was beginning to think I’d never see you again. What’s it been, four or five years?”

“Four years.”

“I don’t wanna sound like your momma, but why didn’t you never come see me?”

Carson paused before answering. He drank down the last of his coffee. “Well, I didn’t think you’d want to see me—after the things I called you. I reckon I was doing right by joining the Army. Still do. It’s taken me years to see that you were just trying to look out for me. I’m sorry. I was wrong to say those things.”

Jack stopped him. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Nephew. You got nothing to apologize for. You did what any patriotic young man would’ve done. Your country was attacked and you answered the call. The government ought to cherish young men like you. Unfortunately it does not. Instead, it sent you off to fight a war, but then made it impossible for you to win. There’s something wrong with the government, Nephew, not with you.”

Carson nodded in appreciation. Jack’s approval meant a lot to Carson. The thought that he had somehow disappointed him had weighed heavily on Carson’s conscience. The weight finally lifted, Carson now felt comfortable enough to talk about the war. “I don’t understand what went wrong. After 9/11 it felt like the whole country was united. The president ordered us to invade Afghanistan. The mission was clear-cut. We were there to exact vengeance on the bastards who’d attacked us and to prevent Afghanistan from ever being used as a staging area for future attacks. We achieved those objectives within a couple of months.

“Then came the decision to invade Iraq. The mission changed to ‘nation building.’ Everything got harder after that. The insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan grew. Casualties mounted. Support from the home front waned. Seemed like every time I picked up a newspaper, there was another story about U.S troops allegedly committing ‘war crimes.’ To satisfy its liberal critics, Washington tightened our ROEs. It got harder still.

“By then most of us had begun to question the mission. Crushing the Taliban and al Qaeda was easy enough. Making sure they stayed in their caves was more difficult, but doable. But building a modern democratic state out of a collection of medieval tribesmen was a bridge too far.

“Then in 2008 a new administration came in and reversed course. Our new mission was to stabilize the situation and withdraw. It was a complete about-face. The message to the Taliban and al Qaeda was unmistakable: the Americans are pulling out regardless of the stability of the new governments in Baghdad and Kabul. Those of us who’d already done multiple deployments felt betrayed. For seven long years we’d battled al Qaeda and the Taliban to create enough breathing room for a democratic government to take root. Now we were being ordered to pull out, let the chips fall where they may. On top of that, the administration issued new ROEs designed to avoid civilian casualties at all cost, but with no regard for our own troops at all. We were ordered to show ‘courageous restraint’ when being fired upon by the enemy. Meaning, if there was even the slightest chance that civilians would be killed if we returned fire, we were expected to hold our fire. Major General Carter even suggested awarding a medal to troops who demonstrated ‘courageous restraint.’ Naturally our casualties increased dramatically.

“I remember being in the field when the new ROEs concerning close air support came down. Our trucks had run into contact outside a village in Panjwayi. I ordered Holverson, my comms sergeant, to call in some Apache support. Holverson came over to me a minute later and said, ‘Captain, there’s a lawyer on the radio. Wants to talk to you.’ I said, ‘What in hell are you talking about?’ He said, ‘That’s right. There’s this lawyer at Kandahar Airfield. Said his job is to

review all CAS requests, to determine if they meet the ROEs.’ I couldn’t believe it. I grabbed the mic from Holverson and spent the next 20 minutes trying to explain my situation to this lawyer who was 50 miles away. He finally approved the CAS. But by then the Talibs who’d shot at us were long gone. Isn’t that crazy? I mean, what kind of commander-in-chief requires troops in the field to call a lawyer before they can defend themselves?

“Whenever the topic of the ROEs came up, guys would say things like ‘That’s above my pay grade. I just follow orders.’ It was our way of denying the truth. The truth is, we’re being led by fools, sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.”

Jack shook his head. It was a familiar story. GIs like Jack Carson had fought under similarly asinine ROEs in Vietnam.

Jack said, “It reminds me of when I was with MACV-SOG in ‘69. We were doing LRRPs along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail started up north and snaked through Laos and Cambodia before ending in South Vietnam. Officially, Laos and Cambodia were ‘neutral’ countries and therefore off-limits to our ground forces. Unofficially, they were anything but neutral. The trail that passed through their territory was the main infiltration route for communist forces and supplies entering South Vietnam. Cutting the trail was key to ending the war.

“Predictably the bureaucrats in Washington didn’t know what to do about the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Furthest they were willing to go was allowing limited airstrikes against the trail. But here’s the kicker: the Ho Chi Minh Trail cut through some of the densest jungle on the planet. So without someone on the ground calling in the airstrikes, the chance of those bombs hitting anything was zero. The ROEs, written by Harvard lawyers in Washington, had condemned us to fight a war we could not win. Imagine playing football where your side is confined to the field of play, but the opposing side is free to run out of bounds anytime it likes.

“Anyway, the generals in Saigon took it upon themselves to ignore the asinine ROEs. At that time we were losing close to 1,000 men every month in Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was in some places less than a few clicks from the border. So we started inserting six-man teams across the border into Laos and Cambodia, whose job it was to watch the trail, locate key arms depots or troop concentrations, and call in accurate airstrikes. The missions were strictly ‘illegal’ and therefore strictly voluntary. If we ran into trouble on the wrong side of the border, we were on our own. The cavalry wasn’t coming to the rescue.

“I volunteered. The missions lasted longer than a week sometimes. We’d set up in a hide next to the trail for days at a time without moving. Counting enemy troops and supplies coming down the trail. If we located an arms depot, we’d call in a B-52 strike. A B-52 strike is like nothing you’ve ever seen. Concussion from the bombs would suck the air right out of your lungs if you were too close. When it was over, the jungle looked like the surface of the moon for a couple of square miles. Smoky tree stumps. Ashy dirt. Smoldering gooks.

“Our missions had an immediate impact. The gooks were losing more men and supplies than they could send down the trail. They quickly figured out that somebody had to be calling in the airstrikes. They assigned an entire NVA division to patrol the trail. Missions became more dangerous after that. Teams would go out but never come back. Entire six-man teams, wiped out, listed officially as MIAs.

“Dogs were the worst. The gooks trained the dogs to pick up scents peculiar to American GIs: soap, aftershave, processed foods. To throw the dogs off their scent, guys started wearing gook sandals and started eating gook food, fish and rice.

“One morning in Cambodia, the dogs got onto my team. We radioed for immediate extraction and made a run for the border. But the gooks were there waiting. Must have been two companies of NVA regulars strung out along the border, blocking our escape route. We turned south, paralleling the border, to get around their blocking position. But when we shifted, they shifted too. They tracked us day and night. It took everything we had to hack our way through that jungle. Worst bush I’d ever seen. And hot as hell. To discourage our pursuers, we strung Claymore mines across our trail. They’d trip the Claymore—kill a few of them—but they kept on coming. We ran out of Claymores and water on the second day. My mouth was dry as cotton. Couple of guys drank their own piss to stay hydrated. Finally we went to ground on top of a small hill inside the Cambodian border, place called the Parrot’s Beak.

“This whole time we had radio contact with our people. From our position atop the hill we could see our Hueys and Cobra helicopters flying on the other side of the border. But they wouldn’t cross over to rescue us. The ROEs prevented them from crossing that imaginary line in the jungle.

“That night the gooks attacked. Hit us with mortar and machine gun fire first. Then they came in waves, some crawling on their bellies trying to get close enough before popping up right in front of you blazing away with an AK-47. Shoot one down, another would take his place. Battle lasted all night. We killed dozens of theirs, but they killed three of ours. Just before first light, we managed to find a gap in their perimeter and slipped through. Took us another two days to get back across the border.” Uncle Jack leaned forward to spit. “I know all about ROEs, Nephew. Washington has a long history of sending its sons off to fight unwinnable wars.”

Jack got up and went to the kitchen to check on the turkey. He stuck a fork in one breast and saw that clear juice seeped from the wound. Done cooking, he let the bacon brown under an open flame for a few minutes. Then he prepared two plates of sliced turkey breast, with sides of potatoes and poke salad and cornpone. He emerged and handed one plate to Carson. “That’s hot. Be careful. Would you like a refill on your coffee?” Carson said yes and handed Jack his empty mug.

Carson cut a slice of smoking hot turkey breast and tasted. “Oh, that’s delicious! How’d you get the bacon so crispy?” Jack returned with a full coffee mug in his outstretched hand. “You gotta take the tinfoil off for the final minutes. Good, ain’t it?” Carson rolled his eyes to indicate his approval.

Carson washed down the last mouthful of cornbread with a slug of warm coffee. His thoughts still on the war, he said, “Uncle Jack, this country has gone plum mad. No two ways about it. Look how we wage war. Within two months of 9/11, our army went through the Taliban and al Qaeda like crap through a goose. Killed a lot of bad guys and sent those lucky enough to surrender to Gitmo. Mission accomplished, right? Wrong. Within another two months, the finest attorneys in America were flocking to Gitmo to represent the very terrorists we’d captured. America has a split personality. One part wages the war, while the other part sides with the enemy.”

Jack interrupted. “That’s a fairly accurate description, Nephew. Our nation is a ‘house divided against itself,’ as the Good Book says. The country that responded to 9/11 with righteous vengeance is the healthy, vital part of America. It’s mom and pop, it’s Old Glory and the Star Spangled Banner, it’s Jesus Christ and George Washington. But there’s the other America, the diseased part that sent that battalion of ACLU lawyers to Gitmo.”

Jack paused to collect his thoughts and to satisfy his craving for nicotine. He pulled out a packet of chewing tobacco and stuffed his cheek with brown leaf. “Nephew, I’m afraid your war was lost before it even began. True, after 9/11 the country appeared to be united behind the president and his call to wage a war on terror. But that was only because the liberals among us were silent, lest they incur the wrath of an awakened American people. For the first time in decades the people could breathe freely without inhaling the pollution of political correctness. It felt good, I know. A lot of folks responded to the patriotic call. Only natural. Showed there was still life left in this country. But it was temporary. The liberals weren’t going to remain silent forever. Within weeks of 9/11, liberals were beginning to caution us about so-called ‘profiling’ Muslims. Islam, *The New York Times* assured us, is a ‘religion of peace.’ Hell, they even forced the president himself to give that ridiculous ‘Islam means peace’ speech. But folks still remembered those thousands of ‘peaceful’ Muslims dancing in the streets of Cairo and Amman and Baghdad when they heard about the Twin Towers coming down. The Southern Poverty Law Center warned us of an ‘alarming rise in hate crimes committed against Muslims.’ A pork sandwich left on the doorstep of a mosque became the equivalent of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center. The liberals insisted our biggest problem isn’t jihadists slaughtering 3,000 of our citizens; it’s our intolerance of Muslims. ‘The enemy is us!’ the liberals said.

“For the most part folks ignored the liberal lies. Nine-Eleven was still fresh in their minds, so most supported the war on terror.

“The invasion of Iraq was a foolish mistake. The vice president and his neo-con advisers must have cooked that nonsense up over one too many cocktails one night. They were going to give the Middle East, the most fractious place on planet earth, a democratic makeover. A Herculean task even with a healthy nation behind the war effort, but quite impossible with a powerful liberal elite determined to undermine any adventure that smacked of western paternalism. The clock was ticking soon as the bombs began falling on Baghdad. The liberals just bided their time. As the war dragged on, memories of 9/11 began to fade. This is the point at which a healthy media steps in to remind folks why we fight. Good press is vital to sustaining the war effort. That’s how the allies won World War Two. But the media in America today is absolutely dominated by America-hating 1960s liberals. They were just waiting for their opportunity to begin turning public opinion against the war. They found it in the images of Abu Ghraib.”

