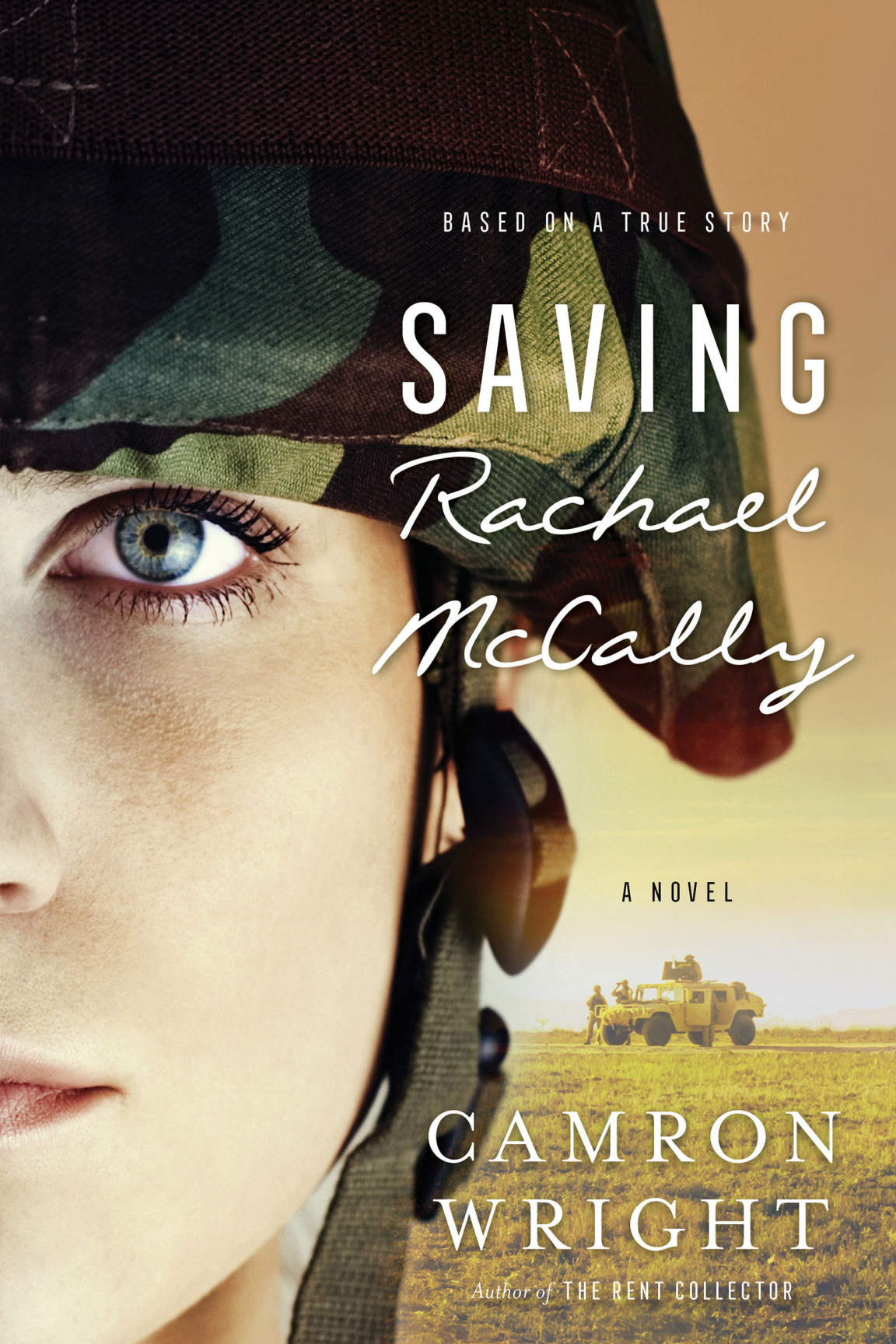
BASED ON A TRUE STORY
SAVING
Rachael
McCally
A NOVEL
CAMRON
WRIGHT
Author of THE RENT COLLECTOR

SAVING Rachael McCally

CAMRON WRIGHT

ALSO BY
CAMRON WRIGHT

In Times of Rain and War
The Rent Collector
The Orphan Keeper
The Other Side of the Bridge
Letters for Emily
Christmas by Accident

Dear Reader,

While this book may be read alone, it was written as a follow-up to my novel ***In Times of Rain and War****, and I believe you will appreciate both stories more deeply if you read them in order.*

Sincerely,

Camron Wright

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I asked Rachel if, when telling her story, she worried that her children would learn more than she wanted them to about her past. She confidently replied, "I'd worry more if they thought that I was hiding something." May we all be as open and honest in our lives.

—Camron Wright

Chapter One

February 7, 2007, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Camp Anaconda, Iraq

There is a knock at my barracks door as the voice of my platoon leader, Lieutenant David Donovan, penetrates through the metal. "McCally, may I come in?"

At the men's barracks, he can barge in and it's not only acceptable, it's almost expected as part of his duties. Thank goodness different rules apply to the women—that's one of the few advantages we females have serving in the US military.

"Sure, come on in," I call back, and Donovan enters. The man has a square face, dark hair, and stocky build. He's thirty-six, exactly ten years older than I am, and he's one of the few father figures of any substance that I've had in my life. That is both good and bad: we speak freely, I confide in him, we've shared secrets; but it means we also argue. In a relationship where one tries to be both a friend and a superior, the line of separation can be dangerous to straddle.

I lay down my pencil and paper.

"Are you writing to your son?" Donovan asks.

"Trying to. What's up?"

"I'm here to let you know that we'll be leaving an hour later than planned."

My head lifts, and I seize an opportunity. "Have you thought about it?"

"Thought about what?" he asks, but I can tell by the look in his eyes that he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

I play along. "My request to be LVC. Let me ride in Gun One."

LVC is the Lead Vehicle Commander, the spotter who rides at the front of our nighttime convoys and watches for improvised explosive devices—IEDs, the makeshift roadside bombs that insurgents set to injure or kill our troops. It's a position that I've been working toward, begging for, since this tour of duty began.

"Why the rush, McCally?" He's asked me this before, and I've given him canned answers—*to do my part, to fulfill my duty, to inspire the team.* I guess he's never believed me because I've never told him the truth.

"I deserve it," I say, a statement I immediately would like to snatch back.

His face droops into a frown as he becomes the fuming father whose adolescent daughter has demanded the use of the family car. "You don't *deserve* squat." When I drop my head, his sourness softens. "Look, McCally, I appreciate your . . ." he searches for his lost word, " . . . enthusiasm, but no, you're not ready. You'll be in Gun Two driving for me, as

always. There's nothing more to discuss."

I want to protest, but I know better. If a woman in the military shows any weakness, any at all, she'll be gleefully thrust aside. "Yes, sir."

His eyes reel as he shakes his head. Unlike me, he has no reason to hide what he's thinking. "McCally, it's the army way. Things don't work the same here as they do in the outside world. Just be happy with your current situation and life will be easier for you."

It's ridiculous advice, but I don't argue. "Yes, sir," I repeat.

He nudges his nose toward my pen and paper. "How is your son, by the way?" He hopes that by changing the subject he'll be able to leave on a more positive note. When I'm slow to answer, he piles on. "Is he in school yet?"

I suck in a short breath, wanting to tell Donovan to give it up and go away, but I know better. "He's in kindergarten."

"And he's the one you named after your grandfather, correct?"

"Well, he's the only son I have, so yeah, that's him." I'm just being difficult now, and I shouldn't be. Besides Donovan, my grandfather was the only other man who was a good influence on me. To carry on his memory, I gave my son his name.

I turn to Donovan. "Sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. Yes, my son is named after my grandfather, but since the divorce, I've had him go back to using my maiden name."

Donovan shrugs. "You know, after all the hours we've spent riding together, I don't think I know your maiden name. Have you ever told me?"

I lean into the man until our eyes meet. "I named my son Wesley, Wesley Bowers."

Ruby Goodhart is my roommate and battle buddy, though the latter is not the battle you may think. In Iraq, as women soldiers, we're assigned a partner for when we're out on base after dark. It's not Iraqi insurgents who necessitate the pairing; it's because sexual assault incidents here on the base are all too frequent. The best solution the top brass could come up with was to assign two women to go out together—which means, besides sticking with Goodhart, I carry my 9mm weapon everywhere.

I'm sitting on my bunk when she steps in from the shower trailer. "Hey, Ruby, I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Do you ever look back on your life and ponder how you got here?"

Goodhart barely blinks. "You called your son again, didn't you?" The woman is clearly a psychic.

I let a sigh escape before continuing. "Yes, and in his adorable little five-year-old voice, he said, 'Mommy, git in the car and come home.' I miss him so much! It makes me wonder what I am doing here."

Her eye roll nearly knocks me over as she plops down on the bunk beside me. "Rachel, you're here because you made a choice to be here. It was voluntary for you, remember?"

I like Goodhart. Besides being a cute little thing, she tells it like she sees it. "Yes, I know, but now I'm wondering *why.* Why would I have made that choice?"

"Girl, I'm a medic, not a shrink."

"You're implying I'm crazy?"

"No—a little lost, maybe, but hey, aren't we all? Listen, I knew a colonel once who used to say that those who join the military are either heroes, hooligans, or the broken."

"Was he right?"

Goodhart flicks back her hair. "He forgot *the adorable,* but his answer is not that cut-and-dried. Take Mack, for example. He was a marine, a macho guy, the hero type, except that I happen to know that he's with our team because he couldn't hold down a job in the civilian world after his last tour. Military life is all he knows."

"So, it was easier for him to come back?"

"And you know about Richie, right?"

"What about him?"

"He hangs around us more than he does the men."

"So?"

"I'm not complaining—he's a good kid. But he lost his mom when he was seven, and I think he's still trying to fill that hole in his life."

"So, we're all a mess?"

"They say a good battle will bring out both the heroes and the villains."

"Then what about Gibbins?" I ask as a smile creeps across my face. "Which is he?"

Goodhart giggles. "Gibbins is here to remind us all why proper hygiene is critical."

Gibbins, my gunner, is a skinny kid with a smoker's cough whose teeth are usually brown or green. If his stint in the military only teaches him to brush his teeth once in a while, it will have been a blinding success.

"And you?" I ask.

"Me? I'm here for the cheap education. I knew that I wanted to be a doctor, but I could never afford medical school, so I'm gracing everyone here with my presence."

I stand, but she isn't finished. "You haven't answered your question," she says, tipping me back in place. "Why are *you* here, Rachel? And I have a pretty good idea, so don't try to lie to me."

"It's not for the food," I reply, "except for Mongolian barbecue night, of course." I expect a nod in agreement since Mongolian barbecue night in the chow hall is the best, but she just sits there watching me until my smile slithers away.

"What, then?" she prompts.

I step slowly around my words, inspecting them as they drop out. "Even though I miss my son terribly, I guess that I'm here because it's easier than being at home."

"Finally, some progress. Now, tell me why it's easier here."

"What if I don't know?"

Goodhart smiles. "I think you do. In life, we tend to be either running toward something or running away from something—and that's where you have a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"When we're running toward something, Rachel, there is always a destination. When we're running away, it's tough to know when to stop."

I've been told that while a girl learns femininity from her mother, her sense of self-worth grows out of the relationship that she has with her father. If that's true, it explains a lot.

In our childhood, we gather sticks of truth, a twig here plucked from a compliment offered up by a kind grade-school teacher, a branch there collected from the smile of a caring friend, and perhaps a plank secreted away from a parent's praise for a chore well done. With these sticks, branches, and boards, we cobble together early shelters of resilience to protect ourselves against life's inevitable storms.

For the fortunate—those born into positive surroundings where lumber and love are handed out freely—adulthood will mean sheltering under a reliable roof, standing behind sturdy walls, drawing from a swelling store of confidence to patch up any holes or cracks that life's hardships bring. For the rest of us—well, at least for me—I crouch behind my sad little pile of dried grass and broken twigs until the next strike of lightning

once again catches it all on fire and burns my mangled mound of hope back down to the ground.

I don't mean to sound pitiful, but it was ingrained into me early in life that I would never amount to much: I would be poor, I would be worthless, I would be used and then tossed aside. I understood these realities from the time I could barely crawl across the weathered linoleum floor of our single-wide trailer—because I heard them preached so often by my stepdad.

I should have despised the man.

After years of fighting, my welfare parents divorced when I was twelve—it was the second time for my mother—and then, as if prizes were awarded for speed, both quickly remarried equally abusive spouses. I was then bounced between them so often I felt constantly nauseous.

With any self-worth at all, after graduating high school early, I should have picked up my few possessions and fled. Instead, at seventeen, in the greatest of life's ironies, rather than follow my childhood ambitions to become a nurse, I joined the military, believing it would finally make my stepdad proud.

If only it would have worked out.

When Donovan asked why I wanted to be in the lead vehicle, I didn't tell him the truth because it hurts. While I originally joined the service for my stepdad, I volunteered to come on this latest tour for a completely different reason.

Every time our convoy goes outside the wire, those riding in the

lead vehicle are more likely to die—and that's the point. After all the mistakes I've made, after all of the things I've done wrong, I can't help but wonder if my son, Wesley, wouldn't be better off without me.

I haven't told Donovan because he'd call it a death wish, and that's not it at all. I just don't yet know who I am or what I'm made of. Until I'm forced to face real fear—the fear of death—I won't know how I will react. Am I ever going to be able to aptly confront the challenges that life plans to throw at me? Is there anything left inside me that's worth a damn, anything at all?

Right now, when I look down, I see a pile of ash sitting at my feet, and beneath it smolders a question that I haven't been able to extinguish: *Who is Rachel McCally, and is she truly worth saving?*

I came on this tour to find out.

Camp Anaconda, located forty miles north of Baghdad near the city of Balad in the Sunni Triangle, is the second-largest American base in Iraq—and the place we call home. In addition to the army units that are stationed here, it also serves as a base for the United States Air Force.

Anaconda houses more than 25,000 military personnel, plus several thousand civilian contractors, making it a small city. It has a movie theater, multiple gyms, a post office, a hospital, an Olympic-size swimming pool, and several fast-food courts with many favorites from home: Subway, Pop-

eye's, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Burger King, Green Beans Coffee, and even a Turkish Café.

Our accommodations themselves are basic: rooms in prefabricated trailers house two soldiers each in a 10 x 10 space with two twin beds and two lockers. There are three rooms per trailer, each with an exterior door, and it's all circled with a wall of sandbags four feet high. Beyond the sandbags is a cement bunker where we can go when the base is being bombed—but I have yet to see a soldier go inside.

The worst part is that we work at night, which means we sleep during the day, but our unit is attached to the 101st Airborne Division. In their infinite wisdom, the top brass assigned us to housing that sits alongside an airfield where air force F-16 maintainers spend their days revving and tweaking the jet engines, making sound sleep almost impossible. There are mornings when I'm so worn out that I want to stumble out the door and death-scream, "JUST SHUT THE HELL UP ALREADY!"

Camp Anaconda is also the most attacked base in the country. It's been nicknamed *Mortaritaville* because of nearly constant mortar attacks staged by Iraqi insurgents, and although most of the mortar shells land in the empty space between the runways, there have been occasional injuries and even fatalities. Still, we're usually so exhausted when we're in our barracks trying to sleep that we simply don't care. I have awakened on more than one occasion to find our trailer quaking and equipment falling from the top of my locker, and I've simply rolled over and pulled the pillow back over my head. Does that make me brave, stupid, or just tremendously

tired? It's a very fine line.

As for our assignment, we are called *ghosts in the night,* unseen by the enemy as we escort civilian supply trucks between US military bases under the cover of darkness. Our convoys consist of seven to nine armored vehicles, which protect about thirty interspersed semitrucks driven by either American contractors or third-country nationals.

Each of our vehicles normally carries three soldiers: a vehicle commander, a driver, and the gunner. The lead vehicle up front, Gun One, is always an ASV—armored security vehicle—fifteen tons of armored joy that scouts ahead, sometimes up to a mile, to make sure the route is clear and safe.

Gun Two comes next, most often an armored Humvee, but as the pacesetting vehicle for all those who follow behind, it tracks at a distance. Next, half a dozen supply trucks will join in, then Gun Three, another half a dozen semitrucks, Gun Four, and so on, until we reach the Aid and Litter truck, which always brings up the rear—and the word *litter* here means a first-aid stretcher and has nothing to do with trash.

While the civilian drivers aren't allowed to carry weapons, we make up for it. Each of our ASVs is armed with an Mk 19 grenade launcher, a .50-caliber M2 machine gun mounted in a turret, and an M240H machine gun mounted outside the gunner's hatch. It's fair to say that we can handle most of the insurgent situations we encounter.

There have been no intelligence reports of suicide bombers or planned attacks on our route for tonight, so we meet as usual at dusk,

waiting until the last possible moment to gear up. It's not yet summer, but the equipment we wear is still daunting. It includes a bulletproof vest, a Kevlar helmet, a 9mm handgun, an M4 Carbine, and ammo for both—not to mention all the required accessories: flashlight, batteries, Chem-Lights (glow sticks), knife, soft cap, tourniquet, PT belt, food, water, and a gas mask. I'm petite, and my gear will add a good forty to fifty pounds. Goodhart and I have a running joke: *does this bulletproof vest make me look fat?*

The larger men need heavier armor that can push their gear close to a hundred pounds. It's not just the weight, but also the bulk. We shimmy into our vehicles like belly dancers dressed in sumo suits. So while I can see the road straight ahead as we drive, it becomes almost impossible for me to twist around to communicate with our gunner—for that, we rely on our comm systems.

Our communication system connects to our helmets and lets the soldiers in the vehicles hear one another. With a press of a button, we can also communicate with others in the convoy. And if we need to speak to those in the civilian vehicles we're protecting—say, if we need to slow the convoy down—then we use separate handheld radios.

Tonight, I'm the first to arrive at the point of departure, but that's perfect. I want to be early because I'll be driving the Humvee for Donovan in the Gun Two position, and I don't want to offer the man any easy excuses to turn me down when I pitch him again for a shot as LVC—since I'm not giving up.

While I wait, Preacher walks up and greets me. "McCally."

