

CHAPTER 1

Sadr City, Iraq, 2005

“Santoli, burn that motherfucker!” I heard over my radio.

It didn’t feel right to kill a man while he was praying.

“Take the shot, Santoli! What the hell are you waiting for?”

I guess I was waiting for it to feel right...or just less wrong. But sometimes your orders and your morals will collide. Unfortunately, orders carry more weight, and they win every time.

“Santoli!”

If a man thinks it so shall it be...and so I thought it. The word *kill* appeared in my cortex and my brain fired the motor neurons inside my spinal cord, which sent a chemical impulse down to my muscle, causing my finger to squeeze the trigger of my M16. I could feel the raw power surging through my arm. Split-second chaos. In that moment I was God, and I decided who lived and who died.

Pulling the trigger engaged the sear which released the hammer. The hammer struck the firing pin and pushed it into the primer. The powder combusted inside the case and sent the bullet down the barrel and out of the rifle. Once the 5.56 caliber round left the muzzle it became a projectile, capable of killing anything, everything. It was death, wrapped in a full metal jacket, travelling at a speed of 3,260 feet per second.

Suddenly I was reminded of Newton’s first law of motion: Every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state unless an external force is applied to it—in this case, the head of an Iraqi

insurgent.

Do you know what a round like that does to a person's head? It's like drilling a hole through a watermelon. There isn't much blood at first, then as they hit the ground, it oozes out like an oil spill out of a tanker. But I didn't flinch; I couldn't. This was now my life. I was a mailman, delivering bullets to bodies. No postage required, no overnight express, just a blink of an eye delivery system.

While searching for my next target, I heard a hissing sound near my position. *Hiss* meant the bullets were close. From the adjacent rooftop, black hoods descended upon me, while enemy Kalashnikovs rang from the distance. It was just another Monday morning. I hadn't even had my breakfast yet, just two cups of coffee to keep me wired.

The hissing soon became a snapping and the enemy was only a few yards away. Struggling, sweating, with my finger twitching, I pulled the trigger and emptied my magazine, turning brains into scrambled eggs.

I looked down at the city street, and in the midst of gunfire, an old Iraqi man sat on a bench reading the newspaper as if it was just another ordinary day. It took a car exploding for him to finally grab his shit and make a run for it.

The sounds escalated, growing increasingly more intense, until finally, the din of bullets stopped, and I heard the words, "All clear," through the radio.

When I got down off the roof, a bloody body lay before me. There was no stepping around the blood; it was everywhere, so I stepped through it and dragged his spirit across the dry Iraqi soil, back toward the Humvee. "Coming out!" I shouted.

The wind blew red dust in all directions, and through the grit, all I could see were pulverized buildings, threatening to give out, discarded shrapnel, pools of blood, and wasted banners ignorantly celebrating liberation, while the ones next to them were begging for God.

But that's war. And our sergeant used to say, "War doesn't determine who's right; war determines who's left, and I'm planning on living until the end." That was Rev, AKA Reverend Ernie Castor. He was one of those overachievers, who had a shelf filled with trophies and a wall covered with medals. He was even born two months premature. I guess he couldn't wait to get his life started. He probably even started walking at six months. But for all his achievements, he was a humble man. He spoke of God in a way as not to offend you, but to make you think about the deeper questions from a different

perspective.

He was always ready to debate an atheist at the drop of a hat. "Every man has mentioned God's name at one point in his life, even if it's just to denounce Him," he would say. "Me? I'm trying to believe in something bigger than myself." It was no wonder he became the consciousness of the group. It's a comforting feeling when you have a leader who can make the right decisions, especially at times when even you don't know what those are. I suppose it was hard for him to lead a team like ours, we were a team of bastards, after all. There wasn't a single father among us—not one that mattered anyway.

