

HE SURVIVED THE JUNGLES OF VIETNAM.
BUT ONLY JESUS COULD RESCUE HIS SOUL.

A WARRIOR
LOST IN THE WAR.

A SOUL FOUND
BY GRACE.

FROM THE JUNGLE TO JESUS

A TRUE STORY OF WAR, BROKENNESS,
AND REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST

DR. PAUL CRAWFORD



NEW HOPE
RESCUE MISSION

JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING



FROM THE JUNGLE TO JESUS

A Christian Novel

by Dr. Paul Crawford

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PREFACE

Every war produces two casualties: the men and women who never come home, and the men and women who come home but are never quite whole again. This novel is about the second kind of casualty — a soldier who survived the jungles of Vietnam only to discover that the hardest battle of his life was still ahead of him, fought not with a rifle but with a bottle, a needle, and a lifetime of unspoken grief.

Jerry Gatchell is a work of fiction, but he stands in for thousands of men who are not. I have sat across from veterans who wore their medals like armor and their memories like chains. I have listened to wives who waited years for husbands who never fully returned, and children who grew up loving a father they could not reach. I have walked into rescue missions and homeless shelters and shaken the hand of a man sleeping under a bridge, only to learn later that he had once led soldiers into combat. Their stories are woven into every page of this book.

This is not simply a war story, and it is not simply a story about addiction. It is a story about what happens when a man believes he is beyond help — and what happens when he discovers he is wrong. Scripture tells us that the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. I have seen that promise proven true in broken places, among broken people, more times than I can count.

I have chosen to tell Jerry's story with Scripture running through it, chapter by chapter, because his story is ultimately not his own. It belongs to a much older story — one about a Father who runs to meet His returning children while they are still a long way off, and a Savior who came, in His own words, not for the healthy but for the sick. Jerry's battles in the jungles of Vietnam and his battles beneath the bridges of America are both, in the end, chapters in a larger story of rescue.

If you are a veteran, I hope you will find in these pages a portrait of your own courage, and permission to believe that whatever you carry, you do not have to carry it alone. If you love a veteran who is struggling, I hope this book helps you see the battlefield behind their silence. And if you have never worn a uniform but have fought battles of your own — with grief, with addiction, with shame, with the belief that you have gone too far for grace to reach you — I hope Jerry's journey convinces you, as it convinced him, that no life is too broken and no past too dark for the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

This book is dedicated to every soldier still fighting a war no one else can see, and to every pastor, counselor, and volunteer who, like Rodney Noblit, refuses to walk past them.

— Dr. Paul Crawford

PROLOGUE

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.”

— Psalm 107:6

The snow came sideways that night, driven by a wind that cut through cardboard and cloth like it cut through nothing at all. Jerry Gatchell pulled the collar of his coat tighter and told himself, as he had told himself ten thousand times before, that he had survived worse. He had survived the jungle. He had survived the ambush at the river. He had survived twenty years of concrete and shelters and men who would kill him for the coat on his back. He could survive one more night.

His legs did not agree.

They had been failing him for blocks now, buckling a little more with every step, and the duffel bag that held everything he owned in the world — a wool blanket, a Bible he had stolen from a church pew and never opened, and a photograph so worn he could no longer make out the faces in it — had grown heavier than any rucksack he had humped through the highlands. He was fifty-one years old and he felt every one of those years and every one of the years before he was born, the way old wounds ache before a storm.

Somewhere behind his eyes, the snow became rain, and the rain became monsoon, and for a moment he was not on a sidewalk in a city whose name he sometimes forgot but in a tree line at 0400 hours, waiting for a signal that never came the way it was supposed to. He heard Ramirez laughing about a girl back in Fresno. He heard the radio crackle. He heard, underneath all of it, the sound he had spent two decades trying to drown — men screaming for a medic who could not reach them fast enough, and his own voice, hoarse, promising them he would not leave them, a promise he had not always been able to keep.

"Not tonight," he muttered to no one, to the snow, to the ghosts. "Not tonight."

He did not know, could not have known, that a lit sign was only a hundred yards ahead of him, red letters glowing faintly through the storm: NEW HOPE RESCUE MISSION. He did not know that a sixty-two-year-old pastor named Rodney Noblit was inside, locking up for the night, pausing at the door for reasons he would later call the leading of the Spirit and would never fully be able to explain. Jerry knew only that his legs had stopped listening to him, that the sidewalk was rising up strangely to meet him, and that the last clear thought in his mind before the world went white and silent was the same thought that had chased him across two decades and a thousand miles.

Nobody is coming for me.

He was wrong.

Somewhere above the wind, a door opened. Somewhere above the wind, footsteps — unhurried, unafraid — crossed a distance that would turn out to be far greater than a hundred yards. And somewhere above the wind, though Jerry could not have heard it and would not have believed it, an old promise older than Vietnam, older than the mission, older than his own broken heart, was already being kept.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. He had been close the whole time. Jerry Gatchell simply had not yet stopped running long enough to be found.

CHAPTER 1

FORGED FOR THE FIGHT

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

— Joshua 1:9

Jerry Gatchell was nineteen years old the morning he told his father he was going to enlist, and he said it the same way he said everything that mattered to him — standing up, looking the man in the eye, and getting it over with fast, like pulling a tick out of his own arm before it had time to dig in deeper.

His father, Everett Gatchell, was at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee gone cold in front of him, the way it always went cold, because Everett Gatchell talked more than he drank. He had come home from Korea eleven years earlier with a Bronze Star, a limp he blamed on the weather, and a silence about the actual fighting that Jerry had never once managed to crack. When Jerry said the word enlist, Everett did not look up right away. He turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer, the way he did when he was deciding whether a thing deserved an argument.

"Army," Jerry said, before his father could ask. "Airborne, if they'll take me. There's talk of something past that too. Special Forces. Green Beret."

"I know what a Green Beret is, son." Everett finally lifted his eyes. They were the same gray-blue as Jerry's, set in a face that had gone weathered and lean from thirty years of red Georgia clay and a war that had never really let him go. "I was at Bragg before you were born. I've seen the kind of men who wear that hat."

"Then you know it's not nothing."

"I know it's not nothing." Everett's jaw worked for a moment. "That's exactly the trouble with it."

Jerry's mother, Ruth, stood at the stove with her back to both of them, and Jerry could tell by the stiffness in her shoulders that she had heard every word and was praying over the bacon like it was the only thing in the room she still had power over. She did that — folded her worry into small, ordinary tasks, as if enough diligence over pancakes and hymnals could hold the family together by sheer force of routine. She had done it when Everett shipped out to Korea. She had been doing some version of it, Jerry realized, every day since he came home changed.

"You don't have to do this," Everett said. "You could stay. Work the Hutchins place with me another year, save up, go on to Georgia Tech like your teachers keep telling your mother you ought to."

"I don't want to work the Hutchins place."

"I know you don't." Something moved behind his father's eyes then, something Jerry didn't have a name for yet but would come to recognize, years later, in his own reflection — the particular grief of a man who has already lost a version of his son and is watching him walk toward the same fire that took him. "That's not really an argument against it, though, is it."

Ruth set a plate down harder than she meant to. The clatter startled all three of them.

"Jerry Wade Gatchell," she said, not turning around, "get the big Bible off the shelf in the hall."

"Mama—"

"Get it."

He got it. It was a family Bible, thick as a cinder block, its spine cracked white from forty years of use, with a presentation page in the front where his grandfather had written the names and birthdates of every Gatchell going back three generations in a hand that had grown shakier with each entry. Ruth wiped her hands on her apron, took the Bible from him, and opened it not to Genesis, where he

expected, but flipped with the practiced speed of a woman who had read this book more than any other book in the world, until she found what she was looking for in the book of Joshua.

"Read it," she said, and pointed.

Jerry read it under his breath first, then out loud, because his mother's eyes told him she wasn't going to let him get away with a whisper.

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

The kitchen went quiet except for the bacon popping in the skillet.

"Joshua was scared," Ruth said. "Anybody with sense would've been scared, taking over for Moses, walking a whole nation into a land full of giants. God didn't tell him not to be scared because there was nothing to be scared of. He told him not to be scared because He'd already decided to go with him." She closed the Bible, but she didn't put it away. She set it on the table in front of Jerry's plate, right next to the cold coffee, and looked at her husband instead of her son. "I can't stop him, Everett. Neither can you. The only thing either of us can do is make sure he doesn't walk out that door thinking he's walking out it alone."

Everett Gatchell looked at the Bible, and then at his son, for a long moment. Then he did something Jerry had not seen him do since the funeral of his own father — he reached out, tore a strip of paper from the edge of yesterday's newspaper, and used it to mark the page in Joshua before he closed the book himself.

"Take it with you," he said. His voice had gone rough. "Whatever else you take. Take that."

Jerry took it. He did not, if he was honest with himself years later, read it much in the beginning. He was nineteen, and strong, and certain in the particular way that only young men who have never yet been broken can be certain, and he believed — the way you believe things you have never had reason to doubt — that whatever waited for him in the Army, he had it in him to meet.

He had no idea yet how many times that verse would come back to him. He had no idea that a night would come, twenty years and a lifetime later, huddled and freezing and half out of his mind, when those words — be strong and courageous, do not be afraid — would be the last coherent thought standing between him and the dark. He only knew, standing in his mother's kitchen with the smell of bacon and the weight of a torn strip of newspaper marking a page he hadn't earned yet, that he was leaving, and that some part of his father envied him for it, and some part of his father was already grieving him.

Three weeks later, Jerry Gatchell boarded a bus for Fort Benning, Georgia, with a duffel bag over one shoulder and his grandfather's Bible wrapped in a spare shirt at the bottom of it, and did not look back at the platform where his mother stood with her hand pressed flat against her chest, as though she could hold her own heart in by force of will alone.

* * *

The Sunday before he left, Jerry sat in the third pew from the front of Mount Zion Baptist Church, wedged between his mother and father in the one good suit he owned, and listened to Pastor Ellis Whitfield preach a sermon that had, by Ruth Gatchell's quiet insistence delivered sometime earlier that week, nothing whatsoever to do with war.

It was about the wilderness instead — forty years of it, a whole generation of Israelites wandering in circles because they had let their fear of giants outweigh their trust in a God who had already promised them the land. Pastor Whitfield was an old man by then, older than Jerry's father, with a voice gone reedy and thin but still capable of filling the little clapboard sanctuary all the way to its rafters when a point mattered enough to him.

"The Lord didn't ask Israel to be fearless," he said, gripping the sides of the pulpit the way he always did when he was building toward something. "He asked them to be faithful in spite of fear."

There's a world of difference, church. A fearless man is a man who hasn't yet met anything worth fearing. A faithful man has met it, looked it square in the eye, and gone forward anyway, because he trusts the One who's going with him more than he trusts his own eyes."

After the service, in the gravel lot outside, half the congregation lined up to shake Jerry's hand — men who had known him since he was in short pants, women who had fed him casserole after casserole through every difficult season his family had ever weathered, a gaggle of younger boys who looked at him now with the particular awe reserved for a young man about to do something they could not yet imagine doing themselves. Pastor Whitfield found him last, waited until the crowd had thinned, and took both of Jerry's hands in his own weathered ones.

"Your mother tells me she gave you the Joshua verse."

"Yes, sir."

"Good verse. True verse." The old man's grip tightened, surprisingly strong for a man who had to be pushing eighty. "But I want to give you one more, son, because a man ought to carry more than one stone in his pocket when he's walking into deep water. Deuteronomy, thirty-one, six. 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.'" He let that settle a moment. "Moses said those words to the whole nation of Israel right before he handed the reins to Joshua and went up the mountain to die without ever seeing the land himself. He said them because he knew that whatever waited for that boy Joshua, and for every soldier and farmer and mother and child walking behind him, it would not be an easy conquest. He didn't promise them ease, Jerry. He promised them presence. That's the whole of it. That's the whole of what I've got to give you today, and it's more than enough if you'll let it be."

Jerry did not fully understand, standing in that gravel lot with the Georgia sun already climbing hot and white overhead, how much he would come to need those two verses laid one on top of the other — courage and presence, promise and company — nor how many years would pass before he would walk back into a sanctuary that felt anything like this one again. He only knew, shaking the old pastor's hand, that something in him had been given a weight to carry that was heavier than a duffel bag and lighter than fear, both at once, and that he intended to carry it as far as it would go.

* * *

Basic training taught Jerry Gatchell two things in the first week, and the Army did not much care which order he learned them in.

The first was that his body, which he had always privately considered strong — a farm boy's strength, built from bucking hay bales and running fence lines since he was twelve — was not remotely as strong as the Army required it to be. The second was that his will, which he had always privately considered stubborn past the point of reason, was exactly as strong as the Army required, and possibly more.

Drill Sergeant Ezra Colton found that second fact within the first seventy-two hours and made it his personal project.

"Gatchell!" Colton's voice had the particular quality of a man who had once been a preacher and had transferred every ounce of pulpit thunder directly into close-order drill. "You got something to say?"

Jerry, flat on his belly in the mud with forty pounds of gear cutting into his shoulders, had not said anything. He had grunted. Apparently that was close enough.

"No, Drill Sergeant."

"Then get your face out of my mud and get up that hill, because the men who taught me are teaching you now whether you like it or not, and one of the first things they taught me is that the Army doesn't want your strength, private. Anybody can be strong on a good day. The Army wants to know what's left of you on your worst one."

Jerry got up the hill. He got up a hundred hills after that one, real and figurative, through weeks that dissolved into a blur of bayonet drills and rifle ranges and midnight low-crawls under barbed wire while machine guns fired live tracers overhead — close enough, Colton assured them cheerfully, that a man who raised his head too high would not live to regret it. He learned to disassemble and reassemble his M14 blindfolded. He learned to march twenty miles with a full ruck and still be expected to think clearly enough to answer a question at the end of it. He learned, most of all, that the Army had a way of stripping a man down past the version of himself he had brought with him, down to something more basic and less negotiable — and that what was left, after the stripping, was either enough or it wasn't.

There was a boy in his platoon named Duane Pruitt, a skinny kid from somewhere in the Kentucky hollows who could not have weighed more than a hundred and forty pounds soaking wet, and who Jerry watched, over the course of three weeks, come apart by degrees the way a rope frays — one strand at a time, until there was nothing left to hold the weight. Pruitt could not make the twelve-mile ruck march time no matter how many times he tried it, and each failure seemed to take something out of him that the next attempt could not put back. Jerry started falling back on the marches to walk beside him, not because Colton asked him to, but because it seemed like the kind of thing his mother would have wanted him to do, and because he could not entirely shake the memory of his own father's voice — that's not really an argument against it, though, is it — every time he thought about simply leaving Pruitt to sink on his own.

"Go on ahead, Gatchell," Pruitt gasped at him, somewhere around mile nine, sweat cutting clean lines through the dust on his face. "Ain't your job to drag me."

"Ain't dragging you," Jerry said. "Walking is all. Man can walk next to another man without it meaning anything more than that."

It meant more than that, and they both knew it, but Pruitt let him stay, and together they made the standard three times running before the platoon's record attempt, and failed it a fourth time by ninety seconds despite Jerry's best effort to talk him through the last mile with nothing but stubbornness and scripture — his mother's verse, mostly, repeated so many times it had worn a groove in both their heads. Pruitt washed out of the infantry track two weeks later, reassigned to a supply unit stateside, and shook Jerry's hand on his way out with an expression that was equal parts shame and relief.

"You'd have made a good NCO for me," Pruitt told him. "Sorry I couldn't be a good enough soldier for you."

"You weren't supposed to be a soldier for me," Jerry said. "Only for yourself. That's the only version of it that was ever going to hold up anyway." He meant it kindly, and Pruitt seemed to take it that way, but the exchange stayed with Jerry longer than he expected — his first real brush with the fact that courage was not evenly distributed, that some men could be handed the exact same training and the exact same twelve miles and simply not have it in them, through no particular fault of character, and that a man who did have it in him owed something to the ones who didn't. He did not yet have language for what that something was. He would spend the rest of his life, in one form or another, trying to find it.

For Jerry, it turned out to be enough. More than enough. He finished basic in the top of his company, and Colton — who did not hand out compliments so much as ration them like ammunition in a siege — pulled him aside on the last day.

"You've got the legs for the hills and the head for the details," Colton said. "That's rarer than you'd think. Most men have one or the other." He studied Jerry for a moment, the way a man studies a horse he's deciding whether to bet on. "You thought any more about jump school?"

"Thought about it since before I got here, Drill Sergeant."

"And past that?"

Jerry hesitated, because past that was a thing he had only allowed himself to say out loud once, to his father, in a kitchen that felt very far away now. "Special Forces. If they'll have me."

Colton's mouth twitched, which for Colton was practically a grin. "They'll have you, Gatchell. Question is whether you'll have you, once they're through. That course eats boys like you for breakfast and spits out the bones." He clapped a hand on Jerry's shoulder, hard enough to stagger him. "Go find out if you're bone or gristle, son."

* * *

Jump school at Fort Benning was, in its own way, a smaller and more concentrated terror than basic had been — three weeks distilled down to a single, repeated question that Jerry found himself asking every time he stood in the door of a C-119 with the wind screaming past at twelve hundred feet: why, exactly, was he about to step out of a perfectly functional airplane.

Ground week taught him how to fall without breaking himself, over and over, off platforms and out of mock doors, until the parachute landing fall became something his body did without his mind's permission. Tower week put him three hundred and fifty feet in the air on a set of cables, dropped him, and let physics teach him the rest. And then came jump week, five actual jumps out of five actual aircraft, and there was no simulating the moment the jumpmaster's hand came down on his shoulder and the word GO cut through everything else in his skull and his boots left the doorframe and there was nothing beneath him but noise and air and the small, violent mercy of a parachute deciding, a few seconds later, to open.

He stood in the door for his first jump next to a wiry, sunburned kid from somewhere in Oklahoma who introduced himself with a grin as Tom Mercer, and who Jerry would later learn had earned the name "Bulldog" not for his looks — though there was something in the set of his jaw that fit it — but for a legendary refusal, back at Benning, to let go of a rope during a tug-of-war exercise even after his palms had split open and bled straight through his gloves.

"You scared?" Mercer had to shout it over the engine noise.

"Yeah," Jerry shouted back, because there did not seem to be much point lying about it thirty seconds before the door opened.

"Good," Mercer said. "Man who says he ain't scared of this is either a liar or a fool, and I don't want to jump next to either one." He grinned, wide and easy, the kind of grin that made strangers into friends before they'd finished being introduced. "Name's Tom. Everybody calls me Bulldog."

"Jerry."

"Well, Jerry." The jumpmaster's hand went up. Thirty seconds. "See you on the ground, or see you in heaven. Either way, it's gonna be a good story."

They saw each other on the ground. Jerry came down hard and wrong, dragged twenty feet through the grass before he got his canopy collapsed, and looked up to find Mercer already jogging over, laughing so hard he could barely get the words out.

"Didn't they teach you the fall, Georgia?"

"They taught me the fall," Jerry said, spitting grass out of his mouth. "Didn't teach me the landing."

"Nah," Mercer said, hauling him up by the arm. "Nobody teaches you the landing. You just gotta survive enough of 'em till your body figures it out on its own." He slapped the dirt off Jerry's shoulder with more force than was strictly necessary. "Come on, Georgia. Chow's this way."

By the end of jump week they were bunked two racks apart, and by the end of the month they had put in together for the same follow-on assignment, and Jerry Gatchell — who had left home three months earlier with nothing but a duffel bag, a Bible he hadn't read, and a certainty he hadn't yet had cause to question — had, without quite noticing the moment it happened, made the first true friend of his adult life.

* * *

It was Mercer, in fact, who was responsible for Sarah, though he would later deny any real credit for it, insisting he had only pointed out the obvious.

"You write anybody, Georgia?" he'd asked one evening, lying on his bunk flipping through a stack of letters from three different girls back in Oklahoma, none of whom, as far as Jerry could tell, knew about the other two.

"My mother."

"Your mother." Mercer had rolled his eyes so hard Jerry heard it in his voice. "A man needs a girl to write, not a mother. Man needs somebody on the other side of all this who isn't already obligated to love him. Makes the coming-home part worth something extra."

Jerry had thought, unbidden, of Sarah Whitcombe — a preacher's niece from Coweta County, two counties over from his own, whom he had met exactly once, at a church singing when he was seventeen, and had not stopped thinking about with an embarrassing regularity ever since, despite having done nothing whatsoever about it. She had a laugh that carried across a churchyard and a way of looking at a person like she'd already decided to take them seriously, and Jerry had spent the better part of two years telling himself the memory of one afternoon didn't amount to anything worth acting on.

He wrote her anyway, that same week, a stiff and overly formal letter that took him four drafts and no small amount of Mercer's unsolicited editorial commentary, and he did not expect a reply. He got one within ten days — three full pages in a looping, confident hand, informing him that she remembered him perfectly well, thank you, including the fact that he'd stepped on her foot twice during the closing hymn and apologized both times with such genuine horror that she'd nearly laughed out loud in the middle of "Blessed Assurance."

I don't know what you're training to become, she wrote, but my uncle says the Lord doesn't call men to be fearless, only faithful, and something in the way you apologized to a girl's foot twice in one evening tells me you've got more of the second in you than you probably give yourself credit for. Write again if you'd like. I don't make a habit of writing soldiers I've only met once, so consider this an exception, not a policy.

He wrote again. She wrote back. By the time he and Mercer shipped out for Selection, a stack of Sarah's letters had accumulated in the bottom of Jerry's footlocker nearly as thick as the family Bible sitting beside them, and though he would have been mortified to admit it to anyone but Mercer, he had begun, somewhere in that stack of pages, to build the outline of a future he had not previously let himself imagine — a house, a porch, a woman with a carrying laugh, children who would never have cause to wonder whether their father loved them. It was a small and ordinary hope, the kind most young men carry without much ceremony. Jerry did not yet know how many years it would take, and how much it would cost both of them, before any part of it came true.

* * *

Special Forces selection did not so much test a man as dismantle him, piece by piece, and then stand back to see what he chose to do about it.

They called it Selection, capital S, and it began the way most of the worst things in Jerry's life would eventually begin — with a ruck on his back, a map in his hand, and a set of coordinates that told him nothing about the distance, the terrain, or how many hours of darkness he would have to cross before a cadre sergeant, sitting bored and unreadable behind a folding table at some godforsaken point in the North Carolina hills, would check his name off a list without so much as looking up.

There was no explanation offered for anything. That, Jerry came to understand, was the point. The Army did not want to know how a man performed when he understood the plan. It wanted to know how he performed when he didn't — when the pack straps had rubbed his shoulders raw and the land navigation problem in his hand seemed to correspond to no actual terrain feature on God's earth and the only information available to him was that quitting was always, at every single moment, an option. All

he had to do was walk up to a cadre member and say the words. There was a truck. There was coffee. There was an end to the pain, immediate and guaranteed, available at every mile marker of the course.

Nobody made a man stay. That was what broke some of them — not the ruck marches, not the sleep deprivation stacked on top of sleep deprivation until Jerry's mind began serving up hallucinations at the edges of his vision, shapes in the tree line that weren't there, voices in the wind that were his own thoughts wearing other people's faces. What broke men was the knowledge that the door out was always open, unlocked, right there, and staying required choosing it again, every hour, with no one to blame but yourself if you didn't.

He watched it happen to a big, capable-looking man named Osgood on the ninth day, a former college linebacker who had looked, on paper and in person both, like exactly the kind of specimen the course was built to produce. Osgood came apart not from weakness of body — his body held out fine — but from some quieter failure Jerry couldn't name, a kind of slow leak in the will that started with small complaints and ended, one gray morning, with the man simply sitting down in the middle of a trail, removing his boots with great and terrible calm, and telling the cadre sergeant who found him that he was finished. Nobody argued with him. Nobody tried to talk him out of it. The truck simply came, the way it always came, and took him away, and the rest of them shouldered their rucks and kept walking, because there was nothing else to do with what they'd just watched except walk past it.