Many of the soldiers in my unit are young, pushing twenty, so, at twenty-six, I feel like their mother—and they let me know it. Preacher, however, is older than I am, and it's refreshing. He's not as ancient as Donovan, but close. His real name is Adam Kellar, a staff sergeant with a full chin, embracing eyes, and a gentle voice. He garnered his nickname on account of a small Bible that he carries everywhere. He's religious, but everyone is cool with that because he is not condescending or judgy. Just the opposite—he seems truthfully interested in what God wants him to do with his life.

I return his greeting: "Preacher." He usually brings along a smile, but tonight I see a wrinkle that balances above his brow. "Is everything okay?"

His lips turn mechanically up, and his eyes are embarrassed that I noticed. "Yes, yes. I'm fine. Thank you." But his words are shaking their heads.

No one else has arrived yet, so I push back. "Remind me about the ninth commandment." When he doesn't answer, I nudge with more force. "If I remember correctly, it's the one about not lying."

His shoulders fall forward. "You're right, McCally," he admits. "I'm a little uneasy." Another hesitation. "My wife and I are having a bit of a struggle—or rather she is. It's challenging being so far away. How do I let her know that I genuinely want to work things out?" He turns to me as if I'll be holding a platter full of advice.

My own eyes narrow to match his. I'm the girl who married at eighteen, birthed a son, and was divorced by the end of my first tour of duty. If that failed relationship had been the worst of my follies, I'd be butting to the front of the *aren't-I-incredible* line. What I'm loath to admit, and still don't fully understand, is my deep-seated need to always have a man around.

Poor choices stacked on poor choices stacked on poor choices have created a tower in my life that is continually crashing down. For example, while at Camp Shelby, Louisiana, preparing for this second tour, I hit it off with a good-looking soldier named Dixon. Even with disaster signs flashing before my eyes in bright neon colors, we married on a whim while on weekend leave and arrived in Iraq as newlyweds—and then he started to push me around.

He was also stationed at Camp Anaconda, but serving in a different platoon, working an opposite shift. Though we seldom saw each other, when we did, it was long enough for him to accuse me of cheating with other men and introduce me to the fisted fingers on his right hand.

Two months in, I was both hiding bruises and doing online research about divorce. At the three-month mark, I moved into the women's barracks with my medic friend Goodhart, filed formal papers, and had Dixon served.

"Hello . . . McCally?"

As Preacher squeezes my shoulder, I realize that I'm kicking at the dirt.

"You'll get through it," he says. It's just like always: he's the one who's hurting, needing sympathy, but instead, he's spreading it to others.

"I don't know what to tell you about your wife," I admit. "As the queen of screwed-up relationships, I'm the last person to ask. I do know that life can be strangely messy . . . so, hang in there, I guess, and it will all work out." I sound like the words on a refrigerator magnet.

Donovan approaches, others trailing behind him. "Gear up!" he directs. "The trucks are ready, and be sure to watch that stretch of road by the cemetery. We repeatedly get hit there by small-arms fire. We'll roll in ten!"

After our gear is on, most of us congregate around Preacher. It's a ritual we've followed since this tour began, listening to him say a prayer before we leave. Seeing as how we have yet to hit an IED, one could argue that it's working.

Tonight, though, before he starts, Preacher glances in my direction and raises his eyebrows, silently asking if I'd care to take a turn. I shake my head before anyone else has noticed. Surely, if I tried to pray for the group after so many bad life choices, lightning would strike down from heaven and kill us all.

Preacher nods, understands, proceeds. It's odd because nearly everyone on the team gathers, bows their head, and listens, even soldiers who profess no belief in God. It could be camaraderie—we love and support each other regardless of our individual beliefs—or we could all be hedging our bets. Either way, my favorite part of our little ritual is the ending.

We aren't all the same religion. We may not all believe in the same

God—or any god, for that matter—but in the Iraqi desert, as members of the United States Army, we're united in a cause. We strive to do our jobs, we work to keep each other safe, and we look forward to the day when we'll return home to our loved ones. With all that in mind, our dissimilar voices mingle and intertwine as one as the prayer concludes.

"Amen," we all whisper. "Amen."

Chapter Two

"Quit sulking. It doesn't look good on you," Donovan says through his headset.

"I'm not sulking, sir," I answer curtly, pretending to focus on the long, slow curve of the road ahead as we grind our way back home from Q-West. Honestly, I want to call Donovan a slurry of vulgar names, but, like a pig soaking in sludge, he'd only bask in the filth and consider it his victory trophy—and I won't give him the satisfaction.

When a report came in about heightened insurgent activity along our return route, I pressed him again for a shot at Lead Vehicle Commander. In hindsight, I shouldn't have. Like a parent teaching a thankless child a lesson, he decided that two scout vehicles would indeed be warranted—but neither would carry me. Trying to show strength, Donovan gave the position to Specialist Fraser, a kid of twenty who's not even a sergeant.

Damn Donovan!

Now, as we creep through the night without so much as a wisp of threat, my anger soon buds into boredom. We run this route routinely, and

the most action we've ever seen is small-arms fire. But since our ASVs are like tanks on wheels, rifle fire hardly makes a ping when it bounces off our armor, and we often don't even know that we've been shot at until we reach camp and find tiny scuff marks on the side. Our armored Humvees are similar.

I came on this tour wanting to be tested, but I didn't mean my patience. My gaze darts to the lights up ahead as the lead scout vehicle begins to slow. I press my comm button. "Gun One, what do you see? Do I need to stop the convoy?"

Before I get an answer, there is a flash, an explosion, and a fireball swallows the lead vehicle. I swear I can see the sound wave from the blast roar toward us and into our lights that shine ahead on the road. Our Humvee instantly shakes, and, as the vibration passes, I'm already yelling.

"IED! IED!" I point toward the blast as if anybody on my team missed it.

Voices crackle quickly into our helmets from Gun Two. "GUN ONE IS ON FIRE!" Fullerton is shouting. "GUN ONE IS ON FIRE!"

My breathing quickens, and my eyes squint. I want to race ahead, see if we can help, but that's exactly what the insurgents hope we'll do—break protocol, giving them the opportunity to inflict greater damage.

While the fireball dies a quick death, it leaves hysteria hanging behind.

"KELLAR IS HIT. KELLAR IS HIT!" we hear through our headsets. It's Mack, the gunner; his voice is spooked and shivering.

"Mack, are you okay? Is anyone else hurt? How's Fraser?" I call back.

There is no reply. We wait and wait and wait. "Gun One?" I say again. Still no response. "Gun Two, what's happening? Are you there?"

In addition to the radio, we can send typed messages to individual vehicles, and Donovan has already called for the Aid and Litter truck. It serves as our ambulance and carries most of our medical supplies. However, as the last gun in our convoy, it can't leave its position until the vehicle ahead draws back to defend the rear.

As much as I want to drive to the wounded up ahead, our primary duty is to provide security for the civilian vehicles behind us.

"This is Gun Two." It's the voice of Fullerton.

"I read you, Gun Two. What's happening?"

"Preacher is hurt." His voice shakes. "How are we doing with a medic?"

Our medic rides in the middle of the convoy, since it's safest there, and her job is critical. The Aid and Litter truck will pick her up on the way.

"She's coming," I tell him, hoping that's the case.

"Hurry. Preacher is hurt bad, and I'm talking *really bad*."

I cringe, wishing he'd practice a bit more discretion. Donovan senses it as well and calls for Gun Four behind us to move up and take over our spot. That means we'll be heading up to help. While we wait, the Aid and Litter truck thunders past us on the left as Gibbins, our gunner, with his finger on the trigger, swings around his turret looking for someone he

can shoot.

Moments march forward, not caring that our men are hurt. Additional radio chatter cracks the silence. They've been able to get Fraser out, and Goodhart has arrived and is working on him.

Gun Four rumbles in behind us and flashes its lights to let us know it is taking over our position, and so I press the gas and we lurch forward. There have been no more explosions, no gunfire, no attack, but the realization of what's unfolding barely forms in my head when our comms crackle to life.

"This is Gun Six, repeat, Gun Six. We have an unexploded IED to our left. It's off the road, and I can see wires coming out of it. Repeat, there is an unexploded IED mid-convoy. We are pulling back. Repeat, we are pulling back."

It means that our convoy is separating into two groups, and with four of our armed vehicles up front helping Gun One, those left behind will be spread dangerously thin. I wipe my wet palms against the steering wheel. Our job is to guard the civilians in our charge, and if they're ambushed now, with so much of our firepower away from the rest of the convoy, people will die. Can it get worse?

"Do we keep going?" I ask Donovan.

"Keep going," he commands.

As we approach, I can see Gun One parked sideways in the road. Two soldiers are bent into the doorway, though I can't tell who they are. Behind it, Gun Two and the Aid and Litter vehicle are side by side, their

turrets swaying 180 degrees back and forth, scanning for danger. They could have maneuvered closer and pulled up alongside Gun One, but it would mean driving off the road into the dirt, and we're specifically trained against doing that. A common practice for insurgents is to place debris in the road, hoping to steer us into a primary or secondary bomb that waits patiently on the shoulder.

"Stay on the radio. I'll be back," Donovan directs before he jumps out and hurries off in the darkness toward Gun One.

The radio pops, but mostly with worry. "This is Gun Seven. What's happening up there?"

I press my comm. "Hang tight, Gun Seven. We're assessing. We'll let you know."

Manning the radio, controlling the flow of information, can be tricky. While the vehicles behind us are thirsty for news, the newer soldiers may not be prepared for it. We train for these times of crisis, but when they at last unfold, fear can unpredictably take hold. For the safety of everyone in the convoy we're protecting, I have to be careful what message I send back.

I can feel sweat drip down my face, and I want to pull off my helmet, but I know better.

Donovan returns, yanks open the door, and fills us in. "Mack seems okay—in shock, maybe a concussion, but he's not bleeding. Fraser was knocked out, took some shrapnel, and broke his foot, but he's awake, and Goodhart is working on him. They still can't get Kellar out of the vehicle."

He turns to me. "McCally, go see if you can help. Gibbins can take over the radio."

"Yes, sir."

A soldier's first instinct is to survey the surrounding terrain and assess any threat. As I step out into the darkness, I can tell that the land around us, like much of Iraq, is flat and barren. I am running toward Gun One when Sergeant Kay seems to step out of nowhere and motions me to stop. "McCally!" he commands. "Get to Aid and Litter and help Goodhart with Fraser."

Sergeant Kay is shorter than most of the men on our team, with wiry blond hair, bulging blue eyes, and skin that looks like weathered leather. He carries the constant smell of nicotine and has the same cough, the same rough voice, as Gibbins. When on base, most of my team tries to avoid Kay, as he can't help but steer even the most casual of conversations toward the tours he claims to have served with Special Ops.

"Are you sure?" I ask, about to tell him that Donovan has asked me to help with Kellar.

"That's an order!" he hollers back, jumpy and out of breath.

When I get to the back of the Aid and Litter, Goodhart is busy working on Fraser. The kid is awake but not moving, not saying anything. Fraser is one of the younger members of our team, a good-looking kid with a nice smile who has revolvers tattooed on the inside of his biceps.

"How are you doing, Fraser?" As I ask, I realize that he was sitting where I would have been had Donovan given in and put me in Gun One.

Should I now feel gratitude or guilt?

He doesn't answer, so Goodhart responds for him. "He has a broken ankle and has taken some shrapnel to his side, but I've stopped the bleeding. I'll stitch him up, and he'll recover just fine."

"How can I help?" I ask.

"I've got things under control here, but they can't get Kellar out. See if you can help at Gun One."

I spin around and head again toward Gun One, and once again, Sergeant Kay cuts me off. I expect him to demand that I return, but his eyes are wild and darting. He's handing me his M4. "Here, McCally," he says. "Take my weapon and pull ground security."

First of all, I'm carrying my own M4. Second, I'm staring at a "highly awarded and experienced" soldier—as he reminds us so often—who is now perfectly content to give away his rifle in a combat zone. When I don't reach for it, he bellows out another order. "I may need more ammo. Check the Aid and Litter for more ammunition. Hurry!"

He's hunching over, sure we're being watched, and though he outranks me, it's evident that he's buckling under the stress. I don't say a thing, pretend he's no longer there, and then I turn and take off in a sprint toward Gun One.

If Sergeant Kay calls after me, I don't hear him, and I no longer care. I'll deal with the consequences later because we need to get Kellar out, and we need to do it now.

The windows in an ASV are small—eighteen inches wide by about six inches high—and they hold glass that is three inches thick. The armor on the vehicle's front and sides angles so that there are no vertical surfaces, a design intended to deflect rocket-propelled grenades. It improves safety, but it also makes it difficult to get in or out, especially when strapped with gear.

There are two hatches on the top roof in front, one each above the driver and passenger seats. To get inside, we lower ourselves down through the hatches into the space below. Side hatches mid-vehicle can open for secondary access, but the gun turret blocks the way, making it hard to shimmy past to reach the front.

As I near the ASV, I see that both front tires have been blown off, the driver's window is cracked, and the front of the vehicle is lower than it should be, its axle cowering against the dirt. Five soldiers are working on getting Kellar out: Specialist Hallwell is leaning in through the top hatch above Kellar and he's pushing; Mack has climbed into the passenger side hatch beside Kellar, and he's pushing; Richie Brickley, the gunner from the Aid and Litter truck, is in the turret reaching through the mesh, and he's pulling; and Sergeants Spicer and Tate are huddled side by side against the driver's side hatch, each holding onto Kellar's arms, and they are pulling. Kellar's seat is folded back, and all are trying to slide the wounded man over it and toward the middle side hatch, where they will transfer him to a

stretcher—but Kellar won't budge.

It appears there is little that I can do, and I'm about to turn away when Sergeant Tate shuffles sideways just enough to make room for me to squeeze in alongside. I reach my arm inside, intending to comfort Kellar, to pat his shoulder and assure him that we'll get him out and that he'll be okay, but instead my fingers latch hold of his vest.

On all of our protective armored vests, there is a handle on the top back near the neck, which makes them easier to carry. Since I have a firm hold on Kellar's, I decide to give it a solid pull to see if it will help free him. The men so far have been grabbing Kellar by his arms and body, but as I tug at the vest, I can feel it give way.

Almost before I know what's happening, the vest slips off of Kellar, and I yank it free out of the side hatch—and my heart races with terror. In training, we're taught to always leave our vest on when in danger. But I hear a victory cheer from Mack as Kellar can finally move.

It was apparently Kellar's vest, with its many tabs and seams that were getting hooked on the vehicle, that was keeping him wedged in place. But now, with him being a good eighty pounds lighter, the pushing and pulling works as we begin to shimmy Kellar past the gun turret and toward the left hatch.

It's when his legs come over the back of his seat that I gasp.

As a child, we would give our dog both rib and chicken bones, and I remember how he would chew them into long, pointy, needlelike shards—and that's what I see below Kellar's knees. There is no solid bone,

and his feet are dragging by scraps of skin. Richie, who sees them at the same time, becomes vocal about it.

"Oh, man, his legs are like spaghetti!"

I want to lean over and gut-punch the kid because I've been taught in training to stay quiet about a soldier's wounds, to keep the injured calm so they don't drop deeper into shock. Richie clearly slept through that day of training.

After we scoot Kellar through the opening and then heave him onto the stretcher, Richie breaks protocol once again by shining a light on the man. That's dangerous for two reasons: one, it makes us an easier target, and two, our eyes are already accustomed to the dark, and it blinds us.

"Shut it off!" I command. He does, but it takes a moment for our eyes to adjust again. When they do, the sight isn't pretty. Blood is oozing out in rhythm from Kellar's leg. If we don't stop the bleeding now, he won't make it to Goodhart and the Aid and Litter truck.

Richie makes the same assessment, and, before I can speak, he calls for a CAT, a combat action tourniquet. While we're all required to carry one as part of our gear, only two of us have one. I jerk mine free from its tab on my vest and hold it out, thinking Richie will take it, but he gazes back as if he has no clue what to do with the thing.

Knowing there's no time for a staring contest, I rip the CAT open, rush next to Kellar, and draw the strap around his shredded leg, trying to find a spot where it will tighten. It should be placed an inch or two above the wound, but two inches below a joint. I want to save his knee, but

there's not much room, and so I find a place that looks like it may work, and then I twist . . . and twist . . . and twist.

When the tourniquet eventually cinches snug and the bleeding stops, I'm barely a nose away from Kellar's face. In the rush of getting him out of the ASV, I don't remember speaking to him, but now he's conscious and looking right at me.

His voice is labored, his whisper scratchy and forlorn. "You can't help me," he mumbles. "Please, let me be."

I won't have it. "No! We're your team," I tell him. "We love you, we need you, and you're going to be fine."

I touch his cheek, but my hands are still wet and warm with his blood. "Stay with me, Preacher," I demand, but his eyes are fading as if his soul is being lured away.

"Let's go!" Richie calls, and so I grab ahold of one corner of the stretcher while Fullerton, Hallwell, and Tate take the others. We don't run, because we can't risk dropping him, but we trot in the dark toward the only woman who can save his life—Ruby Goodhart, our medic.

The Aid and Litter vehicle is a large armored truck whose bed in the back is at eye level, so we have to raise Kellar up to slide him in beside Fraser. Whenever we've practiced this lift in training with a live person lying on the stretcher, I've never been able to lift the litter high enough.

"I can't do this. I need help!" I call out as we approach the back, but there is nobody there. With only one person on each corner, I'm afraid I will drop mine, and Kellar will tumble to the ground.

"Dear God, help me," I cry, and with a surge of adrenaline pulsing through my veins, I press my corner heavenward, and Kellar's litter glides into the back of the truck in perfect position.

Goodhart is in the back of the truck working now with Joanna Riggs, an assistant medic, and they cut open Kellar's clothes, push a needle into his arm, and start a mobile IV.

"He's missing a foot," I hear Goodhart say as they triage his leg.

"Did we lose his foot?" Richie asks, his eyes in a panic. We trace our path back to the ASV in the dark, looking for a severed limb, but find nothing. It's when we return that Goodhart calls down that it was bent underneath him, that he still has both of his feet. We watch as she and Riggs work feverishly to keep this good man alive.