Carson said, “I remember Dan Mathers breaking the Abu Ghraib story. I was on my first deployment in Afghanistan. Lost my first soldier one day earlier. Poor kid bled to death right in front of me. That night all of us sat around the TV in the TOC watching. When Dan Mathers warned viewers that the images he was about to show were ‘disturbing,’ I sensed something significant was about to happen. To be honest, I was expecting to see Dachau or Buchenwald. But photos of Hajjis in dog collars being led around by uncovered American women? Oh, the horror! And how about the naked pyramid. Looked like hazing week from my college days.”

“The naked pyramid was enough, Nephew,” Uncle Jack said. “The liberal media has such a stranglehold on peoples’ imagination that a naked pyramid can be made to appear like Dachau or Buchenwald. Then began the liberals’ slow drumbeat of retreat. Reporters began using buzzwords like ‘quagmire’ to describe the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. That word ‘quagmire’ was dredged up from Vietnam, when pinko reporters like Dan Mathers were doing their best to undermine the war effort there too. And it worked. By 2008 most Americans wanted out of Iraq. The 2008 election was basically a referendum on the war. The election of an anti-war leftist was a clear demonstration of how completely the liberal media had succeeded.”

“What’s their motive?” Carson asked. “Why are liberals so intent on undermining the war effort? The jihadists want to kill them just as badly as they want to kill American soldiers. Liberals have no idea what kind of people we’re fighting. I can take them around to villages and show them women who’ve had the ears or nose cut off for not covering their faces in a hijab or burqa. I can show them little children with eyes gouged out because a relative passed intel to coalition forces. Jihadists are barbarians. Don’t the liberals understand that? Didn’t they see what happened on 9/11?”

Jack leaned forward in his chair and spat a dark stream of tobacco juice against the base of a pine tree. He dabbed his lips with the back of his sleeve. “Liberals saw what happened on 9/11, Nephew. They just reached different conclusions than the rest of us.”

“Which are?” Carson asked.

“That America had it coming.”

“That’s insane.”

“That it is, Nephew; that it is. But you see, the liberal mind believes that America, and the West in general, is a force for evil in the world. Terror attacks like 9/11 are therefore understandable, even justifiable. That’s what Professor Ward Churchill meant when he referred to the victims in the World Trade Center as ‘little Eichmanns.’ To Churchill and the liberals like him, the bourgeois businessmen working in the World Trade Center were the equivalent of Nazi bureaucrats, cogs in a machine of mass murder that commits ‘genocide’ in places like the Middle East. You hear the same rationale in the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the long-time pastor to the current President of the United States of America. After watching 3,000 Americans get buried alive in the Twin Towers, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright gave a sermon in which he said ‘America’s chickens are coming home to roost.’ In other words, America is reaping what it has sown. To those who evoked our national benediction ‘God bless America,’ Reverend Wright substituted his own version: ‘No, no, no, not God bless America. God damn America—that’s in the Bible—for killing innocent people.’

“Our illustrious president sat in Reverend Wright’s church for 10 years listening to him spew that kind of hate. What do you reckon happens when a man like that becomes the commander-in-chief of our armed forces? You think he picks up where George ‘W’ left off? You think he continues to wage war against Islamic extremism? Hell, he can’t even bring himself to say the words ‘Islamic extremism,’ lest it offend all those ‘moderate Muslims’ he’s always talking about. No, when this president takes office he goes to Cairo to meet with Islam’s leading clerics in a clear gesture of repentance for the sins of ‘W’s’ administration. He unilaterally withdraws all U.S. troops from Iraq, handing the country over to America’s mortal enemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran. He throws heroes like you in prison, but releases from Gitmo the

terrorists who pulled off 9/11. That's what our illustrious president does. It's a hard lesson to learn, Nephew, but you can't fight an enemy to your front while taking fire from the rear."

Carson jumped out of his chair and walked to the porch rail and spit. He was angered by Uncle Jack's word. He didn't want to believe that the whole war had been for nothing. Five thousand young Americans had died for nothing. "Maybe I'm a fool," he said, "but I have to believe that it was worth it. It's the only thing keeping me sane."

"I understand exactly what you're going through, Nephew. Believe me, I do. Been through it myself. I wrestled with the same frustrations after I got back from 'Nam. I can remember the day I stepped off the plane in San Francisco. There was a bunch of us GIs together, all decked out in our green uniforms, our medals and ribbons dangling from our puffed up chests. I was happy to be home. Happy to be alive. Happy to breathe American air again. Vietnam always smelled like rotting fish to me. Hated that damn fish smell.

"Anyway, I had a layover in San Francisco. First flight to Atlanta was in the morning at 0700. So I walked out of the terminal to get a cab into the city. To my left, I noticed a group of about 30 or so kids on the sidewalk. Hippies mostly, dressed in tie-dye and sandals, carrying protest signs with various anti-war slogans. Soon as they spotted our uniforms, they rushed us. One long-hair ran right up to me and spit in my face. 'Baby killer!' he yelled. 'Fascist pig!' My normal response would've been to flatten this punk. But for some reason I just stood there, in shock. The mob surrounded us shouting 'Baby killer! Baby killer!' over and over. The other GIs reacted same as me. Just stood there being pelted with objects and insults.

"It was devastating, like learning about some intimate betrayal for the first time. After everything I'd been through, this was my homecoming. It was a stab in the back. That wound has stayed with me long after the physical ones had healed."

"But isn't that what you were fighting for?" Carson asked. "Those protesters showed up at the airport to voice their opposition to the war. They have that right under the First Amendment? Don't they?"

"There's a huge difference between expressing one's opinion and treason. Those protesters who met me at the airport weren't just a bunch of idealistic college kids exercising their First Amendment rights. They were members of the Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS. The SDS were foot soldiers in a well-organized fifth column operating in the United States, whose sole purpose was to aid the communist cause in Vietnam. The SDS openly supported the Viet Cong. It carried Viet Cong flags in its marches. It held mock funerals for GIs who would hopefully return home that way from Vietnam. It met returning GIs at airports to spit in our faces. The SDS was just one front in a vast conspiracy, which by the time I returned home, numbered in the millions and had the support of intellectuals, celebrities, and politicians. During the war a long procession of activists and celebrities—SDS leader Tom Hayden, his wife and actress Jane Fonda, Staughton Lynd—made pilgrimages to Hanoi to show their solidarity with the communists. As hundreds of American POWs languished in the 'Hanoi Hilton' prison, Jane Fonda posed for a famous photograph atop a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun a few blocks away. The gun had recently been used to shoot down an American plane. Had she done that during WWII she'd have been hanged for treason. But during the Vietnam War she was feted by

the Hollywood elite and awarded an Oscar for best actress in the film *Klute*. Treason was ‘cool’ and ‘hip.’

“Is that the freedom I fought for? Is that the freedom you fought for? Like you, I tried to intellectualize it, tried telling myself I’d fought for freedom, for the freedom of that SDS protester to spit in my face, for the freedom of Jane Fonda to mock our POWs. But deep down I knew I was lying to myself, just like you’ve been lying to yourself. That SDS protester and Jane Fonda wanted me dead. It occurred to me then that if I was fighting for people who wanted me dead, I should’ve just saved the Viet Cong the trouble and put a bullet through my own head.”

Carson shook his head in utter exasperation. “If not freedom, what is there that’s worth fighting for?”

“Nephew, them big words politicians are always using—freedom, equality, democracy—don’t amount to a hill of beans when the bullets are flying and your buddies are dying all around you. It’s at that time, you realize that the only thing worth fighting for is *patria*.”

“What does that mean?!” Carson asked in confusion.

“*Patria* is an old Latin word that means father, or family, or country, which the Romans believed was a kind of extended family. Those who love their family or country enough to fight for it are patriots. Only thing worth fighting for, Nephew, is your ma and pa, your brothers and sisters, Pastor Owens and Principal Shields, the man in the foxhole next to you—the folks you love and who love you back.”

“What about Jane Fonda and Reverend Wright?” Carson asked.

“Not my *patria*,” Uncle Jack said. “Not my countrymen.”

“What about the president?”

“Not my president,” Uncle Jack said.

* * *

Carson trod the worn path up the mountain trail. The long talk with Uncle Jack hit him hard, like a punch to the gut. He’d given nearly a third of his life to the Army, done three deployments to Afghanistan, and for what, he wondered. He’d lost his wife and son; he’d lost his friends; he’d lost his youth and almost his sanity. Coming to terms with the fact that he’d gone through it for nothing was devastating.

On the other side, the trail followed a meandering brook. Next to the trail sat a 1,000-gallon reservoir that fed spring water to the houses in the hollow below. Carson stepped to drink from the bubbling overflow pipe. The water tasted sweet and cold. Farther down the mountain his rundown trailer occupied a deep cut in the hillside. As he drew closer, his redbone hound dog trotted out on three legs to greet him. The hound had lost his front leg to a rattlesnake bite. “How you doin’, Red,” Carson said, patting the old hound’s back and rubbing his floppy ears.

Carson paused on the threshold where he noticed a bundle of mail wedged in the crack of the front door. His mom must have put it there while he was hunting with Uncle Jack. He snatched up the bundle and went inside. He tossed the mail onto the coffee table and switched on the light that was on the coffee table. Also on the coffee table were a half bottle of Jack Daniels and his Colt .45 caliber pistol.

It was a now familiar routine. He sank back into his dilapidated lounge chair and turned on the TV. Using the palm of his hand, he spun the cap on the whiskey bottle and the cap tumbled to the floor and rolled into a corner. Hoisting the bottle to his waiting lips, he took a long pull, his throat convulsing like a python swallowing a pig. The alcohol overcame his gag reflex and the whiskey gushed from the corners of his mouth and ran down his belly. He looked down at his bulging whiskey-soaked belly in disgust. He hadn't worked out in months. *What a slob*, he said to himself. *A drunken slob*.

He surveyed his dismal surroundings. Barely habitable, the rusted-out trailer should've been buried in a landfill or sold to the Chinese to make lawn furniture a long time ago. His brother John had bought the trailer years ago for \$300 and dragged it up the mountain to use as storage space. Now Carson was using it as a 'temporary' home until something better came along. Its aged carpet, once a yellow shag, was pressed flat. A large black oil stain dominated the living room. His brother John had once rebuilt an engine there back in the 1980s. In one corner, a refrigerator-sized section of the floor was missing. At night it was the access point for numerous rodents and insects. So many holes in the trailer made it impossible to keep out the bugs. It was dark outside now and moths were beginning to flutter around the lamp on the coffee table. When they struck the lamp shade, they made a light tapping sound.

The feature Carson loathed most was the diamond-shaped window in the front door. *You know you're living in white trash hell when you have a diamond-shaped window in your front door*. After draining the whiskey bottle, he flipped it end-over-end like a juggler to grasp it by its neck. Then he threw it with all his might at the diamond-shaped window and the bottle smashed right through the diamond-shaped window and landed on the gravel driveway outside. "Bulls-eye!" he shouted.

The buzz was coming on strong now. Then Carson did something that buzzed people shouldn't do. He prayed. "Dear Lord," he said in a slurred voice. "Everything has turned to crap. I've lost nearly everyone and everything that's ever meant anything. Lost my friends. Lost my commission and my reputation. Lost my wife and son. I wanna know why, Lord. I know I ain't been much of a prayin' man. But I done my duty. Tried to be a fair man. Why has my life gone to seed?" The effects of the alcohol and his mood made him surly and spiteful and he cursed God. "I want an answer, Old Man! Are You even listening to me? Or maybe I'm just talking to my ceiling." Carson cocked his head sideways as if to listen for God's answer. But there was nothing but the sound of moths tapping the lamp shade. "That's what I expected. Must be entertaining watching all this misery and suffering. Is it not?"