Never before had you seen four men who had no purpose being together forced into each other's company. There was Corporal Arrigo Batali, who most would describe as a peaceful man. He was twenty-five-years-old and spoke Arabic and Farsi fluently. You could spot him from a hundred meters away. He walked with this distinctive hunch. A million years of evolution, yet Batali still couldn't walk upright. His shoulders were always slouched forward, and he had a slight curve in his spine. When I asked him if there was anything wrong with his back, he replied, "No. I just got used to walking this way. Walking upright is exhausting."

His chicken neck would always pitch forward anytime he spoke. Not exactly the kind of behavior you want when you're on recon. He couldn't look around a corner, without projecting his entire head forward. But at least he was harmless, which is more than I could say about our Grenadier, Aries Alvarez, a twenty-one-year-old brash punk. I honestly didn't know what he was doing in recon; he was clearly an infantry jarhead. A grunt. He was younger than me but built like a tank. A towering trunk of nonsense is what I used to call him. He was 6'4, 250 pounds, with big, battering ram arms and legs the size of Roman columns. He had a twelve-gallon head and a gash on the hollows of his cheekbones. A professional wrestler is what he reminded me of most. It was no wonder, since he wanted to become one as soon as he returned back home. But someone should've told him there were no cameras around. He spoke as if he was on Monday Night Raw, calling out an opponent.

As I returned to the Humvee, he slipped on a pair of Oakleys and said, "I am the Marine, which makes me a machine, well-oiled, programmed to follow orders, to seek out and destroy. My emotions are shut off, my adrenaline is pumped up, and I come guaranteed with

a one year warranty—anything beyond that and the Marine Corps can't be held accountable!" The overwhelming pride came out through his loud, obnoxious voice. "I am the Marine!" he would say as if it was his professional wrestler name. "Ooooooooooooooh-rrrrrrraaaaaaaah!" He always held his ooh-rahs for six seconds just in case someone missed it. Then he would kiss his dog tags and smile like he was sitting at Sunday dinner with his family.

His aim was shit, that's the other thing I remember about him. But with a full magazine, I guess it didn't really matter. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he let loose like some 1930's gangster in a low budget film: his fingers chattering, gut churning, legs pumping, heart racing, brow beating and pits sweating. Everything quickly became Swiss cheese: doors, buildings, cars, wagons, and yes, even his target. What he didn't hit from a direct shot was inevitably caught by a ricocheting bullet.

He stood, arms slung over the crossbars of the Humvee, with a cigarette between his greasy fingers. He blew a perfect smoke ring and watched it rise into the air.

I smirked at him and said, "It looks like you put a bullet in pretty much everything in a two-block radius."

He took his shades off and gave me the finger, while flicking his cigarette at my chest. "Let's get the hell out of here. Our work is done."

I looked up from the American eagle inked on his massive arm to the reflection of my own face in his giant pupils, "Whatever you say, buddy."

Suddenly, I saw a man lurking in an alleyway. It was my job to assess every threat, big or small. He was in traditional garb with a bandana covering one eye, a disdainful look in the other and a cheap Iraqi cigarette in his ailing fingers. He looked me in the eyes, fearless and yelled something in Arabic. It's funny how an unknown language can still make sense on the inside. I heard 'asshole'. I might have been wrong, but not by much, maybe not asshole, maybe devil, bastard, baby killer. What's the difference? I got the gist of it. It meant leave my country, leave us alone, stop killing. I said nothing in return. I did my job. I assessed the threat. He wasn't dangerous, just some store clerk, merchant, vagabond, hiding out, waiting for the bullets to stop.

From behind him, a little boy came running out and stumbled, landing on his knees, right on top of a ragged flyer shouting: FREEDOM! Out of his dirty, soiled hands, spilled out empty shell

casings, which he was most likely trying to recycle.

He stood up and looked back at our war machines and foreign flags and trembled. His long black lashes and the intense flex of his brow brought my attention to his powerful brown eyes that seemed to have their own gravitational pull. Although he was just a boy, he looked as if he had lived an entire lifetime. He stared at me unblinkingly, and there, I remained, trapped in the corners of his eyes, unable to look away. His small, soft face—blackened from the dirt and debris—spoke in volume, the tortuous road that had shaped out his life: a labyrinth of love and hate, filled with crusades of hope.