A voice in the dark mutters to me. "We need to do something. We need to get payback!" When I turn, I see Mack, the only man from Gun One who survived without injuries—at least any that are visible. His breathing is brisk, he has lackluster eyes, and he's agitated, all symptoms of shock. Worse, he's holding his M4 and jabbing it toward the lights of a distant Iraq village, sure the residents there had something to do with this, and he wants revenge.

If it were anyone else, I'd be less apprehensive. But Mack is a former marine, and he has way more grit in him than we're allowed. If I

don't keep him engaged, this could get uglier. I wait until he's looking into my eyes. "Mack, put the gun away. We need to think about Preacher right now."

As I talk, he seems to relax, and I convince him to walk with me toward the Humvee where Donovan is on the radio, checking on the status of the medical helicopter flying in from Camp Speicher.

"We have to do something," Mack says again, not ready to give up.

"Clean out all the hot items from Gun One, in case we have to blow it," Donovan says, addressing both of us.

It's the perfect job to keep Mack busy, so we haul box after box of 50-caliber ammo, 203 grenade rounds, and then the weapons from the turret. We remove the radios and other electronic gear, and at one point I even run my fingers through the coagulated blood that is pooled on the driver's-side floor. To my surprise, I find one of the handheld radios used to communicate with the civilians.

We make trip after trip back to the Aid and Litter, where we store the equipment in compartments on the side. Each time, while Goodhart and Walker continue to treat Kellar, I call out encouragement.

"Hang in there, Preacher. We love you! We need you!" I can see that Goodhart is exhausted, and it raises the question: *Where is that damn chopper?*

It's on our last trip back to the Aid and Litter that I realize I've been cheering on Kellar but not Fraser. As we draw close, I see a small white light, I think from a flashlight that's been positioned behind Fraser's

head, and it's shining like a halo on the kid's face. He's lying just inches from Kellar, staring at the man as two medics toil to keep him alive, and I swear I can see innocence leaking out of his body and evaporating into the night. His chiseled features still glow under the light's beam, but it's his eyes that betray him: soft, boyish, bruised, as they plead with Kellar not to die.

Poor, sweet, naïve Fraser. He joined this tour young, wholesome, and unblemished—at least by the wounds of war—and he'll leave anxious, hurting, and scarred, never fully trusting life again. For that, I'm sad.

I finally hear the chopper in the distance, so I rush back to the Humvee, where Donovan is messaging the base where Kellar will be taken. Donovan pauses to direct me. "We need to signal the chopper to our location. Have someone set a marker!"

I jump on the radio and call up to the vehicles ahead. "Gun Two, Gun Two. The bird needs to see where to land. Is there someone who can signal?"

Fullerton answers back. "Sergeant Kay is here. He can do it. What should we use?"

I consider the options. "Have him tie two or three ChemLights to a rope and swing it around. The pilot should be able to see that."

A few seconds pass while I wait for confirmation, then a reply spits back. "He says that will make him an easy target."

You've got to be kidding! This from the guy who claims that he served with Special Ops. My words prickle. "Does he want Kellar to die?" I ask,

before passing along Donovan's directive more forcefully. "Tell him to do it now!"

Another moment passes. "He says he doesn't have a rope."

This time I scream into the mic. "TELL HIM TO USE HIS DAMN BOOTLACES!"

Fullerton keeps his button pushed so I can hear the exchange, first from Fullerton to Tate, "MCCALLY SAYS HE SHOULD USE HIS DAMN BOOTLACES," and then from Tate to Kay, "MCCALLY SAYS TO USE YOUR DAMN BOOTLACES."

He must have complied, because after a minute Fullerton tells us that the chopper has landed. It's not that I don't believe him—I just have to see it for myself, so I tell Donovan I'm going back up to help. I jump out and run toward the Aid and Litter truck. The helicopter is just off the road but down a small rise, and I see that Fraser is being carried toward it, leaving four of us to take Kellar.

Thankfully, Goodhart has him stable. Surprisingly, he's awake and talking, which I take as a good sign until I hear what he's saying.

"Leave me," he begs. "I'm not going to make it."

This time it's Richie who chimes in. "Nonsense, you're going to pull through just fine, Preacher. You'll walk with a dreadful limp, mind you," he says with a forced smile, "but you'll be okay."

None of us look to see if Kellar buys it. Instead, we clench our respective corners of the litter and heft him down the hill toward the chopper. My arms still ache from the previous carry, and I'm afraid again that I

may drop him. But I have no choice, so I grip until my fingers feel numb.

In a Hollywood movie, during pivotal moments in the plot, time will sometimes slow as the music builds. Tonight, in the Iraqi desert, I hear the whoosh of the chopper's propellers in place of music, feel the gust as each blade slices past—but in the dark, I can't see them, and it's unnerving. I duck as I approach, not knowing if it's necessary, but also not caring to find out that it is.

I am to the left of Kellar, and once again, as if stuck in a freakish recurring nightmare, I find myself trying to lift him high enough to slide his litter onto the helicopter but lacking the required strength. They have put Fraser in the lower litter, so we have to position Kellar above him, and I am overcome with shame, knowing it will be too high—and then I hear a voice calling from behind: "Help her, somebody needs to help her!"

It's Donovan, who has followed us, but he's distant and I'm barely holding up a man who is dying, and I know we can't wait. For the second time, I cry silently into the night sky, knowing I'm not worthy to be asking heaven for any favors, but trusting that perhaps Kellar is. Then I scream like it's my last act on earth, amassing all the strength I can muster as I press Kellar's litter skyward toward the chopper's flight medic.

The man onboard can see what's happening, and, in an act of both wisdom and grace, he is able to tip the chopper's litter just enough for us to catch our edge on his. And then, in a pure miracle, Kellar's litter slides onboard.

The doors close as I stumble backward, away from the whirring

blades, away from the commotion, and then fall to the ground heaving. My muscles throb and tremble, and I am gasping, gasping, gasping for breath and still filled with shame. Was it my fault it had taken so long to get Kellar on his way?

Unable to move—or unwilling—I watch as the helicopter carrying Staff Sergeant Adam Kellar, the man we lovingly call Preacher, lifts lightly off the desert floor and fades away into the darkness of the night.

When they finally reach us, EOD, the explosive ordnance disposal specialists, determine that the bomb discovered mid-convoy is a dummy. We also conclude that we can tow the damaged ASV home instead of blowing it up in place, but our slowed departure means that our drive will stretch into the morning's early hours.

It's a ride home that is both hushed and horrible.

In addition to the four currently in our Humvee—me, Donovan, Gibbins, and Hallwell—we have squeezed in Mack, and the array of emotions, the way people are dealing with the ordeal we've experienced, runs the gamut. Hallwell is bent over in the back, his hands hiding his face, and he's faintly crying. Up front, Donovan's jaw is stiff and jutted, his features drooping with fatigue, and while he would probably like to follow Hallwell's lead and weep, he knows that as LVC, he can't. Gibbins, in the turret, still swings back and forth, back and forth, looking for someone to blame.

And Mack, suffering from shock, is asleep, though he woke up briefly a few miles back with no memory of what had happened and confused as to why he was riding with us.

As for me, I can't find tears. My heart tells me that I should cry, and my eyes occasionally twitch like they are primed and ready, but my racing mind hasn't yet created the space. I keep replaying everything over in my head. *What if I'd done this? What if I'd done that?* And it's creating an odd swirl of emotions because, while I'm embarrassed for my faults, there is also the slightest stir of wonder.

I'd been waiting for an experience to test me, to prove how I would react in the face of death, and now, looking back on that trial, I see moments of marvel. I kept my cool. I did what I was trained to do. I was there to help save Kellar, and although I had missteps, I was steady and coherent—and the curiosity of it all overwhelms me.

Is it possible I'm not the failure that my stepdad always said I would be? Could it be that I'm worth something after all—even if that something is small? Can I truly make a difference in this world?

As I ponder what these thoughts all mean, we approach the turnoff to Camp Speicher, where Kellar was taken. We don't yet know if he's alive or dead, but we don't have time to stop. I feel my chest tighten, my vision blur, and my eyes moisten—but I can't let myself think about Kellar's fate any longer.

I will not cry. *I will not cry!*

My priority now is to get us home safely, and so I drive my feelings

away in the quickest manner I know how. We're not allowed to listen to music in the convoy, but right now, I don't care. I pull earphones from a pocket in my vest and slip one into my ear that is opposite of Donovan so he can't see. Then I bend away the mic on my helmet so that others in the noisy Humvee can no longer hear what I'm saying. I tap *play,* crank up the volume, and begin to sing along. Soon, I'm belting out loud, hard, inappropriate songs at the top of my lungs, but it keeps the pain at bay, and right now, anger and filth are better than feeling pain.

We have to reach the base, and it's my job to get us there.

Screaming out every foul and furious syllable, I sing . . . and sing . . . and sing.

When we drive into Camp Anaconda, our maintenance platoon is there to greet us. After every convoy, it's our job to download all of our vehicles—empty our gear, check fluid levels, clean and prepare them for the next trip. It's a chore that can take hours, but we're told that this morning others will be doing it for us.

We are also told that the company commander has an update on Kellar, but she hasn't shown up yet, and the delay is torture. While some find a place to sit, I pace in the motor pool. I have to keep moving, active, busy.

Every so often, someone will approach to ask if I'm okay; not

knowing how to answer, I give a thumbs-up and hope they'll go away. After what feels like hours, the company commander strides over. She's a petite thing who has likely never seen battle. She ushers us all into a large room where some of us circle and hold hands.

As she pauses for everyone to assemble, I watch her glance up, down, anywhere but at the soldiers standing before her, and then, without further delay, she addresses an empty spot at the back of the room.

"I regret to inform you that Staff Sergeant Adam Kellar has passed away. He bled out of his femoral artery."

I hear gasps, moans, and sniffles—and then a storm of doubt gusts across the room like smothering desert sand. Should I have placed the tourniquet in a different location? Could I have cinched it up more quickly? What if I hadn't been so slow lifting Kellar up into the chopper?

I stumble from the room in silence, glancing down to see that there is still dried blood staining my hands.

"I help you," a woman's halting voice says.

It is Halima, a bathroom attendant from Somalia who takes care of the shower trailer near my room. We hardly know each other, have spoken only through broken English, but she follows me softly into the trailer and watches with silent, downcast eyes as I scrub the blood and dirt from my hands. Her rounded features pinch slightly, telling me that she's experienced something similar herself back home, and then she takes soap in her own hands and places them on mine. Together, we let the stains of innocent blood dribble and drain away. I just wish that the ache wrenching in

my heart could wash away with it.

Words between us are no longer needed.

She passes me a towel, but, knowing it will never be big enough to hold so much pain, she drapes her arms around me and pulls me tight against her chest, and in the caring embrace of Halima, I fall to my knees on the shower trailer floor, and I whimper and then groan and then wail.

I weep for Kellar and his children. I weep for unnamed soldiers who have died in like manner. I weep for the loss of Fraser's innocence, our hurting families back home, and my team's pain.

I know it is selfish, and I instantly feel guilty, but I also weep for the memory of a young girl from Apache Junction, Arizona, for her mistakes, her damaged relationships, and her unquenched need to be loved.

I weep deeply for Kellar, but, buried in those tears, I also weep for myself.

Chapter Three

As soldiers, we train to perform under pressure. It's the main point of soldiering—learning to do your job even as death and mayhem crash the party around you. So which zipperhead upstairs had a brain cramp and decided that the best way for our team to deal with grief was to force us into taking two weeks off?

Two miserable weeks spent wondering, *what if?*

I work out at the gym. I waste time at the motor pool. I write letters to home, though we aren't allowed yet to tell them what we've been through because apparently they can't locate Kellar's wife to share the tragic news.

There's a knock at my door. "Are you ready?"

On account of my smart mouth and the fact that I complain the loudest, Donovan has selected me to help him box up Kellar's things. We walk together to Kellar's barracks and push through his door. It's both humbling and eerie.

"Do you feel as if he's here?" I ask, glancing around. "Like he could burst in at any time and ask what we're doing with his stuff?"

"If he does, I'm going to shove you down and run like hell."

Smiles are still rare, so I try to hold on to this one just a little longer.

While Donovan sorts through the clothes in Kellar's locker, I sift through and box up the things on his desk. I know that he had agonized over his marriage, but it's not until I spread open the letter on top, the most recent from his wife, that I grasp the extent of the man's burden.

"She was cheating on him," I tell Donovan. "She admits it right here. She was letting him know that she's found someone else, that she wants a divorce. That must be why they can't find her."

He stops folding. "That would also explain why the man wasn't fighting harder to live. He wasn't just bleeding from his leg, he was bleeding from his heart, and that's a more deadly wound."

As I place the letter in a box, I notice the page below is written in Preacher's familiar hand. At first, I assume it's a reply to his wife, but a sentence or two in, I see that it's more.

"What is it?" Donovan asks as he watches me hold it up to read.

"It's a prayer letter."

"A what?"

"He was writing his thoughts to God."

Donovan's lips droop like hot wax. "Well, he didn't get much help, did he?"

The scribbled pleadings are sad, even shattering, and they don't sound like the Preacher I knew, the man who was always there to help

others.

"You're wrong," I say. "He asked for God to take him, said it wasn't worth living with his pain."

Donovan's head lowers.

"You said God didn't help him much," I add, "but he gave Preacher exactly what he asked for."

The mutual silence lingers, a tribute not just to the death of Kellar but to the hidden heartache of a crumbled marriage.

"I almost pity his wife," I say out loud.

"How so?"

"Think about when they finally find her, and she hears the news but is with some other guy. She'll get to read these letters and know what Kellar was thinking, what he was feeling the last moments of his life, and that she played a part in that—and she'll have to cart around that guilt until the day she dies. I wouldn't want that millstone around my neck."

Donovan turns, pauses. "I want you to know—that's precisely what I'm dealing with."

I set down the letter. "You're cheating on your wife?"

"No, of course not. I'm talking about the guilt. I couldn't live with it. How can I ask you or anyone else to ride in Gun One after what we've seen?"

I bristle. "You don't have to ask. I'm here to volunteer. I *want* to be up there. You need to give me a chance."

The man sighs, and his shoulders sink as if he's leaking air. "I

won't argue with you about it here, but I felt like you should know why. We've driven together for too long. If something were to happen to you, I wouldn't forgive myself."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you should get used to driving with me, McCally, because you'll never be riding in Gun One—and that's final!"

For our first mission back, we're being sent to Camp Warhorse. In our line of work, it's the equivalent of running down to the 7-Eleven to pick up more milk—but none of us care. We're just excited to do something.

We've been standing around for more than an hour, waiting for final permission to leave, and everyone is anxious. I've found that it's during these times of unrest and boredom when true personalities come out. While waiting a few weeks ago, Fullerton strapped a bunch of Chem-Lights to his uniform and then twirled around in the dark, looking like a dancing skeleton. I've also found that boredom leads to mischief.

While we stand beside our trucks waiting for clearance, Richie shushes us all with a shake of his finger, like he's threatening toddlers who've been getting into candy. Gibbins has fallen asleep on the hood of our Humvee, and Richie has pilfered a wide-tipped Sharpie marker, the black kind that won't wash off for days, and he's about to play Pablo Picas-

so using sleeping Gibbins's lips as his canvas.

And it isn't the first time Gibbins has been the victim of Richie's pranks.

Twice before, Richie has given the poor kid a proper Hitler mustache, and on both occasions, it was deemed our challenge to keep a straight face about it, to see how long it would take Gibbins to realize that his face had been vandalized. Any other member of our team would notice within minutes, but we're talking about *Gross Gibbins,* a man who doesn't own a toothbrush or a comb and has little need for a mirror.

For us, it wasn't easy. Try speaking to someone who's wearing a black-markered Hitler mustache that they don't know is there and see if you can carry on a regular conversation without busting out into uncontrollable laughter.

Today, for a change of pace—because three Hitler 'staches in a row would mean Richie was losing his creativity—he draws six quick lines and a few peppered dots to give Gibbins a blackened nose and remarkably realistic Hello Kitty whiskers.

The poor kid reaches up as if to brush away a bug, and had I been watching such shenanigans back home, the mother in me would have put a stop to it. But we aren't back home. We're at war with insurgents in Iraq who want to kill us, and for our first time out since Kellar's death, it's critical that things get back to normal.

Besides, not only can Gibbins take a joke, I know for certain that Richie would take a bullet for the kid or for any one of us—and that's why

these moments must never end.

We are still family.

I resolve that next time, if needed, I will pretend to be asleep and then let them draw all over me to their hearts' desire. For now, Gibbins sits up sleepily as Richie jerks the marker away, caps it, and slips it back into his pocket. Though Gibbins's hygiene is lacking, he's not stupid. His eyes pry open and then circle the soldiers standing oddly around him.

"He did it again, didn't he?" he finally says, but no one answers.

Instead of being mad, he just closes his eyes to try to get more sleep, and we barely have time to share a laugh before Donovan honks the horn of the Humvee to get everyone's attention.

"We have the green light. Let's head out!"

"Wait!" Goodhart calls before anyone can leave. "I think . . ." She arches forward as if prodding her words to drop out.

"What is it?" Donovan asks.

"What about Preacher's prayer?" she asks. "I think we should still do it. Maybe not for us, but for him."

As I look around, I see others nodding their heads.

"Okay," agrees Donovan. "Who wants to say it?"

Not knowing who else is religious, I decide I'd better volunteer, but Richie beats me to it. I can't be the only one with saucered eyes since Richie has always been quite vocal in sharing his views: he's an atheist.

As we bow our heads, I sneak a look to see Richie glancing up. He starts out slowly. "God, I don't think you're up there . . ."

I hold my breath, fearing this could go very wrong, very quickly.

" . . . but Preacher believed in you," he continues, "and that works well enough for me."

While the rest of Richie's prayer is equally nonconventional, and it won't go down in the annals of religious history as the most spiritual of discourses with the Maker of the Universe, it serves its purpose, and as we all say *Amen* together, I imagine both God and Preacher must be cracking a knowing smile.

It appears that Richie's words have also touched Donovan, as his finger is in the air to let us know that he has something more.

"Let's do this also," he adds. "From now on, we will no longer have a Gun One, because Kellar has that position covered. Our lead vehicle will hereafter simply be called Scout. Those that follow will still be Gun Two, Gun Three, and so on. Any objections?"