Carson turned to the pistol lying on the coffee table. He eyed it closely for a full minute, as he did every night. *Is tonight the night?* Something inside him said *Why not?* He grabbed the pistol and slid the barrel into his mouth and cocked the hammer. The taste of CLP from the barrel reminded him of Afghanistan. His mind returned to the Korengal Valley. He wished he'd have died alongside his men that night. But he'd see them again, he thought. One pull on the trigger would send a hollow-point bullet tearing through the base of his skull, shattering his cerebral cortex. He'd feel no pain. He'd see a flash of light, then the journey to the other side. Carson gave himself to the count of three. One... two ...

Before he got to three, Bill Carson froze like a block of ice. For some reason, he felt drawn to the coffee table and the bundle of mail. One letter in particular caught his eye. The

handwritten return address was odd because he never received personal letters anymore. Removing the pistol from his mouth, he set it down on the coffee table. He brought the letter under the lamp for closer inspection. Katherine Murphy, 402 Spruce Street, Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania. Carson opened the letter with his thumbnail and read.

Dear Captain Carson,

I hope this letter finds you. Since your release from prison I lost track of you. Your old team Sergeant Wolfe gave me this address. I just wanted to reach out to let you know you are not alone. We are still here for you. Many people, via the Internet, are educating themselves about your case, how you were railroaded by the government. One day you will surely be vindicated.

That said, things have been hard for us since Murph passed away. My boys, Matthew and John, are growing like weeds. But they miss their father. It scares me to think how not having a father will affect them later in life. The VA paid Murph's death benefit until you and the others were charged. The payments abruptly stopped after that. I can't help but think the two are connected. I've gone round and round with the VA, but it's like talking to a brick wall. For a time I was earning enough money for the three of us, working at a plant that manufactures electronic components for aircraft. Last month, the plant manager called us all onto the factory floor and told us the plant was moving to Bangladesh and to start looking for other employment. Next Friday is my last day. Without that paycheck, I can't afford the rent here in the city any more. It's been a tribulation. But God has found us a new home in the country. Our parish priest told us about an old farm house out near Lancaster. We drove out to look at it the other day. The boys loved it. It's smack in the middle of Amish country. It's a bit of a fixer-upper, but it's dirt cheap compared to the city. And there's a 20-acre apple orchard behind the house. I think it will be good for the boys. Better schools. Cleaner air. The simple life.

Anyway, once we get settled, I'll send you our new address. In the meantime, please call me on the cell: 223-555-0180. I would love to hear from you, Bill. And you are welcome to visit us anytime.

God Bless,

Kathy Murphy

P.S. Sergeant Wolfe said he'd love to hear from you too. He's still at his old place in Kalispell, Montana. He's working as a hunting guide, I think.

Carson looked up toward the ceiling. "Okay, I guess that's my answer." He fumbled through his pockets for his cell phone, and tapped in Kathy's number.

CHAPTER 14

The moving van was nearly empty. Carson pulled the last large piece of furniture, a dresser, onto the hand truck and secured it with nylon straps. He then wheeled it to the ramp that protruded from the rear of the U-Haul. Kathy's eldest son Matthew tried to get on the other side of the dresser to help it down the ramp. "Don't stand in front of it, son," Carson cautioned. "Just let me ease it down myself." Carson got it to the ground. Then he rolled the dresser to the front door. Kathy stood in the living room directing traffic.

"That goes in the master bedroom," she said.

Carson nodded. "This is a beautiful piece. Handmade, isn't it?"

Kathy ran her hand over the dresser's smooth dark surface. "Solid walnut. My father made it for my mother. It was her wedding present."

Carson carefully maneuvered the heavy dresser through the house's maze of narrow doorways. Matthew followed close on his heels. In the master bedroom, Carson unstrapped it and scooted it up close to the wall. He turned, almost tripping over Matthew. "Careful, son." Carson returned to the living room. "That's all of it," he announced.

"Great," Kathy said. "Thank you so much, Bill. I couldn't have done it without you."

"And me!" Matthew said.

"And you, my first-born child," Kathy said, stroking the boy's head.

"I'm happy to help," Carson said.

"Believe me, I tried to get one of my cousins to help me move. They're less than useless when it comes to manual labor. Half are hooked on oxy or meth; the other half are just plain lazy. Seems like every family I can think of is falling apart."

Bill Carson had spent the better part of his life serving others. It felt good to be appreciated again. Felt good to be alive. Hadn't been more than a week ago that he stuck that pistol in his mouth. If not for Kathy's letter, he'd have pulled the trigger for sure. Apparently someone up there had plans for Bill Carson, though he had no idea exactly what those plans entailed. Humbled by the hand of Providence, Carson was just living moment to moment, waiting for a new path to open up before him.

Since arriving in Pennsylvania a week earlier, Carson had been helping Kathy and her boys move from Drexel Hill to the farmhouse near Lancaster. The two-story house, built in Pennsylvania Dutch style, was barely habitable. The original owner was Old Order Amish, so he'd built the structure without electrical circuits, in keeping with the tenets of his faith. The plumbing was ancient and in need of repair. In the meantime, Kathy and her boys had to rely on an old hand pump in the back yard for water, and oil lanterns at night. The wood cookstove was serviceable, but the flue pipe needed replacing. In short, the Murphy family needed a full-time handyman around the house.

The time came for Carson to return to North Carolina. Kathy grew anxious. Late at night she'd wander around the old house with a lantern looking at all the things that needed to be done. Carson sensed that she wanted him to stay, but she never came right out and said so.

Kathy's boys followed Carson around everywhere. The elder one, Matthew, had his father's eyes. Carson thought the resemblance uncanny, so much so that he found it difficult to look at the boy for any length of time. Murphy's dying words—"Tell Kathy that I love her"—still haunted him.

Worst of all, Carson found himself attracted to Kathy. An Irish beauty, she had long strawberry blond hair and curves in all the proper places. But there had been no romantic overtures between them; Carson made sure of that. He slept in a sleeping bag on the living room floor, while Kathy slept in the master bedroom. Carson couldn't shake the feeling that he was trespassing into another man's domain, a brother no less. He had to go.

Carson packed his things before dawn and gave the truck a once-over: checking the oil, tire pressure, and the radiator. Kathy and the boys were just coming downstairs to breakfast when Carson stepped inside to say goodbye.

"Wait a minute and I'll make you a few sandwiches for the road," Kathy said.

"No thank you, I'll pick something up on the road," Carson said.

Kathy gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Have a safe trip, Bill. God watch over you."

Matthew and John stood beside their mother, sadness in their eyes. Carson extended his hand to Matthew. The youngster grasped his hand firmly and gave it a good shake. As Carson proffered his hand to John, the boy rushed to him and latched onto his leg like a koala bear. "Please don't go, Uncle Bill!" he said, tears streaming down his tiny cheeks. "You can have my room if you want. I'll sleep on the floor. Don't go!" Carson patted the youngster's head. "It's alright, son. I'll come back some time." But the boy was inconsolable. "Don't go!" he cried.

Kathy started to tear up, too. "I'm sorry, Bill. You are the first man that has been around the house in a couple of years. He misses his father. He'll be alright though. Really. You've done more than enough for us already, Bill. We'll manage."

But Carson doubted whether she'd be able to manage the repairs to that house on her own. The house needed major repairs, too much for a woman raising two young children. Carson was stuck. He wanted to do the right thing. He thought for a minute. It was a dilemma. He couldn't abandon a widow and two children in that wreck of a house. But at the same time he didn't want to usurp the role of his departed friend.

"Alright, I'll stay," he said. "Long enough to get you guys on your feet. Get this house livable."

"Are you sure?" Kathy said, obviously elated.

"Yah. I can't leave you guys in this house," Carson said.

Little John jumped up and down. "Yay, Uncle Bill is staying!" He grabbed hold of Carson's hand and dragged him to the backyard. The yard was overgrown in knee-high fescue.

An ancient doghouse lay decomposing next to a sagging clothesline. John pointed to future building projects. "Here, we can build a new doghouse. Mommy says I can get a dog. Here, we can build a swing. Here, we can build a rabbit house."

Carson halted the precocious little architect in his tracks. "Maybe one day we'll build all those things. But right now, let's get you guys some running water and some electricity. Electricity that's safe and won't zap little boys like you." Carson tickled the youngster's ribs and the boy squealed and laughed with joy.

The old house's plumbing consisted of corroded lead pipes installed around the turn of the last century when people didn't know that drinking from lead pipes would turn you into a blithering idiot. Carson commenced to tearing out the old pipes and replacing them with safer PVC. Although not as efficient as copper, the plastic pipes were cheaper and easier to install. The boys helped some. But small boys are easily bored. More often than not, Kathy and Carson worked together as a team. Once the plumbing was finished, they moved on to installing electrical wiring. They ran new circuits underneath the crawl space.

Working together every day, Carson and Kathy got to know one another better. He understood why Murph was crazy about her. She was kind and considerate. Though devoutly Catholic, she wasn't overly sanctimonious. And she wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty, either. The crawl space beneath the ancient farm house was choked with cobwebs and littered with rat droppings and reeked of rat urine. Kathy didn't bat an eye when Carson needed her to crawl under with a tool or an armload of pipes. Very unlike Lydia, he thought. Lydia wouldn't have set foot in an old farmhouse like this, let alone crawl underneath it. When the work was done, the house had functional plumbing and at least one outlet in each room.

To celebrate the completion of the project, Kathy fired up the wood cookstove and made corned beef and cabbage. A traditional Irish dish, her mother had taught her to make it when she was a little girl. Carson had eaten corned beef before, but never made from scratch with quality beef. The meat Kathy used melted in the mouth like ice cream.

After the dishes were washed and dried and the boys tucked in their beds, Carson and Kathy sat in the living room talking. The radio started playing Al Green's "Let's Stay Together." Kathy stopped in mid-sentence. "Oh, I love that song. Here, let's dance," she said, holding out her hand.

Carson demurred. "I'm not much of a dancer."

"Don't worry. I'll lead."

Carson grasped her hand reluctantly. They danced, facing one another, bodies apart like two 13-year-olds at their first spring hop. Carson wasn't exaggerating when he said he couldn't dance. He rocked from side to side, the non-dancer's version of dancing. Kathy noticed Carson struggling.

"Here, Bill, just follow my feet," she said.

Carson kept his eyes trained on her tennis shoes, not only to avoid stepping on her toes but also to avoid eye contact. It was intensely awkward, being attracted to Kathy but not able to act on those feelings. He had to make up some kind of excuse to stop this, he thought. He'd say his

back hurt. He needed rest. It was late. He should get an early start in the morning. Something. Anything.

When he finally got enough nerve to look up, he saw Kathy's eyes wanting him. Her arms came around his neck, inviting him. Accepting the invitation, Carson's hands enveloped her waist and pulled her close. Her ample breasts pressing against his chest sent a twinge of excitement through his loins. He kissed her gently on the lips. She sighed. It was then that Carson hugged her harder, more insistently. He kissed her hard on the mouth. He took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes, and what he saw was woman, soft and enticing. He was man. They were meant to be together.

The boys noticed a difference right away in how Carson and Kathy behaved around one another. The hand-holding and stolen kisses sent them giggling. Too young to understand romance, they understood that Carson's presence made their mother happy. Happier than either could remember. For their part, the boys responded to Carson instinctively, like two wolf pups bonding to the new Alpha male.