Jerry thought about Osgood more than he expected to, in the days that followed — not with contempt, which surprised him, but with a kind of sober respect for how thin the line actually was, how little separated the men still walking from the men sitting on the trail with their boots off. He understood, watching it, that whatever kept a man's legs moving after his body had stopped agreeing to the terms was not, in the end, a physical resource. It could be spent down to nothing and still, somehow, be borrowed from somewhere else — pride, or love, or the plain refusal to be the kind of man who quits, or, in Jerry's case, a verse that kept surfacing in his mind uninvited at the exact moments he needed it most, whether or not he had decided yet that he believed it.

Jerry chose it again in the black hours of a night so cold his canteen had started to skin over with ice, sitting on a stump somewhere he could not have located on a map to save his life, eating a can of cold beans because he had missed the last resupply point by forty minutes and the cadre had not seen fit to mention that failure carried a penalty measured in meals rather than miles. He had his father's face in his head, and Colton's voice — a man who says he ain't scared is either a liar or a fool — and, unbidden, in a moment he would later describe to Sarah as the closest thing to a vision he'd ever had, his mother's voice reading from the book of Joshua at the kitchen table.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

He had not, in three months of carrying that Bible in the bottom of his duffel bag, cracked it open more than a handful of times. But the verse had lodged in him anyway, the way certain sentences do, waiting for exactly the kind of night when a man has nothing left to argue himself out of quitting except a promise he isn't entirely sure he believes yet.

He finished the can of beans. He got up off the stump. He found the next point on his map somewhere around 0300, mostly by instinct and the stubbornness his mother liked to say he'd inherited from both sides of the family at once, and he was still on his feet three weeks later when the cadre finally called his name off a much shorter list and told him, in the flattest voice imaginable, that he had been selected to continue.

Of the hundred and forty men who had started Selection with him, nineteen were left standing in that field. Tom Mercer was one of them, ten pounds lighter and grinning like the whole ordeal had been a personal favor from God.

"Told you," Mercer said, throwing an arm around Jerry's shoulders that Jerry was too exhausted to shrug off. "Bone, not gristle."

* * *

What followed Selection was longer and, in its way, harder, though it no longer announced itself with the same theatrical cruelty. The Qualification Course took the survivors of Selection and began building something out of them, layer by layer — small unit tactics in the swamps and pine barrens, land navigation problems that grew more punishing rather than less, weapons training on rifles and machine guns and mortars that had never been manufactured in the United States, because a Special Forces soldier was expected to be able to pick up whatever an allied guerrilla force happened to be carrying and put it to immediate, effective use.

Jerry found, to his own quiet surprise, that he had a gift for demolitions. There was something in the precision of it that appealed to the same part of him that had once taken apart his father's tractor engine on the Hutchins place just to see if he could put it back together running better than before — a patience with complexity, an instinct for the exact point where enough was enough and more would only waste the charge. His instructor, a taciturn master sergeant named Voss who had blown bridges in Korea and, rumor had it, in places the Army did not officially acknowledge existed, told him flatly that he had the calmest hands he'd seen in a classroom in six years.

"Most men shake," Voss said, watching Jerry wire a training charge with hands that had gone perfectly, unnaturally still. "Fear does that. Keeps you alive in some situations, gets you killed in this one. You don't shake."

"I'm plenty scared, Sergeant."

"I didn't ask if you were scared." Voss almost smiled — a rare enough event that the other men in the class actually turned to look. "I said you don't shake. There's a difference, Gatchell, and it's the difference that's going to matter someday. Scared keeps a man sharp. Shaking gets him and everybody around him killed. Learn to carry the first without ever tipping over into the second, and you'll do fine over there."

Over there. It was the first time anyone had said it to him so plainly, without euphemism, and Jerry understood in that moment — the way a man understands a fact he has technically known for months but never quite let become real — that all of this, the ruck marches and the demolitions range and the language classes in Vietnamese that had started the week before, all of it was aimed at a single destination, a country on the far side of the world that he had, until recently, only been able to find on a map because a teacher had pointed to it once in a current-events unit that half his classmates had slept through.

The language classes met in a low cinderblock building at the far edge of post, taught by a soft-spoken Vietnamese instructor named Mrs. Trinh Nguyen, a widow whose husband, Jerry gathered slowly over weeks of careful, half-answered questions, had died fighting for the French years before the Americans had arrived in any real numbers. She was patient with the soldiers in a way none of their other instructors bothered to be, correcting their tones over and over without a hint of impatience, and she had a habit, near the end of each class, of teaching them small phrases that had nothing to do with the tactical vocabulary the course required — greetings, expressions of respect for elders, the proper way to decline a offered bowl of rice without giving offense.

"Why teach us this?" Halvorsen asked her once, not unkindly, more out of genuine confusion. "We're not going over there to make friends."

Mrs. Nguyen considered the question longer than it seemed to deserve. "You are going to a country full of people, Sergeant," she said finally. "Some of them will be your enemies. Many more of them will simply be people — farmers, mothers, old men who remember the French and will now have to learn to remember you too. A soldier who can only kill is a weapon. A soldier who can also show respect might, on his best days, be something more useful than a weapon." She looked at Jerry in particular when she said the next part, though he never knew exactly why she'd singled him out. "Your Green Beret is supposed to mean you understand this already. I hope it is true."

Jerry took the lesson more seriously after that than he might have otherwise, staying late some evenings to drill phrases with Mrs. Nguyen long after the rest of the class had gone to chow, and he would carry her words with him, half-forgotten and then suddenly vivid again, into villages two years later where the difference between a soldier who only knew how to kill and a soldier who knew how to sit down and share a bowl of rice with a frightened old man would matter more than any of them, sitting in that cinderblock classroom, could yet imagine.

He wrote his mother that week. He did not tell her about the training in any detail — the letters were vague by design, the way a soldier's letters home usually are, full of weather and food and small complaints calibrated to reassure rather than inform. But he did tell her, near the end, that he'd been reading the book of Joshua some, on nights he couldn't sleep, and that he thought he understood now why she'd chosen that verse instead of a hundred others.

Joshua didn't get to see the land before he crossed into it, he wrote. He just had God's word that it was worth crossing for. I guess that's about where I'm at too. I can't see what's coming, Mama. I just have to decide whether I believe it's worth walking toward anyway. Ruth kept that letter for the rest of her life, folded inside the same family Bible she had marked for him at the kitchen table, and read it again on the worst nights of the two decades that followed, when believing anything good about her son had become the hardest kind of faith she had ever practiced.

* * *

The culmination exercise was called Robin Sage, a sprawling, weeks-long simulation staged across the towns and back roads of North Carolina, in which the candidates were dropped into a fictional occupied country and tasked with organizing, training, and leading a guerrilla resistance force made up of local civilian role-players who had been doing this particular volunteer work, some of them, since before Jerry was born.

It was meant to feel real, and it did. Jerry and his team — Mercer among them, along with a quiet, watchful communications specialist named Delgado and a big-shouldered weapons man out of Wisconsin named Halvorsen — were dropped by parachute at night into unfamiliar terrain with nothing but their equipment, a mission brief, and the expectation that they would locate their guerrilla contact, establish trust, and build an effective fighting force out of farmers and shopkeepers within a matter of days, all while evading a hostile aggressor force whose sole job was to hunt them down and make their lives as miserable as the exercise rules allowed.

It was during Robin Sage that Jerry Gatchell first understood, in his body rather than just his head, the particular weight of command.

It was one thing to be responsible for himself — to carry his own ruck, make his own decisions, absorb his own consequences. It was an entirely different thing to stand in a barn at two in the morning in front of eleven role-playing guerrillas, half of them skeptical, all of them looking to him for a plan that would determine whether the exercise's simulated raid succeeded or collapsed into chaos, and to understand that whatever he said next, right or wrong, these people — even the pretend version of these people, in a training exercise with no real bullets — were going to trust him with it simply because he had opened his mouth first and sounded like he knew.

He did not always know. He said so, more than once, and found that saying so, and then working the problem out loud with his team rather than pretending certainty he didn't have, earned him more trust than false confidence ever could have.

The clearest test of it came on the eleventh night, when the aggressor force nearly rolled up their entire operation. A local role-player they'd been counting on to guide a night raid on a simulated supply depot turned out, at the last possible moment, to be exactly the kind of unreliable asset every instructor had warned them to expect and none of them had quite believed they'd encounter — drunk, frightened, and unwilling to move another step past the tree line he'd already led them to. Delgado wanted to abort.

Halvorsen, characteristically, wanted to press on without the guide and trust the map. Mercer looked to Jerry and said nothing at all, which was somehow the loudest vote of the three.

Jerry crouched in the dark with his team bunched close around him, the makeshift guerrilla unit waiting behind them for a decision, and felt for the first time the specific, physical weight of a dozen people's fates resting on words he had not yet decided how to say. He thought of Voss's calloused hands wiring a training charge, of the flat unhurried patience with which the sergeant had told him fear keeps a man sharp, and he made himself breathe before he made himself talk.

"We don't abort," he said finally, "but we don't press blind either. Delgado, get eyes on the depot from the ridge before we commit anybody. Halvorsen, work the map with me — if the guide won't move, we go around him, not through him." He looked at the frightened role-player, a middle-aged farmer named Otis who was playing his part with more genuine anxiety than the exercise strictly required. "Otis, you don't have to come any further. Just tell me what you know about that tree line before we leave you here, and that's the last thing I'll ask of you tonight."

It worked, in the end, though not cleanly — the raid succeeded by a margin thin enough that the after-action review spent a full hour picking it apart — and Voss, watching from the shadows the way cadre always seemed to be watching, no matter how remote the location, told him afterward that this had been the single most important thing he'd learned in the entire course.

"Command isn't about having all the answers, Gatchell," Voss said, in the flat, unhurried voice he used for the things he actually wanted a man to remember. "It's about being the man who's still standing there working the problem when everybody else wants to run. You did that. Keep doing it, and you'll bring men home who wouldn't have made it home under somebody else."

Jerry did not know, standing in that barn with mud on his boots and a fake war winding down around him, how many times he would hear an echo of those words in his head over the following two years — in a tree line at dawn, in a river crossing gone bloody, in the particular silence that follows a radio call that never gets answered. He did not know yet how many men Voss's promise would prove true for, and how many it wouldn't. He only knew that something in him had settled, quietly and permanently, into the shape of a leader, the way a bone sets crooked or straight depending on how it's held in the first hours after the break.

* * *

Graduation fell on a gray, drizzling morning at Fort Bragg, the kind of low Carolina sky that seemed to press the ceremony down close to the ground rather than lift it up. Jerry stood in formation with the nineteen other survivors of his class — down to fourteen, now, after the Q Course had claimed five more along the way — and listened to a full colonel deliver remarks that Jerry mostly did not retain, because his attention kept snagging on the green wool beret folded under the colonel's arm, waiting to be issued.

When his name was called, Jerry stepped forward, and the colonel placed the beret in his hands himself rather than passing it down a line, the way it was sometimes done, and said something to him quietly enough that Jerry alone could hear it.

"You know what this hat means, soldier?"

"Sir?"

"Doesn't mean you're better than the man standing next to you who doesn't wear one. Doesn't mean the Army bought you anything. It means the men who trained you believe — not hope, believe — that when everything goes to hell in a place with no support and no easy way home, you are the kind of man other men can build a plan around." The colonel's eyes, tired and not unkind, held his for a moment longer than protocol required. "Don't let it go to your head, Gatchell. Let it go to your spine instead. Wear it there."

Jerry put on the beret. It fit strangely at first, the way anything does before a man has worn it long enough to forget it's there, and he would spend the better part of the next two years adjusting the flash on it, blocking it just so, the small vanities of a young soldier who had earned something and wanted the world to see that he had.

Tom Mercer found him after the ceremony, his own beret already cocked at an angle no manual would have approved of, grinning the same grin he'd worn stepping off the ramp of a C-119 a year and a lifetime earlier.

"We did it, Georgia."

"We did it, Bulldog."

"Orders came down this morning." Mercer's grin didn't waver, but something steadier moved underneath it, the first real gravity Jerry had ever seen cross his friend's face. "Same team. Same company. Vietnam, both of us, inside sixty days."

Jerry had known it was coming — had known it, in truth, since the day Voss said the words over there in a demolitions classroom that felt like a hundred years ago now — but hearing it spoken as a fact, a date, a destination rather than an abstraction, landed differently than he had expected. He thought of his father at the kitchen table, turning his coffee cup a quarter turn. He thought of his mother's hand pressed flat against her chest on a bus platform in Georgia. He thought, without meaning to, of Sarah — a girl from two counties over he'd started writing to during the Q Course, on Mercer's insistence that a man needed something on the other side of the ocean worth coming home for, and whose last letter, tucked now in his footlocker, had ended with the words I'll be praying for you every single day, Jerry Gatchell, whether you write back or not.

"Sixty days," Jerry repeated.

"Sixty days." Mercer clapped him on the shoulder, the same gesture Colton had used at the end of basic, the same gesture that seemed to pass down some invisible current of soldiers extending it to the ones behind them. "Best make 'em count."

He made the first of them count by spending a seventy-two-hour pass driving south to Coweta County in a borrowed car with a bad muffler, to meet Sarah Whitcombe in person for only the second time in his life, though it did not feel like the second time to either of them by the end of the first hour. She was taller than he remembered, and sharper-tongued, and she laughed at him within the first ten minutes for the careful, over-rehearsed way he'd planned out everything he intended to say, as though a year and a half of letters hadn't already told her most of it.

"You wrote better than you talk," she informed him, sitting across from him on her uncle's porch swing with her hands folded primly in her lap and her eyes doing something considerably less prim. "I was starting to worry the real version of you wouldn't measure up to the paper version."

"And?"

"And I reserve judgment." But she was smiling when she said it, and she let him hold her hand for the better part of the evening, and when he finally worked up the nerve, somewhere around dusk, to tell her plainly that he intended to marry her if she'd have him — not that night, not before he shipped out, but someday, on the far side of whatever was coming — she did not laugh at that.

"I already decided that a while back," she said. "Somewhere around your fortieth letter, if you want to know exactly. I just didn't see any profit in telling you before you'd worked up the courage to say it first. Man needs to feel like the idea was his own, my mother always says, even when it plainly wasn't."

He kissed her on that porch, once, carefully, the way a man kisses something he has decided is worth being careful with, and drove back to Bragg the next morning with a photograph of her in his shirt pocket and a promise between them that neither of them spoke of again in quite those terms, because it did not need repeating. It simply was, from that evening forward, a fact about his life the way Georgia clay or his father's limp were facts about his life — settled, permanent, load-bearing.

His last stop before returning to post was his parents' kitchen, the same table where it had all started three months earlier. His father shook his hand at the door this time instead of arguing with him,

gripped it a beat longer than necessary, and said only, "Write your mother more than you write that girl, or you'll hear about it from both of us." His mother did not say anything at all. She simply pressed a small card into his palm — the Deuteronomy verse Pastor Whitfield had given him, copied out in her own careful hand, small enough to fit inside a wallet — and held onto his hand a moment longer than the card required, as if she could transfer some further measure of protection through her grip alone.

That night, before lights out, Jerry sat on the edge of his bunk and took the family Bible out from the bottom of his footlocker for the first time in weeks. He found the strip of yellowed newspaper still marking the page in Joshua, exactly where his father had left it, and he read the verse again, slowly this time, the way a man reads something he has decided, finally, to actually believe rather than merely carry.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

He did not yet know what wherever you go would cost him. He did not know about the river crossing waiting two years down the line, or the ambush at dawn, or the faces of men he would fail to save no matter how calm his hands stayed or how many demolitions courses he'd finished top of his class. He did not know that the beret now sitting on his footlocker, still stiff and new and smelling faintly of the wool it had been cut from, would one day be the last possession he had left in the world — pawned and reclaimed and pawned again, carried under bridges, in doorways, through twenty years he could not yet imagine standing in this dry, well-lit barracks room with his whole life still ahead of him like an unmarked map.

He knew only what every young soldier knows on the last quiet night before deployment, which is almost nothing, and he closed the Bible, and turned off the light, and lay in the dark turning his mother's words over in his mind — the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go — and chose, for one more night, to believe them.

Sixty days later, Staff Sergeant Jerry Gatchell boarded a transport plane bound for a country whose name he could now say fluently in two languages, wearing a green beret he had earned with his body and his will and very nearly the last of his fear, carrying a rifle, a rucksack, a photograph of a girl from two counties over, and a promise from the book of Joshua that he had not yet been tested enough to know whether he actually believed.

He was about to find out.

CHAPTER 2

BOOTS ON FOREIGN SOIL

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

— Psalm 23:4

The heat hit Jerry Gatchell before anything else did — before the smell, before the noise, before he had even fully cleared the aircraft door. It came up off the tarmac at Bien Hoa Air Base in a visible shimmer, thick and wet and alive in a way no Georgia summer had ever managed, and it wrapped around him the instant he stepped onto the ramp with a force that felt almost personal, as if the country itself had been waiting for him specifically and wanted him to know it.

"Lord have mercy," Mercer said beside him, already sweating through his fatigues before they'd gone twenty feet. "Georgia, is this what you call a climate back home?"

"This ain't Georgia," Jerry said. "This is somebody's idea of a joke."

It was not a joke, though the two of them kept up the bit down the length of the flight line, because joking about it was easier than admitting how much the heat alone had already begun to work on them — how it sat on a man's chest and made every breath cost something, how it turned the simple act of carrying a duffel bag across two hundred yards of tarmac into a genuine physical trial. Around them, the base sprawled in every direction, a churning, deafening mess of transport planes and helicopters and men in a dozen different uniforms moving with the particular hurried indifference of people who had stopped being surprised by anything a long time ago. Jets screamed off in the distance. A convoy of trucks rattled past close enough to coat them all in a fine layer of red dust that Jerry would come to learn never fully washed out of anything — not fatigues, not boots, not, eventually, memory itself.

He had expected, in some vague and unexamined way, that arriving in a war would feel like something. A crossing. A threshold he stepped over and instantly became a different version of himself on the far side of. Instead it felt disappointingly, disturbingly ordinary — a long flight, a bureaucratic shuffle through in-processing, a stack of forms to sign, a line to stand in for a duffel bag tag, all of it conducted under a sun so relentless that half the new arrivals around him had already gone glassy-eyed and silent, staring at nothing, waiting for someone to tell them where to go next.

"Gatchell. Mercer." A sergeant with a clipboard and sunglasses that hid most of his face called their names off a list without looking up, the same flat efficiency Jerry remembered from every cadre sergeant at every stage of training that had brought him here. "Fifth Group's expecting you. Truck leaves in twenty for Nha Trang, then you'll get onward orders to your team."

"Any idea which camp, Sergeant?" Jerry asked.

The sergeant finally looked up, and something moved behind the sunglasses that might have been amusement or might have been pity — Jerry couldn't tell which, and would spend a fair amount of his first month in-country trying to learn to read the difference on other men's faces. "Wherever they need two more Green Berets bad enough to fly you out same week you land, son. Which is most of 'em, these days. Get your gear."

* * *

They waited out their twenty minutes at the edge of the flight line, sitting on their duffel bags in a strip of shade thrown by a corrugated tin overhang, and it was there that Jerry got his first real look at the other kind of soldier this war produced — the ones going home instead of coming in.

A knot of six or seven men sat on the opposite side of the strip waiting for a different flight, and Jerry knew before anyone told him which direction they were headed, because the difference between the two groups was written plainly enough on their bodies that a blind man could have read it. His own group, the new arrivals, sat upright and alert, gear squared away, uniforms still holding their creases, eyes moving constantly over a landscape that hadn't yet stopped being strange to them. The men across the strip sat loose and low, boots scuffed pale, fatigues faded to a color that bore only a passing resemblance to the jungle green they'd started as, and their eyes, when they moved at all, moved with a slow, weary economy that had nothing curious left in it.

One of them, a buck sergeant with a scar tracing white through one eyebrow, caught Jerry looking and ambled over without any particular hurry, the way a man walks when he has finally, after however many months, run out of reasons to hurry anywhere ever again.

"First tour?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Figured." He crouched down, forearms on his knees, studying Jerry and Mercer both with an expression that was neither unkind nor especially warm — simply assessing, the way Boone would assess them an hour later on a different helipad. "Advice?"

"We'll take it," Mercer said.

"Don't count days." The sergeant said it flatly, like a man reciting something he'd repeated to a dozen other green replacements before them. "Every FNG comes in here counting. Three hundred sixty-five, minus whatever you've already burned on travel, and it feels like something you can hold onto, a number ticking down. It ain't. Counting days makes every single one of 'em longer, and it makes a man start thinking about the number instead of the ground in front of him, which is exactly the kind of thinking that gets a man killed with sixty days left instead of three hundred." He straightened up, wincing slightly at something that might have been an old injury or might just have been the accumulated weight of a year spent moving carefully through country that punished carelessness. "Do your job. Watch the man next to you. Let the number take care of itself. That's the only advice worth a damn I've got, and I've had a year to think about it, so you might as well take it."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Jerry said.

The man gave him a long look, something flickering behind it that Jerry would only fully understand months later, once he'd earned the right to understand it. "Welcome to the war, son. Hope you make it to my side of this flight line looking better than I do." He walked back to his own group without waiting for a reply, and Jerry watched him go, filing the exchange away in the same part of his mind where he kept Voss's lessons and Boone's, though he did not yet know this man's name and never would learn it.

* * *

The flight from Nha Trang to their assigned camp went by C-123, low and loud over a landscape that unfolded beneath them like nothing Jerry had ever seen from the air — endless green canopy broken by rivers the color of milk chocolate, rice paddies laid out in flooded silver grids, and here and there, scars in the green that he did not yet have the vocabulary to identify as bomb craters, defoliated strips, the visible residue of a war that had been running for years before he'd arrived to join it.

He pressed his face near the small window and thought, absurdly, of the maps he'd studied in language class back at Bragg, flat and abstract, lines and place names with no weight to them. This had weight. This had a smell that came up even through the aircraft's own fuel and metal stink — vegetation and wood smoke and, underneath it, something else Jerry couldn't name yet but would come to associate, before his tour was finished, with death in more forms than he wanted to count.

Mercer, across the narrow aisle, had gone quiet in a way that was unusual enough that Jerry leaned over to check on him.

"You alright, Bulldog?"

"Yeah." Mercer didn't take his eyes off his own window. "Just thinking my mama's probably making Sunday dinner right about now, and I could not feel further away from that table if I tried." He glanced over, and the grin came back, though it looked a little more deliberate than it used to. "Don't tell anybody I said that. Wouldn't want to ruin my reputation as a man who don't get homesick."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You writing that girl yet? Sarah?"

"Wrote her from Bien Hoa. Didn't have much to say besides 'landed safe, hotter than the surface of the sun, more to follow.'"

"Good policy," Mercer said. "Say enough to let 'em know you're alive. Don't say enough to let 'em start picturing what it actually looks like over here." He was quiet a moment, watching the green pass beneath them. "My daddy told me that. Said it's the not-knowing that's easier on the folks back home

than the knowing would be, most of the time. Man can pray over a blank space a lot easier than he can pray over a picture he can't get out of his head."

Jerry thought about that longer than he expected to, turning it over the way he'd turned over Voss's lessons on demolitions, looking for the load-bearing part of it. It seemed true, as far as it went, though he wondered — and would keep wondering for years — whether it was really a mercy to the people back home, or just a mercy to the men who couldn't bear to be pictured that way themselves.

* * *

Camp Dak Lien sat in a river valley in the Central Highlands, a rough triangle of earthen berms and razor wire and sandbagged bunkers carved out of jungle that pressed in close on every side, so close that Jerry's first impression, stepping off the resupply chopper into the swirling red dust of the helipad, was less of a military installation than of a wound the jungle had not yet finished healing over.

A man was waiting for them at the edge of the pad when the rotor wash died down enough to make walking upright practical — tall, sun-blackened, with a mustache that had clearly been growing without interruption or trim for the better part of a decade, and sergeant's stripes that had faded nearly to invisibility against faded jungle fatigues.