There are none, and I've never been prouder of the man. But that makes what I plan to do next even harder.

Donovan raises a hand to signal. "Let's roll!"

Camp Warhorse is tiny compared to Anaconda—no swimming pool, no movie theater, no fast food. The only place to eat is their chow hall, which is about the size of a small elementary school gym, with a dozen or so cafeteria tables that fill the space like dots on a dominoes tile.

While the trucks in our convoy are being unloaded, we have a good four hours of downtime, and so I sit beside Mack, pretending to politely listen as I watch for Donovan to arrive.

"It's so odd," Mack says. "I remember the fireball enveloping the truck, and then the next thing I know, I'm waking up in the Humvee to the sound of you singing your guts out. I thought we'd died and I'd gone to hell."

It was funny the first time he told me, but he's been like a forgetful grandfather who's recounted these details twice in the last few minutes. So, when Donovan enters and takes a seat on the opposite side of the room, I quickly excuse myself from Mack and walk confidently over to sit beside him.

"McCally," he greets.

"Donovan," I answer back.

I'm not going to complain anymore because tonight I have a plan. It's not a set-in-stone plan that I've completely thought through, but more of an adjustment in my approach.

We start with chatter about family: his older boy's basketball game, the geode that his youngest found while hiking, and the crappy job the repairman did on his leaky roof, taking advantage of his wife, who didn't know enough to ask for references. We have plenty of time, so I tell him that my son is reading on a second-grade level, that Apache Junction is renovating the community swimming pool, and that my mother took a job at the city's new health center.

We then shift to the news: tornadoes in Alabama have killed almost a dozen, a human case of bird flu has been confirmed in China, and Switzerland accidentally invaded Liechtenstein after 171 of its infantrymen got lost and mistakenly crossed over the border.

Then, at the next pause, I sit taller. "There is something I need to know," I say to him.

"Sure, what?"

"Why no do-rags?"

His eyes squint. "I beg your pardon?"

"You know, do-rags, the scarves that Goodhart, Laurel, and I wear to keep the hair out of our faces. A regulation was issued stating that they are now prohibited because they aren't part of our *official uniform.*"

"It's the rule. What do you want me to do about it?"

"How about you grow out your hair and then try to keep it out of your eyes." I don't smile, and so Donovan suddenly doesn't know if he should either.

"What are you saying?" he asks.

I'm not distraught; I'm direct. "I'm saying that it's a stupid rule, probably made by a bald one-star who's never had to worry about hair in his life."

Donovan's jaw drops, his mouth is empty, and there is no sound. I fill the pause with another point of my plan.

"It's not just the do-rags. I got chewed out the other day on base by a major for having my hands in my pockets. Why? Are they afraid it will

slow us down when we have to John Wayne salute each other?"

Donovan's chair pushes away, retreating from the ambush. "Look," he finally says, "try to just obey and stop asking *why* all the time."

Typical answer, but tonight I'm locked and loaded. "Is that it? Well, that would make perfect sense, except that in training a few weeks ago, we were told that to get ahead, to make a difference, we needed to be *problem solvers* and *critical thinkers.* When I try to do either, the standard reply back is to *shut up and color,* follow commands without objection. How can army brass have it both ways? It's an approach that's bad in parenting and worse in military leadership."

In a way, I feel like I'm fishing back on Saguaro Lake. *Bait, cast, nibble, and get ready to set the hook.* Donovan is nudging at the worm now with this nose—so I encourage him. "Look, I get that troops should be trained to follow orders when in combat, but in typical military life, we need more common sense, more flexibility. Don't you agree?"

His hands turn up; his shoulders follow. "Your concern is valid, but I'm not the one making all these rules, so quit complaining and just try to follow them. Change will come, but sometimes it needs to come slowly."

He shouldn't have taken the worm.

"I plan to."

A line crosses to touch both of his temples. "You do?"

"I do. Back at Anaconda, you said to me, and I quote, 'I'm not going to lose you, or any woman on my team, to an IED—not on my watch.' Goodhart has heard you say that on more than one occasion as well, and

she'll back me up. Those were your exact words."

I watch him bristle as he fights the pull of the line. "Back you up? You don't need backup. You're damn right that's what I said because it's true. What's your point, McCally?"

"Donovan, this isn't 1980. You can't discriminate like that."

"It's not discrimination. It's . . . it's looking out for my team. It's being a good leader, a good person. You can't argue with that."

He must feel a bit of dismay being hooked so firmly in the mouth, sensing there's little he can do about it—so I give him a little slack. I want to win this battle, but I don't want to resort to burning and pillaging to do it. "I will admit to you that I wasn't ready to be LVC when I initially approached you. I was naïve, arrogant, and untested, and you had every right to turn me down."

I can tell he wants to say, "You were?" but he stays silent.

"I wasn't ready then," I confirm, "but I discovered something profound about myself on the night Kellar died—and that is, I'm ready now. Donovan, I proved myself capable that night. You know it, and everybody else on the team knows it. You need to make me LVC."

It's Donovan's turn to sit tall, to push back—and he does. "I don't *need* to do anything," he says. "I'm the guy making the decisions, remember? I'll tell you when you're ready—and that's final."

I stand up so that I'm looking down at him. "As per regulations, which you yourself said I should follow, I want to inform you that I'm going to file a formal EO complaint." I slow my sentence to accentuate every

syllable. "In case you missed the training, that stands for *equal opportunity*. You may not have heard, but you can't discriminate against women. It's a pretty big legal deal in the army these days. They frown on it big time."

Donovan's cheeks are twitching, his jaw has dropped open, and I swear I hear gurgling. If he starts flopping around on the floor, I'll have to scramble to find a net.

I've made the man angry—okay, livid. I can tell that he wants to lurch forward, slap me broadly across the face, and then ground me and send me to my room.

When he says nothing, I turn tranquilly from the table and start to walk away. "This will be a pleasure," I say. I'm almost to the door when he calls out.

"FINE! YOU WIN! GET YOURSELF KILLED AND SEE IF I CARE!"

I stop. I turn. I step back. He's fuming, he feels defeated, but I know that he *does* care and that's why this is painful for him. But I *do* deserve it, and I wish he'd realize that. I decide to make sure we are both clear on the matter. "Sir, does this mean that I can be LVC?"

His head shakes in disgust as he concedes. "I said that you win. I'll put you up front on the very next mission. But I won't . . . I repeat . . . I *won't* be the one to tell your son when you're killed by an IED. Do you understand?"

"My son?" The rest of my words stop cold. It's seconds before I can collect my thoughts.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” he asks again.

The line breaks and the fish swims away.

“Yes, I . . . I understand.”

Chapter Four

It's not easy to explain how I look for IEDs. My eyes strain constantly at the road, scrutinizing anything at the edge of the darkness that seems out of place: a patch of wet dirt, a bent piece of plastic, a newly covered pothole.

It's fear that keeps me vigilant. Not the fear of dying, but the fear of missing a bomb that will kill a member of my team in a vehicle behind me. In my new job as LVC, I instinctively recognize that truth: worse than dying is feeling responsible for the death of a friend.

I also get the feeling that Donovan would take a measure of glee in my failure—if only for the sake of his pride and the chance to wag his father finger at my nose and exclaim, "I told you so."

A few of the bombs are small, and if we were to hit one of those, it wouldn't hurt us. Our ASV is built on a mine-resistant hull and is heavily armored, so the worst damage a small bomb could do is to flatten a tire. Even then, our tires are made to run flat, so that it wouldn't be a problem getting back to the base.

But it's not the small bombs that scare me.

Insurgents perpetually look for new ways to hurt us, novel methods to slow us down.

On our trip Monday, for example, someone had dug a large pit beside the road, and a smoky vapor was billowing out of it. It was blowing the opposite direction, so we didn't stop to see if the locals were roasting us a pig. But when we arrived at Tallil, we were told it was a chlorine gas attack. The wind hadn't been as friendly the day prior when a convoy from Speicher drove through a similar mist, bleaching their vehicle white and blistering the lungs of six soldiers, one of whom died.

As I said, the buggers can be innovative.

We're halfway through our drive tonight when something catches my eye.

"SLOW DOWN! IED! IED!" I call through the intercom to Richie, my driver, who crawls the vehicle to an almost halt.

"Where? I don't see it."

"Side of the road," I tell him. "On the left."

"Looks like garbage to me," he replies as he turns the vehicle and shines a light—and then he sees the wires. "Son of a . . . How did you see that?"

I quickly radio back to Gun Two. "Slow the convoy. Repeat, slow the convoy. We've got something up here; we're checking it out."

IEDs generally have two detonators. One is wired to a radio switch that can be triggered remotely. Fortunately, every one of our vehicles has an RF jammer, which renders radio signals inoperable. The bigger det-

onator threat is a pressure plate. A pressure-wired IED will explode the moment a vehicle drives over it. It's what killed Kellar.

"This one looks pretty tiny," Richie says, as he creeps us closer.

"The part we can see," I remind him.

Then Gibbins, our gunner, chimes in. "Can I shoot it?"

"That will piss EOD off," I tell him, "but let me call it in and find out."

Usually, the explosive ordnance disposal specialists want to come out and inspect everything in person—I often wonder if it's only to feel important. Still, I can't knock what they do. They're experts who put their lives on the line every time they defuse a bomb. Their teams are always out and can sometimes come right away. Other times, depending on what they have going on, it can take hours, which means we sit like smoked sardines in armored tins, and it brings us right to the edge of crazy.

Tonight, they tell me EOD is close, and because the bomb is small and off to the side of the road, they've given us permission to mark it with ChemLights and then carefully drive the convoy past.

Of course, we'll have to open a vehicle hatch to throw a light to mark the bomb, and we never know who or what will be waiting for us in the dark. As a precaution, Gibbins likes to wrap a tourniquet around his arm at the shoulder. That way, in case a hand or arm is blown off, he can hurriedly stop the flow of blood.

Tonight, as Gibbons opens the hatch, there are no gunshots, no explosions, and so he marks the bomb with half a dozen light sticks, and

then I radio both our team and the civilian drivers behind us to steer clear of the hazard, and we move on.

Richie turns toward me and says, "I don't see how you found that." Fortunately for me, with all of our helmets and gear, he can't see my face very well. With this being my first real IED spotting as Lead Vehicle Commander, a wily grin has attached itself to my face, and honestly, I can't get the silly thing to go away.

After that first, I found two more IEDs on separate trips, one while we were heading to Speicher and the other on the way to Baghdad International Airport. On both occasions, Richie stopped our vehicle in time, and the explosives were defused by EOD. With the next IED finding, we'll win the Eagle Eye award, a trophy given by the battalion that travels among Anaconda's platoons to recognize the team who's found the most roadside bombs.

I seem to have a knack for spotting IEDs—I'm not sure why—and even the normally reticent Sergeant Kay congratulated me last week on a job well done. In truth, I've settled into my new role so quickly and easily that I've surprised even myself.

Still, this whole Eagle Eye award has put me into a peculiar position tonight on our quick trip to Taji. Should I be hoping to find another IED or praying for a noneventful trip?

I cast the dilemma aside and focus on the road. It's tricky because only a minuscule portion of the discarded trash that I visually sift through will turn out to be IEDs. It seems there's a life analogy crying out for recognition in the thought—we sift through a lot of garbage to find the worthwhile—but I can't work through how finding bombs as the prize equates to winning, and so I drop the notion and go back to the sorting.

My eyes dart back and forth, covering the same area twice in case there's something I've missed. Up ahead is a patch of weeds, but there is nothing unusual about them—no disturbed dirt, no oddly formed mounds—simply weeds. Then I spot a rusty oil drum, and though an object that large would normally set off multiple warning bells in my head, both circular ends of the drum have been removed, allowing me to see right through it, like a plain piece of pipe—so again, just trash.

There is a discarded child's toy, a shredded plastic bag, the carcass of a dead dog—trash, trash, trash.

BOOM!

A concussive blast lifts up our ASV and shakes it angrily, while an enveloping fire tries to reach in fingers from the outside. The blast batters my face and chest, then steals my breath as the vehicle jerks angrily to a halt.

I'm panting. I'm shaking. My nose is bleeding, and my head feels like it's been pummeled with a brick. After I finally pull in a half gasp of air, I shove a wad of tissue up my nose and then check on my team.

"Richie, are you okay?"

He's moving, wiggling his feet, bending his limbs. "I'm okay. I'm okay." He looks at me. "You're bleeding!"

"It's just my nose. It will stop." I try to twist around. "Gibbins? How are you doing?"

There's no reply, and from where we sit, we can't see into the turret.

"Gibbins, talk to me. How are you doing, buddy?" We can hear him squirming like he's injured, but he says nothing.

A call crackles in from Gun Two behind us. "Scout? How are you?"

I press the comm to call back. "Richie and I are fine, Gun Two. We're checking on Gibbins. Let's stop the convoy." I switch back to our vehicle comm. "Come on, Gibbins. Tell me that you're okay, kid! What's happening?"

The fireball outside is gone, and while my front window is cracked, I can't see any further danger or hear any gunfire. The blast has knocked us sideways in the road, but the armor held, our feet are still connected, and we are alive.

"Can we drive?" I ask Richie. "We need to get away from here so we can check on Gibbins."

Richie presses the gas, and we lunge forward. "It's a little sluggish, like the tires may be flat, but we can drive."

And then we hear Gibbins through the comm. "Wow, that was crazy!"

My tone rises. "Speak to us, Gibbins. What's happening?"

"The blast stuck my eye to the sight. I couldn't get it off!"

I've heard of this happening. In the turret, the gunner has a thermal sight with an eyepiece that looks like the end of an expensive telescope. Imagine a periscope with a hard piece of rubber that fits firm against the gunner's face. Apparently, the pressure change from the shock wave caused it to suction to Gibbins, and it's going to leave a killer black eye, for which our gunner will be appallingly proud.

"I'm glad you're fine, kid, so that Richie will still be able to draw on you while you sleep." I'm trying to lighten the mood, but in my head, I'm going back through what I saw along the road, and then it hits me. "It wasn't bloated."

"What wasn't bloated?" Richie asks.

"They hid the bomb in the dead dog. The carcass wasn't bloody, bloated, or mangled. I should have noticed."

Richie's reply gives voice to what we're all thinking. "What kind of person would kill a dog and use it to hide a bomb?"

He's right. It used to be that the bad guys just dug holes, but they're getting more creative, more vile. Humans are becoming animals. Does this mean that, as a species, we're devolving?

Gibbins must not be listening because he pipes up with an inquiry of his own. "McCally?"

"What is it?"

"Will this still count as finding an IED?"

"What year is it?"

I smile at the army medic who is asking, a young kid with thick blond hair and a puffy face.

"It's 2007. Now give me a hard one."

His eyes skip further down the printed page on his clipboard. "Okay, repeat the alphabet backwards."

"Sure. Z, Y, X, W, V, U, T, S, R, Q. . . Do I need to keep going?"

If he had any sense at all, he'd know that any nonconcussed normal person couldn't whip the letters off backward like I just did without stopping to think. But I've nailed every answer, and he's following regulations, so he's not going to argue.

"You're fine," he concludes. "No concussion. You're cleared to go back out. Let me know if you have any headaches, nausea, or blurred vision."

I've had all of those things, but I say nothing, take his paperwork, and leave.

The team said that I was being weird on the way home, getting my right and left mixed up, and using the wrong words. I would say it's pretty plain to anyone with a nickel's worth of common sense that I have a concussion, that I should be resting, but I'm not about to be sidelined at the base for two or three weeks, slowly turning crazed and lazy, while my guys are out pulling my weight.

Not. Gonna. Happen.

That's why we cheat. We memorize the answers to the concussion test that the army medics give when our vehicles are hit by an IED because no one is smart enough ever to change it up. We actually practice with one another until we have the answers down pat, and I submit that our effort is proof of a very important principle: hard work in life pays off.

Besides, by tomorrow, I'll be ready to be LVC again.

Chapter Five

As summer creeps across the alluvial plains of Iraq, an already hot place becomes insufferable. The sun ladles out its heat like an Assyrian mother serving up Bamia stew, letting its boiling broth flow into everything. It wets our skin, cracks our lips, and pushes along rivers of salty sweat that amble from our necks down to the ammo belts that cinch against our dampened waists.

While it's helpful that we run our convoys at night to avoid the heat, it's not the main reason that we do it. A curfew has been placed by the military on Iraqi citizens, which requires them to stay inside after dark. So essentially, if a vehicle approaches us along our nighttime route without properly identifying itself, we have full authority to open fire.

It's a policy that is meant to keep us safe, and, to a degree, it does, except that the insurgents know that it's mainly the US military using their roads at night and so they gleefully take up the challenge to make those roads as deadly as possible.

During the summer, insurgent activity—including the placing of

roadside bombs—always rises.

While our convoy has been lucky as of late, other convoys have been recently hit, and it keeps me nervous.

We are heading toward Baghdad on a long, flat stretch of desert road when Richie asks, "Do you see that up ahead?"

Plainly, I do. A distant pair of headlights is coming toward us.

"Have you flashed them?" I ask Richie.

"I have, but they didn't respond. Let me try again."

It's protocol here when driving at night to flash our vehicle's headlights at anyone oncoming, and if they are on our side, they will immediately flash back, letting us know they are friendly. If they don't flash back, that means they're either a disobedient local out against curfew or, worse, a suicide insurgent manning a bomb-laden car intent on crashing into our convoy.

Richie's voice lifts in both volume and dread. "Nothing! Three times and they're not responding!"

"Gibbins, hit him with the laser," I direct.

If an approaching civilian vehicle doesn't stop, we will next target them with a laser from one of our guns. If you've never been on the receiving end of said experience, trust me when I say it's unnerving. In Iraq, a red laser beam circling anywhere on your body speaks a universal language: *you're about to be shot.*

"Laser is on," Gibbins calls back, "and they're ignoring it."

The hair on my neck bristles. "Don't make me kill you," I mutter,

but it appears I'll have no choice. "Fire a few rounds in front," I direct.

It's the second-to-last step before either a menacing enemy or a clueless foe will lose their lives. To warn them, we'll fire rounds into the ground right in front of their vehicle, which kicks up dirt and dust and hand delivers what to us seems like a pretty plain message: *prepare to die.*

A volley of warning shots rings out in the darkness.