The couple wed that spring in a small chapel outside Lancaster. Kathy insisted on a small ceremony, just family and a few friends. She'd had a big wedding the first time around with a huge expense of time and money, and figured that a simpler, more modest ceremony would do just fine. She wore her grandmother's wedding dress, while Carson came in a borrowed tuxedo. Kathy's father, recovering from recent heart surgery, barely made it to the altar to give the bride away. Little John served as the ring bearer.

The young family settled into quiet domesticity. Kathy stayed at home while Carson got a job with a local construction company. Carson informed the contractor that it would be temporary, until he found a job that paid better. The contractor expressed doubt whether there were any better paying jobs around there, the country being in a recession and all. But before long, the contractor became impressed with Carson's work ethic and rewarded him with the position of foreman. Carson got his own crew and a significant increase in pay.

The boys were ecstatic about having a new father. Carson made sure to enroll both in a parochial school run by Benedictines. The boys had previously attended public schools, where the teachers had pretty much let them do whatever they liked. Carson figured they needed structure and discipline, and the Benedictines gave it to them in spades. Carson also signed them up for Little League baseball. He began teaching them how to play. After he got home from work, they'd toss the ball around in the backyard.

One weekend, Carson took the family over to Gettysburg to visit Murph's grave. After placing a small flag and laying some flowers by the marble tombstone, Carson gave the family a guided tour of the historic battlefield. It was an unusually hot day for that time of year, like it was during the battle a hundred and fifty years ago. Little John got bit on the nose by a yellow jacket. His little nose swelled up like a ripe plum, but he didn't cry. At the end of the day, they had a picnic near Cemetery Ridge where Hancock's Corp had smashed Pickett's charge that sweltering summer day in 1863.

Eventually Carson got around to telling Kathy about Fanning, and immediately regretted it. She insisted that by hating Fanning he was only harming himself. He couldn't change the past or

bring back Murph and Holverson and Cole. He had to forgive Fanning and leave it in Jesus's hands. His divine justice would see to it that Fanning got his just deserts.

Hers was a woman's view of the world: passive, oblivious to the realities that underpin her own existence, blind to the walls that surround her and protect her and the men with guns who kill to defend those walls. The "forgiveness" of which she spoke was actually indifference. Having spent the better part of his life guarding the wall, Carson had learned that forgiveness was a luxury reserved for those who live on the inside. Fanning's crime was unforgivable. Letting it go wasn't an option.

Although Kathy never persuaded Carson to forget the past, she did make him mindful of his new responsibility as a husband and father. It added a dimension of responsibility which hadn't been there before. It gave him a new sense of purpose, but also made him feel guilty for the things left unresolved. Holverson, Cole, and Murph cried out to him from the grave for justice. His loyalties were divided between his new family, which he loved dearly, and the ghosts he brought back with him from Afghanistan.

Every so often Carson would see Fanning, not just in his memories but staring back at him from the newsstand of the local Piggly Wiggly. *Time* magazine once voted Fanning "Person of the Year." *People* magazine had the temerity to put Fanning's ugly mug on its front cover under the headline "The Most Beautiful Woman in America." All reminders to Carson that when it came to Fanning, God's justice needed an executioner.

With summer just around the corner, Carson made a trip to North Carolina to pick up some tools and equipment needed to finish the renovation to the old farmhouse. He visited Uncle Jack. Jack was pleasantly surprised by the news of his nephew's recent nuptials.

"Married?" Jack exclaimed. "Well now, that's good news. Who's the lucky lady?"

"Katherine Murphy. She's a Yankee," Carson admitted.

"Where have I heard that name before?"

"She's the widow of my former weapons sergeant, 'Murph'."

"Now I remember. Her husband was killed in action at Yaka Chine."

"That's right."

"She have any children?"

"Two boys. Great kids. One is nine, the other is five."

"Do you love her?"

Carson paused before answering. "I do."

"I sense some hesitation," Uncle Jack said.

"About her, I have no doubts. She's a gem. It's me I'm worried about. It's just that he—Murph—was my friend. I loved him like a brother. And he adored Kathy and those boys, more than life itself. Part of me feels guilty, like I'm betraying him somehow. Stealing his wife and his children."

“Don’t do that to yourself. You’re always setting yourself up for failure with unrealistic expectations. Murph’s not coming back. And she needs a husband. Those boys need a daddy. If Murph truly loved his family he’d want you to marry Kathy and take care of those boys.”

“I guess you’re right,” Carson said.

“I know I’m right, Nephew.” Jack combed his beard with his fingers, weighing his next words carefully. “I never said this before—out of respect—but Lydia was never right for you. You were from two different worlds. When I met her that one time, I said to myself, ‘This marriage won’t last.’ What she done—getting that abortion and divorcing you—is downright vicious. Women like that ain’t got no soul. She cares more about some fish than her own baby growing inside her.”

“The California smelt,” Carson said, contemptuously.

“That’s right, the smelt. Some stinkin’ catfish is worth more than a human being to people like that. But here you have a second chance. Stick by this girl Kathy. Raise them young’ins up right. Heck, have a few more youngins of your own. Why not?”

Carson grinned. Another of Uncle Jack’s tough-love speeches, he thought. “I appreciate the advice. I should listen to you more often.”

“I’m cheaper than one of them fancy therapists that people are going on about,” Jack said.

Carson sat in silence for a few more minutes, looking out at the blue mountains. “Anyway, I gotta go now. I’ll be back in the fall when the leaves turn. Let you meet Kathy and the boys.”

“Perfect timing,” Uncle Jack said. “I gotta nice buck up yonder on the mountain. Ten-pointer. Been savin’ him for a hunt. We’ll take them boys huntin’ for him come fall.”

Carson climbed the familiar trail up the mountain. At the top, where the trail switched back, he jumped a gang of turkeys. The large beautiful birds got a running start and flew out over the hollow. Carson watched them glide to the other side, where they landed in a copse of tall white pines. Carson remembered Uncle Jack taking him up there when he was just a child. Situated at the edge of Uncle Jack’s property line, the ground there was flat with a spring nearby. Perfect place for a homesite, Carson thought. When he brought Kathy and the boys this fall he’d take them up there. And maybe if he could talk Jack into selling it, start building a cabin there next spring.

CHAPTER 15

Colonel Fanning took his seat beneath the seal of the Army of the United States. He reclined in his high-backed chair to survey the room through imperious eyes. The closed hearing consisted of a couple dozen or so officers and enlisted men and women, plus a stenographer and a few observers from the Inspector General's office. Fanning loved this part, when all went silent in deference to his authority.

"Is everyone present, Sergeant?" Fanning asked.

"Yes sir," the aide said.

"Good, bring in today's witness," Fanning said.

Since its inception, the Army's Rainbow Review Board (RRB) had gone after military chaplains mostly. Fanning used his platform to full effect. Not given the benefit of counsel or normal due process, witnesses were relentlessly harangued. What he lacked in rational argument, Fanning made up for in volume. He shouted down witnesses who made the mistake of defending themselves. He made generous use of his wooden gavel whenever someone spoke out of turn. The last witness, a Christian chaplain out of Ft. Lewis, was berated for an hour over his decision not to perform a same-sex wedding. The chaplain tried to equivocate. He claimed his "conscience" wouldn't allow him to consecrate something he believed to be "intrinsically disordered." He mentioned "religious liberty." At which point Fanning gavelled him into silence and delivered an ultimatum. "Either you will perform the wedding, or go back to street preaching in Seattle." Given a choice between his faith and his commission, the chaplain meekly chose the latter. As he was walking out, Fanning opined. "They're all the same, these Christians. A little heat and they melt like snowflakes."

Today's hearing was to be an important test for Fanning's RRB. For the first time, the board would call a general officer.

Satisfied that everyone was in place, Colonel Fanning motioned for his aide to call in the witness. A man of average height with gray hair and gray eyes, he wore a plate of service ribbons and decorations on his heart that told a warrior's saga of 30-years' service to his country.

"State your name and rank for the record," Fanning said officiously.

"Brigadier General Frank Barton," said the witness.

Barton's appearance before the board was no accident. As soon as General O'Malley had filed the paperwork overturning Captain Carson's murder conviction, the Secretary of the Army, at the behest of the president, launched an investigation. Although no proof could be found, the Pentagon suspected that General O'Malley and General Barton had colluded to release Captain Carson. Both were immediately slated for early retirement. The investigation searched for something, anything that could be used to drum both generals out of the service. In Barton's case, they were rewarded with the transcripts of two speeches he'd given to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) in the 1980s.

Colonel Fanning's first question: "General Barton, are you a homophobe?"

"No, I have no fear of mankind," General Barton said.

“The term ‘homophobe,’ as commonly understood, refers to a deep-seated hatred of homosexuals. It has nothing whatsoever to do with a fear of mankind. But I’m sure you know that already.”

“What I know is that every year another batch of neologisms emerges from the ‘Ministry of Truth,’ and it’s hard to keep track of them all.”

“Let’s try another one, shall we? General, are you a sexist?”

“No. I’ve always loved women. I even married one.”

“Since you seem to be having difficulty with basic vocabulary, let me rephrase the question. Do you believe that men and women are different and, therefore, ought to pursue different roles in life? For example, encouraging a young woman to forego a career in order to raise children—that would be sexist.”

“Last time I checked, women were the only half of the species capable of having children. Encouraging a young woman to raise the children she has seems not only logical but natural. Until such time as people can conjure forth life as an exercise of their volition, we’re stuck with good old fashioned biological reproduction.”

“Which is a textbook definition of sexism,” Fanning said.

“Or what they used to call sanity,” Barton retorted.

Colonel Fanning held up some papers for everyone to see. “I have in my hands the transcript of two speeches given by you before the VFW. One speech, given December 7, 1980, concerns the question of whether to admit homosexuals into the armed services. At that time homosexuals were barred from serving openly in any branch of the armed services. According to this transcript, you were in favor of upholding the ban. Did you give this speech?”

“I did,” said General Barton.

“The other speech, given October 10, 1982, concerned the question of whether to admit women into combat roles. Not surprisingly, you opposed that progressive initiative as well. Did you give this speech, General Barton?”

“I most certainly did.”

“Do you stand by the hate-filled reactionary opinions contained in both speeches?”

“I stand by every word, although I reject your false characterization.”

“Is that so?” Colonel Fanning said, more than happy to give General Barton all the rope he needed to hang himself. “Well, General, please enlighten us as to why women should be barred from serving in combat roles.”

“Because nature has not equipped women for combat. They are far weaker and less aggressive than men. Whether behind a rifle or a tank gun, or the stick of a fighter aircraft, even the strongest, most aggressive female is no match for the average male war fighter. As such, women constitute a liability to overall unit effectiveness.”

“So, you’re not even going to disguise your sexist attitudes behind the now familiar argument that women shouldn’t serve in combat units because they might develop romantic

relationships with their male counterparts, thereby impairing unit readiness? All that hanky-panky in the trenches might distract them from their mission, and so forth.”

“That’s a cowardly argument. No, women shouldn’t serve in combat units because they cannot fight. If they could, we’d have seen some evidence of that in, say, the last 6,000 years of recorded history. But we do not. The history of warfare going back to the Stone Age is the story of an all-male fraternity. And there’s a reason for that, other than just a bunch of mean boys excluding the girls from the warrior clubhouse. War is an existential struggle. Faced with imminent violent death and societal extinction, human beings will put forth their maximum effort to survive. In war, that boils down to killing the enemy before he kills you. All-male military units are the gold standard for achieving that objective on the battlefield.”

Colonel Fanning interrupted to say, “Since females were admitted into combat roles in the U.S. military, efficiency ratings haven’t declined as many had predicted. How do you respond to that, General?”

“Efficiency ratings generated by politics, not facts. These mixed infantry units are a joke; and every combat veteran knows it. If those male-female units ever come up against a comparably equipped, determined foe, they’ll melt like butter.”