"Gatchell. Mercer." He didn't offer a handshake, just a nod, sizing them up with the unhurried thoroughness of a man who had watched a great many new arrivals walk off that same helipad and had learned not to waste first impressions on politeness. "Master Sergeant Cyrus Boone. Team sergeant. Men call me Preacher, on account of I quote scripture at 'em more than the chaplain does when he bothers to fly out this far, which is not often enough for my taste or God's, probably." He turned and started walking without checking whether they followed, which they did, hauling their duffel bags through ankle-deep dust toward a cluster of low buildings and bunkers Jerry was already trying to map in his head, the way Voss had trained him to map anything — exits, high ground, fields of fire, the instinctive geometry of a place that might need to be defended on short notice. "Captain Reyes runs the team. Good officer. Trusts his NCOs, which is the only kind of officer worth following out here, and I've followed a few of the other kind long enough to know the difference."

"How many on the team, Sergeant?" Jerry asked.

"Twelve Americans when we're at strength, which we ain't, currently, on account of you two. Was ten before you landed. Plus about two hundred Montagnard strike force troops we've raised, trained, and armed out of three villages up this valley, and who'll fight harder for this camp than half the regular units I served with in Korea, if you give 'em half a reason to trust you." Boone glanced back over his shoulder, and something in his weathered face sharpened. "That trust part is the whole ballgame out here, gentlemen. Won't nobody tell you that in a classroom at Bragg, because it ain't a classroom kind of lesson. These are people, not a resource. Man who forgets that gets good men killed, his own and theirs both."

They passed a low building with a hand-lettered sign that read DISPENSARY, where a stocky, dark-haired medic sat on an overturned ammo crate cleaning a set of surgical instruments with the unhurried focus of a man performing a ritual rather than a chore.

"Doc Alvarez," Boone said, by way of introduction. "You'll get to know him whether you want to or not. Everybody does, sooner or later."

Alvarez looked up long enough to give them both an assessing once-over, the particular clinical stare of a man whose job it was to estimate, on sight, how much damage a given human body might eventually require him to repair. "New blood," he said, not unkindly. "Y'all eat breakfast yet?"

"No, Doc."

"Eat something before Boone runs you through the wire perimeter tour. Man thinks better on a full stomach, and you're gonna need to think today." He went back to his instruments. "Welcome to Dak Lien. Try not to need me too bad, too soon."

* * *

Jerry's first full day at Camp Dak Lien was, in its way, as disorienting as anything he had experienced in Selection, though the disorientation here had a different texture — less about physical exhaustion than about the sheer, saturating strangeness of everything around him, the accumulated weight of a hundred small details his training had not quite prepared him for.

There was the heat, which did not relent even at what should have been the coolest hours, and which made every task — checking a weapon, walking the perimeter, simply standing in formation for Boone's morning briefing — cost more than the same task would have cost anywhere Jerry had trained. There was the sound, an unbroken wall of jungle noise that never fully stopped even at the darkest hour of the night, insects and birds and things Jerry couldn't identify layered on top of each other until his ears, trained since childhood to listen for the specific silence that meant danger on his father's farm, had to relearn an entirely new definition of what silence and its absence actually meant out here. And there was the camp itself, a strange hybrid world where American radios and American weapons sat inside earthen bunkers built and reinforced according to techniques these Montagnard soldiers' families had likely been using for generations, where a strike force private might greet him in halting, careful English learned from the last team to rotate through, and where Jerry found himself falling back, more than once, on the phrases Mrs. Nguyen had drilled into him in that cinderblock classroom at Bragg — not the tactical vocabulary, which turned out to be less useful here among the Montagnard troops who spoke their own tribal languages first and Vietnamese as a distant second, but the simple respect of it, the willingness to try.

Captain Daniel Reyes found him at midday, crouched at the edge of the strike force barracks watching a young private methodically clean an old French-issue rifle that looked older than either of them.

"Sergeant Gatchell." Reyes was younger than Jerry had expected an A-team commander to be, lean and sun-browned with the kind of watchful stillness that Jerry was starting to recognize as a common trait among men who had already spent real time in this valley. "Boone tells me you've got a gift for demolitions."

"That's what they told me at Bragg, sir."

"Good. We'll need it. This valley sits astride a piece of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network the enemy uses to move men and supplies south, and part of our job here is making that movement as expensive as we can manage." Reyes crouched down beside him, watching the private work on the old rifle with the same patient attention Jerry had been giving it. "That's Y'Blul. Rade tribe, like most of the strike force here. His father was killed by the Viet Cong three years ago for the crime of letting American medics treat his village's children. His mother's brother was killed the year before that for refusing to let VC cadres use his rice stores. He's nineteen years old and he has more reason to hate this war than either of us will probably ever have, and he still shows up to clean that rifle every single morning like his life depends on it, because it does." Reyes stood, brushing red dust from his knees. "I tell you that because I want you to understand something before you're out on your first patrol with these men, Sergeant. This isn't an abstraction to them. It never has been. It's their home, their families, their graves. We're guests here, whatever the rank structure says. Don't ever let yourself forget it."

"No, sir."

"Good man." Reyes studied him a moment longer, the same appraising look Boone had given him on the helipad. "You scared, Gatchell?"

Jerry considered lying, the way training had almost taught him to, and then thought better of it, remembering Mercer on the plane out of Benning a lifetime ago — a man who says he ain't scared is either a liar or a fool. "Yes, sir. Some."

"Good," Reyes said, echoing Mercer so closely it startled him. "Man who tells me he isn't, out here, is a man I don't trust with a weapon. Fear's not the problem, Sergeant. Fear that runs your

decisions instead of informing them — that's the problem. Keep the first kind. Lose the second kind as fast as you can manage it." He turned to go, then paused. "Chaplain flies in once a month, if that matters to you. Rest of the time, Boone runs a Bible study out of the mess tent on Sunday evenings for anybody who wants it. Not mandatory. Half the team goes anyway. Man finds he wants something to hold onto out here, sooner or later, whether he expected to or not."

* * *

The remainder of Jerry's first week was consumed by the unglamorous, unrelenting labor of simply keeping Camp Dak Lien standing, and he came to understand, watching it, that half the war being fought in this valley had nothing to do with contact against the enemy at all and everything to do with the ordinary discipline of maintenance — bunkers that needed their sandbags replaced where the monsoon rains had rotted the burlap through, wire that needed checking and re-checking for the gaps a man could walk a battalion through if nobody caught them in time, a berm line that had to be extended another forty meters before the rains made the digging impossible for weeks.

Boone ran the strike force training with the same unhurried thoroughness he brought to everything, and Jerry found himself assigned, within his first few days, to help run a demolitions familiarization course for a dozen Rade tribesmen who had never in their lives handled a block of C-4 and regarded the stuff, initially, with the same wary suspicion Jerry's own grandmother might have shown a rattlesnake found coiled on the porch steps.

"Show them it is not magic," Boone told him, handing over a crate of inert training charges. "Show them it obeys rules, same as anything else God made. Man who understands the rules of a thing stops being afraid of it and starts being able to use it."

Jerry spent the better part of two days doing exactly that, working alongside Y'Blul as an informal translator when his own halting Vietnamese and the strike force troops' halting English both ran out of road, walking each man through the mechanics of a charge with the same patient repetition Voss had once used on him — how much explosive a given cut of bamboo or a given support beam actually required, how a poorly placed charge wasted force in every direction except the one that mattered, how respect for the material, not fear of it, was what kept a demolitions man's hands steady. By the end of the second day, Y'Blul himself had wired and detonated a training charge clean enough that even Boone, watching from a safe distance with his arms crossed, allowed himself something close to a nod of approval.

"Good work, Sergeant," Boone told Jerry afterward, in the flat tone that Jerry was learning constituted real praise from the man. "Took me the better part of a month to get the last batch of trainees that comfortable with a charge. You did it in two days." He considered Jerry for a moment with the same appraising look Reyes had given him. "You've got a gift for teaching a man something without making him feel small for not already knowing it. That's rarer out here than good aim, and it'll matter more, over the length of a tour, than you'd expect."

* * *

That first Sunday, Jerry went.

He told himself, walking over to the mess tent in the deep purple dusk with the jungle noise rising up around him the way it did every evening at this hour, that he was going out of curiosity, or out of the simple desire not to sit alone in his bunk with nothing but his own thoughts for company. It was not until Boone opened his battered, water-stained Bible and began reading from the Psalms in that same flat, unhurried voice he used for everything, that Jerry admitted to himself the truer reason — that he had been carrying his mother's verse and Pastor Whitfield's verse and his own uncertain, half-formed faith around in his chest for months now like a stone in his pocket, and some part of him wanted, badly, to know whether it would hold weight out here the way it had held weight back home.

"Twenty-third Psalm," Boone said, and Jerry felt something in his chest tighten before the man had even finished the first line, because he already knew it, had known it since Sunday school, had never once until this moment understood it. "'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.'" Boone looked up briefly, taking in the dozen or so men scattered on ammo crates and folding chairs around him — Mercer, Alvarez, a radio operator named Whitfield whose name Jerry noted with a small, private jolt of recognition, a handful of others whose faces he was still learning. "Y'all notice something about a shepherd's job? Ain't to keep the sheep from ever walking through a dangerous place. Sheep gotta eat, same as anybody. Green pastures don't grow in the safe places all the time. Sometimes the only path to the next meadow runs straight through a valley where the shadows sit deep enough a man can't see what's moving in 'em." He turned the page, though Jerry suspected he knew the verse well enough not to need it. "'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.'"

The tent had gone very quiet, quiet enough that Jerry could hear, underneath it, the ordinary sounds of the camp settling into evening — a generator running somewhere, a burst of laughter from the strike force barracks, the endless jungle noise pressing in against the wire.

"Don't say he won't walk through it," Boone said. "Says he'll walk through it and not be afraid, on account of who's walking with him. That's the whole difference, gentlemen, between a man who's got something to hold onto out here and a man who's just white-knuckling it till his tour's up. Ain't a promise you won't walk through the valley. Every man in this tent already knows that ain't true, or will know it soon enough. It's a promise about who's walking through it alongside you when you do."

After the study broke up, Boone found Jerry lingering near the tent flap, in no particular hurry to head back to his bunk.

"You got questions, son, or you just working something out in your own head?"

"Bit of both, Sergeant." Jerry hesitated, then decided there wasn't much point being anything less than honest with a man who'd already read him as easily as Boone apparently had. "My mother gave me a verse before I left home. Joshua, chapter one. Been carrying it around since. Guess I'm trying to figure out if it's the kind of thing that's actually going to hold up out here, or if it's just a thing that sounded true back in Georgia."

Boone considered that for a long moment, the way he seemed to consider most things, unhurried and thorough. "I'll tell you what I've learned in eleven years of doing this, Gatchell, for whatever that's worth to a man three days in-country. Verse like that ain't a magic charm. Won't stop a bullet. Won't bring back a man you lose. What it does — and I've watched it do this more times than I can count, in worse places than this one — is give a man something solid to stand on when everything else underneath him is shifting. Don't tell you the ground won't shake. Tells you there's a rock under the sand somewhere, if you're willing to keep digging for it." He clapped Jerry on the shoulder, the same gesture that seemed to travel from sergeant to sergeant to soldier the whole length of the Army, an inheritance older than any of them. "Keep carrying it. Won't do you no harm, and it might do you considerable good. That's about as much certainty as I can offer any man out here, on that subject or most others."

* * *

The quiet terror, when it came, did not announce itself the way Jerry had expected.

He had imagined, in the abstract way a man imagines a thing he has never experienced, that fear in a war zone would arrive in a single overwhelming wave, tied to some specific and identifiable threat — an incoming round, a sighted enemy, a moment a man could point to afterward and say, there, that was when I was afraid. What he found instead, over his first two weeks at Dak Lien, was a slower and more insidious thing: a low-grade current of tension that never fully switched off, that hummed beneath

every ordinary task like a wire carrying more voltage than it was rated for, until a man's body simply adjusted to living inside it the way it adjusted to the heat, without ever quite getting used to it.

It was there in the way Boone made every new arrival walk the perimeter wire at night before he'd trust them on a daylight patrol, not because darkness made the walking harder, but because darkness stripped away everything a man could see and left him only what he could hear, and a soldier who couldn't function on what he could hear alone was, in Boone's flat assessment, a soldier not yet ready to be trusted with other men's lives.

It was there in the strike force troops' own quiet vigilance, the way Y'Blul and the others moved through the camp and the surrounding treeline with an economy of motion that had nothing performative about it, born of men who had grown up understanding, in their bodies before their minds, that the jungle around them was never fully safe and never would be again.

And it was there, most of all, in the hour before Jerry's first patrol beyond the wire — a routine reconnaissance sweep of a suspected trail junction three kilometers up the valley, nothing Boone considered likely to produce contact, a training patrol in every sense but the fact that the ammunition in Jerry's magazines was live and the men walking beside him were not simulating anything.

He sat on the edge of his bunk in the gray predawn light, checking and rechecking gear he had already checked twice, and found his hands were not quite steady in a way that surprised him, given how calm Voss had once praised them for staying under a demolitions charge. He thought of Voss's voice — fear does that, keeps you alive in some situations, gets you killed in this one, you don't shake — and made himself breathe the way he'd been taught, slow and deliberate, until the shaking settled into something more like readiness.

Mercer found him there, already geared up, grinning the same grin he'd worn at the door of a C-119 a lifetime ago.

"First one's always the worst, Georgia. Not on account of what happens. On account of not knowing what's going to." He sat down beside Jerry, uncharacteristically still for a moment. "You scared?"

"Some."

"Good. Man who says he ain't—"

"Is a liar or a fool. I remember." Jerry managed something close to a smile. "You gonna say that to me before every patrol we ever run together, Bulldog?"

"Every single one," Mercer said, standing and offering Jerry a hand up. "Somebody's gotta remind you it's normal, seeing as how you're too stubborn to admit it on your own most days." He clapped Jerry on the shoulder, the gesture again, the inheritance. "Come on. Preacher's waiting on us at the wire, and that man does not enjoy being kept waiting on anything, including the sunrise."

They moved out through the wire gate as the first gray light was breaking over the treeline, twelve men total — six Americans and six Montagnard strike force troops, Boone at point with Y'Blul beside him, Jerry midway back in the file with Mercer just ahead, the jungle closing around them almost immediately, swallowing the camp behind them so completely that within a hundred yards Jerry could no longer see any sign it existed at all.

An hour into the patrol, moving single file along a game trail that shadowed a shallow, fast-running stream, the column stopped dead all at once, the way a well-trained patrol stops — not on command, but on the accumulated instinct of a dozen men reading the same small signal in Boone's posture at point. Jerry froze mid-step, weapon coming up without conscious decision, his heart suddenly loud enough in his own ears that he was half convinced it could be heard fifty meters off.

Ahead, through a gap in the undergrowth, something moved — a low shape crossing the trail perhaps thirty meters out, there and gone in under two seconds, too fast and too fluid for Jerry to resolve into anything more specific than movement itself. He held his breath, watching Boone's raised fist, watching Y'Blul's rifle track smoothly across the same gap in the brush, and felt the entire length of his body go taut with an adrenaline so total it seemed to erase, for the length of those next thirty

seconds, every other sensation he possessed — the heat, the sweat already soaking through his fatigues, even the low hum of fear that had been running under everything for two weeks now, all of it burned away and replaced by a single, narrow point of focus aimed at the gap in the brush where the shape had crossed.

Boone held the column frozen for a long two minutes, reading the treeline with the patience of a man who had learned, the hard way, that the difference between an ambush and nothing at all was very often a matter of who moved first and who had the discipline to wait. Then, slowly, he lowered his fist, and Jerry watched the tension bleed out of the file ahead of him in a visible wave, man by man.

"Muntjac," Boone said quietly, when the patrol finally moved again, using the name for the small barking deer that ranged through these hills in numbers Jerry hadn't yet had occasion to appreciate. "Sounds like a man moving, sometimes, in thick brush, if you're green enough to still be learning the difference. You'll learn it." He glanced back at Jerry, and something almost sympathetic moved behind the weathered face. "First hundred times a man hears something in this jungle, Gatchell, his body's gonna tell him it's the enemy. Ain't a flaw. That's the body doing exactly what it's supposed to do, keeping you alive on the assumption that every unknown thing is the worst thing, until you've got enough experience to sort the muntjac from the real trouble. Don't let anybody tell you different, and don't let it shame you either. Shame's a luxury this jungle doesn't have room for."

Jerry nodded, working to steady a heartbeat that did not want to be steadied quite as quickly as the rest of him had already recovered, and thought, not for the first time and not for the last, that there was a wide and unbridgeable gulf between the abstract fear he'd carried across the ocean and this — the specific, total, animal alertness of a body convinced, for thirty real seconds, that it might be about to die. He understood, standing there catching his breath in the wet green heat, why Boone had wanted him walking the wire at night before he'd trust him on a patrol like this one. No classroom, however good, could have taught him what his own pulse had just taught him for free.

The patrol found nothing further that day in the way of contact — no ambush, no firefight, nothing that would have made it into an after-action report as anything other than routine. But it found something else, something that stayed with Jerry longer than a firefight might have: a set of fresh sandal prints crossing the trail junction they'd been sent to check, pressed into the mud in a pattern Boone identified without hesitation as too recent, too deliberate, too obviously the tracks of men who knew exactly where they were going and why. Boone crouched over the prints for a long moment, reading them the way another man might read a letter, and then looked up at the six Americans gathered around him with an expression Jerry would come to recognize, over the following months, as Boone's particular brand of grim, unhurried seriousness.

"They're moving through here," Boone said quietly. "Not today. Maybe not this week. But they're moving through here, and they know this valley better than we ever will, and sooner or later that's going to matter to every man standing in this circle." He straightened, resettled his rifle, and looked back down the trail toward camp. "Valley of the shadow, gentlemen. Preacher told you that wasn't a figure of speech, out here. Wasn't lying."

They walked back to Dak Lien in a silence that had a different quality than the silence they'd walked out in, and Jerry understood, without anyone needing to say it aloud, that something in him had shifted during those hours in the jungle — not fear exactly, though the fear was still there, humming under everything the way it had been for two weeks now, but something adjacent to it, a settling, the particular sobriety of a man who has just seen, for the first time, physical proof that the danger he had been warned about in classrooms and briefings was not an abstraction after all, but a set of footprints in real mud, made by real men, close enough to camp that he could have walked the distance in an easy afternoon.

* * *

That night, Jerry wrote two letters.

The first was to his mother, and it was, as Mercer had advised him back on the flight in, deliberately thin on detail — the food, the heat, a joke about Mercer's inability to stop sweating even in his sleep, a request for more of the peanut brittle she used to make at Christmas, because he'd mentioned it once in passing and the men in his squad had made him promise to share whenever a package arrived. He did not mention the sandal prints in the mud. He did not mention the low, constant hum of fear that had taken up permanent residence somewhere behind his ribs. He closed, as he always did now, by telling her he was reading his verse, and hers, and that both of them seemed to be holding up about as well as anything could be expected to hold up out here, which was as close to the truth as he was willing to send four thousand miles by military mail.

The second letter was to Sarah, and it was, against his own better judgment, considerably less thin.

I don't rightly know how much I'm allowed to say about what we do out here, he wrote, sitting on the edge of his bunk by the light of a single bulb strung from the tent pole, and I don't know how much I'd want to say even if I could. But I'll tell you this much, because I think you're the kind of person who can hold it without it breaking you the way it might break somebody else: I'm more afraid, most hours of most days, than I ever let on in my letters home, and I expect I'll be more afraid than that before this year is through. Our team sergeant read us the twenty-third Psalm on Sunday, the part about the valley of the shadow, and I understood it for the first time in my life sitting in that tent, understood it the way you only understand a thing once you're standing inside it instead of just reading about it from the outside. I don't know if that's supposed to comfort a person receiving a letter like this one, or scare them. I hope it's the first. I mean it to be the first. I want you to know the real shape of what I'm carrying over here, not just the parts that are easy to send home, because I intend on being honest with you about everything, for as long as you'll let me, starting now and lasting a good deal longer than this war, if the Lord's willing and you are too.

He read it over twice before sealing it, wondering whether he'd said too much, whether Mercer's advice about the not-knowing being easier than the knowing applied to a sweetheart the same way it applied to a mother, and decided, in the end, to send it anyway, because some instinct in him — the same instinct that had made him tell his father the truth standing up instead of easing into it sideways — insisted that whatever else this war took from him, it was not going to take his honesty with the one person he had already privately promised to spend the rest of his life being honest with.

* * *

The days that followed fell into a rhythm Jerry would look back on, in later years, as the closest thing to normal that his time in Vietnam ever produced — patrols out and patrols back, perimeter watches split into rotating shifts through the long, humid nights, training sessions with the strike force troops that gradually taught Jerry as much about patience and mutual respect as they taught the Montagnard soldiers about American small-unit tactics, and, underneath all of it, the constant low hum of vigilance that Boone had been right to warn him about, the sense of living inside a wire carrying more voltage than a man's nerves were built to handle indefinitely.

He grew close to Y'Blul over those weeks, in the halting, patient way two men build understanding across a real language barrier — a shared cigarette on perimeter watch, a rifle disassembled and reassembled side by side with more gesturing than words, a slow accumulation of trust that had nothing to do with orders and everything to do with two young men choosing, night after night, to watch out for each other's lives. Y'Blul taught him a handful of Rade words, laughing at Jerry's mangled pronunciation with an openness that reminded him, oddly, of his mother's kitchen — the particular warmth of people who correct you not to shame you but because they've already decided you're worth the trouble of getting it right. Jerry, in turn, showed him a worn photograph of Sarah, and watched the younger man's face go soft and serious in a way that needed no translation at all.

"Family," Y'Blul said, in his careful English, tapping the photograph gently. "You go home. Family."

"I hope so," Jerry said. "Someday."

"Someday," Y'Blul repeated, nodding slowly, and something in the way he said it — gentle, and a little sad, and entirely without bitterness — told Jerry that the young man understood exactly how much weight that single word was carrying for both of them, in a valley where someday was never a guarantee anyone could make to anyone else.

Boone continued the Sunday evening studies, working slowly through the Psalms as the weeks went on, and Jerry found himself looking forward to them with an intensity that would have surprised the version of himself sitting in his mother's kitchen three months earlier, half listening to a verse he hadn't yet had cause to need. He began carrying the small New Testament Boone had given him — a compact, worn copy Boone kept a stack of in his footlocker for exactly this purpose — folded into the same breast pocket where he kept Sarah's photograph, so that the two things rode against his heart together on every patrol, faith and hope pressed flat against the same beating muscle.

He wrote his father, too, eventually, a shorter letter than the ones he sent his mother or Sarah, because there had never been much need for length between the two of them. Preacher here reads us the Psalms most Sundays, he wrote. Made me think of Pastor Whitfield, and of you standing in the door the morning I left, telling me to write Mama more than I write my girl. I'm trying, Daddy. Some days it's easier than others to know what to say. Some days there's not much a man can put on paper that would make any sense back home, so I just tell you I'm alive and trust that's enough for now. I think about you a lot out here — more than I expected to, if I'm honest. Didn't understand until I got here just how much of what you carried home from Korea you never once talked about. I think I understand it better now. I hope, when my turn comes to come home, I do a better job than you did of letting somebody carry it with me instead of alone. No disrespect meant by that, Daddy. Just the truth, and I figure you'd rather have the truth from me than the easy version.

Everett Gatchell read that letter three times the evening it arrived, standing alone in the barn long after Ruth had gone in for supper, and did not speak of its contents to anyone for the better part of a year, though he carried it folded in his shirt pocket for most of that time, the way a man carries something he isn't ready to put down.

* * *

The chaplain's monthly visit fell, that cycle, on Jerry's fourth Sunday in-country, and the camp treated the occasion with a seriousness that surprised him until he understood how rare it actually was, out here, for anything resembling ordinary church to reach this far up the valley.