Boom, boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom, boom!

We watch and wait for a response; then, my helmet smacks against the windshield in disbelief. Gibbins has fired off several rounds from the .50 cal, and, incredibly, the vehicle doesn't stop its approach or even so much as turn. They give me no other choice.

"Open fire!" I command.

Gibbins elevates his sites to the dark space right above the headlights where the driver should be sitting behind the windshield of the car or truck and squeezes the trigger.

Boom, boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom, boom!

The vehicle should lurch sideways off the road, or even explode into flames when a round hits the gas tank or other explosive material that the insurgents typically pack inside. But nothing happens—the headlights keep coming straight toward us.

We're getting close, but in the dark, we still can't positively identify the oncoming threat. I'm about to order Gibbins to snag the M203 grenade launcher when the headlights roll sideways as the vehicle turns broadside.

We slow to a stop, close enough now to make out what we're up against, and Gibbins's next uttered words speak for us all.

"Holy hell!"

We are staring at the silhouette of a United States Army tank.

No one moves. We watch with incredulous eyes and frozen jaws while the tank crawls slowly away, and just when I think the silence will smother us, which would be the happiest possible ending for everyone, Gibbins chimes in as only Gibbins can.

"That's crazy—I didn't even know tanks had headlights."

"The colonel will be with you in a moment."

I'm sitting in a reception area—nicer than I expect, considering our subpar barracks—with Captain Ella Dowling, our company commander, the same woman who informed us about Kellar's death. After the episode with the tank, our team was temporarily taken off duty, and we can't go back out until we're cleared by Colonel Abrams.

As we wait outside his office, Dowling repeats the same instructions that Donovan offered before I left to come over. "Don't speak unless spoken to. Don't disagree with the colonel. Merely listen, nod back when appropriate, and, with any luck, this will all blow over soon."

The receptionist—red hair, freckled hands, and stern countenance—steps over and invites us both to follow her into the colonel's

office. We enter, salute, and then sit in the chairs placed opposite his desk.

The man is in his late forties with broad shoulders, a low voice, and thinning hair, and I swiftly suspect he's the same officer responsible for the recent ban on do-rags. There is a folder on his desk that he skims, no doubt a report submitted by both parties detailing the "friendly fire" incident. He mumbles through the listed bullet points as he reads them.

"Outside of Baghdad . . . the convoy vehicle approached . . . it was at night . . . difficult to see . . . the tank was inadvertently fired upon . . . nobody was hurt."

The colonel glances over at the commander, and I worry that his gaze alone will knock her from the chair. I wait for her to chime in, to correct the record, at least make a gurgling noise to let others know that she's breathing. Instead, all she musters is a tiny smile, and I swear if she starts to parade-wave, I'll reach over and face-pinch the woman.

The colonel is obviously itching to get this review over with, so he moves next to the resolution portion of the report. He leans forward, his eyes focusing briefly on me, but I must be fidgeting something fierce, so they brush right past me to my commander. "How can we make this situation better in the future?"

I know I was told to keep quiet, but I can't help myself—and he did peek at me, even if for but a second.

"I know what can be done, sir."

His eyes swing back to mine; then he lifts his brows, and I take that as permission to proceed.

"Teach the morons who drive the tanks to flash their lights back when an approaching vehicle flashes theirs. That would completely solve the problem in the future . . . sir."

I don't turn to my commander because, if she's having a heart attack, I don't want to know about it.

"Flash their lights?" the colonel asks back.

"Yes, sir. They didn't flash their lights like we're trained to do. That's the reason we fired at them, sir."

I don't know if this is news to the colonel or if he's just startled that a woman in the army has spoken her mind, but he thinks about the suggestion for a moment and then continues.

"Okay," he says. "I will pass that along. Now, is there anything that you and your team can do in the future to ensure that this doesn't happen again?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely," I say, pausing for permission to proceed.

"Well, sergeant, what might that be?" he finally asks.

"Sir, my team and I would be happy to conduct a class for the moron tank drivers in that platoon to teach them how to correctly flash their lights when a vehicle approaches . . . sir."

I hear a gasp in my right ear; if it's from my commander, it will be the first sound she's made since walking through the door.

The colonel's head has twisted to the side, and I can't tell if he's incensed or stifling a smile.

"Thank you, sergeant," he says. "You're excused. I'd now like to

speak to your commander alone."

In my barracks, I pace back and forth, fretting and cursing my big fat mouth. Once again, I'm in trouble and planning for my possible punishments. I'll be cleaning latrines until January. I'll be doing so many push-ups my arms will look like She-Hulk. I'll be forced to eat MREs three times a day. Could they also kick me out for insubordination?

Donovan knocks.

"Come in."

He knows that I'm unnerved, but he chuckles like a private on payday. I wait to hear *I told you so* sandwiched between a slew of vulgarities, but instead, he calmly informs me that he's finished meeting with the commander.

"How bad is it?" I ask, every speck of me cringing.

"Follow me and find out for yourself."

I trail the man to the food court where Richie, Gibbins, Mack, Goodhart, and other members of my team are crowded around a table of hot pizza, and when I walk in, they all stand and cheer. It's only then that Donovan's smile widens.

"The colonel found your fortitude refreshing, and he told the commander as much. She couldn't be here in person, but she asked that I congratulate you on standing up for your team."

I've bought my guys pizza before—a nod to the fact that they're doing a great job—but this is the first time that they've bought pizza for me, at least since I became LVC, and I'm not ready. I accept their congratulations, their pats on my back, their kind thanks for my speaking up to the colonel. But I promised myself that I wouldn't get emotional—not now, not ever. I react exactly like the company commander whose presence I've just left, and I recognize we're all in over our heads. I say little but hand out plenty of smiles, as that's all my swelling tear ducts will presently allow.

A few minutes later, with the team still huddled about the table, Donovan yanks me aside. "I want to say that you did a helluva job today. You've really surprised me, in a good way, with how you've stepped into this new position. I'm proud of you and what you're doing with the team."

I can't recall a man in my life ever using the word *proud* in reference to me.

I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood because . . . I. Will. Not. Cry.

My self-torture is disrupted by a soldier who enters and hands Donovan a note. He reads it silently, is about to announce it to the group, but stops and hands it to me instead.

"You do it."

I read the directive silently and then holler it aloud to everyone.

"We've been cleared. Next mission is Taji tomorrow night. There's been some activity on that route, so get some sleep and . . . *Hoo-ah!*"

Chapter Six

My alarm sounds at 2:00 p.m., which is morning for me. It's one of the best day's sleep that I've had in a long time, and I don't want it to end. I glance at Goodhart's bunk, but she's up and gone, probably in the shower, and my bed feels so comfortable—something that's never happened before in Iraq—I tug the sheet up to my chin and then stare blankly at the acoustic tiled ceiling while I tick through preparations for today's mission.

Transfer the .50 cal ammo.

Have Richie check the static in the comms.

Did the motor pool fill the . . . ?

I'm mid-thought when a cloud of concern creeps over me so forcefully that my knees bend to my chest and my body shivers.

I've had these feelings before—not often, yet every mother understands. Most recently was before this deployment, when I took my son, Wesley, on a picnic to the Superstition Mountains. There's an easy two-mile hike called the Dacite Mine Trail, which is mostly flat but leads to a beautiful valley vista. I packed sandwiches, Oreos, and lemonade, hoping

we'd find a shaded place to spread out for a picnic beside a palo verde tree.

Wesley, like any four-year-old boy, was running ahead of me on the trail when a feeling suddenly came over me, and I knew—I don't know how—that I needed to grab him. I yelled his name as I raced ahead, and he stopped long enough for me to scoop him into my arms. As I drew him tight, I could see a coiled rattlesnake just a dozen feet ahead at the trail's edge.

I've heard some call this a gut feeling, a sixth sense, an instinct, or a hunch. Explaining how it works, how one can know so surely, is like describing the taste of salt, the true color of a mirror, or the depth of forever. And though some will write off my story as coincidence, subconscious, or good peripheral vision, I know better. Mother's intuition is real, and it's the same feeling that now wrenches my heart.

The truth that has come to me is scary, and I can scarcely speak it aloud. It whispers into my soul's ear with the certainty of springtime, a message that is both specific and smothering.

Today is the day I'm going to die.

My hands tremble, my head sweats, and veins pulse in my throat. I climb out of bed and stand with bare feet on the tile, but the brooding continues to cling to me like sweaty pajamas. What do you do when you know that your time is up, when this day you're living will be your last?

Hide?

My first sense is to crawl back into bed, feign sickness, refuse to leave my room, but I know better. If today is the day that death plans to

call, these poorly fabricated barrack walls will be the least of his obstacles.

I need to speak to my son.

Except it's early morning in Arizona, and he won't be awake. Calling him now would cause distress, and for what? I've written him the letter, the one that my mother has been instructed to give him if they ever receive the news that I'm not coming home. I've told him in those pages how much he means to me, how much I love him, that he's the greatest single thing that has ever happened to me. But will he believe it?

I need to apologize, to change my life.

I have so many regrets, words spoken and unspoken, choices I've made that have hurt both me and others. I long to gather this shame back, to do better, to be better, but a pinky-swear promise now to improve would just be mocking God. I've been given plenty of chances, and that's sort of the lesson: we never know when it will be our time, and on that day, it is frankly too late.

Then what?

The door opens, and Goodhart walks in, wrapped in her towel, as I stand shaky beside my bed. "Are you okay?" she asks.

A sigh, a cough, a look of sorrow.

"I'm . . . I'm fine. I was simply thinking about home."

We are an hour into our drive, nearing Taji, pushing route 69A. It's

a hot route, which means we need to be especially careful. It's a place that always feels sinister to me every time we drive past because I swear the earth here breathes evil.

I should have expected this might be the place of my demise, as other convoys have lost men here, and we've been hit ourselves several times with small-arms fire.

There are two Iraqi checkpoints, and we have passed the first. As the United States military, we never have to stop, but they are manned by Iraqi policemen who peer at us impassively. Since they know our schedules and procedures, we often can't help but wonder if they aren't passing information along to the enemy.

My eyes remain fused to the narrow, rectangular window in front—watching, scanning, staring at the spot where our light fades into darkness. I should be resigned to my fate. I know that it's coming, but instead of acceptance, I'm girded in grief.

I don't want to die. I want to see my son again.

But what I'm doing right now is fitting, considering it's where I've spent so much of my past, sitting barely in the light, staring into blackness. At least God appreciates irony.

"Are you alive, chatty-pants?" Richie says through the comm. "I don't think you've said a thing this entire trip."

I haven't told Richie, or anyone on my team, about my premonition, as I'd sound flat-out crazy, and I don't want to be remembered that way.

"Maybe slow it down a bit," I tell him, as he's going too fast, but he doesn't slow down, and my mind is also racing.

There's a bag in the road . . . never mind, just a scrap of plastic.

Is that a box? . . . chill, it's a torn piece of cardboard.

Every slip of garbage is menacing, every clump of weeds is bent on my demise, every bump in the road causes me to remember Kellar's legs and to lift up my own off the floor.

We are coming to a long bend, which throws more light from our vehicle to the left side, forcing me to squint harder toward the right. My stomach tenses as I shift my hand from the bar that I normally hold in front to place my fingers on Richie's knee.

The road. The darkness. The brooding feeling is pressing down, and I sense that we're getting close. Will I feel something when the bomb explodes, or will it just be over?

God, I'm okay to die, but please let Richie and Gibbins live.

And then, not through my headset, but with words that somehow push past the muffled padding at my ears, I hear someone speak to me in a tone that is distinct, urgent.

"It's coming, Rachel!" the voice says. "Watch for it. It's just up ahead—keep looking!"

It's a man's voice, and I take my eyes off the road to glance toward Richie, but he's not saying a thing. Before I can even twitch, it speaks again.

"Watch, Rachel! Keep your eyes on the road. It's coming. You have

to see it!"

I turn back to resume my scanning of the road ahead. My eyeballs burn, and I'm too afraid to even blink, and then, out of the blackness and into the light rolls a huge, swallowing pothole that is partially paved.

"STOP! STOP!" I scream. "IED, IED!" I squeeze Richie's leg with all of my strength.

It takes a long moment for him to brake, and as we bear down on the wet, dark, recently disturbed dig, I catch an instant glimpse of a half-buried box beside two protruding green bottles. I can also tell that we aren't going to stop in time.

As I resign myself to die, Richie does something completely out of character and against all of our training. He screams, "Whoa!" and then swerves violently off of the road and into the dirt, skidding to a stop directly across from the bomb.

There is no explosion, no fireball, no more warnings from the voice that spoke so unmistakably in my head.

"That was too close," Richie says. As my wobbling hands focus the beam of our spotlight, I see jutting blue wires that snake away from the hole. It's plain that the design of this bomb is like no other that we've ever encountered.

"Back up very slowly, very carefully, and I'll message EOD."

As we do, I realize that I'm repeating whispered words over and over, as my brain is still trying to convince the rest of my body of a truth.

I am alive . . . I am alive . . . I am alive.

It takes forty-five minutes for EOD to arrive, and I've never been so happy to wait.

The leader of their team, a Sergeant Bordello, is almost giddy at first sight of the bomb. They get to work quickly, but it takes his team another good hour before they cart it away in pieces and declare that it's safe for us to pass.

Bordello explains that it's a brand-new type of IED in which two bottles of accelerant were placed on top of 155mm artillery shells, and had we set it off, the blast would have penetrated the bottom armor of our ASV and instantly incinerated everyone inside. He knows this firsthand because he examined a convoy that was hit with the same type of bomb last night.

"The ASV looked great from the outside," he says, making a circle with his hand as if walking around it. "No visible damage at all, except every window was blackened. Inside, however, an entire team died."

As we climb back into our vehicle and then radio permission for the convoy behind us to proceed, I can't help but point out. "Richie, you pulled into the dirt."

He tries to look me in the eyes, but his gear won't let him rotate. "I know. Will you have to report me?"

"Report you? Richie, it saved our lives."

His helmet is shaking. "No. You squeezed my leg early, almost like you knew it was coming, so I'd say it was you who did the saving."

Do I tell him? Will he think I'm nuts?

"Richie, I . . . don't think that . . ." I pause. I stammer. I stutter.

"Spit it out, McCally. You don't think what?"

"I heard a voice, Richie," I finally blurt out. "Before I saw the IED. I heard a voice that warned me it was coming."

There is silence as Richie tries to make sense of this information, which must be hard for him because he doesn't believe in spiritual things—anything, for that matter, that can't be parroted by an agnostic science professor. But he finally says, "That's why, then."

I turn. "Why what, Richie?"

"It's why I pulled off the road into the dirt. It had to be Kellar warning us. I wouldn't have done that otherwise. He's still with us, just like Donovan said."

I don't mention that a scientist might have a hard time reconciling his reasoning—and I don't tell him that he's wrong. It's fine to trust that Kellar is still with the team—and he may be—but as for the voice I heard, I know otherwise. Kellar always called me McCally, but the voice I heard called me Rachel, and it didn't sound at all like Preacher.

In a flash, it makes sense as I realize whose voice it was, though he sounded younger than I would have supposed. I don't know a whole lot about him, as I was just a kid when he died, but there is one thing I do

know.

The voice I heard that saved me was my grandfather's . . . Grandpa Wesley Bowers.

Two miles down the road from the bomb, we are hit by a barrage of small-arms fire. It pings off our armor like someone throwing fists of gravel. While we often don't even notice, tonight it's heavy and constant, and suddenly it makes sense. Standard procedure if we're hit is to drive the convoy forward a couple of miles to get out of the kill zone. There, in relative safety, we can get out and check our vehicles for damage.

But tonight, at the two-mile mark, there is way too much arms fire for this to be just a handful of resentful insurgents. Rather, we are driving through a coordinated ambush.

Had we been killed or wounded by the bomb, the convoy would have towed our damaged ASV and then stopped here, two miles away. Then, once everyone had scrambled out to assess further vehicle damage, they would have been brutally slaughtered.

Grandpa Wesley saved more than just me tonight—he saved my entire team.

Chapter Seven

The fence near the front gate serves as our backdrop as we take our last pictures together as a team. Behind us, past the wire, heat rises from the desert floor like ghostly fingers wanting to wave their goodbye. Even the shadows here seem to perspire—I won't miss that part.

While most of the team bounds with eagerness, an odd disquiet keeps contentment away. I'm watching the breakup of a family—a dysfunctional family, but family, nonetheless.

"What are we supposed to do at home?" I ask Goodhart, as if we're being punished.

"Um, go home and play with your son?"

She's right, and I am excited to reunite with Wesley, but I can't convince the angst to stop attacking my heart. Am I going to be enough for him?

Mack edges in between us. "Hey, can I get a picture with you two?"

He seems so calm that I can't help but ask, "Are you not excited to be going home?"

We smile at the camera while Fullerton takes the picture, and then Mack turns to me. "Haven't you heard? The fourth platoon is short a couple of guys, so I'm transferring over. I'll be serving out their tour with them."

It's no wonder. "I'm happy for you," I say, though it smacks more of jealousy.

"How about you two? What are your plans?"

Goodhart pipes up without a pause. "I've applied to the military's physician assistant school in Texas. I'm still waiting to be accepted. My goal is to start in January."

He turns for my answer, thinking I'll be equally prepared. "I'm going home to try to be a better mom, but I haven't been accepted yet either, so I'll let you know."

We all laugh, but the smiley clown is often the saddest person in the crowd.

I take pictures in front of our ASV with Richie, Donovan, and Gibbins, trusting Gibbins won't smile too wide and show teeth. Then we all exchange emails and phone numbers, promising to keep in touch.

Donovan announces that he'll buy the last round of pizzas, and as we enter the food court, I happen to walk past a table where two young soldiers are drinking Cokes. They must be new to Anaconda because I overhear one say to the other, "It's so boring here."

My feet plant firmly on the cement beside them, as if something is clenching my ankles, until the man closest to me looks up.

"Did you guys just arrive?" I ask.

"We got here a couple of weeks ago," he says, "which feels like forever."

They are repeating the same phrases that I spoke at the beginning of my tour, and I want to warn them, let them know that this place changes people, that when you leave, you aren't the same inside—especially after you witness death.