Colonel Fanning looked down at the papers in front of him, mentally preparing the next question. “According to the text of the speech, you actually believe the efforts to integrate women into combat roles was some kind of plot to weaken our military. Tell us, General, who’s behind it? Is it the commies? Is it the Jehovah’s Witnesses? Or perhaps the Salvation Army?”

“It’s no secret that radical egalitarians were behind the efforts to lift the ban on women serving in combat roles. And they did it not to promote equal opportunity for women, but to undermine the combat efficiency of our armed forces, with the ultimate goal of abolishing the military as an institution in our society. They believe they can rid the world of the scourge of war simply by ridding it of armies and soldiers and weapons, thereby establishing a ‘perpetual peace,’ as Kant called it. Which is to say, they are a bunch of fools, dangerous fools.”

“Why are they fools to believe that people can one day live in peace with one another?” Fanning asked.

“Because you can no more eliminate war from the human condition than you can eliminate hate, fear, pride, jealousy, or greed. The choice America faces, any nation faces, is not between a world with war and one without; the choice is between an independent nation and one dependent on the ‘good graces’ of stronger nations. If we want to remain free to chart our own destiny, we must sometimes fight. If you want peace—on your terms—prepare for war; the Roman proverb says. The only guarantor of our nation’s independence is our military. All-male combat units are the gold standard for achieving victory on the battlefield. If you play around with that by admitting females into combat roles, you threaten our nation’s very survival, you threaten our way of life.”

Fanning interrupted angrily. “That’s nonsense! Those who fought to lift the ban did so because all-male units contradict our commitment to absolute equality between the sexes.”

“All-male units *do* contradict the principle of absolute equality between the sexes. And the reason why we should go back to all-male units is because the principle of absolute equality between the sexes is a lie. One of the places you discover that is the battlefield, where women are

either fleeing the conflict, or caught between the warring sides, or functioning as nurses—but never playing a key role in the actual fighting.”

Colonel Fanning said, “The Norwegians and the Dutch have successfully integrated women into combat roles for over 30 years.”

General Barton could barely contain his laughter. “Neither of those countries have fought a real war in over a century. Both their militaries would be hard-pressed to handle a riot, let alone a war. Those are poor examples. The Soviet experiment with women in combat during World War II is the best example of what can happen when a nation allows ideologues to overrule national security. Shortly after their revolution in 1917, women were integrated into all branches of the Soviet military. Lower ranking officers were also elected democratically—by the troops. Both policies in keeping with the radical egalitarian tendencies implicit in Marxism. And both policies nearly led to the destruction of the Soviet Union. When the Nazis invaded in 1941, they met little more than an armed mob. Soviet formations were no match for the Germans. Popularly elected officers misled their troops. Women in infantry units couldn’t carry their own weight. By the second year of the war, women were relegated to mostly supply and medical units. But even in their non-combat roles, women faced recurrent problems. Rape and sexual assault were common. The better looking women invariably ended up under the protection of higher ranking male officers. They referred to them as their ‘camp wives.’ By the end of the war, all officers were appointed by superiors based upon battlefield performance, and all frontline units were exclusively male. Soviet units were now able to match the Germans on the battlefield, and gradually they pushed them out of Russia. After the war the Soviets never renewed their egalitarian experiment. National security was too important to be left to dumbass ideologues.”

Colonel Fanning cut the general short. “Thank you, General, for that lengthy exposition of your antiquated sexist opinions. Let’s move on to your views of homosexuals, shall we? In this second speech to the VFW, you argue that homosexuals should be barred completely from serving in the armed services. Why, General? Please enlighten us.”

“Homosexuality is a deviant sexual behavior. As the U.S. military is a reflection of what is best about our nation, it ought to instill in its soldiers the best virtues, like fidelity, courage, friendship, as well as a model of sexual virtue. That model is natural marriage between a man and a woman.”

General Barton suddenly felt a stabbing pain, like someone sticking a knife in his heart. The pain started in his chest and shot down the length of his left arm. His fingers turned numb. It was his heart acting up, he knew. The timing couldn’t be worse. Sergeant Humphries, who sat to General Barton’s left, noticed the general wince and his face tighten up. He immediately reached in his pocket for a blood pressure pill, poured a glass of water, and set the pill on the table near the general’s hand. But the general ignored the pill. He hated the pills because they dried his mouth and made it difficult for him to speak clearly. Besides, he mustn’t show weakness in the face of the enemy. He mustn’t give Fanning the satisfaction, so he mustered every last ounce of strength in his old body and soldiered on.

Colonel Fanning was so angered by the general’s responses, he never noticed the look of pain on his face. “How did you come by those vile opinions? Are you a Christian, General Barton?”

“Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, I’m proud to say.”

“Thought so. Yet another Christian bigot insisting that the rest of us live according to your reactionary creed. Thank heavens we live in a secular democracy, and such narrow-minded religious opinions no longer inform public policy in this country. Unfortunately, there are still a few dinosaurs who haven’t gotten the memo yet. Don’t you know, General, that your private religious opinions about homosexuality have no place in the U.S. military?”

“The Resurrection and the Incarnation of Christ are religious opinions. That homosexuality is a filthy, disgusting, abnormal behavior is a fact of nature accessible to any rational human being, regardless of their religious opinion, or lack thereof.”

“Don’t be fatuous, General. Your opinions about homosexuality are rooted in your Christian faith. The Bible explicitly condemns homosexuality, in numerous places.”

“It does. But the Bible also condemns murder and theft. Don’t tell me you believe prohibitions against murder and theft are based exclusively on religious opinion?”

“I’ll ask the questions!” Colonel Fanning shouted, the coolness of his customarily icy demeanor in rapid meltdown. “Whatever their derivation, your vile homophobic opinions are now in the minority, I’m proud to say.” He mocked General Barton’s Texas drawl. “Your redneck religion doesn’t apply here anymore. You’ve been outvoted.”

“Arriving at the truth is not a democratic process.”

“But it is a scientific process. Homosexuality, the psychologists tell us, is perfectly normal behavior.”

“Forty years ago the psychologists told us homosexuality was abnormal.”

Colonel Fanning grew more agitated by the second. “As a transgender person, I can tell you from my own experience that homosexuals *are* born that way.”

“There’s no proof of that. There’s no such thing as a gay gene, or a transgender gene.”

“Homosexual attractions appear very early and persist throughout a lifetime. That’s what they mean by sexual orientation. Do you deny that?”

“Pedophilia and rape fantasy appear very early and persist throughout a lifetime. Are you also in favor of pedophiles and rapists serving openly in our military?”

Colonel Fanning’s face flushed red. His eyelids narrowed into two narrow slits. “This is not a debate. Homosexuals have served in all branches of the military from our nation’s inception. Only back in the old days they had to hide from the witch hunters like you. Never again! Now, thankfully, we can serve openly, with dignity and honor. Any soldier, no matter their rank, who cannot accept that needs to ‘find work in the private sector,’ in the words of our beloved commander-in-chief.” Fanning then delivered his standard ultimatum. “General Barton, this board finds you guilty of holding sexist and homophobic beliefs. Your beliefs are incompatible with military service. The question now becomes, will you renounce your beliefs and submit to re-education?”

“When hell freezes over,” the general growled.

“This board interprets your response as a no,” Fanning said. “Do you have anything further to say in your defense before this board issues its recommendation?”

“I do have something to say,” General Barton said, his eyes locked onto Fanning like an old hawk. “I think my speech, given over 40 years ago, has a tremendous bearing on what has occurred here today. Anyone unsure of the implications of allowing sexual degenerates to serve openly in our armed services need look no further than you, Colonel ‘Michelle’ Fanning.” General Barton pointed accusingly at Fanning. “Look at you, all dolled up in that clown makeup. Those fake tits. You’re a damned disgrace to the uniform, and you’re a traitor to boot.” The general took a deep breath before delivering his final blow. “In your capacity as the battalion S2 at Asadabad Airfield and Camp Democracy from April 2009 to May 2010, you did in fact provide classified intelligence to the enemy. Isn’t that right? You are a traitor to your country, Colonel!”

Colonel Fanning immediately grasped his trusty gavel and slammed it down. “General, you will confine your statement to the topic set forth by this review board!”

The general ignored the warning and raised his voice to make sure the stenographer transcribed every word. “This much we know: Fanning here formed a sexual relationship with one Afghan terp by the name of Muhammad Rashid Haq. Old Muhammad, it turns out, was a Taliban spy. His brothers, his cousins—all were in the mountains fighting with the Taliban. Later, Fanning did pass thumb drives containing classified Defense Department intelligence to Muhammad, who in turn passed them along to another fella named Ahmad Khan, a local Taliban honcho. Khan then used the intel contained on the thumb drives to carry out two ambushes of U.S. troops. The first ambush killed 19 Navy SEALs on June 27, 2009, at Abas Ghar Mountain. Exactly one week later, Khan carried out a second ambush on a team of Green Berets that had been sent to the village of Yaka Chine to capture him. Khan was again tipped off in advance of the raid—by you and Muhammad. Half the team was killed; the other half managed to escape, including its leader Captain William Carson. Am I right so far, Colonel?”

By now, Colonel Fanning was out of his seat, shouting at the two MPs who were standing guard at the door. “Remove him! Get him out of here, now!” The MPs, both low-ranking enlisted men, walked to where General Barton was seated and politely asked him to stand up. But Barton refused to budge. In the tussle, Fanning’s blond wig came loose of its moorings and cocked sideways on his pale bald head. “Get him out!” he screamed. The MPs stood there wondering what to do next, since enlisted men simply didn’t manhandle generals. Meanwhile, General Barton continued with his indictment of Fanning.

“Captain Carson managed to survive the ambush at Yaka Chine. As his commanding officer, I assigned Carson the mission of uncovering the mole who was passing intel to Khan’s network. Carson’s a bloodhound. True to form, he captured Khan. Brought him back to Camp Democracy. I’ll bet that put a scare into you, when he showed up at Democracy trailing Khan? You warned Muhammad, who then passed word to Khan’s network. You suggested a rescue operation. Even provided plans of Camp Democracy, I’ll bet. But Khan cracked under questioning before the rescue operation could come off, and he led Carson to Muhammad. Carson discovered one of your thumb drives hidden among Muhammad’s property. With your lover, your coconspirator now in custody, it was only a matter of time before Muhammad cracked, too. You had to act fast, or it was Leavenworth for you. Under cover of the planned

Taliban rescue operation, you were able to slip into the Green Berets' B-hut where Khan and Haq were being held and you killed both men. Then you removed the incriminating thumb drive from Carson's laptop. But you weren't satisfied merely with getting rid of the evidence and the witnesses that could link you to treason. No, you used Captain Carson's personal sidearm to kill Khan and Haq. And when Captain Carson was charged with the crime, you sealed his fate by testifying against him at trial. Besides committing treason and murder, you sent an innocent man to prison.

"Any natural man would feel shame at the mention of these heinous deeds. But not you, you unnatural creature. Here you sit, the head of this little clown show, celebrated like some kind of national hero. You're no hero. Captain Carson's the hero. You, on the other hand, are nothing but a cheap transvestite, a murderer, a traitor ... to your country... to the men who died serving..." The general's breathing became shallow. His face turned white as cotton.

Sergeant Humphries shouted out for medics, who soon arrived from the infirmary. They asked General Barton questions but he sat in silence, staring at Fanning who continued yelling, "Drag him out! Drag him out now!" The medics tried to examine Barton. He didn't respond. He sat like a statue, his eyes still locked on Fanning. Slowly, the general sank to the floor and rolled over onto his back.

One medic checked his pulse, then shook his head indicating a negative. General Frank Barton was dead.