Chaplain Owen Foss arrived by resupply chopper along with the mail and a crate of medical supplies, a round-faced, sunburned man in his forties whose collar insignia was the only thing about him that looked remotely official, and who set up a folding table under the mess tent's canvas awning with the unhurried efficiency of a man who had done this in a hundred camps just like this one and had stopped needing much ceremony to make it feel like church. He held a short service first — a handful of hymns sung a cappella and somewhat off-key by men who had not sung in a congregation in months, a brief sermon on the peace that surpasses understanding drawn from Paul's letter to the Philippians, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus — and then, for those who wanted it, communion, administered from a small traveling kit of bread and wine that had clearly crossed more miles of hostile jungle than any communion set back at Mount Zion Baptist Church had ever been asked to travel.

Jerry took it kneeling in the red dust beside Mercer and Doc Alvarez and, to his mild surprise, Captain Reyes himself, and found the ritual land differently out here than it ever had back home — not less sacred for the strangeness of its surroundings, but somehow more so, stripped down to its barest essentials in a way that made the essentials themselves impossible to overlook. This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. He thought, taking the small piece of bread from Chaplain Foss's hand, of Boone's Sunday evening study, of the valley of the shadow, of the promise that ran underneath both — that whatever was broken, out here or anywhere, was not broken beyond the reach of a God who had chosen, on purpose, to be broken first.

Afterward, Chaplain Foss made a point of sitting with each man individually for a few minutes, and when he got to Jerry, he asked the question with the same unhurried directness Boone favored, as though the two men had learned their conversational style from the same source.

"First tour, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. About a month in."

"How's the fear treating you?"

Jerry considered lying, the way he'd nearly lied to Captain Reyes on his first day, and then, as with Reyes, thought better of it. "Honestly, Chaplain, it's more constant than I expected. Not the big kind. Just — always there. Under everything."

Foss nodded slowly, unsurprised. "Isaiah forty-one, ten," he said. "'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.' Notice the order of it, Sergeant. Doesn't say the fear won't come. Says what to do with it when it does — not indulge it, not pretend it away, but set it down next to a promise sturdier than the fear itself." He studied Jerry for a moment with the same clinical warmth Alvarez brought to a wound assessment. "That constant hum you're describing — most men who make it through a full tour intact, in the ways that matter most, learn to carry it alongside their faith instead of expecting the faith to remove it. The men I worry about are the ones who expect God to make the fear disappear entirely. That's not usually how He works, in my experience, and expecting otherwise tends to break a man worse than the fear itself ever could."

He left Jerry with a small pocket New Testament to replace the one already going soft and dog-eared from Boone's stack, and a promise to return in four weeks' time, God and the resupply schedule willing, and Jerry watched the chopper lift off into the hazy afternoon sky feeling something he hadn't expected to feel this early into a combat tour — not comfort exactly, but a kind of steadying, the sense of a rope thrown across a gap he hadn't fully realized he was straddling until someone handed him something solid enough to hold.

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A little over a month into his tour, not long after the chaplain's chopper had lifted off into the haze, Jerry stood his watch on the northeast bunker in the deepest hour of the night, the hour Boone called the graveyard shift with a dryness that had stopped being funny to Jerry sometime around his second rotation through it, and found himself doing what he now did most nights at this hour — running his mother's verse through his mind like a man worrying a stone smooth in his pocket.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

The jungle beyond the wire was a solid black wall, broken only by the faint, shifting patterns of moonlight through the canopy and the occasional, heart-stopping rustle that was almost certainly an animal and might not be. Somewhere out there, Jerry knew now with a certainty he hadn't possessed a month earlier, men were moving through the dark with intentions that had nothing to do with the peace his mother's church back home prayed for every Sunday. Somewhere out there was the valley of the

shadow, not a metaphor anymore but an actual place with actual coordinates, close enough that he had stood in it himself and read the tracks of men who wanted him dead.

And yet — and this was the part Jerry found hardest to explain, later, to anyone who hadn't stood a watch like this one — the fear that had hummed under everything since his first day in-country had not, in this first month, grown into something unbearable. It had become, instead, something closer to a companion, familiar in the particular way that even hard things become familiar with enough repetition, and underneath it, quieter but no less real, something else had begun to grow alongside it: not the absence of fear, which Boone had told him plainly he should never expect, but the presence of something steadier than fear, running beneath it like a current beneath choppy water.

For you are with me. He said the words out loud, quietly, into the dark, testing the shape of them the way he'd once tested Vietnamese phrases in Mrs. Nguyen's classroom, and found, to his own quiet surprise, that he believed them — not with the untested, unbroken certainty of the boy who had left his mother's kitchen three months and a lifetime ago, but with something harder-won and more durable, the belief of a man who had walked partway into the valley already and found, so far, that the promise was holding.

He did not know yet how much further into that valley he would walk before his tour was finished, or how many of the men standing watch beside him tonight would not walk back out of it at all. He did not know about the ambush waiting for him at a river crossing eleven months from now, or the radio call that would go unanswered, or the particular weight of guilt that no verse, however true, would fully lift from his shoulders for the better part of two decades to come. He knew only what a man on watch in the deepest, darkest hour of a Vietnamese night could reasonably be expected to know, which was that the sun would come up eventually, that his relief would arrive on schedule, and that whatever waited for him in the days ahead, he intended — the way Joshua had intended, the way his mother had prayed he would intend — to walk toward it strong, and courageous, and not alone.

CHAPTER 3

BAPTISM BY FIRE

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."

— Psalm 91:1

The intelligence came in on a Tuesday, relayed by radio from a Special Forces liaison team working a valley two ridgelines to the west, and Jerry watched the mood at Camp Dak Lien shift the moment Boone walked out of the commo bunker with the decoded message still in his hand and an expression that had none of its usual unhurried patience left in it.

"Captain wants the team assembled," Boone said, finding Jerry and Mercer at the demolitions range where they'd been running another familiarization session with the strike force trainees. "Now, not after you finish up here."

They found Reyes in the small operations hut, a map spread across the plywood table with three grease-pencil marks already drawn on it, and the young captain's usual watchful stillness had sharpened into something more focused, the look of a man doing arithmetic he did not entirely like the answer to.

"NVA regular battalion, moving south through this corridor." Reyes tapped a point on the map perhaps eight kilometers northeast of the camp, a stretch of the valley where the jungle canopy thinned

briefly around an old logging trail before closing back over itself. "Confirmed by two independent sources — an air recon flight yesterday and a Rade hunter from Y'Blul's own village who watched the better part of a company cross a stream ford at first light this morning and had the good sense to walk eleven kilometers to tell us about it instead of pretending he hadn't seen anything." He looked up at the assembled team, six Americans now that Jerry and Mercer had settled fully into the roster, along with Boone, Reyes himself, Doc Alvarez, and the young radio operator named Whitfield whose easy laugh Jerry had grown fond of over the past six weeks. "Higher wants confirmation of route and strength before they commit air assets to interdict. That's us. Twelve-man patrol, reinforced with two squads of strike force troops, moving to observe and report. We are not, gentlemen, going out looking for a fight."

"And if the fight comes looking for us anyway, sir?" Mercer asked, the question flat and practical, no bravado in it at all.

Reyes met his eyes without flinching. "Then we handle what we're given, same as always. But I want it on record and understood by every man in this hut — our mission tomorrow is eyes-on, not engagement. A battalion is a great deal more than twelve Americans and forty strike force troops can profitably argue with, and I have no intention of losing men proving a point nobody's asking us to prove." He rolled the map, the gesture final. "Wheels up at 0500. Boone will run rehearsals this afternoon. I want every man's kit checked twice before dark."

* * *

Jerry spent the afternoon of rehearsals with a knot in his stomach he did not fully understand, given that Reyes had been explicit about the mission's limited scope, and it was Boone, catching him double-checking his magazines for a third time behind the ammo bunker, who named the feeling for him before Jerry had worked out how to name it himself.

"First real one's different, Gatchell. Doesn't matter what the captain says the mission is. A man's body knows the difference between a training patrol and a patrol where somebody might actually be trying to kill him tomorrow, whatever the paperwork calls it, and there ain't a rehearsal in the world that settles that difference down."

"I keep running the drills in my head," Jerry admitted. "Immediate action. Battle drill. All of it. Feels like I'm trying to talk myself into believing I'll remember any of it once it's actually happening."

"You will," Boone said, with the flat certainty that made most of his statements land like fact rather than opinion. "That's the whole point of drilling it till it's boring, till you could run it half asleep, till your body knows it better than your mind does. When the moment comes — and it might not come tomorrow, might not come this month, but it's coming, sooner or later, to every man who stays in-country long enough — your mind's gonna go clean out from under you for the first few seconds. Everybody's does. Question's just whether your body's got something solid underneath it to fall back on while your mind catches up. Drilling's what builds that floor." He studied Jerry a moment, something almost gentle moving behind the perpetual weathered squint. "Ninety-first Psalm. You know it?"

"Some of it."

"'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.' Whole psalm's like that — a man walking through every kind of danger the ancient world could throw at somebody, terror by night, arrows by day, pestilence, plague, and every verse of it says the same thing underneath the different words. Man's not promised he won't walk through those things. Promised he's got shelter while he does, if he's willing to dwell there instead of trying to build his own." Boone clapped him once on the shoulder, the gesture, the inheritance. "Get some rest tonight if you can manage it. Won't feel possible. Try anyway."

Jerry did not manage much rest. He lay on his bunk in the thick dark listening to the jungle noise pressing against the wire, the same wall of sound that had become almost soothing to him over six weeks at Dak Lien, and found it offered no comfort tonight, only underscored how much lay hidden

inside it. He took out the small New Testament Chaplain Foss had given him and read the ninety-first Psalm by flashlight, slowly, the way Boone had taught him to read anything that mattered, and fell asleep somewhere past midnight with the little book still open on his chest.

* * *

They moved out through the wire gate at 0500 into a darkness so complete that Jerry could see nothing beyond the man directly ahead of him, guided only by the faint luminous strip sewn into the back of Mercer's boonie hat, a trick Boone insisted on for any patrol moving before first light. Forty-eight men in total — the twelve-man American-led element and two reinforced squads of strike force troops, Y'Blul among them, moving in a long, disciplined file that would have looked, from any distance, like a single organism rather than four dozen individual men.

The eight kilometers to the observation point took the better part of four hours, Boone setting a pace that balanced speed against the noise discipline the mission required, and Jerry spent every one of those hours running the immediate action drills through his mind exactly as he'd promised Boone he would, rehearsing the sequence of movements his body would need if the jungle around them erupted without warning — where he would go, what he would do, how he would communicate with the men on either side of him without a word needing to be spoken.

The pre-dawn jungle had a different character than the daylight version Jerry had grown accustomed to over six weeks at Dak Lien, a stillness that felt less like peace than like held breath, and he found his senses sharpening in ways he hadn't experienced since his first night walking the perimeter wire — the particular give of wet leaf litter under a boot placed carefully instead of carelessly, the way sound traveled strangely through the pre-dawn humidity, carrying the distant call of some bird for what seemed an impossible distance while swallowing the footsteps of the man directly behind him almost entirely. Twice the column stopped without explanation, the silent, rippling halt Jerry now recognized as Boone's instinct rather than any specific sign, and both times the patrol simply waited, motionless, for two or three long minutes before Boone's raised fist dropped and the file began moving again, no explanation offered or required. By the third hour, Jerry's shirt had gone through and past merely wet into a state that no longer had a meaningful word attached to it, sweat running steadily enough that he'd stopped bothering to wipe it from his eyes, and his shoulders had settled into the particular ache of a rucksack carried at a pace deliberately calibrated to arrive at the objective with enough daylight left to observe and enough darkness left to withdraw unseen if the mission required it.

They reached the observation position, a low rise overlooking the logging trail Reyes had marked on his map, a little after 0900, and settled into a loose perimeter with fields of view onto the trail below, and for the better part of two hours nothing happened at all except the patient, sweat-soaked business of watching and waiting, the jungle heat climbing with the sun until even lying still in the shade felt like labor.

It was Y'Blul who spotted them first, a slight shift in his posture that Jerry had learned, over six weeks of working alongside him, to read as clearly as a shouted warning, and Jerry followed the direction of the younger man's gaze down through a gap in the foliage to the trail below, where the first elements of a column were beginning to emerge from the treeline on the far side — men in khaki and mottled green, weapons slung, moving with the unhurried confidence of soldiers who believed, correctly as it would turn out, that they were nowhere near American forces.

Boone's hand signals rippled down the line without a sound: observe, report, do not engage. Whitfield, beside Boone, began speaking in a near-whisper into the radio handset, relaying strength estimates and direction of movement back to the operations center at Dak Lien in the flat, practiced cadence of a man trained to make himself understood in five words when five words would do. Jerry watched the column pass below them for what felt like a very long time and was, according to his watch afterward, only eleven minutes — perhaps sixty men, then a gap, then another forty, weapons

and what looked like mortar tubes broken down for transport, the visible fraction of a much larger force still moving somewhere out of sight through the valley beyond.

They had counted nearly a hundred and fifty men and were beginning, cautiously, to plan their withdrawal back toward Dak Lien when the trail below them went suddenly, violently loud.

* * *

Jerry would spend a great deal of the rest of his life trying to describe, to people who had never experienced it and could not fully understand it however carefully he chose his words, the specific quality of the first few seconds of real combat — the way it arrived not as a single clear event but as a total sensory flood that briefly overwhelmed every faculty a man possessed for making sense of anything.

The sound came first, an explosion of automatic weapons fire from somewhere below and slightly to their left, so much louder and more physical than anything a training range had prepared him for that his body registered it as a blow before his mind registered it as gunfire. He learned later that a strike force soldier on the perimeter's flank, a young private no older than seventeen, had been spotted by a rear element of the NVA column moving up a parallel trail Reyes's intelligence had not accounted for, and that the resulting exchange had, within seconds, collapsed the entire careful discipline of observe, report, do not engage into the older and more elemental discipline of survive.

"CONTACT LEFT!" Boone's voice cut through the chaos with a clarity that seemed almost supernatural against the roar of gunfire, and Jerry's body moved before his conscious mind had finished processing the words, exactly the way Boone had promised it would — dropping into cover behind a fallen log, weapon coming up, eyes searching the smoke and foliage below for a target his training told him should be there and his racing heart insisted he would not be able to find in time.

A round snapped past his ear close enough that he felt the pressure of its passing against his skin, a sensation so specific and so violently intimate that his whole body flinched sideways before his mind had caught up to what had nearly happened, and for one long, suspended half-second Jerry Gatchell understood, in a way no classroom lecture on mortality had ever managed to make real to him, that he was not watching a war from a safe distance the way he had watched newsreels back home. He was inside it, and it did not care, one way or the other, whether Jerry Gatchell walked out the far side of the next sixty seconds.

He found one. A muzzle flash from the treeline, close enough that he could hear the round crack past him rather than simply hear the report of the weapon that fired it, and Jerry returned fire toward the flash with a controlled burst that felt, in the moment, like the only coherent action available to a body otherwise flooded with more raw input than it knew how to process — the smell of cordite and churned earth, the screaming of a wounded man somewhere down the slope whose voice Jerry could not place and would spend an uncomfortable amount of time afterward trying not to place, the deafening overlapping crash of a dozen weapons firing at once from both sides of a fight that had exploded from nothing into total chaos in under ten seconds.

"Gatchell! On me!" Mercer's voice, close by, and Jerry crawled the eight feet to his friend's position with his rifle cradled against his chest, aware in some distant analytical corner of his mind that the eight feet had taken him considerably longer to cross than it should have and that time itself seemed to have come unmoored from its ordinary pace, stretching some moments into something that felt like minutes and compressing others into something that felt like nothing at all.

"Where's the captain?" Jerry shouted, the words feeling strange and too loud in his own mouth.

"Right flank, with Boone! We're pulling the perimeter tight and breaking contact toward the ridge — Doc's got a man down forty meters that way!" Mercer's face, inches from his own, had none of its usual easy humor left in it, replaced by something harder and more focused that Jerry recognized,

distantly, as simply Mercer's normal steadiness turned up to an intensity the training range had never required of it. "You good?"

"I'm good."

"Then lay covering fire when I say, and we're moving to Doc's position. Ready?"

* * *

The forty meters to Alvarez's position took Jerry through the worst few minutes of his life to that point, low-crawling and rushing by turns through undergrowth that seemed, in the chaos, to actively conspire against speed, rounds cracking overhead with a frequency that made his whole body want to press itself flat into the earth and stay there, every instinct screaming at him to stop moving while Boone's drilled-in training screamed the opposite — movement is life, stationary is death, keep moving toward the objective.

He found Alvarez kneeling over Y'Blul.

The sight hit Jerry harder than the gunfire had, a specific and total kind of impact that no amount of rehearsal in his mind on the walk out that morning had prepared him for. Y'Blul lay on his back in a shallow depression Alvarez had dragged him into, his young face gray beneath its sun-darkened color, a wound in his lower abdomen that Alvarez was working on with a speed and focus that seemed, to Jerry's flooded senses, almost inhumanly calm against the chaos surrounding them.

"Pressure here," Alvarez said without looking up, guiding Jerry's hands to a compress already soaked dark. "Keep it firm. Don't let up regardless of what you hear or see around you, you understand me? This is the only job you have right now."

Jerry pressed down, feeling the warmth of Y'Blul's blood soak through the compress and against his own palms, and looked into the younger man's face, finding his eyes open, glassy with shock but present, tracking Jerry's own face with an expression that seemed, impossibly, almost apologetic, as though he were sorry for the inconvenience of being wounded in the middle of a firefight.

"You're gonna be alright," Jerry told him, with a confidence he did not remotely feel and hoped desperately that his voice was not betraying. "Doc's got you. I've got you. You hear me? Family, Y'Blul. You're getting home to your family."

Something moved behind the glassy eyes at that word, family, the same word the young man had used months earlier tapping Sarah's photograph, and his hand found Jerry's wrist and gripped it, weakly but with intention, and held on.

The firefight raged for what Jerry's watch would later insist was only eighteen minutes and what every part of his lived experience insisted had been considerably longer, Boone and Reyes coordinating the strike force squads into a fighting withdrawal up the slope toward higher ground, laying suppressing fire in disciplined, alternating bursts that Jerry recognized, even through the fog of his own first combat, as the visible product of years of training finally proving its worth under conditions no classroom could simulate. Whitfield, twenty meters away, worked the radio handset with a steadiness that Jerry would later learn had cost the young operator considerable effort to maintain, calling in their position and requesting immediate air support in a voice that never once cracked despite rounds impacting close enough to shower him with dirt on two separate occasions.

The gunships arrived with a suddenness that felt, after eighteen minutes of ground-level chaos, almost like divine intervention — a pair of Huey helicopters screaming low over the treeline, miniguns opening up on the NVA position below with a sound unlike anything else in the entire engagement, a deep, tearing roar that seemed to physically press against Jerry's chest even from a distance. The enemy fire below slackened almost immediately, then stopped, and Boone's voice cut through the ringing aftermath with the same supernatural clarity it had carried into the fight.

"Fall back to the LZ! Move, move, move!"

* * *

They carried Y'Blul the four hundred meters to the hastily cleared landing zone on a poncho litter, Jerry at one corner and Mercer at another, moving as fast as the terrain and the young man's condition allowed, and Jerry kept up a steady, low murmur the entire way — half prayer, half simple insistence that Y'Blul stay with them, stay conscious, stay alive long enough for the medevac chopper already inbound to reach him.

"Sought the Lord," Jerry found himself saying, not entirely sure where the words were coming from until he recognized them as Boone's Sunday study from three weeks earlier, "and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. You hear that, Y'Blul? Delivered from all my fears. Hold on. Just hold on."

The medevac chopper set down in a swirl of red dust and déjà vu — the same dust, Jerry thought distantly, that had greeted him on his own arrival at this camp six weeks earlier, now carrying a wounded friend away from it instead — and Alvarez rode with Y'Blul back toward the field hospital at Nha Trang, shouting instructions to the flight medic over the rotor noise until the doors closed and the aircraft lifted clear. The young door gunner, harnessed into position with his weapon still hot from covering their withdrawal, caught Jerry's eye for just a moment as the aircraft lifted off and gave him a single, brief nod — not triumph, not sympathy exactly, just the plain acknowledgment of one man who had done a hard job to another, the particular currency that passed between strangers who had shared, for a few violent minutes, the same small patch of dangerous sky. Jerry stood in the rotor wash long after the aircraft had shrunk to a speck against the hazy afternoon, watching it carry his friend away, and found he could not make himself turn back toward the trail until it had vanished entirely from view.

The patrol's final tally, when Reyes assembled the team back at Dak Lien that evening for a debrief conducted in a silence heavier than any Jerry had experienced since arriving in-country, came to one strike force soldier killed outright in the initial exchange — the seventeen-year-old private whose spotted position had triggered the entire engagement — and Y'Blul critically wounded but, according to the last radio traffic from the field hospital, stable enough that the surgeons were cautiously optimistic. No Americans killed. Two Americans with minor shrapnel wounds treated and returned to duty. Enemy losses, based on what the gunship crews and the withdrawing strike force troops had observed, estimated at somewhere between eight and fifteen killed, though Reyes noted, in the flat voice of a man reciting figures he did not entirely trust and did not entirely want to trust, that battlefield estimates in the chaos of a broken engagement were notoriously unreliable in either direction.

Jerry sat through the debrief with his hands still faintly stained despite having washed them twice already, and felt, underneath the physical exhaustion, a churning he did not have words for yet — not regret exactly, because he could not point to anything he had done that he believed, on reflection, to have been wrong, but something adjacent to it, a heaviness that sat in his chest the way Y'Blul's blood had sat in the compress, warm and immediate and impossible to fully wash away.

* * *

Mercer found him afterward, sitting alone on the steps of the dispensary in the last gray light of evening, and sat down beside him without asking permission, the way he'd done a hundred times since a C-119 doorway a lifetime ago.

"You did good today, Georgia."

"Doesn't feel like good."

"No," Mercer agreed, quietly, none of his usual performance left in his voice. "Wouldn't expect it to." He was silent a moment, picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. "I keep seeing it when I close my eyes. The kid. Rmah. Wasn't but a few years younger than us, and I didn't even get his whole name till tonight, and now that's the only thing I'm ever gonna know about him — his name, and the fact that he died about thirty yards from where we were lying." He shook his head slowly. "Back at Bragg, they

trained us for the moment. Nobody trained us for after. For sitting here tonight not knowing what to do with what's in my chest."

"Boone says that's normal. Says it's supposed to be there."

"Boone's usually right about that kind of thing." Mercer looked over at him, and something passed between them that didn't need words, the particular understanding of two men who had walked into the same fire together and come out the other side changed by exactly the same amount, even if the shape of the change was different for each of them. "We're gonna be alright, Jerry. I don't mean today. I mean eventually. I've got to believe that, or I don't know how a man does the rest of this tour."

"I believe it too," Jerry said, and found, a little to his own surprise, that he meant it — not because the day's cost had gotten any lighter in the telling, but because saying it out loud, to the one man in this valley who had earned the right to hear it, made it feel like a weight two people were carrying instead of one, and that, he was beginning to understand, made all the difference in the world.

* * *

He found Boone alone that night, sitting on an overturned ammo crate outside the commo bunker with a cup of coffee gone cold in his hands, in a posture that struck Jerry, with a small jolt, as almost identical to his father's posture at the kitchen table three months and a lifetime ago.

"Can't sleep either," Boone said, without turning around, and Jerry understood it as an invitation rather than an observation.

"No, Sergeant."

"Sit."

Jerry sat on the crate beside him, and for a while neither of them said anything, the jungle noise pressing in around the camp exactly as it did every night, indifferent to whatever had happened eight kilometers to the northeast that day.

"First one's the worst," Boone said finally. "Not on account of the danger. Danger's the same, more or less, every time out, give or take. It's the worst on account of it's the first time a man finds out things about himself he didn't know were in there to find. Some of it good. Some of it he'd rather not have learned." He took a slow sip of the cold coffee, grimaced, and drank it anyway. "You did fine today, Gatchell. Better than fine. You kept your head, you moved when you needed to move, and you held pressure on a wound for the better part of ten minutes under fire without your hands shaking once, which is more than I can say for some men twice your experience. Whatever's sitting on your chest right now, it ain't guilt over doing your job badly. I'd stake my pension on that."