I lower my voice so they'll have to strain to hear, hoping it means they will listen harder.

"I heard you say that you're bored, but I want you to know that the boring days are the good days—the *very good* days."

They look at each other first and then glare at me like I'm crazy, and I expected nothing less, but they'll find out soon enough. I nod a cordial goodbye, then join my team for pizza.

This is the last time we'll eat together, so I try my best to let it all soak in and remember every moment. In the midst of it all, Donovan wanders over and pulls me aside.

"I've just been told, and I wanted you to know. You'll not only be getting a Purple Heart for the times your vehicle was hit, but you will also be awarded a Bronze Star for what you did to try to save Kellar. There's going to be a ceremony in Texas on our way home."

I don't know what to say—a first for me *and* for Donovan—so I simply thank him and then rejoin the team to help polish off the last of the pizza.

Later I head back with Goodhart to our barracks so we can finish packing our things. We're halfway there when my phone buzzes—it's a text from home. As I read it, I feel my posture stoop, my eyes wince and then wilt.

"What is it?" Goodhart asks.

It turns out this day is going to be unforgettable, all right, but for all the wrong reasons. "It's from my mother."

"What does she say?"

"It's about my Grandma Nathelle—she has just passed away."

We are sent to Kuwait for debriefing, where our bags are meticulously inspected. The army wants to be sure we aren't bringing home anything we shouldn't: wartime souvenirs are strictly prohibited.

From there, it's a twenty-two-hour flight to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, where we're greeted with medical exams, and then more forms than any human being should ever have to endure: documentation of awards, active time served, accrued paid time off, just to name a few.

As Donovan had said, there is a ceremony where medals are awarded, and though I'm grateful, it means that by the time I make it home to Arizona, I've missed my grandmother's funeral by ten days.

Chapter Eight

My arrival back home is surreal. Thankfully, the reunion with my son, Wesley, eases the pain. He runs toward me at the airport with outstretched arms, and then we wrap each other tight. "I've missed you *sooo* much," he says.

I can't get over how much he's grown! I'd swear he was just a toddler when I left, but I'm now conversing in grown-up sentences with a tiny man, and I breathe a sigh of relief as I imagine that he'll be enough to save me after all.

But in the days that follow, I'm less sure.

I lease a two-bedroom apartment in Tempe for us and then quickly take a job as a nurse's assistant. But the work—ordering medical supplies, filling out patient forms, changing bedsheets—is so menial, so opposite of what I've been used to doing, that I'm certain it's what the wicked are forced to do when they are sent to hell.

I work the night shift because the money is good and I'm used to being awake at night anyway, but it leaves me groggy in the mornings as

I get Wesley off to school. It takes only a few weeks before the guilt once again feels sticky against my skin, and I begin to look for something to wash it off.

Sadly, it's a feeling that's familiar.

When I was a kid, and my stepdad would turn violent, if I could get away in time, I would escape to the safety of the washes that flowed down behind the property where our trailer sat. I would often play beneath the sheltering palo verde trees until well past dark, wondering why no one else ever escaped with me.

As my older brother would take the worst of the beatings, my mother would retreat to the couch, her head bowed low, a book clutched close to her face. And when I'd return, often hours later, she wouldn't have budged. She'd still be lying there, reading with wistful eyes, quietly turning page after page.

The covers of those books always featured a rugged-looking shirtless man with flowing hair, with his arms clasped around the waist of the amply bosomed heroine he was defending, and I could never figure out how those stories could make a woman cry.

What I've learned since is that abandoned washes can be found in many places and that if we spend too much time hiding in them, we're likely to get lost—or worse, washed completely away, never to find a path back home.

I haven't spent a great deal of time in bars since I don't usually drink, but on one of my nights off, two of my coworkers, Suma and Misti, drag me to a western bar called the Handsome Cowboy. It's nice enough—and there are indeed handsome cowboys at a distant table who glance our direction as we walk in, but the band has turned up their amps to compensate for their lack of talent, which makes it difficult to carry on any kind of conversation. And I suppose at this time of night, in this type of place, that's exactly the point.

I don't like that I can't hear, and worse, the hostess is trying to seat us at a table that's about as far away from the entrance as one can get. I catch myself pressing forward on my toes, ready to bolt at any moment. The air inside is stuffy, smelling of stale smoke, suede leather, and Cedarwood cologne, making it impossible to take a deep breath.

"Can we get a table closer to the door?" I ask the blonde woman wearing skintight jeans and a navy halter that's doing its cotton-best to keep things in place.

"Darlin', this is all we have."

We take a seat at the table, and when our waitress moseys over, my friends order a couple of drinks to start, along with corn-cups and green chili. When she turns to me, I ask for a Coke. The place is dark and noisy and worst of all packed, and I don't see an easy way out if something were to happen. I feel like I might hyperventilate, and when I catch myself incessantly twirling my watch, I lean toward Suma.

"I'm sorry, I need to get some air."

"What?" she asks, not clear on my meaning, so I motion toward the door and then toward my chest. I don't know if she understands or not, but I bolt anyway. I find a spot outside, away from the entrance and the flow of people, and prop myself up against a car in the parking lot. I suspect that at least one of the women will follow to check on me, but after ten minutes alone, I cradle my phone and dial a number.

"Hello?" the answering voice sounds groggy.

"Hi, Donovan. It's Rachel Bowers . . . er, McCally."

"Hey . . . what's up?"

"I hate to disturb you. I'm just wondering . . . have you had a hard time adjusting? I mean, has being around crowds been a problem for you?"

There is a shared silence, and I can't tell if he's thinking or has fallen back asleep. "Call Richie," he says at last. "He may be able to help."

I hang up and am about to dial Richie when something at the gas station across the street catches my eye. Beside the door where one enters to pay is a metal post, and chained to it, like a prisoner begging to be set free, is an SV 650 with a "For Sale" sign fastened to it.

The SV 650—commonly called a bullet bike—is a midsized V-twin roadster with a liquid-cooled, 645cc, four-stroke engine, sporting dual overhead camshafts and a 90-degree, L-twin design. That means the bike can go from zero to a hundred in about ten seconds, and the one now winking back at me in the night is metallic blue. As I walk across the street and then draw close to read the phone number, I'd swear the bike straight-

ens up and begins to purr.

I'm not there long before the gas-station door opens and a man of medium build, with his hair tied back into a ponytail, calls out to me. "Hey, are you interested in my bike? I'm Ted, the manager here."

My words won't form, but I nod, and so he says that he'll be right back with the key, and when he returns, he's almost sad as he unlocks the bike and encourages me to jump on.

"Why are you selling it?" I ask Ted.

"My wife and I just had a son. She says I have to get something . . . well, slower—a lot slower."

We talk about the price, and when he hears I'm a vet, he drops it on the spot by five hundred dollars. He tells me that his best friend served in Iraq, before my time, and was killed in a training accident. I'm appreciative of the discount, but I didn't intend to haggle. One of the many benefits of being stuck in a place where there's little to buy is that I have an ample supply of discretionary cash.

He says that I look trustworthy, so he passes me the key, and I give the bike a careful spin down the street and back, never going above the speed limit—and it's the first time that I've smiled since leaving home tonight.

I give Ted the hundred and twenty dollars that I have on me and tell him that I'll be back with the balance in the morning to pick up the bike. As he's writing down my information so he can have the title ready, my phone rings.

"Hey, McCally, it's Richie. I spoke with Donovan, and he said I should call you. He said you were stressed and needed to talk."

"Thanks, Richie. I appreciate it. I was in a crowded restaurant, and I sort of freaked out, but I'm doing better now."

"That's good."

"Oh, and hey, Richie?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if this is a good sign or a bad one, but . . ."

"What is it?"

"I just bought a bullet bike."

On the weekend, to celebrate Wesley's birthday, I load my new toy into the back of my mother's pickup and we all drive out near McDowell Mountain to give it a spin.

"I wanna ride! I wanna ride!" Wesley squeals as I unload the bike.

"Okay, but we have to go slow," I caution him.

Wesley climbs on the back and grips my waist, and I rev the engine for effect before puttering off down the road, and for an amazing few moments, I'm the coolest mom in the universe. I'm going at most twenty miles per hour down the deserted road, but he's giggling like we're racing in the Motorcycle Grand Prix.

To me, the bike is both powerful and comforting. While it isn't

mounted with a .50 caliber machine gun or loaded with an Mk 19 grenade launcher, it provides enough of a dopamine fix—something I've missed—that I count it the wisest purchase I've made in years.

After Wesley has had enough turns riding, we sit on a blanket at a campsite and laugh and tell stories and eat more grilled burgers than anyone should legally be allowed, until the sun finally surrenders and sets low behind a silhouette of proud saguaro cactus, a proper closing to one of the most pleasant and relaxing days I've had in weeks.

On the ride home, my mother tells silly jokes, and we make fun of an old Loretta Lynn song that comes on the radio called, "You're the Reason Our Kids Are Ugly," and for the tiniest blink of time, I sense my future may turn out okay after all.

Chapter Nine

When I was about twelve, a girlfriend at school let me wear her mood ring, a present she'd gotten for her birthday, and I was enthralled that this magical piece of jewelry could know what I was feeling and then display its change of colors. Oddly, over the past several days, I've discovered that my bullet bike possesses the same power.

On my good days, purple days, when I'm tranquil and content—which is most of the time—I'll ride my bike to work and back home, keeping my speed at the legal limit, and the ride does its part to keep me grounded and sane.

On occasional moderate days, yellow days, when a storm of sadness is brewing in the secluded shadows of my mind but has yet to sweep across my heart, my speedometer will show that I'm bumping past the limit by about twenty miles per hour, attempting to outrun whatever is coming. Stopped cars? Not a problem—there's enough space for me to slide in between them. Busy traffic? I can pass on the right, and though it's dangerous, I get to where I need to be.

And then there are the dark days, black days, when the thunder rattles in my head and the sleet of life pours down so cold that even the full desert sun can't keep my insides from shivering. I lean right and then left, doing 120 miles per hour, recklessly weaving past moving cars as if they were parked, cutting my turns so close that one more inch to the left or the right would mean a vicious death—and in the moment, I don't care. I can hear the blood pumping from my toes to the tips of my fingers, and there are no limits to danger because, for a few seconds, I'm both running away from the unavoidable and running toward the inevitable.

And then I remember Wesley.

I imagine my mother telling my son that I won't be coming home, and the picture of him standing there sobbing is more than I can bear. I brake to a stop and curse my stupidity, and, like a crack user who's later ashamed of the track marks in her arm, I solemnly promise that it will never happen again.

I almost believe myself, especially when the ramifications of my untimely death drop me to my knees. My bullet bike is both an answer to prayer and a demon, depending on the color of the day. But unlike the wearing of a little girl's mood ring, if I don't stop this insanity with my bullet bike soon, one of my upcoming black days is going to turn deadly.

It's only a matter of time.

"I've been having nightmares," Richie tells me.

I'm not sure how to respond. "What kind?" I finally ask.

Richie has been calling me every few days in the middle of my shift, usually around midnight. He claims it's to check on me, but he's always the one who wants to talk.

"They're like these frightening battle dreams, except . . ."

"Except what?"

"I'm constantly fighting against Kellar, and that makes no sense because we were on the same side. I wake up sweating and screaming. It's kind of freaking me out."

"I'm sorry that's happening to you, Richie. Have you spoken to anyone else on the team, besides me, to see how they're doing?"

"Goodhart says that she's fine and hasn't had any problems, but secretly I don't think she's human. Fullerton said he's been okay as well. As for Donovan, I've tried to ask him, but he refuses to talk about it. Same with Gibbins." He pauses. "How about you? Any nightmares?"

I shake my head, though Richie can't see it. "I'm generally pretty exhausted after my shift, so my sleep is tolerable. There are times when I get . . . anxious, but riding my bike sometimes helps. As for how to sleep better, have you tried taking pills? You can pick something up at the drugstore."

"Yeah, that or tequila."

I hesitate for a moment before broaching the next subject. "Richie, have you ever considered . . . you know?"

"No, I don't know. What?"

"A counselor?"

"Going to a shrink? No, thank you! It's not going to happen. What do you take me for, a wuss?"

"I only suggest it because—"

His voice is determined, defiant. "Look, if I can handle Iraq, I can handle this. We all just need a little more time."

Since coming home from Iraq, I'm hyper-aware of other vehicles around me as I drive, even to the point of suspicion. Tonight, as I insist that Wesley sing along with me to the radio—because I don't want my son to see me sad—I notice two cars near me that are troubling.

The first, directly in front, is a blue and white Dodge pick-up—1985, if I had to guess—and its bed is strapped full of what look to be homemade chicken pens. I can see the back of the driver's head with flowing gray hair, and his perfectly placed arms that grasp the top of the steering wheel—no cause for alarm, probably just an old farmer.

To my left is a red Chevrolet Impala with two young boys in the front seat, seventeen years old at best, both with dark hair, and they're laughing, not paying proper attention to the road, drifting more than they should.

I'm edgy being boxed in, so I want to pass the pickup. But I can't

do that unless the Impala speeds up, because it's blocking the lane to the left.

I won't honk—I'm not one of those people—but I let off the gas, deciding to slide behind the teens and tailgate them, spur them forward to pass the truck, and then pull around on the right.

Without warning, one of the chicken pens wiggles loose from the strap that is holding it down in the back of the truck, and it tips off and bursts into pieces as it hits the road in front of me.

A massive fireball engulfs my ASV as the explosion lifts the front of the vehicle and jars us sideways. As we jolt to a stop, I grab my comm and smash the button to warn those in the convoy behind me.

"WE'RE HIT! WE'RE HIT! This is Gun One—we've been hit." Bullets ping off our armor, and I can hear Gibbins as he fires back. I try to twist around to check on my team, but I'm stuck firmly in my seat and can't move. "Richie? Are you okay? Richie, talk to me! Tell me you're alive!"

Richie calls back, but he's bawling. He must be injured, and I can't make out what he's saying.

"RICHIE, ARE YOU HURT?"

"Mommy, Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Miss, miss! Do I need to call an ambulance?"

The desert's darkness skates away as the city lights drop back into their proper position around us. Instead of my ASV's comm, I grip a smashed water bottle in my hand. In place of my military uniform, my blouse now clings wetly against my chest.

I blink and try to clear my mind. There is no ASV, no explosion. There is just a scared six-year-old boy talking to me from the back seat of my beat-up Toyota, which is now sitting crooked at the side of the shoulder as a petrified farmer pokes at my shoulder, wondering what on earth is happening.

I take a long, deep gulp of air, release my hold on both the water bottle and the wheel, and then I look into the elderly man's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I was disoriented. The broken chicken pen startled me when it hit the road, but I promise, I'm fine."

The man's eyes shift back and forth from me to Wesley as he speaks. "I apologize. I thought it was strapped down better than that." I can tell that he's wary, unsure what to do: Call the police? Call the paramedics? Check this woman's car for drugs and then get her child to Social Services?

"I hope your boy, Richie, is okay," he adds, nudging his nose toward my son.

"Yes, yes. He's fine as well."

He takes another look into my eyes, probably trying to see if my pupils are dilated before he turns and kicks the remaining pieces of his broken pen off to the shoulder of the highway. He then climbs back into his truck, gawks at me for another long moment in his rearview mirror, and finally drives away.

When I find the strength to check my own mirror, Wesley is sniffling, wiping his sleeves at puzzled and panicked eyes. "Mommy, are you

okay?" he mumbles.

I no longer lie. "No, I'm not. Honey, I need to get help."

Chapter Ten

I tug Wesley toward the door, click open the lock, and then point Wesley toward his room. My mother's place was too far, and I couldn't keep driving—not tonight, not after what happened—and so I turned back toward home.

"Are we gonna be all right?" Wesley asks. While it's a valid concern, the fact that it's coming from a six-year-old child—*my* six-year-old child—causes my insides to wrench and knot. The knots only tighten when I see the longing disappointment dripping from his eyes.

"Yes," I whisper, but it's a lie because, at the moment, I just don't know.

I help him brush his teeth, kneel beside him as he says his prayers, and then lie down next to him as best I can in his small bed until he falls asleep.

I'm weary and my body is demanding I get some sleep myself, but my protesting heart has other plans. I slink into a chair at the kitchen table and drop my head in my hands, letting my eyes do the job that they

were taught so well in Iraq: always, I mean *always,* fight back the tears. But tonight, my lips break rank and begin to quiver, my throat unwittingly constricts, and then my hands join the rebellion and begin to shake.

How did I get here?

It's the same question that I'd asked Goodhart in Iraq, and it is still without an answer, at least one that I'm willing to face. I have the urge to slap on my headphones, to crank up the vile music so loud that it won't leave any room for the truth.

Instead, too tired to even stand, I slide from the chair down to the floor—that's where I belong anyway—and I draw my knees toward my chest like an infant.

My breathing is lurching and labored. While my eyes are working to hold the line, they rapidly realize they've been ambushed by almost every other part of my body, so they surrender, letting pent-up moisture pool. Against all that I've learned while serving as a woman in the military, I let my pain fall with me to the floor, unprotected and exposed, and I openly weep.

You're good for nothing. You'll never amount to anything.

The echoing truths of my childhood are quickly swept aside by my son's disappointment, his words so recent and real that they stick to my heart like hot tar.

Are we gonna be all right?

Layered with my tears are confessions of shame. "Why Kellar and not me? Why couldn't *I* have been the one to die?"

I'm speaking only to myself, and I have no answers to offer—but one comes anyway. It is the same voice that spoke to me in Iraq in the ASV when it warned me about the bomb. It is the voice of my grandfather.

I roll over and stare up at the ceiling, longing to have a conversation—I have so much to ask him—but I see nothing. Though his voice lasts for but a moment, the message he speaks is unmistakable.

"Rachel, you're stronger than you think you are. You're more than you think you are."

In the morning, when I wake up and rise from the floor where I've slept, my first thought is that it was all a dream—but I know better.

I fill a glass of water, drink it down, and then fill it again.

I step to Wesley's room, open the door, and prod my son. "Honey, wake up. I'll make breakfast, and then we need to pack up all of our things. We're leaving."

Wesley is rubbing at his eyes. "To where?" he asks.