CHAPTER 16

“Come here, boys,” Carson said, pointing at the odd growth on the apple tree. “See how this sprout doesn’t merge into the main branch? That’s called a ‘sucker’.”

“Why do they call it a sucker?” John asked. John was in the “why” phase of life when his natural curiosity punctuated every activity with a question.

Carson didn’t mind, though. He enjoyed teaching. “Because it sucks the nutrients away from the main branch that produces the apples. We have to cut it off or we’ll end up with tiny apples.” Carson climbed a latter, placed the tongs of the pruning shears around the base of the unwanted sucker, and squeezed tightly. It fell to the ground where John gathered it up and placed it on a nearby brush pile. Carson pulled a can of spray paint from his hip pocket. After shaking it for a half minute, he squirted a thick layer of paint over the exposed wound.

“Why do you paint the tree?” John quipped.

“To protect the tree from bugs,” Carson said. “The paint acts like a Band Aid.” Carson descended the latter. He retracted it and moved it aside.

There were about 20 apple trees behind the old farmhouse, mostly red delicious with a few Granny Smiths thrown in for cross-pollination purposes. The old trees hadn’t been pruned or fertilized in ages. What fruit fell in the fall was quickly scarfed up by the whitetail deer that roamed the area in small herds. Carson’s first project that spring was to get the orchard in shape. Much of the heavy lifting had already been done back in March before the first blossoms. It was now June and he and the boys were trimming the last suckers.

Kathy marveled at Carson’s ability to make everything seem like fun to the boys, since she could barely get them to brush their teeth before bedtime. Carson had them hauling around buckets of chicken manure. When not in school or playing baseball, they helped Carson in the orchard. Their curious minds peppered Carson with questions.

“Alright, let’s put down some blood,” Carson directed. John used a rake to scrape away the leaves and twigs while Carson and Matthew came behind him and dusted the ground in a thin layer of blood meal. John raked the dried cow’s blood into the soil.

“Careful you don’t cut the tree’s roots,” Carson said to John.

“Why do we use the blood?” John asked.

Carson pinched the boy’s tiny nose. “The smell of blood scares the deer away. It also has the added benefit of fertilizing the tree.”

Once the soil was good and tilled, Carson took a pickaxe and, lifting it high overhead, he sank its spike into the ground. He pulled the pickaxe out carefully, leaving a fist-sized hole in the ground. Walking to the other side of the tree, he made another hole. In all, he made six holes around the apple tree.

“Bring the bucket of fertilizer, Matthew,” he said. Matthew lugged the heavy bucket containing 10-10-10 fertilizer over to where Carson was working. “Fill these holes up level with the ground,” he instructed.

John squatted down next to the hole to look in. “Why do you put it in the hole?” he asked, helping his brother pour fertilizer pellets into the holes.

“It delivers nutrients to the tree’s roots over a long period of time,” Carson said.

By now the sun was down over the horizon. Fireflies were beginning to appear. John chased after a fly trying to cup it in his hands. Carson stood back to admire their work.

“All done,” Matthew said.

“We should have good apples in the fall,” Carson said proudly.

“Candy apples?” John asked.

“Good, healthy apples,” Carson corrected.

“Dinner!” Kathy’s voice rang through the dark shrouded apple trees.

“Let’s call it a day, boys,” Carson said, coaxing the youngsters toward the house. He could see Kathy waiting on the threshold of the back porch. He stopped the boys briefly to whisper in their ears. “Take your dirty shoes off before you guys go in the house, okay? Your mother will kill us for tracking mud all over her living room floor.” The boys shucked off their shoes and squeezed past their mother. But Kathy blocked Carson’s path into the house. They stood face to face. He gave her a peck on the lips, trying to gauge her mood. “Anything the matter?” he asked.

Kathy wrapped her arms around Carson and gently rested her face against his chest. “Wolfe called,” she said. “He said your old CO General Barton passed away. Heart attack. Wolfe wants you to give him a call. He said it was urgent.”

Carson nodded. “Okay, I’ll call him after dinner.” Kathy held on to Carson for a long minute. Something about Wolfe’s phone call portended change—always a frightening thing to a mother with small children.

Their small family sat together before a steamy plate of spaghetti and meatballs. On the side, Kathy had prepared French bread and salad. Carson sat at his usual place at the head of the table in a large oak chair. Built in the Amish style, the chair had come with the house. Carson was much distracted by Kathy’s revelation about General Barton. The boys were already picking at the meatballs with their forks.

“Let’s say Grace first,” Kathy said, swatting their hands away. “Bill, would you do the honors?”

Carson folded his hands and bowed his head. “Lord Jesus, thank you for this delicious food that we are about to receive. In your name we pray. Amen.”

After dinner, Carson retreated to the backyard with his cell phone. He tapped in Wolfe’s area code and number. It was still late afternoon in western Montana when Wolfe answered.

“Glad to finally get you on the phone, Captain,” Wolfe said. “Been a long time.”

It had been a long time since anyone had referred to him as Captain. Wolfe’s voice and the military title summoned old memories. “Too long, Team Sergeant. I’ve been meaning to call, but you know how it goes. Been real busy lately.”

But Wolfe understood the real reason why Carson never called. It's a common experience among combat veterans. In a war zone they faced death together and formed a deep and unequivocal relationship. But back in the world most circumstances are equivocal. The basis of the relationship changes. It's difficult to go from the deepest kind of connection to just being casual friends.

Wolfe spoke. "I guess Kathy told you, General Barton passed away."

"She did. How did it happen?"

"The general died in the middle of his hearing before the so-called Rainbow Review Board. Right there in front of everyone, he had a heart attack. They say he was dead before he hit the floor."

Carson had recently read an article about the Rainbow Review Board, about the purges being carried out in the name of "diversity." And he knew the name associated with it. The anger that he'd repressed for so long began to percolate to the surface again.

"That's Fanning's little outfit, isn't it?" Carson asked, though he already knew the answer.

"One and the same. The president himself appointed Fanning to run the circus. You know he's a full-bird colonel now?"

"I heard."

"When I heard what happened to General Barton I called down to Ft. Bragg and spoke to some of our people. One of them knows the general's aide. He was present during the hearing. He said the general went after Fanning. Laid it all out there before God and everyone: Muhammad Rashid Haq and Ahmad Khan, the thumb drive, Fanning's treason. Fanning tried to shut him down, but the general kept talking up until the moment he died."

"Is that so?" Carson said.

"The few news reports that came out afterward mentioned only that the general had died during his hearing after being 'exposed as a sexist and homophobe.' But no mention of Fanning's treason or what General Barton actually said. And the Army's official transcript of the hearing is 'unavailable.' A cover-up is underway, Captain. We're working on getting a copy of the transcript from the stenographer who was there."

Carson, who listened in silence, was having a hard time processing these new revelations. He'd always believed that General Barton had abandoned his team in order to save his own career. All that time while he languished in Leavenworth, Carson had pictured Barton in some cushy office in the Pentagon: a pretty secretary; lunches with senators and congressmen; on his way to receiving that second star.

"How did General Barton find out about Fanning?" Carson asked. "I never spoke to him about it."

"None of us talked to him about Fanning. He must've figured it out on his own. The word is he had something to do with getting us released from prison."

"How?"

"Do you remember General O'Malley?"

“Sure. He’s the commandant of Ft. Bragg. The general who reviewed our appeal.”

“Well, O’Malley and Barton are old friends. They came up together in ‘Nam. Guess who’s up next before Fanning’s board?”

“O’Malley?”

“That’s right. Fanning is getting revenge. He’s tying up loose ends. There are only a few of us left who know the truth. What Barton did during that hearing has likely got Fanning spooked. I don’t mean to alarm you, Captain, but I’d watch my six from here on out. No telling what Fanning might do.”

“I will,” Carson said.

“Look, the general’s funeral is two weeks from Saturday. He’s to be buried at the National Cemetery in Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia. Me and a few of the team guys plan on attending. Doc will be there. Donovan said he’s coming too. We’d love to have you there, Captain.”

“That’s June 23?”

“Yes. If I’m not mistaken, that’s Gay Pride day,” Wolfe said. “Kind of ironic, don’t you think? I mean, the reason the general had to appear before that damn review board was to explain his views on gays in the military.”

Carson had a sudden epiphany. He got to his feet and walked to the far side of the yard. The planet Mars, Roman god of war, appeared bright red in the night sky. He stared at the red planet for a minute, deep in thought. Finally he said, “I’ll call you tomorrow at 0930, Sergeant. I have something to discuss with you.”

In the morning, Carson dropped the boys off at school as usual. But this morning he lingered for a few extra minutes with them in the truck. He gave each a big hug before saying goodbye. Then he drove to the jobsite where he’d been working for the past three months. He told the contractor that he’d found a better paying job closer to home. He apologized for not giving notice and offered to forego payment on the time he’d already put in this month. The contractor paid him anyway. Shaking his hand, the contractor said he’d keep a position open if Carson changed his mind.

Back at home, Carson found Kathy in the garden fashioning a trellis for her baby tomato plants. Kathy was surprised to see him back so early.

“What’s happened?” she asked. “Did you get laid off?”

“I have to go away for a while,” he said.

Kathy suddenly grew worried. “Where to?”

“To Georgia. To attend General Barton’s funeral.” Carson hated lying to those he loved. He embraced her to keep from having to look at her face.

Kathy instinctively pushed him away for precisely the opposite reason: so she could read his eyes. “How long will you be gone?”

“Couple weeks. Maybe longer.” Carson tried changing the subject. “When I get back, how about we get a dog? I’ll build a doghouse for it. Training and taking care of a dog will teach the boys responsibility. Start thinking about breeds. I’m leaning toward a Labrador. They’re smart dogs. Easy to train. Great with children.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Kathy asked. Carson shook his head no. “This is about that Fanning, isn’t it?” she demanded. But Carson knew when to stop. Anything he told her now could potentially come back to hurt her, so he said nothing. “I’m your wife. I love you. You owe me the truth.”

It was no use trying to hide anything from her. Kathy could read him like a book. “I’m your husband. And I love you too. But I need to do *this*, or I won’t be able to live with myself. Can you understand that?”

Kathy recoiled at Carson’s cryptic words. She had guessed his intentions. Tears welled up in her eyes. “What’s going to happen to us if you don’t come back? Have you thought about that? I need you here. Matt and John need you. I’m asking you, please don’t go.”

“I’ll be back, honey,” Carson said. “I promise.”

Which were the exact same words Murph used to say to her before every deployment, Kathy remembered. “I’ll be back, honey,” he’d tell her. For years she believed him—until he didn’t come back. Three weeks later a flag-draped coffin arrived at the local funeral home. The day she buried Murph, it was rainy. A slow, steady drizzle. Murph’s grave, which had been dug days earlier, was muddy and partially caved in. They had to re-dig it by hand while she waited under the awning with the coffin. When they finally lowered him into the earth, Kathy could see the rainwater left in the hole rise around Murph’s coffin. The sight of her beloved husband sunk down in that watery grave devastated her. She wouldn’t go through it again. She wouldn’t bury another husband. She’d give Carson an ultimatum: *If you leave, don’t come back.*

Kathy dried her eyes. The ultimatum on the tip of her tongue, she said, “Have a safe trip, Bill.” She gave Carson a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, and returned to her tomatoes.

Carson reached over and gently squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. Then he turned and slowly walked away.

Around 2200 hours, Carson made his way through the Mission District in the direction of Market Street. The marijuana dispensaries were overflowing with “patients” filling “prescriptions.” The methadone clinic across the street was closed for the day, but its regular customers still filled the sidewalks on both sides of the street. Some were standing; others were reclining on sleeping bags up against the building. A pungent cloud of ganja hung in the air like cordite after a battle. Two emaciated men stooped over a candle cooking a spoonful of heroin. The nightlife in San Francisco.