After a minute, those young, innocent eyes finally blinked, releasing me from their hold, and I heard Alvarez yelling, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

When I looked back, the boy was gone, scurried back down the narrow alleyway I’m sure.

We all got into the Humvee and headed back to our Forward Operating Base, which was located on the outskirts of Baghdad, just north of Sadr city. As soon as we crossed the border, we saw exploded vehicles on the side of the highway, dead bodies and disintegrating buildings.

From the backseat, Alvarez slapped me on the shoulder and said, “I could go for a second round right now.”

I smirked. “The pawns are done for today.”

“I aint no pawn. I’m a King, you hear me!”

“You’re a drone, Alvarez. We all are.”

He grabbed his dog tags as if they were his resumé. “This is who I am,” he said. “I’m a Marine, and Marines follow orders.” He said it as if that’s all we were, as if being a Marine was what would define us one day.

The comment didn’t sit well with Batali. “Not me. I’m more than a piece of metal hanging around my neck. I’m more than just my blood type, my religion and my last name. My memories are not on this piece of tin, nor are my hopes or my dreams. A craftsman crafts and still he has his handiwork. What does a Marine have, but blood and tears?”

“We’re the right hand of America,” Alvarez fired back. He was just as clumsy with his words as he was with his rifle—both aims were off.

Batali’s superior debating skills would, however, reign on this day. “That hand can be righteous or fatal depending on who’s swinging it. Iraq is definitely a threat and I like to believe that we’re here to stop

that threat, but that's not all we're here for. After all, a war is not initiated by soldiers; it's paid and bought for by duplicitous men in suits who drive down the price of oil. Men who have never set foot in afflicted countries or bled for anything meaningful, yet watched from above on satellite streams, sipping coffee in their armchairs. If you really want to see chickens with their heads cut off, just tell the pencil-pushing geeks on capitol hill that the price of crude oil is rising."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about," Alvarez said, flicking Batali's ear like a third grader.

But Batali finished his thought. "The greed of oil is what will lead to the downfall of man. Correction: *bas* led to the downfall of man. This world should've been counted in dollars, not souls. The population is fifty trillion, and still the interest accumulates. Life is expendable, while dollars are invested, and sadly too many dollars have been invested in making life expendable."

"Be careful, Batali," Alvarez warned. "You're starting to sound like the locals."

He smirked. "You leave water in a plastic bottle long enough and it begins tasting like plastic."

I turned to Rev to see what he thought of Batali's words, but from the look of it, he didn't think anything at all. He sat in the passenger seat, calm as could be. And when we came across a shepherd on the road who was tending to his flock of a hundred or so, Rev said, "I will not be led astray, and no shepherd may lead me." I guess it was his way of saying, he had already made up his mind and was protected from all other ideologies.

We came to a stop and waited as the shepherd herded his sheep across the dusty terrain. Through the window, I watched in wonder, the colors of sunset: a tangerine, saffron sky, that looked like it was painted by Claude Monet. It floated over the landscape, which waited patiently to swallow up the setting sun. The nameless wind brought with it stories of summer times spent floating down Galena river, with my cousin, Kelly, in an old kayak our grandfather had left behind. We would go fishing using homemade rods that Kelly had whittled out of two old broomsticks in woodworking class. We'd stay out there by ourselves, talking about girls and random dreams, watching the world through the unadulterated sunlight. Only at that brief moment when we were wedged between night and day, would we finally head back home, running barefoot through the afterlight.

With all the disappointments and regrets in my life, those rare poignant moments—which passed all too soon—were all I had to keep any shred of imagination alive within me. I had consciously surrendered over to my memories when Alvarez’s axe-like voice brought me crashing back down to reality. “Can this guy hurry the fuck up already!”

The herd had cleared the road, and I put away my smile, somewhere deep down, to be resurrected later when I desperately needed to get away from this place.