It's hard to answer, because I don't have a specific plan—but I do have a purpose, and that's more than I've had in a very long time. Besides, how do I explain that during the night an idea wedged itself into my head and refuses now to leave—an idea that still doesn't make sense to me, let alone to a child of six?

Or perhaps it all makes perfect sense.

"We'll talk just as soon as I make a couple of calls."

First, I dial my mother. "Hey, Mom, has Uncle Clifton sold Grandma Bowers's house yet?"

"No, he's trying to get it cleaned out and fixed up first."

My idea takes a breath. "Can you give me his number?"

I don't know my Uncle Clifton well, since he's my father's brother and my biological dad hasn't been involved in my life, but I dial and then wait for him to pick up.

Uncle Clifton is friendly, and we spend a few minutes catching up. Then I tell him that my son and I would like to move into Grandma Bowers's house, to help him get the place cleaned up and ready to sell. I explain that it will be temporary, that I can pay rent, and though he's hesitant—I'm sure wondering if I'm capable—I remind him that I was trained to repair military vehicles in Iraq and know my way around a toolbox.

"You're right," he admits, and we strike a deal.

And before I know it, Wesley and I are in the car heading toward Mesa and Grandma Bowers's vacant home.

It will be a bit of a juggle to live in Mesa while keeping Wesley enrolled in the same school and commuting to my job in Tempe, but it's workable—and just like that, I have the beginnings of a plan.

I pull up to the house, step out of the car, and see that the outside is more run-down than I remember, though it's probably thinking the same thing about me. The home is a single-story Victorian, or trying to be, with

an asymmetrical bay window and scrolled gingerbread trim still clinging to the roof's gables. The yellow siding, once bright, has faded under the relentless Arizona sun to the color of cornmeal.

Although the house has aged, my memories have not. Evidence abounds that the man who once lived here loved the place. Signposts of his life strive to confirm that his existence mattered: two fruit trees, apple and pear, peek sheepishly from the side yard, a pathway of bricks leads to a shed in the back, and rusty metal numbers, still visible from the street, present the home's address with a certain sense of pride.

As I stand now at the front door, I am thinking the inside will be no different. I remember that the house has two living rooms, the first with a short wall dividing it from the kitchen. I could never sneak by that wall without Grandpa Wesley catching me with his big, rough hands, planting an emphatic kiss on my cheek, and then sealing my giggles with a hug.

After my grandfather had passed and I grew older, I recall hearing talk from relatives about the man's anger. But I never saw anger. All I ever knew from him was love.

It was different visiting the place after he'd died, with Grandma living alone. While it was still pleasant, with plenty of homemade bread and honey butter, it was also . . . lonely. Grandpa Wesley had left a big hole in our lives that was impossible to fill.

"Are we going inside?" Wesley asks. I shake my recollections away and find the key under the porch pot, and then we unlock the door and walk inside together.

While the yard was my grandfather's domain, the inside belonged to Grandma Nathelle. It is just as I remember, decorated with more pink than any woman should ever legally be allowed to use. The color was prevalent when I was small, but over the years it had elbowed its way into everything throughout the house, especially after my grandfather passed—and it brought friends. The rooms burst with frills and ruffles—couch cushions, doilies, handkerchiefs, table runners, stuffed animals, and more, every piece proudly screaming, "A little old lady once lived here!"

It's not the sights that cause my chest to warm and my heart to melt, but the lingering smells: a pinch of cinnamon, a trace of mildew, a dash of loitering Pine Sol, all blending with the remembered scent of baking bread.

It is the smell of memories. It is the smell of love.

There is another tug on my pants. "Are we just gonna stand in here now?"

"I'm sorry, honey. Let's put our things in the hallway, and then I need to get you to school."

And then my impatient boy utters a truth that makes his mama proud. "I miss Great-Grandma."

"I miss her too, honey. I miss her too."

"Welcome, please come in," says the woman standing in the doorway to her office. "You're Rachel Bowers, I presume? You're as beautiful in person as you sound on the phone."

If I'd been given a compliment like that in any other environment, I would have kissed her on the cheek, and she would have become my new best friend. For the moment, I cautiously offer thanks and then stumble into her office like a drunk attending her first AA meeting, not knowing how this game is played or what answers I'll need to secretly memorize in order to pass.

She is Dr. Caroline Baker, a woman in her fifties with generous eyes, a reassuring voice, and an advanced degree in psychology. She beckons me toward the chair that is strategically positioned between her desk and the door, offering me a quick exit should I need it, and so I take a seat.

Professional counseling is a benefit the US Department of Veterans Affairs provides to those who have been to war, but few take up the offer, as most veterans perceive that it says they're weak—and I'm not ready to disagree.

We get the formalities out of the way—I will call her Caroline, and she will call me Rachel—and then she asks more about me. Naturally, as a soldier, I start with just my name and rank, but she's done this before, and it doesn't take long before I'm like a captured spy on truth serum. I tell her about my job: dreadfully dreary, but the nursing side is intriguing. I tell her about my grandmother's home: it's good to be back, but the place needs a lot of work, and it's painful to see it in such disarray. And I tell her about

my son: he talks about being a fireman, his favorite food is mac and cheese, and he sleeps in my bed after he's had a bad dream.

"It's good that you have a son," she says, "and it's evident that you love him. That love will be an important part of your healing."

She then leans forward. "I don't usually do this, but since you mentioned your concern on the phone, it might be helpful to establish a dossier on the enemy up front, to let you better understand the nature of your conflict."

"The enemy?" I ask.

"Yes, I know from both our discussion on the phone and then your file that you were in two separate vehicles that were hit. There was also a mission where you lost a man from your unit, and you'd mentioned that you were involved in the effort to save him."

My whispered *okay* barely manages to break out.

"The enemy I speak of is PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and its associated symptoms," she says. "When your vehicle was hit, you likely suffered a concussion. Well, think of PTSD as a concussion to your nervous system."

I raise only my eyebrows.

"Many soldiers believe that talking about their trauma makes them weak—it doesn't. They think that they are alone in dealing with it—they aren't. PTSD and its symptoms have been around from the dawn of man. In one of the earliest surviving works of literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, from 2100 BC, Gilgamesh witnesses the death of his friend and is so tor-

mented, he has recurring nightmares."

Clearly, she relishes in this description, and I wonder why she isn't teaching this all at a college. "I wasn't aware of that," I say softly.

"There is also a Greek account from 440 BC in which Epizelus, an Athenian, is inexplicably stricken with blindness after watching his friend die in combat."

Another nod.

The doctor's eyes never leave mine. "I hope you know you're not alone. It was called *shell shock* during the Great War, and *battle fatigue* during World War II. Other names have included *combat fatigue, combat stress reaction, soldier's heart,* and even *war neurosis.* It seems that we're quite good at coming up with names, but it's taken us longer to develop treatments, especially since it's often documented in soldiers who've been nowhere near exploding shells. Now, Rachel?" She waits until I'm looking back.

"Yes?"

"You've told me a little bit about your work, your living arrangements, and your son. If you're comfortable to keep talking, I'd like to hear about your time in Iraq."

Chapter Eleven

I don't know why my grandparents' basement always frightened me. It may be the disparity between the warmth that I felt on the main floor compared to gloomy rooms below ground that had never seen the sun. I also like to think that I was merely following Grandma Nathelle's lead. She must not have cared for the stairs down either, as I can never remember seeing her in the basement—ever.

Now, as an adult, even after having faced real-life fears—Iraqi insurgents, indignant drill sergeants, the raising of my six-year-old boy—the steep stairs, with their lack of proper lighting, still bring a shiver. But I've learned a truth that helps allay my childhood worries: stairs lead down, but they also lead up.

Today, with a pair of pliers, a piece of garden hose, and a flashlight, I'm intent on flushing sediment from the water heater to give it another few years of life—one of the many jobs I've promised Uncle Clifton I would do to earn my keep.

There are two large rooms at the bottom of the stairs, in addition

to a bathroom. The room on the right was used by Uncle Clifton when he stayed here, and it's cluttered with his things. The room on the left was used for storage, its walls lined with homemade shelves that hold dozens of cardboard boxes, all filled with items once deemed worthy enough to save but never useful enough to retrieve.

At the far end of the storage room sits my patient: a forty-gallon natural-gas water heater that hasn't met a repairman in years. I don't know where I gained my knack for being handy, but I attach the hose to the heater's spigot, snake it to the floor drain across the room, and then stand beside the heater to open and close the water source on top to stir up the sediment inside and encourage it to drain.

All is going well until I notice that the hose has pulled away from the drain, and water has been pouring onto the room's concrete floor beside the far shelf. I quickly reattach the hose to the drain and survey the extent of the flooding. It's not a disaster—the floor will dry soon enough—but to be certain nothing is damaged, I start yanking boxes up from the cement, checking that they aren't wet, and then stacking them on higher shelves.

They are mostly old produce boxes, the kind with holes and telescoping lids, and as I reach for the last one, I inadvertently grab it through the holes on top, and the lid lifts free.

I can see that the box is full of letters, very old letters, and something about them piques my curiosity: beside them sits an unusual black wooden box.

I finish with the water heater, put my tools away, and then cart the cardboard box upstairs to the kitchen to more closely examine the contents. I removed the black box, dump the letters beside it, and then begin to sort them on the table. As I remove several from their aged and decaying envelopes, I recognize their distinctive handwriting. Most of these letters were written by my grandfather, Wesley Bowers—the man who saved my life.

I call in sick, make arrangements for my mother to pick up Wesley from school and keep him overnight, and then I begin to read.

At 4:30 in the morning, a time when I'm usually getting home from work, exhausted and wanting a good couple hours of sleep before waking Wesley, I am still sorting and reading letters, wide-eyed and curious—all without the help of caffeine.

The battered wooden box had presented the biggest challenge. I knew there were more envelopes inside because I could see them through a large crack in the cover, probably caused by the dry Arizona heat. It took a bit of patience to understand the mechanism and then keep testing combinations, but the lid finally popped free—and my tinkering was well rewarded. The letters the box contained filled in missing pieces of a life story I had not known.

It's a story of young love and heartache, tragedy and loss, set in an era when life was fragile and freedom was fleeting. Why had I never been told about the full account of my grandfather's past? Like so many who came home from the war with him, he built impenetrable steel walls—not just to keep judgments out, but to hide shame that smoldered within.

It was hard initially to accept that my grandfather once loved another woman—this Audrey Stocking—so fiercely. She was so young, a girl not yet twenty: is it fair to call her a woman? I try to balance this discovery against the affection that I know he felt for my dear grandmother Nathelle, who lived a long, full life. But after having read these many pages, I feel neither jealousy nor anger—my heart simply weeps for them all.

And yet, amidst unspeakable loss, through overwhelming heartache, my grandfather didn't give up but pressed forward, trying his best to find joy. Is his charge that different from mine?

I am drawn to my grandfather's old room, across the hall from where Grandma Nathelle slept in her final years—a place that was like the man himself, stark and plain. Except there is a large mural that he painted on the entire far wall of the room, a striking landscape that is still teaching us the man's lessons. I examine it now with new vision, remembering Grandpa Wesley's words.

Life is a mountain, grand and majestic, inviting us to climb, not for the view, which will be magnificent, but so we'll know that finding beauty takes effort.

Life is a forest, lush and green, and while every growing tree adds to the

wooded splendor, each has an individual story written into its rings that is also worth telling.

Life is a river, deep and wide, constantly flowing, but letting each of us decide when to swim along with the current and when to rest on the bank at the river's side.

And life is the nighttime sky, where the stars shine so intently one can't help but gaze in sacred wonder at the vastness of the universe and hear the whispers of heaven.

My grandfather's life was indeed a landscape, one that melded all of his joys and sorrows into an intricate and diverse panorama that is completely his own—and it makes me want to pay more attention to how I am going to paint mine.

"Have you thought any more about pizza?"

I have to smile because, on its face, the doctor's question is downright odd. But not to me. During my last visit, I confessed to her that since returning home from Iraq, I haven't been able to eat pizza—a food Wesley loves—and so it's becoming a problem.

"I have," I tell her.

"What have you come up with?"

I search her eyes and find safety. "I've been thinking a lot about past struggles and how I process them, and I think you're right. I need to

lay down more positive memories."

"Why is that, Rachel? What is it about pizza that currently bothers you?"

My jaw trembles as my eyes close. I can't tell if the emotion pressing at my lungs is anger or agony, which is so ridiculous because we are talking about *pizza,* for heaven's sake—but I continue. "There was a major in Iraq who repeatedly told us . . ."

A flush of heat brushes like a broom across my chest, causing a quick gasp.

"Go ahead when you feel comfortable."

" . . . he told us that when we were shooting back at Iraqi insurgents, if we ever shot one between the eyes, he'd buy us a pizza. It was a standing offer."

Caroline's own eyes wedge together. "And did you shoot somebody?"

"No, it's not that. It's that at the time, while at war, it all felt so . . . normal. It felt like it was an acceptable thing to say, or to do—and some did."

"But you're no longer at war."

I exhale, realizing I have been guarding my breath. "Now that I'm home and have had time to reflect, I'm horrified that I reduced the killing of a person, enemy or not, to the level of a video-game challenge. I mean, trying to shoot an actual person between the eyes to get a pizza? It makes me ill."

Dr. Caroline reaches forward and takes my hand. "You weren't necessarily wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Rachel, in the arena of war, life is trivialized. The enemy is dehumanized in order to help a soldier justify the taking of a life—and that may arguably be necessary. The problem is that soldiers come home, and that's when they pay the price—and there will always be a price." She squeezes my fingers, and I squeeze hers back. "What new memory do you plan to lay down?"

"I'm picking Wesley up after school, and we're going to order ten pizzas and then take them to the Child Crisis Center in Mesa and give them to those who need them."

When the doctor lowers her chin, a smile trickles out. "That's an excellent idea. Please share a slice with Wesley while you're there, will you?"

"I will . . . and Caroline?"

"Yes?"

"I have one more concern that's been bothering me."

"Go ahead."

"I'm wondering how my issues are going to affect Wesley, my son."

She looks as if she's been asked this before, as an unusually coy smile draws across her face. "I don't tell all my patients this, but it's true for you. Know this, Rachel, that you're not as crazy as you think you are, and your kids won't need as much therapy as you do. I can guarantee you that much."

We smile together, and, joking or not, her statement brings an odd measure of relief. She checks her watch, and I know that our time for today is over. But I have one more matter to bring up.

"Caroline, I've brought some letters that I found. They're my grandfather's letters, and I'd like you to read them."

"Okay, but why?"

"Because I need your help."

I'm sitting on the couch in living room number one, opening and then closing Audrey's prayer box, and it's causing a thought to etch into my forehead. The girl believed this box would carry a message to those who have passed—and if it can, it's miraculous indeed. But wouldn't it be an even bigger miracle if one could speak to their loved ones in person?

"Whatcha doing?" Wesley asks as he wanders in.

I've switched my schedule so I no longer have to work nights, so Wesley gets to sleep here with me instead of staying at my mother's.

"I was going to come and find you. I have a treat for you, but first, go brush your teeth so that you're all ready for bed and then meet me back here."

His eyes light up, and I'd guess he's thinking chocolate, but the surprise I have for him is even better, though he won't appreciate it for another thirty years.

I hurry to the bedroom, but I can't find my letter, and for a moment I worry that it was lost in our move. Then I check my jewelry box, discover it folded in the bottom, and I'm back on the couch by the time Wesley returns.

I snuggle him tight beside me. "Honey, when I was over in Iraq serving in the army, my job was very dangerous, and I didn't know if I was going to make it home."

"You thought you were gonna die?" he asks, his eyes growing tall.

"Well, I didn't know. So, I wrote you a letter that Grandma was to give you if something happened to me. Luckily nothing did, but I've decided that I want to read the letter with you today. Would you like to do that?"

When my son nods, I take the letter from its envelope, spread open the pages, and begin to read.

My Sweetest Wesley,

If you are reading this, then it means that I will not be coming home to you, and for that, I am so truly sorry.

First, I want you to know how deeply I love you. You, my son, are the biggest part of my heart. Whatever lies ahead, your life will be forever changed, but I will also be helping you from the other side. You will struggle; you will make mistakes. That's okay. All I ask is that you try your hardest and do your best—that's all anyone can do—and then be content, knowing that I will be so proud of you, cheering you on every step.

Second, I want you to know that God sees you, hears you, and loves you, even when times get hard in your life—and they will get hard, so hard you may want to turn away. With that, know that the most important thing you can do is to talk to him, even when you don't feel like it. Pray when you're mad, when you're sad, when you're glad—always.

Never forget that life is both short and temporary, so enjoy and cherish every day, every hour, every second that you're given—even the hard times, for they also end too soon.

Lastly, look around for lessons, because you will find them everywhere, and in them, you'll hear my whispers.

I love you, dear Wesley, with all that I am!

Know that I am with you always,

Mom

Chapter Twelve

"Is now a good time?" Richie asks, his voice crawling through the phone.

In reality, it's not, as I'm in the middle of my shift, but I sense he's hefting a bit of desperation on his back that I can't ignore. When I worked nights, there were few people around, and it was easy to talk. Today, I slip into the lunchroom. "I can take a break for a few minutes. I'm shocked you're up this early."

It's only when his laugh reaches through the phone that I realize he has not yet been asleep.

"I'm thinking of going back, signing up for another tour," he announces.

I press the phone closer to my ear. "Wow—that's news. I thought you were enrolling at the community college. What prompted the change of heart?"

Richie answers with a question, quickly changing subjects. "Hey, what's your address? I'm going to send you flowers again on Mother's Day."

It brings a smile. It was one of my sweetest memories in Iraq. Our vehicle was hit just before Mother's Day, and so Richie, being the kind kid that he is, bought me flowers.

"That would be nice. Thank you."

"Hey, one more thing," he says, as his voice cracks, like he's trying to stay patched together, but pieces keep falling off.

"Are you all right, Richie?" I ask, but again he answers with another question.

"Do you remember when the MPs wouldn't let us leave Tallil because the drones had hit a group of high-profile targets, and they were out collecting the body parts?"

"I remember, Richie," I whisper, not sure of his point.

"And then they finally agreed to let us drive through, but only if we promised to steer around any human parts in the road—and the streets were so red?"