"Then what is it, Sergeant?" Jerry asked, and found, once the question was out in the open air between them, that he genuinely did not know the answer himself, only that something heavy and unnamed had settled into his chest sometime in the last twelve hours and showed no sign of lifting on its own.

Boone was quiet for a long moment, considering the question with his usual unhurried thoroughness. "Could be a dozen things, and only you can sort out which ones are true for you specifically. Could be grief, plain and simple, for that young private who didn't make it home tonight, and for Y'Blul, wherever he's lying right now, and that grief's got every right to be there and no need to apologize for taking up space. Could be the particular weight of knowing you fired on another human being today, whatever the justification, and finding out that a man's conscience doesn't fully care about justification even when his mind knows the justification was sound. Could be simple exhaustion wearing the costume of something heavier." He looked over at Jerry directly for the first time since he'd sat down. "Whichever it is, or however much of all of it, I'll tell you the same thing Paul told the Corinthians, on account of it's the truest thing I know to say to a man carrying what you're carrying tonight. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Don't mean you're

supposed to feel strong right now, son. Means you're allowed to feel exactly as unsteady as you feel, and lean on something sturdier than your own steadiness while you do."

Jerry sat with that for a long while, watching the dark line of the treeline beyond the wire, thinking of Y'Blul's grip on his wrist, of the word family passing between them in a moment neither of them had expected to share, of the seventeen-year-old private whose name he had not learned until the debrief and would not forget for the rest of his life.

"Ninety-first Psalm," he said finally. "'A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.' I kept thinking about that today, in the middle of it. Wondering if it was even true. A man fell not thirty yards from me, Sergeant. Another one's fighting for his life in a hospital bed right now. Didn't feel like anything wasn't coming near."

Boone considered that with the same care he gave everything. "I've turned that same question over plenty of times myself, over eleven years of this. Best answer I've got, and I don't pretend it's a complete one, is that the psalm was never promising no man falls. Whole Bible's full of good men falling, going all the way back to Abel. What it's promising is that the falling, when it comes, doesn't have the final word over the man who's dwelling in that shelter — not that harm won't touch him, but that harm doesn't get to define where he ends up, in this life or past it. That private tonight — I didn't know him well, but Y'Blul spoke well of him, said he was a believer, baptized in a river not two years back by a missionary who used to work this valley before the war made it too dangerous for him to stay. If that's true, then tonight didn't come near him near as much as it looks like it did, from where we're sitting. Hardest thing about this whole business, Gatchell, is learning to hold that hope without letting it turn into something cheap, something that stops taking the actual grief seriously. I haven't fully worked out how to do that myself, all these years in. Don't know that any man fully does."

* * *

Jerry wrote to Sarah that night, later than he should have given how early reveille would come, sitting on the edge of his bunk with a hand that had, for the first time all day, finally stopped feeling entirely steady.

We had our first real contact today, he wrote, and I expect this is the point in a letter where I'm supposed to reassure you that I'm fine, and I am, physically, not a scratch on me. But I don't think I can write you an honest letter tonight without telling you that something happened to me out there today that I don't think is going to un-happen, if that makes any sense. I fired on another person for the first time in my life. I held a friend's wound closed with my own hands and prayed harder in those ten minutes than I think I've prayed in my whole life put together, and I don't yet know if the prayers worked, because I won't hear how he's doing until tomorrow at the earliest. A boy I never got the chance to properly meet died about thirty yards from where I was lying, and I keep turning his name over in my head — Rmah, they told me at the debrief, just the one name, seventeen years old — trying to make it mean something more than a line in a report, because it feels wrong for a life to end up as just a line in a report, even if that's mostly what the Army's paperwork is built to reduce it to.

Our team sergeant told me tonight that finding out things about yourself is the hardest part of a first firefight, worse than the danger itself, and I think I understand what he meant now in a way I couldn't have understood it yesterday. I found out I can do the job. I found out my hands stay steady even when the rest of me doesn't feel steady at all. I also found out that doing the job doesn't come free, that there's a cost to it I'm only beginning to understand the shape of, and I expect I'll be paying pieces of that cost for a long while yet, maybe the rest of my life, in ways I can't predict from here. I'm telling you all this, Sarah, because I promised you honesty and I intend to keep that promise even when honesty is heavier than either of us would like it to be. I love you. I'm coming home to you if the Lord allows it. I just wanted you to know the real weight of what that homecoming is going to be carrying, so it doesn't surprise you later the way it's surprised me today.

He read it over once, decided against softening any of it, and sealed the envelope by the light of the single bulb strung from the tent pole, and lay awake a long while afterward listening to the jungle press against the wire, running his mother's verse and Boone's psalm both through his mind, side by side, until somewhere past two in the morning, exhausted past the point where fear could keep him conscious any longer, he finally slept.

* * *

The village held its funeral for Rmah two days after the contact, and Reyes, at Boone's quiet urging, arranged for a small delegation from the team to attend — himself, Boone, and Jerry, who had asked to go without entirely being able to explain why, beyond a felt obligation to the boy whose face he had never seen alive and whose name he could not stop turning over in his mind.

They walked the three kilometers to the village in the early morning, following Y'Blul's uncle, who had come to the camp gate at first light to extend the invitation personally, a gesture Boone told Jerry afterward was not extended to every American team that rotated through this valley, and should be understood as an honor rather than a formality. The village itself was smaller than Jerry had pictured, a cluster of longhouses raised on stilts around a central clearing, and the funeral, when it came, bore almost no resemblance to any funeral Jerry had attended back in Georgia — no somber hymns, no folding chairs in careful rows, but a raw, communal, unhidden grief that moved through the gathered villagers in waves, wailing and singing and long stretches of silence that seemed to carry as much weight as either.

An elder spoke for a long while in the Rade language, and Y'Blul's uncle translated in a low voice for the three Americans standing respectfully at the edge of the clearing, and what struck Jerry most, listening, was how little the substance of the words differed from anything Pastor Whitfield might have said over an open grave back home — a life cut short before its season, a family left to carry a grief too large for any one household to hold alone, a hope, however small and however hard-won in a valley that had already taken so much from these people, that the boy's sacrifice had not been made for nothing.

"They believe he is with his ancestors now," Y'Blul's uncle told them quietly, when the ceremony had wound toward its close. "And some of the believers here, Rmah's mother among them, believe also he is with your Jesus, whom the missionary taught them of before the war made him leave. She asked me to tell the American soldiers, if any came today, that she does not blame you for her son's death. She says he chose this fight himself, same as she watched her own husband choose it years before. She only asks that his choosing not be wasted."

Jerry did not trust his voice enough to answer that directly, and simply bowed his head the way he had watched the villagers do, and felt, standing in that clearing four thousand miles from his mother's kitchen table, the strange and humbling recognition that grief itself did not require translation, that a mother's love for her son looked the same in every language he had yet encountered, and that whatever else this war took from him before it was finished, he intended to carry Rmah's name and his mother's grace alongside his mother's verse and Boone's psalm, for as long as memory allowed him to carry anything at all.

Afterward, Rmah's mother sought Jerry out directly, guided by her brother through the thinning crowd, and pressed something small and worn into his palm before he understood what was happening — a carved wooden bead, dark with age and handling, strung once on a cord that had long since worn through. She spoke a few words in Rade, and her brother translated them quietly.

"She says her son wore this since he was a boy. Says a soldier who held his weapon close in the fight where her son fell should carry something of him home when his own time comes to leave this valley. She does not ask you to remember her grief. She asks only that you remember that he was more than a soldier — that he was a son first, same as you are."

Jerry closed his hand around the bead, unable to speak, and bowed to the woman more deeply than he had bowed to anyone in his life, and carried that small piece of carved wood in his breast pocket alongside Sarah's photograph and his New Testament for the remainder of his tour, a weight so slight it registered on no scale and yet, in the months that followed, came to feel like the heaviest thing he owned.

* * *

A letter from Sarah arrived four days after the contact, and Jerry recognized her handwriting on the envelope before he'd even finished crossing the distance from the mail sack to his own bunk, and felt something in his chest loosen that had stayed tight since the firefight.

I got your letter about the contact, she wrote, and I want you to know I read it three times before I could make myself put it down, not because it frightened me — though it did, some — but because I wanted to make sure I understood every part of what you were telling me before I wrote back, on account of you deserve better from me than a hasty answer to something that heavy. I've been praying for that boy's family every night since, Rmah, even though I never met him and never will, because you loved him enough to want me to know his name, and that tells me plenty about the kind of man I'm engaged to, Jerry Gatchell, whether you've formally asked me yet or not.

I won't pretend I know what to say to a man carrying what you're carrying. I've never held a wound closed with my own hands, or fired a rifle at another human being, or watched a friend nearly die in front of me. But I know a little something about carrying weight a person didn't ask for and can't set down, on account of losing my own daddy the way I did, and I'll tell you the same thing I had to learn to tell myself in that season: the weight doesn't have to be carried alone to still be yours. You can hand pieces of it to the people who love you without it stopping being real, or stopping being heavy. That's not me trying to take the weight away from you, because I know I can't, four thousand miles off and safe in a place you can't even picture anymore. It's just me telling you I want the pieces you're willing to hand over, whatever they cost to send, for as long as you're willing to keep sending them. I'd rather carry the real weight of loving a soldier than the pretend lightness of loving a man who only sends me the easy parts.

He read the letter twice through, the second time more slowly than the first, and found himself, for the first time since the firefight, genuinely and simply grateful — not for anything the war had given him, which had so far given him nothing but cost, but for the fact that four thousand miles away, in a county he could picture with his eyes closed, a woman had read his worst day and chosen, without hesitation, to lean in closer instead of pulling back. He folded the letter carefully into the same breast pocket where he already carried her photograph and his small New Testament, so that all three rode together against his heart, and understood, with a clarity that felt like the first solid ground he'd stood on since the contact, that whatever this war eventually cost him, it was not going to cost him her.

Word came the following week, relayed through the same commo channel that had carried the original intelligence report, that Y'Blul had survived surgery and was expected, with time, to make a full recovery, and Jerry felt something in his chest unknot that he had not fully realized was still clenched until the moment it released. He found Reyes reading the same message in the operations hut and allowed himself, for the first time since the firefight, something close to real relief.

"Good news, sir."

"Good news," Reyes agreed, though something more complicated moved behind his eyes as he said it, and Jerry understood, watching him, that the young captain was carrying his own version of the same weight Boone had described — the private lost, the men wounded, the calculus of a mission that had gone, by any objective measure, about as well as a contact of that scale could reasonably go, and still cost more than any of them would have chosen to pay if the choice had been theirs to make.

"Sir," Jerry said, before he'd fully decided to say it. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead, Sergeant."

"Does it get easier? The part after. Not the fighting itself — I expect that gets more familiar, the way anything does with repetition. I mean the part where you're sitting with what it cost."

Reyes considered the question for a long moment, the same unhurried thoroughness Boone brought to everything, as though the trait were simply part of the uniform out here, worn by every man who'd earned the right to wear it. "No," he said finally, with the plain honesty Jerry had come to expect from him. "I won't lie to you, Gatchell, because you've earned better than a comfortable lie after today. It doesn't get easier. What I've found, in three years of this, one tour and now most of a second, is that it gets more familiar, the way you said. A man learns to function alongside the weight instead of being flattened by it every single time. But I don't think the weight itself gets lighter, and I've started to distrust the men who tell me it does, because I think what they've usually done is find a way to stop feeling it rather than a way to actually carry it well." He set the message down, meeting Jerry's eyes directly. "The men I respect most out here — Boone's one of them — aren't the ones who've stopped feeling the cost. They're the ones who've found something solid enough underneath them to keep carrying it without it eventually burying them. I'd encourage you to keep looking for that same footing yourself, Sergeant, and not to be embarrassed that you need it. Every man who lasts a full tour out here needs it, whether he admits it or not."

He wrote his father last of all, that same evening, a shorter letter than the one he'd sent Sarah but a harder one to begin, and he sat with the blank page for the better part of twenty minutes before the words finally came.

We had our first contact this week, Daddy, he wrote. I expect you knew a day like that was coming for me the morning I told you I was enlisting, and I expect that's at least part of why you looked at me the way you did across that kitchen table, though you never said it plain. I understand that look a whole lot better now than I did three months ago. I keep thinking about Korea, about all the things you never told us, and I don't think I'm going to make that same mistake when my time comes to sit at a table of my own with a family who deserves to know at least some of what their husband and father is carrying. I don't know how much I'll manage to say when the day comes. I know I want to try harder at it than you were able to, not because I think less of you for the silence — I understand it better now than I ever did growing up — but because I watched a boy die about thirty yards from me this week, and I watched a friend nearly die with his blood soaked through my own hands, and I don't think a man is meant to carry that kind of weight in total silence for the rest of his life the way I think you might have tried to. Our chaplain read us a verse about God's power being made perfect in weakness. I think that might apply to more than just prayer, Daddy. I think it might apply to a man finally telling somebody else what he's carrying too.

He did not know, sealing that letter, that his father would read it standing in the same barn where he'd read the last one, and that Everett Gatchell would sit down afterward on an overturned feed bucket and weep for the first time since his own homecoming from Korea eleven years earlier, not from grief exactly but from something more complicated — pride, and fear, and the particular ache of watching a son walk further into a wound the father had never fully let himself heal from. Everett wrote back within the week, a longer letter than he had sent in months, and told Jerry, in halting, unpracticed sentences that had clearly cost him something to produce, about a hillside outside Pusan he had never spoken of to anyone, not even Ruth, and closed by telling his son that he was proud of him in a way he did not have adequate words for, and that he would try, God willing, to find better words by the time Jerry came home. It was the beginning, though neither man could have known it yet, of a conversation between father and son that would take the better part of the next four decades to finish.

"Can I ask you one more thing, sir?"

Reyes nodded, and waited.

"How do you decide what to tell people back home? My mother writes me every week asking how I'm really doing, and I've been giving her about a tenth of the truth, same as I expect every man in this

camp gives his own mother. Feels dishonest some days. Feels like the only kind thing to do, other days." Jerry turned the question over even as he asked it, unsure himself which of those two feelings he trusted more.

"I don't know that there's a clean answer," Reyes said, after a moment's consideration. "I've gone back and forth on it myself, and I've watched better men than me go back and forth on it too. My own read, for whatever it's worth — tell them the truth about the weight, even if you can't tell them the truth about the details. Your mother doesn't need to know the tactical particulars of what happened on that trail. Classified or not, some of it's simply not hers to carry, and you'd be handing her a burden she has no way to set down, four thousand miles removed from any of the context that might help her carry it. But she probably does need to know that her son is carrying something heavy, in general terms, so that when you do finally come home, whole or not, she isn't blindsided by a stranger wearing her son's face. That's the balance I try to strike, anyway. Doesn't always work. Probably never works perfectly. But I'd rather err toward honesty about the weight than toward a comfortable silence that leaves everybody back home believing a war can be survived without leaving any mark on the man who fought it."

* * *

Jerry thought about all of it walking back toward his own bunker in the harsh midday sun, past the strike force barracks where Y'Blul's cot sat empty and would sit empty for weeks yet, past the wire and the bunkers and the small, sunburned world of Camp Dak Lien that had, in six short weeks, become something closer to home than Jerry would have believed possible on the day he'd stepped off that helicopter into the swirling red dust. He thought of the shelter of the Most High, and the shadow of the Almighty, and the private named Rmah whose life had been reduced, unfairly, to a line in an after-action report, and the friend whose blood still marked the knees of his fatigues despite two washings, and he understood, with a clarity that felt like the first genuinely adult thought he had ever had in his young life, that he had crossed some threshold in the jungle three days earlier that there would be no crossing back over — not because the war had broken him, though he suspected, somewhere in the honest part of himself, that it eventually might, but because he had learned, in the space of eighteen minutes, the true and total difference between believing a thing in a church pew back in Georgia and needing it to be true while another man's blood soaked warm through his hands in the mud of a country four thousand miles from home.

He did not know yet how many more times he would learn that same lesson before his tour was finished, each time in a slightly different key, each time cutting a little deeper than the last. He did not know about the river crossing still waiting for him months down the line, or the particular weight of a radio call that would someday go unanswered, or how many more small wooden tokens of other men's sons he would come to carry, in one form or another, before his year in this valley was finally through. He knew only that the shelter Boone had promised him, whatever its exact shape and mechanism, had held — not perfectly, not painlessly, not without cost paid by men who deserved better than the cost they'd paid — but it had held, and Jerry Gatchell intended, for as long as he had breath left to intend anything, to keep dwelling there, one impossible day at a time, for as long as the valley kept demanding it of him.

That night he took out his mother's Bible one last time before sleep, turned past Joshua to the ninety-first Psalm, and read the whole of it through by flashlight, slowly, the way a man reads something he has finally earned the right to understand. He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge. It read differently than it had a week earlier, before the trail below the ridge, before Rmah's mother pressed a worn wooden bead into his palm, before he understood, in the specific and total way only experience teaches, exactly what kind

of shelter a man needed when the shadow of death stopped being a phrase in a psalm and became eight kilometers of jungle trail with his own name written somewhere inside it, waiting. He closed the Bible, set it beside his footlocker, and for the first time since the contact, slept without dreaming at all.

CHAPTER 4

BROTHERS OF THE BUSH

"Two are better than one... for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion."

— Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

By the time the monsoon rains finally broke over the valley in earnest, ten weeks into Jerry's tour, Camp Dak Lien had stopped feeling like a place he was merely stationed and had become, in the quiet, unremarkable way such things happen, something closer to a second home — not because the danger had lessened, which it hadn't, but because the men around him had become, without any of them quite deciding it on purpose, something closer to family than to colleagues.

Boone named it plainly one Sunday evening, closing his battered Bible after a reading from Ecclesiastes that Jerry had not expected, given the book's reputation among the men for being the gloomiest text in the whole of Scripture, the tired old preacher's meditation on the vanity of all things under the sun.

"Solomon spends most of that book telling you nothing under the sun adds up to much of anything on its own," Boone said, tapping the open page. "Chasing after wind, he calls it, more than once. But right there in the middle of all that gloom, he stops and tells you the one thing that does hold up. 'Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.'" He looked around the mess tent at the dozen men gathered there, Mercer beside Jerry on an ammo crate, Alvarez and Whitfield and Halvorsen and Delgado scattered among the others, a knot of strike force troops sitting respectfully at the tent's edge where they'd taken to listening even on evenings the reading wasn't translated for them. "Solomon had every reason in the world to know what he was talking about. Richest man who ever lived, wisest man who ever lived, and by his own account, about the loneliest man who ever lived, on account of he kept trying to answer the question of a man's life by himself, one experiment at a time, instead of finding somebody to walk it alongside. Took him the whole book to figure out what half the men sitting in this tent tonight already know in their bones, on account of this valley's taught it to you the hard way. A man ain't built to carry his life solo. Never was."

Jerry glanced sideways at Mercer, who caught the look and returned it with the easy, familiar grin that had become as much a fixture of Jerry's daily life as the heat or the wire or the endless green pressing in beyond the perimeter, and thought, not for the first time, that whatever else this valley had cost him, it had also given him something he had not fully possessed before arriving — a friendship forged in a kind of fire that peacetime simply did not produce, tempered by shared fear and shared grief in equal measure until it had become something closer to iron than to the easy camaraderie of two young men who happened to enjoy each other's company.

* * *

The friendship had not, if Jerry was honest looking back on it, started out especially deep. It had started, as most good friendships between young men seemed to start, with jokes and small kindnesses and the accumulated proximity of shared hardship — Mercer's grin in a C-119 doorway, a hand offered up out of the mud after a bad landing, a shared bunk row through jump school and Selection and the Q Course and now a war, four separate trials that had each, in their own way, sanded away whatever polite distance two strangers ordinarily maintained.

But it was the small, unglamorous rhythms of camp life, more than any single dramatic moment, that had done the real work of turning Tom Mercer from a friend into something closer to a brother. It was the two of them splitting a care package from Mercer's mother that had arrived crushed and half-spoiled after six weeks in transit, salvaging what could be salvaged and laughing so hard at the state of the ruined fudge that Boone had come to investigate the noise, expecting trouble and finding instead two young sergeants weeping with laughter over a box of melted candy. It was Mercer teaching Jerry to play a card game called Setback that his grandfather had taught him back in Oklahoma, dealing out hands on an overturned crate with a running commentary of trash talk that grew more elaborate with each passing week, and Jerry teaching Mercer, in exchange, the particular Georgia art of pitching horseshoes, improvised out of bent rebar and a stake driven into the red dirt outside the mess tent, tournaments run with a seriousness wildly disproportionate to the stakes involved — usually nothing more than bragging rights and the loser's obligation to take the worse of the two watch rotations for the following week, a wager that somehow generated more genuine competitive fury than actual money ever could have.

"You're cheating," Mercer accused him more than once, watching Jerry's horseshoe ring the stake for the third time in a row. "Ain't natural, a man being that good at something this dumb."

"Ain't cheating. Just practiced. We didn't have much else to do on a Georgia farm most evenings besides pitch shoes and listen to my daddy talk about Korea, which he didn't do near often enough to fill up the whole evening, so the shoes got most of my attention." Jerry lined up another throw with exaggerated care, purely to needle his friend further. "Some of us grew up with a skill besides drilling oil and losing at cards, Bulldog."

"I do not lose at cards." Mercer's protest carried the particular indignation of a man who, in fact, lost at cards fairly regularly, at least against Jerry, whose quiet patience turned out to translate unexpectedly well from farm labor to the strategic mathematics of Setback. "I'm building toward something. Long game. You'll see."

He did not, in fact, ever fully turn the tide of their ongoing card rivalry, though he claimed victory in the retelling often enough that Whitfield eventually started keeping an informal, mostly fictional scoreboard chalked on the inside of the mess tent's support post, weighted heavily, by Mercer's own insistence, in his own favor. It was the two of them taking turns reading aloud from the small stack of paperback westerns that circulated endlessly through the camp, dog-eared and sun-faded, doing the voices badly enough to make Whitfield choke on his coffee more evenings than either of them could count.

The Fourth of July arrived that summer with a strange, muted quality neither Jerry nor any of the other Americans at Dak Lien had quite expected — a holiday that felt, out here, both more urgent and more hollow than it had ever felt back home, celebrated with none of the fireworks or parades that would have marked it in Georgia or Oklahoma, and yet observed all the same with a determination Jerry found almost moving in its stubbornness.

Boone had somehow arranged, through channels Jerry never fully understood and suspected involved a favor owed by a supply sergeant somewhere down the chain, for a resupply flight to bring in real steaks instead of the usual rations, along with two cases of actual cold beer packed in ice that had mostly melted by the time the chopper touched down but was cold enough, still, to feel like a genuine luxury after months of tepid canteen water. Mercer took charge of the grill — an improvised half-barrel affair that Halvorsen had welded together out of scrap metal for exactly this kind of occasion — and

burned the first four steaks so thoroughly that Doc Alvarez declared them, with mock solemnity, casualties of war deserving of a proper burial, which set off a round of laughter that Jerry heard, distantly, as the sound of a dozen homesick young men choosing, for one evening, to remember what ordinary joy felt like.

The strike force troops joined the celebration too, curious and a little bemused by the whole spectacle, and Y'Blul, fully recovered now and moving with only the faintest trace of a limp, taught half the Americans a Rade drinking song that none of them could pronounce correctly no matter how many times he patiently repeated it, while Whitfield produced a battered harmonica from somewhere in his gear and played something that might charitably have been called music, and Jerry found himself, sitting in the circle of firelight with a half-burned steak in one hand and a lukewarm beer in the other, laughing harder than he had laughed since he'd left Georgia, surrounded by men who had, in the space of a few short months, become as essential to him as his own blood family.

"To home," Mercer said later, raising his beer once the food was gone and the fire had burned down to embers, and the toast went around the circle in a dozen variations — to home, to family, to getting every man in this circle back to both in one piece — and Jerry drank to it with a fullness of feeling that surprised him, understanding, even as he did, that home had quietly come to mean something larger and stranger than it had meant to him nineteen weeks earlier, expanded now to include a circle of firelight in a jungle clearing eight thousand miles from Georgia clay.