As he weaved through the throng, Carson kept his eyes trained to the ground to avoid the surveillance cameras overhead. Suddenly a pair of Doc Marten’s boots stood in his path. He stopped and glanced up briefly and saw that the boots were attached to a young woman holding a pamphlet in her outstretched hand. She was dressed in all black clothes and her face was riddled with numerous piercings. She had a jet black Mohawk and the words “NO FUTURE” tattooed

across her forehead. Carson took the pamphlet and made a show of reading it. Its cover showed a Jersey milk cow defecating on a scale model of planet earth.

“Are you coming to the circle?” she asked in a nasally monotone.

“Circle?” Carson asked, trying not to make eye contact.

“The drum circle in the park. Next Friday we will hold a 90-minute drumming to dissipate the cloud of methane gas that’s choking the life out of Gaia, our Mother Earth.”

“Methane?” Carson asked incredulously.

“Cow flatulence from the vast herds of cattle used to produce your McDonald’s Big Macs. Like one of those cows produces enough methane to like melt a glacier.”

But cow farts were the least of Carson’s worries since drifting into San Francisco two days earlier. Being identified was his chief concern. To disguise his appearance, he’d dyed his own hair and beard purple and wore his filthiest set of work clothes and avoided the bath for a week. Carrying nothing but a backpack, he’d crossed the Golden Gate Bridge as just one of the thousands of drug addicts and runaways and professional homeless who flock to the city by the bay every year.

During the day, Carson slept in a culvert near the methadone clinic in the Mission District. At night, he reconnoitered. Blending in with the city’s large, privileged homeless population was his means of remaining invisible. The homeless of San Francisco are treated like the mendicant monks of ancient India: showered with gifts of food and money. The city likewise provides free needles to shoot their heroin. The “authorities” basically look the other way as the homeless break or otherwise soil on every city ordinance. Against the backdrop of San Francisco Bay junkies shoot up in Golden Gate Park. While the tech millionaires sip lattes at the cafes on Nob Hill, derelicts bathe nude in a city fountain across the street.

It didn’t take Carson long to develop a plan. As a trained professional, Carson focused his attention on the high ground, which in San Francisco is Nob Hill. The city’s finest Victorian mansions sit atop the steep hill. From the heights, one can see the entire city and Bay area. Market Street, site of tomorrow’s parade, ran along its southern flank. The perfect kill zone. Right now, there was one more thing left to do.

Focused like a laser on his mission, Carson pushed past the girl with the piercings and the face tattoo. He turned right at the next block and headed underneath the James Lick Skyway. The six-lane elevated highway merged into the Bay Bridge, which straddles San Francisco Bay like the skeletal remains of some ancient prehistoric beast. Tiny cars inched along its steel torso. At the bottom of the hill, he turned left at the water front. The lights of Oakland reflected off the black surface of the bay. Here, large stretches of the waterfront were under construction. He ducked into a construction site and climbed atop the tracks of a crane. Here he was hidden from the street lights. Across the street lay a small fenced-in lot containing floats for tomorrow’s parade.

Despite its libertine reputation, San Francisco is one of the most heavily surveilled places on the planet. City cameras cover most major intersections, and store cameras surveil the streets in between. Carson had two cameras to deal with, and one street light.

Loosening the straps on his pack, Carson removed the upper and lower receivers of a modified AR-15. He spliced the two halves of the rifle together and secured the linchpins. Then he screwed a suppressor to the end of the barrel. Resting the rifle along the muddy track of the crane, he scanned both sides of the street for pedestrians. The 10-power scope enhanced available light several degrees. He spotted a couple derelicts on the far side of the street. They were sharing a bottle and heading in the direction of AT&T Park. Once out of ear-shot, he zeroed in on the closest camera. An easy 50-meter shot, he squeezed the trigger slowly like a machine, allowing the kick of the rifle to surprise him. The camera's lens shattered easily, showering the pavement in fine glass. The sound was no louder than a hand clap. To further reduce the noise level, he'd reloaded the rounds with minimum loads of powder. The bullets, when they exited the barrel, were travelling at sub-sonic speed, which greatly reduced the report. Although not very accurate at longer ranges, the reduced loads were sufficient for closer targets. The other camera, facing south, he shot through its rear housing. He placed a second round in the housing for good measure. The sodium vapor streetlight shattered with a loud *pop* like that of a wine bottle being tossed against a brick wall. A bit louder than Carson had anticipated. To be on the safe side, Carson waited a good 20 minutes to see if the noise had triggered a police response.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, Carson sprinted across the street and headed for the dark corner of the lot. Owned by the city, the lot was surrounded by a 10-foot chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Carson knew it was easier and safer to go through it rather than over it. Using a pair of small bolt cutters, he snipped the wire fence closest to the corner pole about two feet up. Squeezing his body through the opening first, he pulled the backpack through.

Once inside, he quickly located his target. Painted in army colors, the long black float had a single gold star on each side. A replica of a Civil War era mortar rested in the center of the float. Typically, a mortar like that is displayed with a small pyramid of mortar rounds stacked next to it. But given the occasion for its use in tomorrow's parade, some "creative" soul had removed all but two rounds and arranged them at the base of the mortar tube, giving the impression of a large black phallus.

After closer inspection of the mortar tube, Carson discovered that it concealed a T-shirt gun inside. The gun was powered by a tank of compressed air. Carson had an idea.

Carson carefully removed the charge of explosives from his pack. Then he secured it to the tank of compressed air with a couple of zip ties. The charge consisted of 10 pounds of improvised HMTD, and extremely powerful primary explosive made with common household ingredients. The means of detonation was a pre-paid cell phone. It was an ingenious placement, for once the main charge exploded, it would detonate the tank of air, thus increasing the overall yield.

Carson was contemplating his handiwork when suddenly a bright light flashed across his face. He flattened out on top of the float and froze. A patrol car's spotlight swept over the lot slowly, but then returned to Carson's float. Carson could hear the sound of a car engine idling just outside the lot where he'd cut the fence. He'd taken his eyes off the street for one second. Never saw the patrol car cruise up behind him. Now he was trapped inside a fenced enclosure. No escape. *What now*, he wondered.

He knew what future he faced if he were caught. But come what may, he had no regrets about his course of action.

Carson waited for the cops to order him out into the open. The spotlight poured over the float several more times. Then he heard a car door slam. Carson peaked around the mortar tube to see the patrol car racing away in the direction of Market Street, its lights flashing as it responded to a call.

On a typical day, the National Cemetery near Kennesaw Mountain is a quiet place with only a handful of people wandering the long rows of white marble headstones. But on June 23, 2012, the cemetery was the scene of a great gathering.

The manner of General Barton's passing, before the odious Rainbow Review Board, caused a tremendous reaction in the retired military community. Conservative talk radio had taken up the cause. By the time of the funeral, several thousand had gathered to pay their respects to the departed general. Few active duty soldiers attended for fear of Colonel Fanning's mighty review board. Most attendees were long retired. World War II vets dressed in brown uniforms that hadn't been worn since they disembarked from Europe in 1945. SEALs from Vietnam. Rangers who'd jumped into Grenada. Rolling Thunder sent a large contingent. Their Harley-Davidsons lined both sides of the road leading into the cemetery. The mood was somber. There was a sense that the nation they'd all served was dead and something truly rotten had taken its place. In burying General Barton, they were laying to rest not only an old warrior, but their loyalty to a faithless government.

Wolfe noticed Doc and Donovan standing together near the Honor Guard. Like Master Sergeant Wolfe, both had worn their dress blue uniforms, in defiance of Army regulations which prohibited dishonorably discharged soldiers from ever wearing U.S. military uniforms in public. Wolfe put his arm around their shoulders. "What's up, snake eaters?" he said. They turned to see Wolfe's grizzled mug.

"Same old, same old," Doc said.

"Damn, it's good to see you again, Sergeant," Donovan said.

"So, tell me, what have you guys been up to?" Wolfe asked. "Donovan, you still surfing?"

"Every chance I get," he said. "Been working at a surf shop giving lessons to yuppies. Pay is not the best, but I get to hang out on the beach all day."

"What about you, Doc?" Wolfe said. "You ever get your medical license?"

"No," Doc answered. "The medical board turned me down, twice. Said it was because of my prison record. Right now, I work at a free clinic as a physician's assistant. The pay isn't great, but I like what I'm doing."

"Well, my door is always open," Wolfe said. "You guys ever want to come to work as hunting and fishing guides, I can put you on the trail next week. I've got a backlog of wealthy clients just waiting to put an elk's head up on their office wall. Pay is decent, too. Best of all, you get to work in the outdoors."

Doc then touched on something that he and Donovan had discussed earlier. "Say, Wolfe, why didn't the captain come to the funeral? Did you talk to him?"

“Captain Carson, you mean?” Wolfe asked.

“Who else would I be talking about?” Doc said.

“Well, if you mean Captain William Carson, he’s standing right beside you.”

Doc turned to look at the patch of empty grass beside him. “Are you suffering from head trauma, Sarge? Take one too many drinks today?”

“Never been healthier in my life,” Wolfe said, a note of seriousness in his voice. “I see Captain Carson standing right beside you. He’s wearing standard dress blues, like the rest of us. We just got done reminiscing about the time General Barton smuggled those two cases of Budweiser into Camp Democracy. The captain showed us pictures of his family. We all made plans to get together for Thanksgiving—at the captain’s house in Pennsylvania.” Wolfe paused to let the impact of what he was saying sink in. “And if anyone questions you in the future, that is exactly what you *will* say. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal,” Donovan said without hesitation.

Doc, always the thoughtful one, was slow to answer. “I suppose it wouldn’t help to ask what this is all about?”

“Nope,” Wolfe said. “It’s either yea, or nay.”

Doc gestured to the patch of empty grass. “Doesn’t the captain look great in his blues?”

Wolfe smiled. “Sure does. Looks like one squared away snake eater.”

For the second year in a row, Colonel Fanning had been chosen Grand Marshal of San Francisco’s Gay Pride Parade. At exactly the same moment that General Barton was being buried in Georgia (2,100 miles away), Colonel “Michelle” Fanning stood atop the long black parade float making its way slowly up Market Street. Wearing his female’s dress blue uniform, he waved to the cheering crowd, hand cupped, oscillating back and forth. Fanning felt invincible, like Miss Universe, or some Roman Emperor at his triumph. The only things missing were his vanquished enemies being driven before his float-chariot in chains.

Fanning’s was the featured float. The Pentagon had given its approval for Colonel Fanning and the official Army logo to participate in the Pride celebration. Instead of captives in chains, an all-male contingent of “The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence” preceded Fanning’s float. Each “sister” wore a matching camo thong, a black beret, red white and blue nipple clamps, and a pair of jump boots. They marched in a mock military formation. The front rank carried the Stars and Stripes alongside the Rainbow Flag. Every few minutes, the mortar-phallus would “ejaculate” a T-shirt out onto the crowds that lined Market Street to the lurid cheers of the crowd. The T-shirts were emblazoned with the Army’s new slogan: *BE WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE*.

Fanning was fully conscious that today was a symbolic moment in the history of the Republic. Just 50 years ago people like himself were forced to live in the shadows. If exposed, they faced arrest, imprisonment, and possible confinement in a mental hospital. It was a new day in America when a transgender “woman” could make his way down Main Street dressed in the uniform of a U.S. Army colonel. Never mind that he was a murderer and a traitor to that uniform.

His enemies now were forced to live in the shadows. Soon, he hoped, they'd be the ones arrested, imprisoned, and confined to a mental hospital.