"Richie, we should . . ."

"Please, hear me out."

"Okay."

"Well, we joked about it, saying it was no different than the dead animals that we would normally swerve to miss. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"I'm telling you this, Bowers, because I hit a dog yesterday . . . I killed a dog."

"I'm sorry, Richie."

"Thing is, I thought that I'd hit a person. I was crying, and I didn't believe the policeman until he pulled me around to the front of my car and showed me that it was just a dog. Those were his words, *just a dog*."

"How can I help, Richie?"

"Don't you see? In Iraq, we animalized people. Then I come home, I hit a dog, and I humanize animals. It's all so mixed up. I don't understand why it's harder here, Bowers. There's no war going on here. There's nobody here trying to kill us, like over there, but it's harder here at home. That's why I'm going back. I just needed to tell somebody why. I'll let you go, but thanks for listening."

"Richie? Richie?" I want to respond, to reassure. But the line is dead, and Richie is gone.

"If I couldn't continue to come and see you—not that I'm saying that's the case, but let's pretend—what suggestions could you offer that would help me to get better?" It's a simple question, so I'm uncertain why Caroline's face is scrunching.

"Am I getting fired?" she asks.

"Of course not. I just want to—"

She cuts me off like an irritated driver. "Successful therapy means sharing and being honest. Tell me what's going on, Rachel."

I don't bother honking my horn. "I'm asking for a friend—seriously. His name is Richie. We served together in Iraq, and he's struggling, but he won't go to therapy. He thinks it makes him look weak. I want to share something with him that will help. Any thoughts?"

"It's not that easy. It would be better if—"

It's my turn to swerve into her lane. " . . . if he goes to therapy, I know. But I told you, he won't go." When she hesitates, I brake harder. "I'm not asking for a clinical dissertation. Think more along the lines of *PTSD for Dummies.* Give me, say, three main bullet points."

She organizes the papers on her desk as if she's thinking. "Well, I guess I would first suggest that he make room for meaningful activity in his life, and when I say meaningful, that usually means helping others. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, help disadvantaged youth, find a cause or a charity where he feels he can make a difference, and then dive into the deep end."

I scribble down notes. "That's good. What else?"

"Well, it helps to be involved in a loving relationship. In your case, for the time being, that means the relationship you have with your son. I don't know if this person has someone in his life."

"Not currently, and he doesn't have much family around."

"Then he should join a club, attend a church, volunteer to head up a neighborhood block party, look for situations where relationships can develop."

I'm nodding, writing, nodding. "This is helpful."

"Lastly, I guess I would suggest that he keep a sense of faith. I don't know if he attends a church or a synagogue or if he is inclined at all toward spiritual things, but having a belief in a force greater than ourselves has been shown to speed recovery."

"What if he doesn't believe in those things?"

"Then have him focus on doing the first two things well." The doctor's shoulders lift. "Mostly, urge him again toward seeking professional help."

"Thank you. I'll try." I draw up tall, scoot forward in my chair. "Now can we talk about the letters? Did you read them?" I don't need her answer. I can see by the gleam in her eye that she did, and so I jump right to it. "My grandfather Wesley also had PTSD, didn't he?"

She lets her satisfaction settle, retakes her typical measured tone. "It's not fair to diagnose someone through old letters . . ."

"He's dead. I don't think that he'll mind."

"He had many of the symptoms. I will say that much."

"And what about Audrey, the girl he loved in England? Did she also have PTSD?" I tip my head and wait.

"She was carrying a tremendous burden of loss. If we trust what's written in the letters, she watched her entire family die ruthlessly. The fact that she temporarily blocked out the memory is a condition called *dissociative amnesia.* It's a documented disorder—more common during World War II, though we don't know why—that can be brought on by trauma, with symptoms that are usually couched under the umbrella of PTSD."

"And yet she was still brave, still able to make a difference."

The doctor's head tilts. "You identify with her, don't you?"

"I . . . I understand why my grandfather liked her."

"Rachel, he loved her. Can you accept that, knowing that he then came home and married your grandmother?"

I let my arm wrap behind the chair. "He loved her as well. Both women were pretty amazing, just in different ways."

"As are you, Rachel. I trust that you do see the parallels."

I lift my hand like a third grader. "What about Audrey's black box?"

"What about it?"

"Do you think it works? Should I put letters into it?"

The doctor veers a direction I don't expect. "If it brings you a measure of peace, I have no objection. Can you think of a reason you shouldn't?"

"No, it's just . . . how do I know for sure?"

She smiles. "You tell me. What do you think?"

It's her typical response, and still annoying when she throws my questions back at me. Today, I lean into her stare. "Perhaps Audrey didn't know if it really worked or not, but I think she believed—and sometimes that just has to be enough."

"I spoke with Kellar's son," Richie says. His voice tonight sounds

steady, content.

"How did that go?"

"I told him that Kellar didn't suffer, but he said I was lying."

"That's because the boy is still in a lot of pain at the loss."

"He did say that they received Kellar's Purple Heart, posthumously."

"That's good news."

"I agree, but it gets even better. You know how Kellar worked for a time as a guard at the prison?"

"Yes."

"They're naming a cell block after him, putting up a plaque and everything, to keep his memory alive."

"I love that. Thank you for letting me know." I let the thought settle. "Now, how are *you* doing, Richie?"

"I've been accepted into EOD training," he says. "I head to Fort Lee next month. I'll soon be dismantling bombs."

My eyes flap open, hoisting up a smile. "I liked those guys—cocky as all get out, but they did know their stuff. I'm happy for you." There's a stumble in my sentence, and he feels it.

"You don't have to worry about me, you know. I'll be okay, *Mom,*" he adds, mockingly.

It's why I love the kid, but I have to be sure. "Hey, remember that time when the telephone pole had been cut down and was lying across the road, and you were about to get out to adjust the lights?"

Richie laughs. He knows what's coming. "Sure. You started seeing red flashes whistle across the hood in front of the vehicle and grabbed my vest to yank me back down—may very well have saved my life."

My tone tightens. "The enemy is still shooting at us, Richie, and, like in Iraq, sometimes we don't see it."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it's all right to let someone else pull you back inside on occasion. I have a number for a counselor—you just have to call. Will you do that?"

The silence is so drawn out that I wonder if he's hung up. "Richie?"

"Fine," he concedes. "You win, I'll do it. But I'm not sending you flowers again on Mother's Day."

"We have a deal, Richie. We have a deal."

I receive a call from Ella Dowling. She was our base commander, the woman who stood beside me when I told off the colonel in Iraq over the headlight-flashing incident. She says sternly that I need to be at the Papago Park military facility in Phoenix this coming Thursday. I gather it has something to do with my service, but the connection is bad, and while I heard the time and place, I'm not certain what it's about, and I hang up praying that I'm not in trouble.

I arrive in Phoenix at the mentioned place and time, where an

event is starting. Thank goodness I've worn my uniform, because Dowling meets me out front and escorts me inside, where I see that Harry Mitchell, from Arizona's fifth congressional district, is seated alongside several top military leaders. He is scheduled to speak, and I'm starting to clue in that this isn't a reprimand at all.

A color guard marches in with the flag to post colors, and then we sing the national anthem, followed by opening remarks and the keynote speaker. The theme of the program is to honor women who have served in the military. I am seated beside my commander, pleased that she thought to invite me, and happy to finally see some military sisters getting their deserved recognition.

To my surprise, after the keynote speaker, my commander and I are suddenly escorted onto the stage along with six other uniformed women who have been sitting beside us. Our records of service are read, and people are soon standing, and high-ranking officers are saluting, and I'm completely unprepared and fighting back tears.

After the unexpected tribute, it's announced that our service will also be formally recognized before congress in Washington, DC, and I'm overwhelmed and grateful, but also a little mystified at all the fuss, as quite frankly I was just doing my job.

We are escorted back to our seats, where a lieutenant colonel faces me directly and offers the most sincere and endearing salute that I have ever received. The mayor of Phoenix concludes with final remarks, and then, as if at this point they're simply toying with my emotions, they bring

on a woman with a stunning voice who sings a heartfelt rendition of "I'm Proud to Be an American." As the singer takes her seat, both the commander and I are wiping at smudged mascara.

All the while, a single thought keeps rolling through my head: my mother is watching Wesley, and I didn't tell a soul where I was going, so if anyone finds out about this—that I came alone, inviting no one—I'm dead.

Chapter Thirteen

"It's time we talk about Kellar," Caroline says as her eyes lock onto mine, clearly gauging when she should push and when she should pull back. It's a topic that we have previously only poked at.

"Did I tell you that we called him Preacher?" My question is to buy time.

"Are you comfortable talking about him?"

While *comfortable* is not the word I would have chosen, I am finally *willing*. I lean close, so my concerns won't have as far to travel. "I could have done more to save him, so much more. How can I ever be forgiven for that?"

Her hands reach across her desk and squeeze her assurance. Her voice carries a quiet calm. "Perhaps, but if you did make mistakes, do you think Kellar would forgive you?"

My lips fight against the truth. "Yes, but—"

"Then forgive yourself," she says, interrupting. "Don't mar Kellar's memory by being harder on yourself than he would have been."

I still don't give up. "But why was it Kellar who had to die? Out of our entire platoon, he was the one living the best life. He was religious, he was kind, he was always trying to do the right thing, and yet, he was the one who was killed. It makes no sense."

Her weight shifts. "Some might argue that it makes perfect sense."

I suspect this conversation is about to turn philosophical, but the doctor chooses to rest instead on her training, continually needing to explain. "You should know that you're experiencing survivor's guilt. It's a significant symptom of PTSD. It's a well-documented syndrome among Holocaust survivors who couldn't understand why they survived when so many died."

Her thought causes me to straighten. "Is this what my grandfather felt after his team was killed . . . and after he lost Audrey?"

She smiles when I make the connection. "You said that some of your aunts and uncles felt that your grandfather was angry at times. That's one symptom. Others include anxiety, social withdrawal, and nightmares, to name just a few."

My head wobbles. "But it doesn't answer the question of why, does it?"

Her shoulders gently fall. "I'm suggesting that despite living in different eras, we have more in common with those who have passed than we might think. Though your point is well taken, and I can't answer why, consider this: we've talked about your childhood and the abuse, both emotional and physical, that you endured. You were told over and over again

that you were worthless, that you would never amount to anything—and yet here you are."

"What are you saying?"

"When did you realize that those things weren't true? When did you begin to recognize that you *were* worthwhile, that you *could* make a difference, that you *did* matter?"

My fingers are tightly clasped, as if the answer I'm holding may flutter away and never find its way back. "The first time was the night of Kellar's death when I stepped up to help save him."

"Don't forget that."

"But we failed!"

"Yes, but you tried. Rachel, I can't say why Kellar died and not you, or why your grandfather had to bear the loss of his team and then the woman he loved. But I do know that even in death, we can find good if we look closely enough. I would suggest that you cherish Kellar's parting gift to you. He provided you with an opportunity to see yourself in a new light. That's worth remembering, and I think he'd be proud."

I want to stay silent, but the truth jabs its finger in my side. "I suppose."

"Rachel, I've counseled with enough veterans to know this: it's harder to live well after the war than to have died in it."

She carries a certainty in her voice that I've not heard before, and I try hard to swallow my tears.

"Rachel, the question, 'Why didn't I die?' will always ring hollow,

but you can give it tenor by answering one that's infinitely more instrumental: to honor Kellar, how do I intend to live?"

The eager knock on my door reaches into every room in the house.

"I called on the phone," says the man on the porch, who steps back as I swing open the door. His eyes are storming with excitement. "I'm here about the bike."

He is older than I am, early forties, with thick, dark hair tinted with whispers of gray.

"It's in the garage. Let me get the key."

I watch him through the glass as I walk back from the kitchen. *Does he know that he's bouncing?*

He walks ahead of me as if showing *me* the way. "Why are you selling it?" he asks before he's even laid eyes on it.

"I have a son. I need something that goes . . . well, a lot slower." It's the best sales pitch in bullet bike history because it's true. Then I blurt out, "Do you have children?" *Should I feel guilty?*

"No. I'm not married," he answers, as his fingers brush across the leather seat like a first-time mother caressing the cheek of her brand-new child. Since his BMW is parked in front, I hand over the key.

"Take it for a spin and let me know what you think."

While he's gone—longer than I expect—I keep myself busy or-

ganizing the garage. When he finally glides up the driveway, his eyes are glossy and his cheeks can barely hold his smile.

I want to sit him down and ask why he feels the need to go so fast, to know if there is something in his life that keeps him wanting. Has he been abandoned, somehow left behind, and is desperate for any way to catch up, or are there demons in a reckless past that he's itching to outrun?

My mouth drops open as my questions form, but before I can speak, he points to the bike. "It's perfect," he says, pulling out his wallet. "I'll take it."

An offer has been accepted on Grandma Nathelle's house, and although Uncle Clifton said he could ask the buyers for an extended closing in order to give us more time to find a new place, I insisted otherwise.

Our furniture has been loaded into a truck, but the important things are crammed in with me. Even with our overpacked Toyota making us look like dust-bowl refugees on moving day, Wesley and I are ready to make a new start. We take one last look around the house, and then I grab his hand and help him into the front seat.

Before I start the car, I reach into the back and retrieve both a letter and the box. I pass the letter to Wesley. "Do you want to put it in?"

We've talked about it, so he's ready. He grins, grips the paper with both hands, and then lets me open the lid. After he places the letter inside,

I click it closed, tap the top, and return his smile.

"Does this mean Great-Grandpa can read it?" he asks.

"Yes, it does," I confirm. "At least, that's what I'm going with. Now, if you're ready, let's head out."

In one of Grandpa Wesley's letters, he said that the war had opened Pandora's box and unleashed hate, misery, vengeance, and death. While that rings true as it aptly describes the horrors of the war, the most important part of the story was left out.

Despite all the evil that had been unleashed, the last whisper to flutter out of Pandora's box was hope—and hope is always enough to conquer the rest.

"Where are we going?" Wesley asks again because I've never given him a great answer.

"Honey, I told you, we're moving."

"I know that, but where to, Mommy?"

"Forward, honey. We are at last moving forward."

Dear Grandpa Wes,

Where do I start? How do I find words large enough to carry the breadth of emotion I feel for you? Those kisses, Grandpa! Those wet, honest kisses that you planted on me passed along warmth to my heart that will never be forgotten. I just wish that we'd had more time together.

I still remember the day my mother shook me awake and told me that my grandpa had died, and, with a tiny breath, I asked which one. I've never told anyone, and I feel a bit of embarrassment for admitting it now, but I had hoped that it was my other grandpa and not you. I cried for days, and then I saw my mother also wiping away tears, and it struck me as so odd, as she hardly ever cried.

After you were gone, those who had known you always held me to a higher standard, one that was often hard to keep. When I did do something wrong, my shame was deepened because I knew I was tainting your good name.

But even in my mistakes, I felt you with me. As I grew, I would often find white, fluffy feathers, and for some reason, I decided they came from you. Or was it merely my desperate need to again feel real love?

Life was hard growing up. I learned how to survive, but never how to thrive. I made so many bad choices that, at times, I didn't believe that I was worth saving—but you did.

You warned me of the IED on route 69A, and then you whispered reassurance again later as I lay in a ball on the floor, broken and confused. You broke through the darkness to place a glimmer of light into my mind's eye. Even though I've never been worthy of your guidance, you were there, still worried and caring for your granddaughter, and it makes me wonder: how does one repay a life saved?

Since Iraq, my life invariably reverts back to that moment of facing death and knowing that there is so much more. It's often challenging to make a new path, but it's possible. Life is a constant progression.

I told a member of my team afterward about hearing a voice, and he said it was Kellar's, and that when a soldier dies, he or she will remain with the unit until it's disbanded. I think family must work the same way. Life is a war, so wouldn't family also stay with their unit until the "war" ends? I hope so, because we've all been injured, we've all been hurt, we all need healing.

While I haven't always made good choices, you always believed in me, so I'm going to start believing in myself.

What's helping is my discovery that your life was never easy, either. It's not surviving a war that is most remarkable, but the fight to survive afterward at home. You felt survivor's remorse after lives around you were lost. You experienced the never-ending bombardment of what-ifs, could-haves, and should-haves. Most importantly, you weren't only brave on the battlefield, Grandpa, you were valiant with me and others at home—and for that, you are remembered and loved.

I don't claim to completely understand what comes after this life, but I know enough to expect another wet and welcome kiss on my cheek when I meet you on the other side.

Until then, I will do my best—and no offense, but let's make it years away because I plan on having a pretty amazing life.

Your loving granddaughter,

Rachel

Author's Note

Although Rachel's story is generally factual (with the exception of the box and letters that tie into *In Times of Rain and War*), I elected to change the names of those with whom she served. In addition, I have altered some aspects of her story for the sake of privacy for her friends and family. In the interest of the story's pacing, I have, at times, combined two characters into one, altered the timeline of events, or otherwise made subtle changes to the plot. That said, I do not believe that any of these alterations substantively detracts from the realities of Rachel's service or experience.

Thank you, Rachel, not only for your military service but for your willingness to share your story with others. You, and all those who have served, deserve our utmost honor and respect.

For a list of sources, as well as broader material for book clubs and other interested readers, please visit AuthorCamronWright.com.

Epilogue

For her service during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Sergeant Rachel Bowers was awarded three medals: a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, and the Army Commendation Medal (for valorous actions in direct contact with an enemy). In addition, she was recognized in the Congressional Record by the House of Representatives in Washington, DC.

Today, Rachel lives in Utah and is a proud mother to five amazing children—Wesley, Eden, Eliza, Jack, and Tilly. Though she will always love adventure, she sold her bullet bike in 2008 and hasn't ridden one since.

In early 2021, Rachel fulfilled a lifelong dream that first sprouted when she was a child living in a single-wide trailer in Apache Junction—she became a Registered Nurse (RN).

She still has occasional struggles with the symptoms of PTSD, has a difficult time driving at night, meets regularly with her therapist, and misses her Grandfather Wesley, but she heartily believes the message she heard him whisper on a lonely night years ago when she lay curled in a ball on the floor weeping. It's a message that has become her life's motto.

You're stronger than you think you are. You're more than you think you are.

Sergeant Rachel Bowers in Iraq