Reyes, who rarely joined the enlisted men's evenings out of a captain's habitual reserve, sat with them a while that night too, loosened by the occasion into something closer to an equal among friends than a commanding officer among subordinates, and told a story about his own first Fourth of July in uniform, stationed stateside and homesick in a way he'd never expected a domestic post to make him feel, that had the whole circle laughing by the time he reached its end. Boone, for his part, said little, content mostly to watch the men under his charge enjoy a rare, uncomplicated evening, though Jerry caught him once, staring into the fire with an expression that looked, for just a moment, like a man doing quiet arithmetic on how many more evenings like this one the valley might grant them before the accounting came due.

Mercer caught the same look, apparently, because he leaned over to Jerry later, voice low enough not to carry. "Preacher's counting something in his head right now. You see it?"

"Saw it."

"Man's buried more friends than either of us has years alive, probably. Makes sense he'd hold a night like tonight a little different than we do." Mercer was quiet a moment, watching the embers. "Makes me want to hold onto it a little different too, now that you mention it."

They did not speak of it further, but Jerry noticed, walking back to his bunk that night, that Mercer lingered a moment longer than usual at the fire's edge before following him in, as if trying to memorize the particular shape of the evening before it passed into memory alongside everything else this valley was slowly teaching him to treasure.

* * *

And it was, increasingly, the quieter moments — the two of them sitting up long after the rest of the team had turned in, talking about home in the particular unguarded way men only seemed to manage in the deep dark hours when the day's adrenaline had finally worn off and left something rawer and more honest in its place.

"You ever wonder if we'd have been friends back home?" Mercer asked him one such night, the two of them sharing a bunker on late watch, the jungle noise a familiar wall of sound around them now instead of the alien threat it had been ten weeks earlier. "Different circumstances, I mean. Georgia farm boy and an Oklahoma roughneck's kid. Might never have crossed paths at all, if the Army hadn't thrown us both out that same door at the same time."

"Might not have," Jerry admitted. "Small town like mine, we didn't get a whole lot of visitors from Oklahoma."

"That's what gets me thinking about it sometimes." Mercer was quiet a moment, an unusual stillness for him. "Feels like the Army did something backward, you know? Took two boys who probably never would've met otherwise, threw us into the worst circumstances either of us has ever lived through, and out the other side of it, we're closer than I've ever been to anybody outside my own family. Closer than some of my own family, if I'm honest." He glanced over at Jerry in the dim bunker light. "That make any sense to you, or am I just talking on account of it's three in the morning and my brain's gone soft from the heat?"

"Makes sense," Jerry said. "I've been thinking something similar myself. Boone read us that verse a while back — two are better than one, on account of if one falls, the other one's there to pick him up. Didn't think much about it at the time. Been thinking about it plenty since."

* * *

The first real test of that bond, though, came weeks before the monsoon broke, on a routine patrol along a stretch of trail known to be seeded, occasionally, with the punji stake pits and simple booby traps that the local Viet Cong cadre favored for harassment more than for any serious hope of inflicting mass casualties on a well-trained patrol.

Jerry was walking second in the file that afternoon, close enough behind Mercer that he could have reached out and touched his friend's rucksack, when Mercer's raised fist stopped the column cold, and Jerry followed his friend's downward gaze to a nearly invisible tripwire strung ankle-height across the trail, so faint against the dappled jungle light that Jerry, walking directly behind him, would almost certainly have missed it entirely had Mercer not caught it first.

"Don't move," Mercer said quietly, crouching to trace the wire's path with his eyes rather than his hands, following it to a crude but effective rig staked into the undergrowth a few feet off the trail — a grenade, spoon held by a simple pin-pull mechanism, positioned to catch exactly the kind of patrol that walked this trail without watching closely enough for exactly this kind of thing. "Whole squad, hold position. Nobody takes a step till I clear this."

Jerry stood motionless, watching his friend work with a careful, unhurried precision that reminded him, with a small jolt, of his own hands wiring a training charge back at Bragg — the same calm Voss had once praised in him, now on full display in Mercer under conditions considerably more consequential than any classroom exercise. Mercer worked the pin free with fingers that did not shake despite the sweat visibly running down the side of his face, disarmed the rig with a soft, anticlimactic click, and sat back on his heels for a long moment before turning to look at the rest of the patrol.

"Clear," he said. "Everybody breathe again."

Jerry crouched beside him afterward, examining the disarmed rig with a mixture of relief and delayed horror that hit him harder than the moment itself had, understanding with sudden, visceral clarity how close the entire patrol — himself walking second in file, close enough to have caught the worst of it — had come to disaster in the space of a single missed footstep.

"You saw that wire before I did," Jerry said. "Wouldn't have caught it myself. Not in time."

"That's what makes a file work, Georgia." Mercer clapped the dirt from his hands, some of his usual lightness returning now that the danger had passed. "Ain't about any one man seeing everything. It's about enough men watching close enough, in enough different directions, that somebody catches what somebody else would've missed." He looked at Jerry, and something more serious moved behind the recovering grin. "Same reason I go through that door first every time, and you cover the rear half the time, and Boone walks point when it matters most. Ain't nobody in this patrol carrying the whole load by himself. That's the whole secret of us still being alive, six months into this thing."

* * *

The bond found its sharpest test, in those later weeks, not in combat but in the mundane, grinding hazard of the monsoon season itself, which arrived at Dak Lien with a violence that made Jerry's memory of Georgia thunderstorms seem, in retrospect, almost gentle by comparison.

The rains did not merely fall; they arrived in walls, gray-black curtains sweeping up the valley with an hour or less of warning, transforming the camp's red dirt into a churning, ankle-deep mire within minutes and keeping it that way for weeks at a stretch. Bunkers that had held firm through the dry season began to weep water from every seam. The perimeter wire, half-submerged in places, required constant maintenance to keep functional. And with the standing water came the mosquitoes, in numbers Jerry had not believed possible until he lived through it, and with the mosquitoes came the malaria that swept through the camp in the second week of the deluge, claiming first two strike force troops and then, to Jerry's genuine alarm, Mercer himself.

He found his friend shivering uncontrollably on his bunk despite the suffocating heat, sweat-soaked and glassy-eyed, teeth chattering hard enough that his words came out broken and half-formed, and Jerry's first reaction — a cold, clenching fear entirely unlike the adrenaline of combat, quieter and somehow worse — surprised him with its intensity.

"Doc!" he shouted, already at Mercer's side, one hand pressed to his friend's burning forehead. "Doc, get in here!"

Alvarez confirmed it within minutes — malaria, the vivax strain common to the highlands, serious but treatable if caught in time, which Jerry's early alarm had ensured it was. Mercer spent the better part of a week in the dispensary's single cot, cycling through fever and chills with a violence that frightened Jerry more than any firefight had, sweat-soaked one hour and shivering under three blankets the next, muttering things in his fever that Jerry did his best not to repeat to anyone afterward, out of respect for a friend who would not have wanted his half-conscious ramblings about his father, about Oklahoma, about a version of himself he was afraid of becoming, held against him once the fever finally broke.

Jerry spent every off-duty hour of that week at his friend's side, spooning broth into him when the fever broke enough to allow it, wringing out cool cloths to lay across a forehead that seemed to radiate heat like a stovetop, and reading aloud from the westerns in a one-sided performance that Mercer later swore, once he'd recovered enough to needle him about it, had done more to make him want to get better than any medicine Alvarez administered. Boone sat with them some evenings too, not saying much, simply present in the way he seemed to understand a man needed presence more than words during a vigil like this one, and it was Boone who finally told Jerry, on the third night, when the fever had spiked high enough that Alvarez's usually steady hands had begun moving with a controlled urgency that frightened Jerry more than anything Mercer's delirium had produced, to go get some rest himself.

"Won't do him any good, you collapsing from exhaustion trying to save him single-handed," Boone said, not unkindly. "Doc's got this. Man can love his brother and still trust somebody else to carry a piece of the watch, Gatchell. Might be the harder lesson of the two, matter of fact." Jerry went, reluctantly, and slept four fitful hours before returning to find the fever finally breaking, Mercer's color returning by degrees, and felt a relief so total it left him briefly light-headed, gripping the cot rail for a moment before trusting his own legs again.

"Man's gotta get well," Mercer told him afterward, still weak but grinning again, propped up in the dispensary cot with color slowly returning to his face, "just so I don't have to hear you do the sheriff's voice wrong one more time. That was suffering on top of suffering, Georgia. Doc oughta write you up for it."

"You're welcome," Jerry said, and found, sitting there in the humid dispensary with his friend teasing him weakly from a sickbed, that the fear of the past week had left a mark on him nearly as deep as the firefight had — a fresh understanding, hard-won and specific, of exactly how much Tom Mercer's continued existence in the world had come to matter to him, and how thin the margin

separating a living friend from a dead one could sometimes prove to be, in a place like this, from causes that had nothing to do with the enemy at all.

* * *

Reyes, over Boone's grumbling insistence that neither man had earned enough downtime yet to justify it, ordered both Jerry and Mercer onto the next resupply flight to Nha Trang for a well-deserved three-day pass once Mercer had fully recovered his strength, and the two of them spent those three days in a version of Vietnam entirely unlike the one they knew from the valley — a coastal town with real streets and real shopfronts, a beach where the South China Sea rolled in blue and warm and entirely indifferent to the war being fought in the hills behind it, and a market where Mercer, with great ceremony, insisted on buying Jerry a cheap tailored shirt from a Vietnamese tailor working out of a tiny stall, on the grounds that a man ought to own at least one piece of clothing from this country that wasn't stained with either mud or worse.

They ate real food at a small restaurant recommended by a soldier from another unit, drank cold beer that did not need melted ice to make it bearable, and spent one long afternoon simply lying on the beach in a state of loose, unguarded relaxation that neither of them had experienced since landing in-country five months earlier, the tension that had become such a permanent fixture of Jerry's body finally, briefly, unclenching.

"Feels like cheating," Mercer said at one point, squinting up at the sun, "enjoying ourselves like this while the rest of the team's back at Dak Lien eating C-rations and dodging mortars."

"Feels earned to me," Jerry said. "Boone would say the same, if you asked him. Man's gotta refill the well sometime, or there's nothing left to draw on when the well's needed most."

They had their photograph taken together on the last afternoon by a street photographer working the boardwalk, the two of them squinting into the sun in borrowed civilian shirts, grinning like the boys they still technically were despite everything the past five months had aged them, and Jerry mailed one copy to Sarah and kept the other folded into his New Testament alongside her photograph and the small carved bead from Rmah's mother, a physical record of a friendship he intended to hold onto long after this war, in whatever form it eventually released him, was finished with both of them.

* * *

The reciprocal test came three weeks later, on a routine resupply run to a smaller outpost eleven kilometers south of Dak Lien, when a flash flood swelled a normally shallow stream crossing into a brown, churning torrent with almost no warning at all, catching the patrol's file mid-crossing and sweeping Jerry's feet out from under him before he'd fully registered what was happening.

The current took him fast, faster than anything he'd trained for, tumbling him downstream past the rest of the patrol's shouted warnings, his rucksack dragging him under despite every instinct screaming at him to keep his head above the surface, the world reduced in an instant to churning brown water and the desperate, animal need for air. He struck something submerged hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs in a rush of bubbles, and for several long, terrifying seconds Jerry Gatchell, who had survived Selection and a firefight and eighteen minutes of the worst chaos he had ever imagined, genuinely believed he was going to drown in an ordinary stream less than a dozen kilometers from a camp he'd grown to think of as home.

There was no drama to it in the way films might have portrayed it, no clean sequence of thoughts marching through his mind — only a chaotic, tumbling darkness broken by flashes of gray daylight each time the current rolled him briefly toward the surface, his lungs burning, his hands clawing uselessly at water that offered nothing to grip, the rucksack straps he could not find the coordination to release even though some distant analytical corner of his mind screamed at him that the weight would kill him faster than the current alone ever could. He thought, in the strange fractured way a drowning

mind thinks, of his mother's kitchen, and of Sarah's photograph now presumably ruined in his soaked breast pocket, and of the specific, absurd unfairness of surviving an ambush only to die in an ordinary stream on an unremarkable Tuesday. And then, cutting through all of it, a hand closed hard around his collar.

Mercer went in after him without a moment's hesitation, according to the account Boone gave afterward, shedding his own rucksack in three seconds flat and diving into the flood current with a recklessness that violated every piece of water-crossing doctrine either of them had ever been taught, closing the distance downstream with a swimmer's strength Jerry hadn't known his friend possessed until the moment his hand closed around Jerry's collar and hauled him, coughing and half-conscious, toward a snag of fallen timber jutting out from the near bank.

They clung there together, both men gasping, the flood roaring past them close enough to spray their faces, until the rest of the patrol worked its way down the bank with a length of commo wire and hauled them both, one at a time, back to solid ground.

Jerry lay on the muddy bank afterward, coughing up stream water and shaking with an adrenaline crash entirely different from combat's particular flavor of it, and looked over at Mercer, who lay beside him in an identical state, chest heaving, mud-streaked, and grinning despite everything with an expression that managed to be both exhausted and entirely unsurprised at his own actions, as though diving into a flash flood after a drowning friend had been the most obvious and unremarkable choice available to him.

"Told you," Mercer managed, between gulps of air. "Two are better than one, Georgia. Preacher wasn't lying."

"You could've drowned too," Jerry said, once he'd recovered enough breath to manage full sentences, hearing his own voice come out rougher than he intended, thick with something that was not quite anger and not quite gratitude but sat somewhere uncomfortably between the two. "You didn't even think about it. Just went in."

"Didn't need to think about it." Mercer sat up slowly, wringing water from his sleeve with hands that were, Jerry noticed, not entirely steady either, whatever calm front he was putting up. "Some decisions a man doesn't make with his head, Jerry. Makes 'em somewhere further down, someplace faster than thinking. You'd have done the same for me. Already have, more or less, sitting up with me all that week I had the fever, forcing broth down me and butchering that sheriff's accent till I got well out of spite if nothing else." He clapped a wet, muddy hand on Jerry's shoulder, the gesture, the inheritance, soaked through now but no less real for it. "That's just what this is, now. Ain't up for negotiation. You go in the water, I go in after you. Simple as that."

* * *

Boone debriefed the incident that evening with a gravity that surprised Jerry, given that both men had, in the end, walked away with nothing worse than exhaustion and a collection of bruises, and it was only partway through the debrief that Jerry understood the sergeant's seriousness was aimed less at the tactical failure of a water crossing gone wrong than at something else entirely.

"I want to say something to both of you," Boone said, once the tactical portion of the debrief had concluded, dismissing the rest of the patrol and keeping only Jerry and Mercer behind in the operations hut. "And I want you to hear it as more than just an old sergeant running his mouth, on account of I mean every word of it."

"Yes, Sergeant," Jerry said.

"What happened at that crossing today is exactly the thing that keeps men alive out here, over the long run, more than any weapon or any piece of training the Army ever handed either of you." Boone leaned back against the plywood table, arms crossed, studying them both with the same unhurried thoroughness he brought to everything. "I've served with plenty of soldiers over eleven years who were

individually as skilled as any two men in this camp, and I've watched some of them die anyway, on account of they never let themselves need anybody else badly enough to be needed back. Pride does that to a man, sometimes. Makes him think reliance is weakness, that the strongest soldier is the one who doesn't require rescuing and doesn't stoop to doing the rescuing either, on account of it's not his job, not his problem, not his risk to take." He shook his head slowly. "That's a lie, gentlemen, and it's a lie that gets good men killed. What I watched happen at that crossing today — one man going into a flood current without a second's hesitation for a friend who'd have done the same for him — that's not recklessness. That's the whole secret of how anybody survives a place like this with their soul intact, not just their body. Solomon knew it three thousand years before either of you was born. Ain't a new lesson. Just a true one, and true lessons have a way of needing relearning every generation, on account of pride's awful good at whispering the opposite in a young man's ear."

He studied them a moment longer, and something in his weathered face softened almost imperceptibly. "Whatever else this war takes from either of you before your tour's finished — and it will take things, gentlemen, I'd be lying if I told you otherwise — don't let it take this. Don't let it convince you that needing another man, or being needed by one, is some kind of failure. It's the opposite. It's very near the whole point."

* * *

Jerry thought about Boone's words a great deal in the weeks that followed, turning them over the way he turned over every piece of hard-won wisdom this valley kept handing him, and found himself watching the friendship between himself and Mercer with a new kind of attention — not analyzing it exactly, but appreciating it more consciously than he had before, the way a man might notice, for the first time, the particular strength of a rope he had been leaning on for months without ever examining its construction.

It was in that period of heightened attention that Mercer, uncharacteristically, opened up to him about his own family in a way he had not before, on a slow afternoon between patrols when the two of them sat cleaning weapons on overturned crates outside the armory, the ordinary domestic rhythm of the task loosening something in Mercer that a more direct question might not have.

"You ever wonder why I signed up for this outfit specifically?" Mercer asked, not looking up from the rifle in his lap. "Special Forces, I mean. Could've stayed regular infantry easy enough, done my time, come home in one piece with considerably better odds than the ones we're running here."

"Figured you wanted to prove something," Jerry said. "Most men who volunteer for this do."

"That's part of it." Mercer worked the bolt of his rifle with more force than the task strictly required. "My daddy was a rig hand, worked the oil fields outside Ponca City his whole life, and he was about as hard a man as you'll ever meet — not cruel, exactly, just hard, the way a piece of ground gets hard from never once being given a chance to soak up any rain. He didn't have much use for a son who liked to read, liked to laugh too much, didn't take naturally to the kind of grim silence he figured a real man ought to carry around with him like a badge." Mercer's jaw worked for a moment, an expression Jerry recognized, with a small jolt, as nearly identical to his own father's jaw working over a cup of cold coffee months and a lifetime ago. "I joined this outfit, if I'm honest with myself and with you, on account of I wanted to come home wearing something he couldn't argue with. Green Beret. Something so plainly hard-won that even a man who thought his son was too soft would have to admit, at least to himself, that the boy had turned into something solid after all."

Jerry set down the rifle he'd been cleaning and looked at his friend directly, understanding, in that moment, a piece of Mercer's easy grin and constant humor that he hadn't fully appreciated before — the particular way some men learned to wear lightness as armor, the same instinct that had made Jerry himself so quick to promise his own future children a different silence than the one his father had carried home from Korea.

"You don't need to prove anything to him, Bulldog. Not out here. Not with your life."

"I know that," Mercer said, and something in his voice suggested he was still working on believing it fully, even as he said it. "Head knows it plain enough. Rest of me's slower to catch up, some days." He glanced over, and the familiar grin returned, though it carried a little more weight behind it than usual. "Preacher's verse again, I guess. Two are better than one. I never had anybody to say that kind of thing to before I met you, Jerry. Didn't have the words for half of what's in my own chest till I had somebody worth saying it to." He extended a hand, an oddly formal gesture between two men who spent most of their days elbow-deep in each other's business without ceremony. "Brothers, then. However this tour goes. However either of our daddies ever come around to seeing it or not. Brothers, and I mean that the same way Boone means his scripture — not as a nice sentiment, but as a fact I intend to hold to, whatever it costs either of us."

Jerry took the offered hand and gripped it hard. "Brothers," he said, and felt the word settle into some permanent place in his chest, alongside his mother's verse and Boone's psalm and the small carved bead from Rmah's mother, one more true thing this valley had given him to carry, heavier and lighter at once than anything the war had yet taken away.

* * *

The strike force troops, watching this friendship deepen over the following weeks, seemed to regard it with a kind of quiet approval that Jerry only fully understood once Y'Blul, returned from the hospital at Nha Trang and walking again though still favoring his healing side, explained it to him plainly one evening on perimeter watch.

"Rade people, we understand this," Y'Blul said, in his careful, improving English, gesturing between Jerry and Mercer where the two of them sat a short distance off, arguing good-naturedly over a hand of Setback. "A man alone, even a strong man, is not safe. A man with a brother beside him — this is a different kind of strong. Older than your Army. Older than this war." He smiled, the first easy smile Jerry had seen on his face since the contact months earlier. "My father had such a brother. Not blood. Chosen, like yours. When my father was killed, this man carried my family for a season, until we could carry ourselves again. This is what such a brother is for, Sergeant. Not only for the fighting. For after, also."

Jerry thought about that phrase — for after, also — long after the conversation ended, turning it over with the same careful attention he gave everything this valley taught him, and found it lodging somewhere deep, a seed that would not fully flower into understanding for another two decades, in a country and a life he could not yet imagine, when a promise made in a Vietnamese jungle would come due in ways neither Jerry nor Tom Mercer could have foreseen on a quiet evening over a hand of cards.

"Does your family have such a brother?" Y'Blul asked him, curious now, the question turning the conversation back toward Jerry in the easy, reciprocal way their friendship had developed over the months. "For your father. In Korea."

Jerry considered the question longer than he expected to, thinking of Everett Gatchell's long silences, the particular loneliness his father had carried home from a war fought a continent away and a decade before Jerry's own war had begun. "I don't think he did," Jerry admitted slowly. "Or if he did, he never spoke of him to us. My daddy came home from Korea and mostly kept what happened there to himself, all these years. I used to think that was just his nature. Lately I've started wondering if it wasn't more that he never had a Tom Mercer of his own out there — somebody to carry the weight alongside him, so he wouldn't have had to carry it home alone and set it down nowhere at all." He looked over at where Mercer and Whitfield were still arguing amiably over the horseshoe pit, and felt something tighten pleasantly in his chest, a gratitude too large to easily name. "I don't intend to make that same mistake, Y'Blul. Whatever else happens to me out here, I don't intend to come home carrying it alone the way I think he did."

Y'Blul nodded slowly, the gesture carrying a weight beyond its simplicity. "Then you are already wiser than many men twice your years, Sergeant. This is not a small thing to understand, at your age. Some men never learn it at all."

* * *

The bond was tested once more, in a smaller and quieter way, on the evening the mail finally caught up with the camp after a three-week gap caused by weather that had grounded every resupply flight in the region, and Jerry found himself holding two letters at once — one from Sarah, thick and eager, and one from his mother, thinner than usual, the handwriting on the envelope carrying a tightness that made Jerry's stomach drop before he'd even broken the seal.

His grandmother, Ruth's own mother, had passed in her sleep three weeks earlier, gently and without much suffering, but the funeral had already come and gone by the time the letter reached him, and Jerry sat on the edge of his bunk holding the news at a four-thousand-mile remove, unable to have said goodbye, unable even to have grieved alongside his family at the appropriate moment, and felt a particular, helpless grief settle over him that had nothing to do with combat and everything to do with simple distance.

Mercer found him there twenty minutes later, still sitting with the letter open in his lap, and did not ask what was wrong so much as simply sit down beside him and wait, the way he had learned, over months of shared hardship, that some griefs needed room before they needed words.

"My grandmother died," Jerry said finally. "Three weeks ago. I wasn't there. Won't ever be there, not really, not the way I should've been."

"I'm sorry, Jerry." Mercer's voice had none of its usual lightness in it. "She raise you much, growing up?"

"Some. She's the one who first taught me to fish, actually, before my daddy ever got around to it. Patient as anything. Never once raised her voice at me, not even the time I fell in the pond chasing a bass that got away." Jerry felt his throat tighten, the particular ache of a grief with nowhere immediate to go, no funeral to attend, no family gathered around him to share the weight of it. "Feels wrong, somehow. Being this far away when it happened. Like I should've felt something, some kind of sign, and I didn't. Just went about my week same as always, not knowing."

Mercer was quiet a moment, and then he did something that surprised Jerry — he simply put an arm around his friend's shoulders, the gesture entirely without embarrassment, the way Jerry imagined a brother might do it, and let Jerry sit with the grief in silence for a long while before speaking again.

"Two are better than one," he said finally, quietly. "Ain't only for flood currents and firefights, Georgia. Sometimes it's just for sitting with a man while he grieves something four thousand miles off that he can't do a single thing about. I can't bring your grandmother back, and I can't get you home in time for a funeral that already happened. But I can sit here with you while it hurts, so you're not carrying it solo in the dark on some bunk by yourself. That's about all either of us can offer each other, most days, out here. Turns out it's more than nothing."