The parade slowly made its way toward the waterfront. As his float emerged from the canyon of tall buildings, Fanning could see the entire San Francisco Bay spread out before him. The heights of Nob Hill loomed behind him. *The world is mine*, he said to himself. It was then that Fanning heard what sounded like a cell phone ringing. It wasn't his, he knew. He'd switched his phone off before the parade. He turned to listen. Sounded like it was coming from inside ...

Witnesses saw a blinding flash accompanied by a loud BOOM. Stunned by the explosion, the hermaphrodites in camo thongs stood there dazed and confused. A cloud of dust and smoke obscured the float. When the dust finally cleared, there was revealed a smoldering wreck. Broken plywood. Bent flashing. Fanning's shattered remains. Those closest to the float were splattered in what appeared to be red paint. One of the "sisters" tried wiping it off with his hands. To his horror, he discovered it was blood. He screamed like a scalded soprano. Panic swept through the crowd as word spread that the Dancing Queen was dead. The hermaphrodites and drag queens and leathermen scrambled in all directions.

From atop Nob Hill, Carson watched the commotion on Market Street through his binoculars. He wore an oversized raincoat with the hood pulled up over his head to conceal his face from the many cameras that covered the streets that fronted the mansions of Nob Hill. He reached inside his coat and grasped the twin cell phone firmly in both hands and he snapped it in two. He nonchalantly tossed it into a nearby storm drain. Then he walked west in the direction of the Golden Gate Bridge. It was a two-mile walk. He covered it in less than 30 minutes. Then he walked to the Marin County side of the bridge.

On the far side of the bridge there is a parking lot used by tourists and mountain bikers to access Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The recreation area has miles of trails that skirt the magnificent bay. Carson followed the rim trail out along the bay. Steep drop-offs next to the trail are covered in dense brush. About a quarter mile out, he left the trail and bounded down the steep brushy embankment. Invisible from the trail above, he pulled aside some cut brush, revealing a mountain bike and a bag of clothes. Stripping off his old clothes, he washed the dye out of his hair and donned spandex pants and a bike helmet. He stuffed his old clothes in the pack and strapped the pack to the bike rack. He eased up closer to the trail, waited till the coast was clear, then joined the procession of mountain bikers coursing along the trail.

Once out of the park, he cut over to the bike trail that runs parallel to the Pacific Coast Highway, and he headed north. Carson peddled hard all day. Coastal pine soon gave way to dense redwood forest in Sonoma County. For the last few miles, the trail followed the edge of steep cliffs overlooking the ocean.

Toward nightfall, Carson located the appropriate mile marker next to the trail. He dismounted and eased the bike to the edge of the cliff and heaved the bike into the foaming waves below. Then he headed into the dense redwood forest. After following an overgrown firebreak for about two miles, he found his truck exactly where he'd left it a week earlier. He retrieved the trail camera he'd hidden in a nearby tree and rewound it. A few deer and what looked like the same raccoon had triggered the camera over the past week. But no humans had

come near the truck. Before leaving, he burned his clothes and anything connecting him to San Francisco. He drove the secondary roads through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Carson crossed into Nevada at daybreak. Desert country. The harsh landscape reminded him of the Red Desert south of Kandahar. He stopped to refuel the truck at an abandoned silver mine near Pyramid Lake. A small private claim, the mine had probably been operational around the turn of the last century. The shaft had collapsed decades ago. Nothing remained but a few rotted timbers to mark the entrance. A dilapidated miner's shack sat next to the shaft.

Carson ate a light breakfast of oatmeal and apples. Then he filled his tank with gasoline. To prevent his truck from being photographed at a filling station in California, he carried his own fuel with him in 5-gallon jerrycans. After topping off the tank, he washed up and changed clothes. When he was finished, he explored the old miner's shack.

The old shack's floor boards were dry-rotted and delicate to walk on. In one corner was a rusted out stove with a date stamp indicating it was manufactured in 1902. An old rag doll lay on the floor, some child's toy whose owner was probably long dead and buried by now. On the living room wall was an old portrait of Abe Lincoln. Beneath the faded portrait was his famous metaphor: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Carson remembered Uncle Jack using that same metaphor.

It had been almost 10 years since Carson took the Oath of a Commissioned Officer: "I ... do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic ..." He knew the words by heart, but until recently, he'd never really thought about their meaning. Back then, in the aftermath of 9/11, it had meant "enemies, foreign," Islamists hiding in caves at the far ends of the earth plotting to destroy America. For years he'd hunted al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in the mountains and deserts and caves of Afghanistan. He was good at it, if allowed to do his job. As a military force, al Qaeda and the Taliban are nothing but ragtag bands of savages, no match for Green Berets like Carson. Existentially speaking, Islamic extremism is a boil on the ass of America. If our nation were in good health, its military could easily lance that boil and slap a Band Aid on it. But liberalism has so ravaged our nation's immune system that now a simple boil on the ass poses a vital threat to our national health, a ragtag band of savages bulks up big enough to challenge the greatest military force in the history of the world. The hardest obstacles Carson had to overcome in Afghanistan were put in his path not by the Taliban, but rather by liberal politicians and bureaucrats in Washington. The most lethal weapons he had to face were not fired by Taliban machine gunners, but rather by a traitor wearing the same uniform as he. The U.S. military was never allowed to achieve victory in Afghanistan or Iraq because America is truly a "house divided against itself," thought Carson.

Carson had never anticipated fighting "enemies, foreign and domestic" at the same time. Of the two, the latter was by far the more formidable. But once he identified an enemy, he took to it with his customary efficiency. He felt no qualms about killing the traitor Fanning, no more than if he had killed Ahmad Mafiz. Both were enemies of the Constitution. By removing Fanning from life support, he was merely fulfilling the oath he took all those years ago, thereby honoring the memories of Holverson and Cole and Murph and all the men and women who died fighting for *patria*.

Kathy had just sat down to dinner when she noticed a pair of headlights sweep past the living room window. She didn't get up. It had been nearly a month since Carson left, long past the two weeks he'd promised her. In those four agonizing weeks she must have looked out that window a thousand times. No more, she promised herself.

"Let's say Grace," Kathy said. Matthew was sullen. Carson's sudden absence had really played havoc with the boys' psyche. Kathy had assured both boys that Dad would return soon. But that was a couple of weeks ago. Matthew was beginning to think that Dad would never come back. She said to him, "As the man of the house, how about you say Grace?"

Matthew scowled at his mother. "No!" he yelled. "Dad is the man of the house!"

"Dad is not here," Kathy stammered, obviously upset by Matthew's sudden outburst.

"Why did *you* make him go away!?" Matthew cried.

"I didn't ... He had ..." Kathy said, too upset to continue.

Like an apparition, Carson materialized in the doorway. Startled by his sudden appearance, everyone was speechless. The first thing Carson noticed was that his favorite chair was missing from the head of the table. *Was it a sign?* he wondered. *Was Kathy removing him from their lives as well?* He couldn't tell from Kathy's face. She remained impassive, a perfect sphinx.

Without saying a word, Kathy rose from her seat and walked right past Carson into the living room. She returned shortly, lugging Carson's heavy oak chair. She placed it at the head of the table. Then she resumed her place.

"Would you please say Grace?" Kathy said to Carson. "The food is getting cold."

Carson sat down, folded his hands, and closed his eyes. "Lord, bless ..."

GLOSSARY

AC-130

Spectre gunship

AH-64

Apache gunship

AK-47

assault rifle

ANA

Afghan National Army

AO

area of operations

AQ53

Carson's B-hut

AT4

disposable light anti-tank missile

A-Team

ODA (Operational Detachment Alpha)
team

Bagram

U.S. base in Parwan Province

B-hut

Barracks Hut, light structures of plywood
and tin

CamelBak

half-gallon water bladder

CAS

close air support

CH-47

Chinook helicopter

CID

Army Criminal Investigations Division

CLP

brand name for a cleaner, lubricant and
preservative used on weapons

Crosshair

call sign surveillance drone

DA

direct action mission

DOD

U.S. Department of Defense

EIT

enhanced interrogation technique

ETA

estimated time of arrival

FOB

forward operating base

Gitmo

Guantanamo Bay detention camp

GMV

general motor vehicle (Humvee)

Hajji

slang for a Taliban or al Qaeda fighter

Hazara

ethnic group in Afghanistan, descendants
of the Mongols

HESCO

large wire baskets filled with dirt and
stacked together to form a wall

IED

improvised explosive device

ISAF

International Security Assistance Force

ISI

Inter-Service Intelligence, Pakistan

JSOC

Joint Special Operations Command

JAG

judge advocate general, a military attorney

JTAC
Joint Terminal Attack Controller

KAF
Kandahar Airfield

Katyusha
Soviet-made rocket launcher

KIA
killed in action

klick
kilometer

LRRP
long range reconnaissance patrol

LZ
landing zone

MACV SOG
Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group

mesher
elder

MIA
missing in action

mikes
minutes

MRE
meal ready to eat

NCO
non-commissioned officer

NOD
night optical/observation device

NVA
North Vietnamese Army

ODA
Operational Detachment Alpha

PAX
suspected enemy

PKM
Soviet-made light machine gun

QRF
quick reaction force

ratline
Taliban infiltration routes

RDI
Rendition, Detention, Interrogation - CIA program

RFF
request for forces

RPG
rocket-propelled grenade

RRB
Rainbow Review Board

S2
intelligence officer

SAT
satellite phone

SAW
squad automatic weapon

SF
Special Forces

SOP
standard operating procedure

SR
surveillance and reconnaissance mission

S-vest
suicide vest

TOC
tactical operations center

Turan

Afghani term for “captain.”

UH-60

Black Hawk

VFW

Veterans of Foreign Wars

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1998 Eric Rudolph was added to the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list and became the focus of the bureau's largest and most intensive manhunt. Suspected of committing four bombings, including the bombing at the 1996 Olympic Games, Rudolph fled into the mountains of Western North Carolina. There he remained hidden for five and a half years. Finally captured in 2003, Rudolph is now serving a life sentence at the Administrative Maximum prison (often called SuperMax) in Colorado.

To write to Eric, see <http://www.armyofgod.com/EricRudolphHomepage.html>

ABOUT ERIC'S FIRST NOVEL

In Eric Rudolph's first novel, *All Enemies, Foreign and Domestic*, America's deep political divisions play out on the battlefields of Afghanistan.

Seven years into the war, Captain William Carson leads a team of elite Green Berets into the Korengal Valley to capture the notorious Taliban commander Ahmad Khan. Instead of Khan, they find a heavily armed force of Taliban fighters waiting in ambush. Denied vital air support due to overly restrictive rules of engagement, Captain Carson's team is nearly wiped out.

In the aftermath, Captain Carson learns that he and his men had been led into a trap. A mole inside coalition forces is passing Top Secret intelligence to Ahmad Khan, which is enabling his network to inflict horrific casualties on U.S. forces in Kunar Province. When he's offered the mission of uncovering the mole, Captain Carson gladly accepts, determined to avenge the deaths of his fallen comrades.

Captain Carson and his reconstituted team then embark on a search that takes them to the remote firebases of eastern Afghanistan and to the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal region. At every turn, Carson is frustrated by rules of engagement (ROEs) drawn up by Washington bureaucrats more concerned with political correctness than protecting American lives. To accomplish his mission, Carson is forced to ignore the asinine ROEs, placing himself on a collision course with his own government. Initially, Captain Carson zeroes-in on an Afghan embedded among U.S. troops as his likely mole. But then the mission takes an unexpected turn when the real mole turns out to be someone protected at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Captain Carson comes face-to-face with the biblical adage that "a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matt. 10:36)