They sat together until well past the hour either of them should have been asleep, and Jerry found, in the quiet company of his friend, that the grief did not lift exactly, but it changed shape somehow, becoming something he could carry rather than something that simply crushed him flat, and he understood, more fully than Boone's Sunday teaching or Y'Blul's quiet wisdom had yet managed to convey, the precise mechanism by which two men bearing a weight together could manage a weight that would have broken either of them carrying it alone.

He wrote Sarah that same week, still turning the grief over, and it was her reply, arriving nearly a month later, that gave him language for a piece of what he had experienced with Mercer that he had not fully possessed on his own.

I've been thinking since your last letter about this friend of yours, she wrote. Tom Mercer sounds like the kind of man the Lord sends a person exactly when they need him most, and not a day before. I don't say that lightly. I've watched my own mother go through hard seasons with nobody beside her, and I've watched what that isolation does to a person over time, how it hardens something in them that softness might have healed instead, if only somebody had been willing to sit with her in it. I'm glad you're not learning that same hard lesson, Jerry. I'm glad the Lord saw fit to put a brother beside you in that valley, even if it took a war to introduce the two of you. I find myself praying for Tom Mercer some nights same as I pray for you, because it seems to me that whatever keeps him alive and whole is now bound up, in some real way, with whatever keeps you alive and whole too. Funny how love works that way, extending itself outward to people we've never met, simply because they matter to someone who matters to us.

Jerry read that letter until the creases wore soft, and carried it, like the others, folded against his heart, understanding that Sarah had named something in a few sentences that had taken him months of hard experience in a Vietnamese jungle to learn for himself — that love, once it took root in a person, had a way of spreading outward past its original boundaries, refusing to stay confined to the single relationship that first planted it.

* * *

Near the close of that season, with the worst of the monsoon finally beginning to slacken and the valley's endless green taking on the slightly fresher cast that came with the changing weather, Boone gathered the team one final Sunday to close out his long study of Ecclesiastes before moving on, the following week, to the Gospel of John.

"Solomon ends that book different than he starts it," Boone told them, closing the worn Bible on his lap. "Starts out asking whether anything under the sun means a blessed thing. Ends up telling you, plain as day, that the whole duty of a man is to fear God and keep his commandments, on account of that's the only thing that actually holds up once everything else has been tried and found wanting — wealth, wisdom, pleasure, work, none of it, on its own. But in the middle of all that searching, he stops long enough to tell you the two are better than one part, and I've come to believe, watching men live and die in this valley for eleven years now, that Solomon put that verse right where he put it on purpose. Right in the middle of all that vanity and chasing after wind, there's one thing that doesn't turn out to be vanity after all. One thing that holds its value no matter how much of everything else gets stripped away." He looked around the tent, his eyes settling last on Jerry and Mercer, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the same ammo crate they'd claimed as their own months earlier. "I've watched a particular kind of brotherhood grow in this camp over the past few months that I don't think either of these two men fully understands yet, the size of what they've built between them. I've served with a lot of soldiers, gentlemen. I don't say this lightly. What I've watched grow between Sergeant Gatchell and Sergeant Mercer is as close to what Solomon was describing as I've seen in a long career of watching men try, and mostly fail, to build exactly that. Don't take it for granted, either one of you. And don't be surprised, in the years to come, whatever this war does or doesn't do to either of you, if it turns out to be the single most valuable thing you carry home from this valley, more valuable than any medal the Army sees fit to pin on your chest."

Jerry did not know, sitting in that mess tent with Mercer's shoulder warm against his own, how many more months of this same valley waited for both of them, or what those months would eventually cost — an ambush not yet come, a river crossing not yet reached, a radio call not yet placed and not yet, on the day it finally came, answered. He did not know that Boone's words that evening would echo across twenty years of silence and separation, across a marriage lost and children estranged and a friendship nearly broken by distance and shame, before finding their fulfillment in a reunion neither man could have imagined from the vantage point of a Sunday evening Bible study in a mess tent in the

Central Highlands. He knew only, sitting there with his friend, that whatever Solomon had understood three thousand years before either of them existed, it was true, and it was theirs, and he intended to hold onto it for as long as he had breath to hold onto anything at all.

After the study broke up, Boone kept Jerry back a moment longer, waiting until Mercer had wandered off toward the horseshoe pit with Whitfield and Halvorsen, their laughter already carrying back across the compound.

"Something I didn't say in front of the whole group," Boone said, settling back against the tent pole with his Bible still in hand. "You and Mercer have got a rare thing, and rare things carry a particular kind of risk with them out here that I want you walking into with your eyes open, not blind to it."

"What's that, Sergeant?"

"Loving a man that much makes losing him, if it ever comes to that, about the worst thing this war could do to you. Worse than your own wound, most times. I've watched it happen — good soldiers, strong men, who could take almost anything the enemy threw at them personally and keep functioning, until the day they lost the man standing next to them, and something in them broke that never fully mended, not all the way, not for the rest of their lives." He held up a hand before Jerry could respond, some of the weight in his own weathered face suggesting this was not merely a hypothetical he was raising. "I'm not telling you this to talk you into loving him less. Solomon's right, and I meant every word I said tonight. I'm telling you because a man forewarned carries a grief different than a man ambushed by it, if it ever comes. Love him with your whole chest, Gatchell. Just don't be surprised, if this war ever asks you to pay that particular bill, that it costs more than almost anything else it could take from you. Might be the truest measure there is of how much the friendship was worth in the first place — the size of what it would cost you to lose it."

Jerry carried those words with him longer than he expected to, turning them over across the weeks that followed with the same careful attention he gave everything Boone saw fit to hand him, and found himself, more than once, glancing over at Mercer during some ordinary moment — cleaning a rifle, dealing a hand of cards, arguing over whose turn it was to burn the coffee — with a gratitude sharpened by the specific, unwelcome awareness of exactly how much there now was to lose.

"Brothers," Mercer said quietly, beside him, not for the first time and not for the last.

"Brothers," Jerry agreed, and meant it with the whole of a heart that had, in ten short weeks, learned more about the true weight and true worth of that word than nineteen years in Georgia had ever managed to teach him.

CHAPTER 5

THE AMBUSH AT DAWN

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge."

— Psalm 18:2

Captain Reyes called Jerry into the operations hut alone, seven months into the tour, and set a map down on the plywood table with a deliberateness that told Jerry, before a word had been said, that this briefing was going to be different from the dozens that had come before it.

"There's a footbridge here." Reyes tapped a point on the map where a thin blue line crossed a tributary stream feeding into the main river, roughly nine kilometers north of Dak Lien. "Wood and

cable construction, old but sturdy, and it's become the preferred crossing point for NVA elements moving supplies through this stretch of the valley over the past three weeks, according to two separate strike force intelligence reports. Higher wants it dropped. I want you to drop it."

"Me, sir?"

"You, Sergeant." Reyes looked up from the map, and something in his expression carried a weight Jerry hadn't seen from him before, not the flat professionalism of an ordinary tasking but something closer to a deliberate decision, made with real thought behind it. "You're the best demolitions man on this team, and it's not close. But that's not actually why I'm putting you in charge of this patrol." He straightened, arms crossed. "You remember what I told you back on your second day here, about command not being about having all the answers?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've watched you for seven months now, Gatchell. Watched you hold a wound closed under fire without your hands shaking. Watched you carry a wounded friend to a med-evac line while calm enough to keep both your heads clear. Watched the way the strike force troops look at you when you're teaching them something, the particular kind of trust that doesn't get built by rank alone." Reyes tapped the map again. "I think you're ready to lead a patrol, not just fight in one. This mission's a good place to find out — contained objective, defined route, small enough element that you can hold the whole thing in your head at once. Boone will be with you. So will Mercer, Halvorsen, and eight strike force troops. But you're the patrol leader. Every call on that objective and the route in and out is yours to make, and Boone's under strict orders from me not to override you unless you're about to get everybody killed, which I don't expect to happen, but which I'm telling you plainly so you understand the weight of what I'm handing you."

Jerry felt something settle into his chest that was equal parts pride and a fear sharper than any he'd experienced since his first firefight — not fear for his own life this time, but a different and in some ways heavier fear, the fear of holding other men's lives in decisions that would be entirely, unambiguously his own to make.

"I won't let you down, sir."

"I know you won't," Reyes said. "That's exactly why I'm handing it to you."

They spent the better part of the next hour walking through the operational details together, Reyes deliberately stepping back from the planning process more than Jerry had ever seen him do, offering guidance only when directly asked and otherwise simply watching, arms crossed, as Jerry worked through troop allocation, timing, contingencies, and the specific demolition plan for the bridge itself.

"How much explosive are you carrying?" Reyes asked, when Jerry laid out the charge calculations.

"More than the textbook minimum for a span that size, sir. I'd rather carry the extra weight in and have margin than come up short on the objective and have to improvise a second charge under time pressure." Jerry tapped the sketch he'd drawn of the bridge's cable suspension points. "Cut the main support cables here and here, simultaneous detonation, and the whole span drops clean into the water. Won't be repairable without heavy equipment they don't have easy access to out here."

"Good thinking." Reyes made a small note on his own copy of the plan. "What's your fallback if the primary detonators fail?"

"Backup initiator set with a longer time-delay fuse, positioned separately, redundant enough that a single point of failure doesn't scrub the whole mission." Jerry had learned that lesson from Voss, back at Bragg, in a classroom that felt impossibly distant now — always build in a second way for the thing to work, because the first way will fail you exactly when you can least afford it to.

Reyes nodded slowly, satisfaction plain on his face. "You've thought this through better than some of the plans I've seen come out of battalion staff, and they had considerably more time and considerably more rank to work with than you just did." He rolled up his own copy of the map. "Get some rest tonight, Sergeant. Tomorrow's yours to run."

* * *

Boone said little about the arrangement in the hours that followed, though Jerry caught him watching with an expression that carried none of his usual reticence about praise, something almost paternal moving behind the weathered face, and it was only that evening, the two of them going over the route on the map one final time before first light, that Boone spoke to it directly.

"Captain's right to hand you this," Boone said, tracing the proposed route with a callused finger. "I want you to hear that from me plain, on account of I know a young sergeant can spend half a briefing wondering if his team sergeant resents getting bumped down the chain for a day. I don't. Watched you grow into this the whole seven months, same as Reyes has. Wasn't a surprise to me when he told me his plan. Only surprise was that it took him this long to make it official."

"I appreciate that, Sergeant."

"Don't need you to appreciate it. Need you to lead it." Boone's finger stopped on a stretch of trail roughly two kilometers south of the bridge, a narrow defile where the terrain rose sharply on both sides. "This is the part of the route that worries me most, for what it's worth, which as your subordinate for tomorrow's mission is exactly as much weight as you choose to give it and not one ounce more."

Jerry studied the terrain features, running through the same analysis Voss and Boone and a dozen field exercises had drilled into him, tracing the contour lines with his eyes and imagining, the way he'd been trained to imagine, exactly where he would position an ambush himself if the roles were reversed and the valley belonged to him instead of to the enemy moving through it. "High ground on both sides. Limited room to maneuver if we get hit there."

"That's the read I'd give it too."

"We move through it fast, minimum dwell time, and we route the return leg around it if the objective's still secure enough to allow the detour." Jerry traced an alternate path on the map, adding perhaps forty minutes to the return trip but avoiding the defile entirely. "Slower, but safer."

Boone nodded slowly, something like real approval in the gesture. "That's the call I'd have made too, if it'd been mine to make. Wasn't, though. Was yours. Good instincts, Gatchell. Trust 'em tomorrow, whatever comes."

* * *

They moved out at 0330, deep into the dark hours Jerry had once found so disorienting and had long since come to regard as simply another working condition, no more remarkable to him now than rain or heat. Jerry walked near the front of the file this time, not at point — Boone had insisted on that much, arguing that a patrol leader needed enough separation from the very front to actually process what the point element was reporting rather than being fully consumed by the point man's own narrow field of attention — and found the new vantage strange for the first several hundred meters, an unfamiliar weight of responsibility settling over him with every silent step, until the old rhythms of movement took over and the strangeness receded into simple concentration.

The nine kilometers passed without incident, Jerry calling the pace and the rest halts himself, checking his own navigation against Delgado's independent pace count at each waypoint the way Boone had once taught him, and feeling, with each correct confirmation, a small private confidence building beneath the larger anxiety of command. They reached the bridge a little before 0500, still comfortably within the window of full darkness Jerry had planned around, and the strike force squad fanned out into a security perimeter with the practiced efficiency of men who had run this exact drill more times than either of them could count.

The bridge demolition itself went nearly according to plan — a careful approach through undergrowth still black with pre-dawn shadow, Jerry and Halvorsen working the charges with the same calm precision Jerry had first demonstrated back at Bragg, checking and rechecking the cable placement against his own sketch by the shielded red light of a single flashlight while Mercer crouched

nearby, weapon up, watching the tree line with an attentiveness that Jerry, working the primary charge, was grateful not to have to divide his own focus to provide. The backup initiator went in exactly where Jerry had briefed it, redundant and unnecessary as it turned out, and the detonation itself was a controlled, satisfying crack that dropped the central span cleanly into the stream below without so much as singeing the surrounding foliage.

"Clean work," Boone said quietly, watching the wreckage settle into the current, the satisfaction in his voice unmistakable even pitched low for noise discipline. "Best charge placement I've watched out of any demolitions man on this team, and that includes me on my better days. Now let's get home before the folks whose bridge that was start asking questions about who dropped it."

Jerry allowed himself a brief moment of quiet pride, watching the current pull the shattered timbers downstream, before turning his attention fully back to the business of getting eleven men home safely, the demolition already receding in his mind into simple completed business, one task finished among many still ahead of him that morning.

They began the return leg a little after 0530, the eastern sky just beginning to pale toward the gray that preceded true dawn, moving at the deliberate pace Jerry had set to route them around the defile Boone had flagged the night before. The detour added the forty minutes Jerry had estimated, and he felt, walking it, a small private satisfaction at having planned for exactly this contingency — a mission executed cleanly, a patrol led competently, the kind of quiet professional pride that came from doing a hard job well rather than from any external recognition of it.

The ambush, when it came, came from ground Jerry had not flagged as dangerous at all.

* * *

It struck without warning at 0612, in the gray half-light of true dawn, along a stretch of trail Jerry's own map study had marked as low-risk — open on both flanks, good visibility, nothing resembling the high ground and constrained maneuver room that had worried Boone about the defile they'd successfully avoided. It was, Jerry understood only much later, precisely the predictability of that avoidance that had made this stretch dangerous instead — an NVA element that had anticipated, correctly, that a cautious patrol leader would route around the obvious kill zone and had positioned accordingly, patient enough to let the bridge demolition proceed unmolested in order to catch the patrol at its most relaxed, on the return leg, with the mission's primary objective already believed complete.

The first indication Jerry had that anything was wrong was the crack of a rocket-propelled grenade impacting the trail thirty meters ahead of the file, close enough that the shockwave staggered the point element and close enough, in the same instant, for automatic weapons fire to erupt from concealed positions on both flanks simultaneously — not the disorganized contact of a chance encounter but the coordinated, disciplined opening of a well-prepared ambush, exactly the kind of engagement every piece of training Jerry had ever received identified as the single most dangerous tactical situation a small unit could find itself caught inside.

"AMBUSH LEFT AND RIGHT!" Jerry's own voice, shouting the warning before his conscious mind had fully processed the tactical picture, carried an authority he did not entirely feel but that his body produced anyway, the product of seven months of training finally proving itself under conditions no rehearsal could fully replicate. He dropped into what cover the trail offered, a shallow depression barely adequate to the purpose, and began the rapid assessment his mind had been drilled to produce automatically — enemy positions, friendly positions, casualties, terrain, the whole tactical puzzle assembling itself in his head with a clarity that surprised him even as adrenaline flooded every other system in his body.

Boone went down in the first ten seconds.

Jerry saw it happen from perhaps fifteen feet away, a round catching his team sergeant high in the shoulder and spinning him hard into the undergrowth beside the trail, and felt something cold and

absolute drop through his chest even as his training kept his body moving, kept his rifle up, kept him returning fire toward the muzzle flashes visible in the tree line to his left.

"Boone's hit!" Mercer's voice, from somewhere to Jerry's right, carrying the same controlled urgency Jerry remembered from the ridge months earlier. "Gatchell, what's the call?"

Somewhere to the right, the RPG team fired a second round, this one impacting closer than the first, close enough that Jerry felt the concussion in his chest before he registered the sound of it, dirt and shattered vegetation raining down across the trail, and a strike force soldier named Y'Dhui screamed somewhere in the smoke, a high, sharp sound that cut through the general chaos with a specificity that told Jerry, even before he could confirm it visually, that someone had just taken shrapnel.

And there it was — the exact moment Reyes had been describing in the operations hut the day before, the moment every decision belonged entirely to Jerry, with no team sergeant's steady voice available to confirm or correct whatever he chose next.

* * *

Jerry would spend a great deal of the rest of his life trying to reconstruct, for his own understanding if nothing else, the actual sequence of thought that produced his next several decisions, and would eventually conclude that thought was not, strictly speaking, the right word for what had happened in his mind during those first critical seconds. It was less a process of conscious deliberation than a kind of trained instinct operating at a speed his ordinary reasoning could never have matched, seven months of patrols and eleven years of Boone's accumulated wisdom and a lifetime of his father's quiet example all compressing into a handful of split-second calls that Jerry made not because he had reasoned his way to them but because some deeper layer of himself, built by every hard lesson this valley had taught him, simply knew.

"Halvorsen, Delgado — base of fire on the left flank, keep their heads down!" His voice again, steady in a way that startled him even as he heard himself produce it. "Mercer, with me — we're getting Boone to cover!"

He moved before he'd finished giving the order, low and fast across the exposed six feet separating him from where Boone lay, rounds cracking past close enough to feel their pressure the way he had on the ridge months earlier, and this time the fear that flooded through him at the sensation did not slow him down at all, burned away by something more urgent than self-preservation — the plain, uncomplicated need to get to a wounded man before the ambush finished what it had started.

Boone was conscious when Jerry reached him, gray-faced and gripping his own shoulder with a hand already slick with blood, but his eyes were clear, and Jerry felt a surge of relief so total it nearly staggered him even in the middle of everything else demanding his attention.

"Report," Boone gasped, an instinct so deeply ingrained that even a serious wound could not fully override it.

"You're hit, Sergeant. I've got you. Mercer, get his other side—" Jerry and Mercer together hauled Boone the last few feet into the depression Jerry had claimed as cover, rounds still cracking overhead, and Jerry pressed his own hand against the wound with the same technique Alvarez had once talked him through over Y'Blul's abdomen months earlier, applying pressure with a steadiness his racing heart did not entirely share. "Talk to me. How bad?"

"Through and through, feels like." Boone's voice was tight with pain but level, the professional assessment of a man who had, evidently, been shot before and knew how to evaluate his own condition even in the middle of being shot again. "Hurts like hell. Don't think it hit anything that's gonna kill me quick, if that's what you're asking." He gripped Jerry's wrist with his good hand, the same gesture Y'Blul had once used on Jerry himself, and looked him dead in the eye with an intensity that cut through even the chaos surrounding them. "Listen to me, Gatchell. This is your patrol. I am not taking

it back. You hear me? Whatever's in your head right now telling you that you need my permission for the next call — you don't. Make the call."

* * *

Jerry made the call.

He assessed the tactical picture with a speed that would have astonished the version of himself sitting in a classroom at Bragg listening to Voss lecture on small-unit tactics — enemy fire concentrated from two elevated positions roughly forty meters to the left and sixty meters to the right of the trail, a rocket-propelled grenade team somewhere further back that had fired once and gone silent, likely repositioning or reloading, eight strike force troops distributed along the file in varying states of effective return fire, one wounded American requiring evacuation, and a stretch of open ground behind them that offered, if they could reach it, considerably better defensive terrain than the exposed trail they currently occupied.

"Whitfield!" Jerry shouted, finding the young radio operator pressed flat behind a fallen log fifteen meters back, weapon up and firing controlled bursts toward the right flank with a discipline that made Jerry, even in the chaos, privately proud of how far the young man had come since his own first contact months earlier. "Get Dak Lien on the horn. Ambush, coordinates as briefed, one American wounded, requesting immediate air support and med-evac standing by!"

"On it!"

"Halvorsen, Delgado — on my mark, we're falling back to that rise behind us in bounds, alternating cover. Delgado's team moves first, Halvorsen holds, then you cover us while we bring Boone through!" Jerry's voice carried across the chaos with an authority that felt, even to him, like it belonged to someone slightly older and more experienced than the young sergeant who had, seven months earlier, stood shaking in his own bunk the night before his first patrol. "Y'Blul, keep your squad tight on the strike force flank — do not let that RPG team get a clean angle on us while we're moving!"

The withdrawal that followed unfolded across what Jerry's watch would later confirm was eleven minutes and what every fiber of his lived experience insisted had been considerably longer, a controlled, bounding retreat executed with a discipline that Jerry recognized, even in the middle of directing it, as the visible product of seven months of training and hard-won combat experience finally converging into something that functioned, under the worst possible conditions, almost exactly the way the manuals promised it would.

Delgado's team moved first, dropping back thirty meters to a shallow rise offering genuine cover, and Jerry watched them go with his heart in his throat, counting silently, waiting for the moment they'd be set and able to lay suppressing fire in turn. The moment came, Delgado's voice cutting through the chaos with a confirmation, and Jerry gave the signal for Halvorsen's team to follow, watching his friend's automatic weapon chatter out a covering burst toward the tree line as the second element broke from its position and moved.

Then it was Jerry and Mercer's turn, and there was no way to make that particular movement anything but brutal — hauling Boone between them across open ground with rounds still cracking overhead, the team sergeant's full weight sagging harder against them with every stride as blood loss and shock ate away at whatever strength he'd been drawing on to help with his own legs. Twenty meters felt like two hundred. Jerry's lungs burned, his arms screamed with the strain of half-carrying a man who outweighed him by a solid twenty pounds, and somewhere in the middle of that agonizing stretch of open ground he found himself praying without any conscious decision to start, the words coming out in fragments between labored breaths — Lord, my rock, my fortress — not composed, not eloquent, just true, the rawest kind of prayer a man produces when eloquence has become a luxury he can no longer afford.

They made the rise. Jerry's knees nearly buckled the moment he was able to set Boone down against solid cover, adrenaline and exhaustion crashing over him in the same instant, but there was no time yet to feel any of it fully — the perimeter still needed organizing, the wounded still needed triage, and Jerry forced his body back upright through sheer force of will, moving to the next task before the last one had finished registering. The team sergeant's face had gone increasingly gray with blood loss but his eyes stayed open, stayed present, watching Jerry's every call with an expression that had shifted, somewhere in the last several minutes, from pained assessment into something that looked, unmistakably, like pride.

They reached the rise with all eight strike force troops accounted for and no additional American casualties, though Y'Dhui's leg wound had bled through two field dressings by the time they made the position, a strike force medic named Y'Nhoi working over him with quiet, focused competence that reminded Jerry, watching from the corner of his attention he could spare, of Alvarez's own steady hands months earlier over Y'Blul. Jerry organized a tight defensive perimeter with a speed that surprised even himself, positioning Halvorsen's automatic weapon to cover the most likely avenue of enemy pursuit, distributing the strike force squad into overlapping fields of fire around the position's circumference, and kneeling beside Boone to reassess the wound now that they had, for the first time since the ambush began, something resembling a stable tactical position.

"Sitrep," he told Mercer, keeping his own voice as level as he could manage while his hands worked a fresh compress against Boone's shoulder.

"Two friendly wounded, Boone and Y'Dhui, both stable for now. No KIA on our side, thank God. Enemy contact's slackened since we broke from the kill zone — either they're repositioning to pursue or they're satisfied with the damage they've already done and pulling back. Can't tell which yet." Mercer's voice carried its own controlled tension, the easy humor entirely absent, replaced by the flat professional cadence Jerry had come to recognize as his friend's own version of steady under fire. "Whitfield's got Dak Lien on the horn. Gunships inbound, ETA maybe eight minutes."

"Copy. Keep the perimeter tight till they're overhead." Jerry glanced down at Boone, whose eyes were still open, still tracking, still — despite everything — watching Jerry's every decision with something that looked, even through the pain, like satisfaction. "You holding, Sergeant?"

"Holding," Boone managed. "Keep doing exactly what you're doing, Gatchell. Don't need my input. Haven't needed it in about ten minutes now, truth be told."

* * *

The gunships arrived nine minutes later, screaming low over the ridgeline in a repeat of the deliverance Jerry remembered from his first firefight months earlier, and this time he watched the miniguns open up on the enemy positions with something other than simple relief — with the particular, complicated satisfaction of a man who had, this time, called for that deliverance himself, coordinated the position that made it effective, held his people together long enough for it to arrive.

The enemy fire slackened within moments of the gunships' arrival and stopped entirely inside two minutes, the ambush force melting back into the jungle the way such forces always seemed to, unwilling to press an engagement against air support with anything resembling the enemy's own preferred odds, and Jerry felt the adrenaline that had carried him through the past twenty minutes begin, for the first time, to recede, leaving behind a shakiness in his own hands that he had not experienced during the fighting itself and that arrived now, in the relative safety of the aftermath, with a force that nearly staggered him.

"You did it," Boone said, from where he lay propped against a fallen log, his voice weaker now but still carrying the same flat certainty it always had. "Textbook fighting withdrawal, under fire, first time out as patrol leader. I've seen career officers with twice your rank botch that same maneuver worse than you just ran it, son."

"I nearly got us killed taking that route," Jerry said, the words coming out rougher than he intended, the delayed shock of the past twenty minutes finally catching up to him. "I planned around the defile. Never even considered this stretch. If I'd routed us differently—"

"If you'd routed us differently, they'd have hit us somewhere else, on ground they'd chosen for exactly the same reason," Boone said, cutting him off with a firmness that cost him visibly, given his condition. "That's the nature of the thing, Gatchell. Enemy gets a vote too. Ain't a plan in the world accounts for every possibility, and any sergeant who tells you otherwise never actually led men into contact. What matters ain't whether you got surprised. Matters what you did in the sixty seconds after the surprise hit. And what you did was get every single man under your command out of that kill zone alive, including me, and I am not an easy man to keep alive when somebody's decided to put a hole in me." He managed something close to a smile despite the pain. "Ninety-first Psalm's your verse, I know. But I'd point you toward the eighteenth today, if you're looking for one that fits. 'The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer.' Wasn't luck that got us to this rise, son. Wasn't luck that got those gunships here in time. I've watched enough patrols go the other way to know the difference."

* * *

The med-evac chopper took Boone out twenty minutes later, along with a strike force soldier named Y'Dhui who had taken a shrapnel wound to the leg during the initial RPG impact — serious but, Alvarez confirmed by radio once the wounded reached the field hospital, not life-threatening, a piece of news that reached Jerry with a relief so profound it nearly buckled his knees, standing in the swirling dust of the landing zone watching the aircraft climb away from the valley for the second time in his tour, this time carrying away the man who had, more than any other single person in this war, shaped him into whoever he had just become over the preceding twenty minutes.

Jerry led the remaining patrol back to Dak Lien himself, seven Americans down to five, eight strike force troops down to seven able-bodied and one evacuated, moving with the deliberate caution of a man who had just learned, in the most visceral way possible, exactly how quickly a well-planned mission could unravel and exactly how much depended, in the moments after it did, on the man standing at the front of the file.

Reyes met them at the wire, and something in his expression as he took in the patrol's condition — tired, blooded, but intact — told Jerry the captain had already heard the essential shape of what happened over the radio traffic, and had been waiting, in the interval since, to see it confirmed in the faces of the men walking back through the gate.

"Sergeant Gatchell." Reyes's voice carried a formality Jerry hadn't heard from him before, even in their most official exchanges. "Report."

Jerry gave it clean and complete, the way seven months of debriefs had trained him to — objective achieved, bridge dropped clean, ambush encountered on the return leg at approximately 0612, immediate actions taken, casualties sustained and accounted for, air support requested and effective, withdrawal executed to defensible terrain, all personnel evacuated or returned to base. Reyes listened without interruption, and when Jerry finished, the young captain was quiet for a long moment before he spoke again.

"That's about as clean a response to a bad situation as I've heard reported on this team in three years of doing this job," Reyes said finally. "I'm putting you in for a Bronze Star with Valor device, Sergeant, and I don't want to hear any argument about whether you deserve it, because I was listening to that radio traffic in real time, and I know exactly what it took to produce it." He studied Jerry for a moment longer, something almost gentle moving behind the professional exterior. "How are you doing, Gatchell? Not the report. You."

Jerry considered the question honestly, the way seven months in this valley had taught him to consider every honest question put to him, running a mental inventory of his own state the same careful

way he'd just finished running an inventory of the patrol's casualties and equipment. "Hands won't stop shaking, sir. Might be a while before they do."

"That's normal," Reyes said. "Wouldn't trust a man whose hands didn't shake after a morning like this one." He clapped Jerry once on the shoulder, the gesture, the inheritance, and let it linger a moment longer than the usual quick contact. "Go see Boone gets word to you the second there's an update from the field hospital. Then get some rest. You earned it today, Sergeant, more than most men earn it in a full tour."

* * *

Reyes found Jerry at the wire a few minutes later, watching the empty sky where the med-evac chopper had disappeared, and stood beside him a while in silence before speaking.

"Doc Alvarez tells me Y'Dhui's going to keep the leg. Shrapnel missed the artery by a wider margin than the wound made it look like, in the field." Reyes's voice carried the particular relief of a commander accounting for every soul under his authority. "You want to know something, Gatchell? Half the officers I trained with would have frozen the moment their team sergeant went down. Not because they lacked courage. Because they'd spent their whole careers leaning on a senior NCO to catch the details they hadn't yet learned to catch themselves, and the day that crutch got kicked out from under them, they discovered they'd never actually built the leg underneath it." He looked over at Jerry directly. "You'd already built the leg. Today just proved it was there."

"Boone built most of it, sir. Not sure how much of today was really mine."

"That's exactly the kind of answer that tells me you're not going to let this go to your head, which is about the only remaining thing I was worried about." Reyes allowed himself something close to a smile. "Boone built the foundation. You're the one who stood on it under fire and didn't fall through. Both things can be true, Sergeant. Don't let false modesty talk you out of the credit you actually earned today."

He was quiet a moment, looking out past the wire at the treeline where the ambush had unfolded, invisible now from this distance, folded back into the same indifferent green that swallowed everything eventually. "I'll tell you something else, since we're speaking plainly. I've written recommendations for promotion before, Gatchell, plenty of them, for plenty of good soldiers. This is the first one I've written where I genuinely believe the Army would be making a mistake not approving it. You've got a gift for this that goes past training, past even the natural aptitude some men are simply born with. You've got the kind of steadiness under pressure that can't be taught, only revealed, and today revealed it about as clearly as this valley knows how to reveal anything." He looked back at Jerry directly. "I don't know what you're planning to do with the rest of your life once this war finally lets you go home, Sergeant, and it's not my business to ask. But I'd be doing you a disservice if I didn't tell you plainly that the Army would keep you, gladly, for as long as you were willing to stay, and that whatever you choose instead, you're going to carry today's lesson into it, whether that's a farm in Georgia or a family of your own or something else entirely. Some men are built to lead other men through the worst moments of their lives. You're one of them. Today just made it official."

* * *

Word came that evening that Boone would recover fully, the round having passed cleanly through the meat of his shoulder without striking bone or anything vital, though the surgeons at Nha Trang estimated six to eight weeks before he'd be fit to return to full field duty. Jerry received the news sitting on the edge of his own bunk with Mercer beside him, and felt something in his chest finally, fully unclench for the first time since the RPG had impacted the trail that morning.

"You did good today, Georgia," Mercer said quietly, echoing words he'd said once before, after a different firefight, though something in his voice carried more weight this time, a recognition of

something that had genuinely changed in the man sitting beside him. "I mean that different than I meant it the first time I said it to you. That wasn't a man following orders today. That was a man giving them, and giving good ones, under about as much pressure as this valley knows how to hand a person."

"Didn't feel like I was thinking at all, half the time," Jerry admitted. "Just moving. Reacting."

"That's what seven months of training's supposed to feel like, once it finally kicks in the way it's supposed to." Mercer leaned back against the tent pole, studying his friend with an expression more serious than his usual easy humor typically allowed. "You scared, making those calls? Boone down, everybody looking to you?"

"Terrified," Jerry said, and found, saying it out loud, that the admission cost him less than he expected it to. "The whole time. Every single call. Just didn't have the luxury of stopping to feel it until we were clear."

"That's command, then, near as I can tell." Mercer's grin returned, though it carried a new weight behind it, an emerging respect that had not been fully present in their friendship before this particular morning. "Being scared out of your mind and doing the job anyway, on account of a dozen other men are depending on you doing it whether you feel ready or not. Preacher would say something about that verse of his — courage ain't the absence of fear, it's what a man does carrying it. You did that today, Jerry. Whatever else you take from this valley when your tour's up, take that. You're a leader. Not gonna be many days left in this war where somebody else makes the hard calls for you. Today proved you're ready for that, whether you felt ready or not."

"Scares me some, thinking of it that way."

"Should," Mercer agreed. "Man who ain't scared of that kind of weight ain't fit to carry it, same as Boone's always said about fear generally. But you carried it today, and every man who walked back through that wire tonight is walking on account of you carried it right." He was quiet a moment, and when he spoke again, something more vulnerable had crept into his voice. "Makes me think, if I'm honest, about what happens if the day ever comes I'm the one bleeding out on some trail with you making the calls to get me home. Used to not let myself think about that kind of thing. Today made it harder not to."

"Wouldn't leave you," Jerry said simply. "Wasn't going to leave Boone either. Not an option my mind even offered up as a possibility, out there. Won't be different if it's you someday, Bulldog. Want you to know that plain, not just assume it."

"Didn't need to hear it," Mercer said, his voice rough. "Already knew it. Still good to hear it said out loud, though. Man likes knowing where he stands, even when he's already sure of the answer."

* * *

Jerry wrote to Sarah that night, his hands finally steady enough to hold a pen with confidence, and found the letter came easier than he expected, the events of the morning already beginning to settle into the particular shape that memory gave to the hardest days, neither softened nor sensationalized but simply, finally, real enough to set down in words.

I led my first patrol today, he wrote, and it went about as badly wrong as a patrol can go without anybody dying, and I want to tell you honestly that I have never in my whole life felt more afraid or more certain, at the exact same time, about anything I have ever done. Our team sergeant — Boone, I've written you about him before — took a round early in the ambush, and for about the length of one very long breath, I understood that every decision left standing between the men under my command and disaster belonged entirely to me, with nobody senior left to correct me if I got it wrong. I don't fully know how to explain what happened in my head after that breath, except to say that something in me that I didn't know was fully built yet turned out to already be built, the way a bridge holds weight it's never actually been tested to hold until the exact day somebody drives a heavy enough truck across it. I got every one of my men out alive. Boone's going to recover fully. My captain's putting me in for a

decoration I don't feel like I deserve, on account of it still feels like I was just doing the only thing available to do, not something brave or extraordinary.

I've been thinking, writing this, about a verse our chaplain gave me some months back, about how the Lord doesn't promise to remove a man's fear so much as promise to be present inside it. I think I understood that verse today in a way I hadn't managed to before, standing in the middle of the worst twenty minutes of my life discovering that fear and capability aren't opposites the way I always assumed growing up. A man can be shaking down to his boots and still make every call correctly, if he's got something solid enough underneath the shaking to stand on. I don't fully know what to call that solid thing, Sarah — training, maybe, or faith, or the accumulated example of men like Boone who showed me what steady looks like long before I needed to produce it myself. Maybe it's simply all three of those things, braided together tight enough that a man can't easily tell where one ends and the next begins. Whatever it is, I found it today, when I needed it most, and I don't think I'll ever again doubt quite so completely whether it's really there.

He wrote his father a shorter letter that same night, though it took him nearly as long to compose, each sentence weighed with more care than the length alone would suggest.

I made command decisions today that got men home alive, Daddy, he wrote. Our team sergeant went down early, and for the better part of twenty minutes, there wasn't a soul above me to check my work. I keep thinking about you standing in that kitchen doorway telling me to write Mama more than I write my girl, and about all those years you carried Korea without anybody to hand any of it to, and I think I finally understand something about what that must have cost you that I couldn't have understood before today. Command is lonely, Daddy, in a way training never quite prepares a man for. Everybody's looking to you, and there's nobody left looking back at you the same way, not in the moment it matters most. I don't say that to complain. I say it because I think it's the truest thing I've learned yet about what you carried home from your own war, and I wanted you to know that your son understands it now, in his body, not just in his head. I hope, when I make it home myself, we might finally talk about some of what that loneliness cost you. I think I'd understand it better than I would have a year ago. I think I might even be able to help carry some of it, if you'd let me.

He sealed both letters, Sarah's and his father's, and felt, doing it, that he had crossed some further threshold that night beyond even the one the ambush itself had opened — not simply a soldier now, but something closer to a peer to the men who had raised him, a son finally capable of offering his father the same kind of understanding Everett Gatchell had never received from anyone in his own generation, silent men raised by silent men, all the way back further than either of them could easily trace.

He lay back on his bunk, exhausted in a way that went past the physical into something deeper, some fundamental recalibration of who he understood himself to be, and found himself murmuring the eighteenth Psalm into the dark the way Boone had once suggested, testing the words the same careful way he'd once tested the twenty-third and the ninety-first, and found that this one too, tried against the reality of an actual morning's actual danger, held.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

* * *

Reyes arranged for Jerry to fly down to Nha Trang three weeks later, ostensibly to collect a resupply manifest that could easily have come by radio, and Jerry understood the errand for the kindness it plainly was the moment he found himself standing beside Boone's hospital cot instead, the older man propped up against a stack of pillows with his arm in a sling and considerably more color in his face than the last time Jerry had seen him.

"Gatchell." Boone's grin, when it came, was the first full, unguarded grin Jerry had seen from him in the whole seven months they'd known each other, rather than the almost-smile he usually rationed out. "Heard about the Bronze Star. Heard about the whole operation, matter of fact, secondhand from Reyes's report, on account of the version I personally witnessed cuts off right around the time I got shot and started paying more attention to my own shoulder than to anybody's tactical performance."

"Wouldn't have needed to run any of it if you hadn't spent seven months teaching me how," Jerry said, pulling a chair up beside the cot.

"Ugly wound, healing clean," Boone said, before Jerry could even ask. "Surgeon says I'll have a scar the size of a silver dollar and about eighty percent of my old range of motion, which he assures me is more than adequate for a man whose primary remaining job function is reading Scripture aloud in a mess tent. Six more weeks before they'll clear me for the field. Reyes tells me you've run two more patrols since the bridge, both clean."

"Both clean," Jerry confirmed. "Wasn't the same without you calling the shots from behind me, though, even hurt the way you were. Kept catching myself wanting to check with somebody before I gave an order."

"That'll fade." Boone studied him with the same unhurried thoroughness he brought to everything, wound or no wound. "That's the last piece of this particular lesson, matter of fact, and I might as well hand it to you now since I've got a captive audience and nowhere better to be. A man can lean on somebody else's wisdom right up until the day he's built enough of his own to stand without it. That day came for you three weeks ago on that trail, whether you'd fully noticed it yet or not. Don't mean you stop listening to counsel — good leaders never stop doing that, and the day they do is the day they start getting men killed out of pure pride. But it does mean you stop needing somebody else's permission before you trust your own read on a situation. You've got the read now, Gatchell. Had it before the ambush too, if I'm honest with you. That morning just proved it to you in a way nothing else could have."

Jerry sat with his old team sergeant for the better part of an hour, trading news of the camp for news of Boone's recovery, and left the hospital that afternoon with something settled in him that had been unsettled since the moment Boone went down on that trail — not quite closure, since Boone was still weeks from returning to full duty, but something adjacent to it, a quiet confirmation that the man who had taught him nearly everything he knew about leading other men through danger was, in fact, going to be alright, and would be there to keep teaching him whatever came next.

He did not know yet how many more mornings like this one waited for him before his tour finally ended, or how much heavier the cost would grow before the valley finished testing him, or that the confidence forged in these twenty minutes would, decades later, curdle into something far darker before it could ever be redeemed — a man who had once held a dozen lives steady under fire, unable, twenty years on, to hold his own family together against a different and quieter kind of ambush, one that came not with rocket-propelled grenades and muzzle flashes but with a bottle, and then a needle, and no team sergeant left standing beside him to help carry the weight when his own legs finally buckled under it. He did not know that the very steadiness he had proven today — the capacity to function, to lead, to keep moving when every rational instinct screamed to freeze — would one day become the very thing that let him hide his unraveling from everyone who loved him, performing competence long after the competence had become a mask over something broken underneath.

He knew only, drifting finally toward an exhausted sleep with the psalm still murmuring somewhere at the edge of his consciousness, that he had been tested in the way every soldier eventually is tested, in the gap between training and the real thing, and that whatever else this valley had planned for him, he had proven, at least for one gray dawn, that the rock beneath him held. Whether it would still be holding twenty years later, in a country at peace with itself in every way except the one that mattered most to the men who'd fought for it, was a question no psalm read by flashlight in a jungle

bunker could yet answer for him. That answer, when it finally came, would take a war of an entirely different kind to find.

CHAPTER 6

UNDER FIRE, UNDER GRACE

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

— John 15:13

The new replacement arrived on the same resupply flight that finally brought Boone back to full duty, nine weeks after the bridge ambush, and Jerry recognized something of his own first day in-country the moment the young man stepped off the chopper into the swirling red dust — the particular wide-eyed alertness of a soldier who had trained hard and arrived confident and was only now beginning to understand, in his body rather than his head, exactly how much the training had not fully prepared him for.

"Private First Class Kenny Baxter, reporting, Sergeant." He couldn't have been more than eighteen, freckled and earnest, with the kind of open, unguarded face that Jerry suspected would either harden fast in this valley or, if the boy was fortunate enough to have someone looking out for him, learn to carry its openness through the hardening without losing it entirely.

"Gatchell," Jerry said, offering a hand instead of the more formal reception the rank difference technically permitted. "Welcome to Dak Lien, Baxter. First tour?"

"Yes, Sergeant. Straight out of the Q Course. Volunteered for this assignment specific, matter of fact — heard some stories about this team back at Bragg. Heard about a bridge job that got a man put in for a Bronze Star." Baxter's eyes carried an admiration that made Jerry faintly uncomfortable, an echo of the way he himself had once looked at Boone and Voss and every other veteran soldier who'd crossed his path during training. "Didn't figure I'd actually get assigned to the team the story was about."

"Stories get bigger in the telling," Jerry said, though something in his own chest recognized, with a small private jolt, that he was no longer merely the green replacement in this exchange — he had become, in the space of nine months, exactly the kind of veteran soldier whose reputation preceded him, and the shift unsettled him more than he let show on his face. "You'll learn plenty out here without needing stories to teach it to you. Boone!" He waved the returning team sergeant over, arm still in a supportive wrap though the sling had finally come off. "Got a new man for you."

Boone looked Baxter over with the same unhurried, assessing thoroughness he'd once turned on Jerry himself, nine months and a lifetime ago on this same helipad. "Welcome aboard, son. You'll bunk near Gatchell here. Man's got a gift for bringing green troops up to speed faster than anybody else on this team, on account of he was green himself not so long ago and hasn't forgotten what that felt like. Listen to him. Might save your life."

* * *

Jerry took the mentorship seriously in the weeks that followed, in a way that surprised him with its own intensity — walking Baxter through the same patient lessons Boone had once walked him through, the demolitions fundamentals, the particular economy of movement a man needed in triple-canopy

jungle, the small unglamorous disciplines of maintaining gear and reading terrain and trusting the strike force troops as fully capable partners rather than auxiliary help. He found himself, more than once, hearing his own voice produce phrases that were nearly verbatim Boone's own — fear keeps a man sharp, shaking gets him killed, a man's body knows the drill before his mind catches up to it — and understood, with something between amusement and a deeper gratitude, exactly how thoroughly this valley's accumulated wisdom passed from man to man, generation to generation, an inheritance as real and as valuable as anything either of their fathers had left them.

"You ever get used to it?" Baxter asked him one evening on perimeter watch, three weeks into his tour, his voice carrying the particular raw honesty that came easiest in the deep dark hours. "The fear, I mean. Boone said something about carrying it instead of getting rid of it, but I keep waiting for it to at least get quieter."

"Gets more familiar," Jerry said, echoing words Reyes had once given him under nearly identical circumstances. "Doesn't get quieter, not really. Just gets to where you know its voice well enough not to let it drive, even when it's talking loud." He glanced over at the young private, seeing in his profile the same anxious alertness Jerry himself had carried on his own first watches. "You're doing fine, Baxter. Better than fine. Most men take longer than three weeks to stop flinching at every branch that snaps out there."

"Still flinch plenty. Just getting better at hiding it."

"That's most of what courage actually is, near as I've worked out," Jerry said. "Not the absence of the flinch. Just getting better at not letting it show, and not letting it stop you from doing the job anyway."

Baxter was quiet a moment, turning something over. "You really run out into open ground on that bridge patrol? Fellas back at Bragg told it like you walked through gunfire like it wasn't even there."

"Wasn't like that at all," Jerry said, a little more firmly than he intended, some old discomfort with the growing legend of that morning surfacing again. "I was flat on my belly half the time, same as everybody else, and my hands shook so bad afterward I could barely hold a pen to write my girl about it. Stories get bigger every time they cross another set of lips, Baxter. Don't build yourself up around a version of me that never actually existed. Build yourself up around the truth instead — that a scared man can still do the job, if he's trained right and he's got people worth doing it for."

"Yes, Sergeant." Baxter considered that, and something in his posture eased slightly, as though the correction had actually been a relief to hear rather than a disappointment. "Guess that's easier to aim for than fearless would be."

"Whole lot easier," Jerry agreed. "And a whole lot truer, besides."

He spent the better part of the following two weeks running Baxter through every scenario he could think to drill — weapons malfunctions under simulated stress, casualty carries with a training dummy weighted to match an average man's mass, land navigation exercises that pushed the young private's confidence without pushing it past the point of useful learning. Boone, watching from a distance more than once, remarked to Jerry privately that he hadn't seen a green replacement brought up to speed that fast in years, and Jerry, hearing it, felt a satisfaction that had nothing to do with medals or reputation and everything to do with the plain, durable pleasure of having passed something valuable along to someone who needed it, the same way it had once been passed to him.

* * *

The assault came eleven days later, in the deep hours before dawn, and it was unlike anything Camp Dak Lien had faced in the nine months of Jerry's tour — not a small ambush or a chance contact on patrol, but a coordinated, company-strength assault on the camp's perimeter itself, opening with a mortar barrage that walked explosions across the compound with a precision that told every man

scrambling for a fighting position that this attack had been planned with real intelligence about the camp's layout, gathered patiently over weeks or months by eyes Jerry would never be able to identify.

Jerry came awake to the first impacts already dressed in the reflexive half-second every man in this valley eventually developed, weapon in hand before conscious thought had fully caught up to his body, and was moving toward the northeast bunker line — his assigned defensive position — within moments of the first explosion, the compound around him already alive with shouted orders and the deeper, more sustained crack of automatic weapons fire opening up from positions in the treeline that ringed the camp on three sides.

The compound around him had transformed, in the space of perhaps ninety seconds, from a sleeping camp into something closer to a vision of hell — mortar craters smoking in the pale pre-dawn light, a supply tent fully engulfed and throwing dancing orange light across the chaos, men running in every direction with the particular controlled urgency of long drilled reflexes finally being called upon for real, and beneath all of it, rising and falling in waves, the sustained crack and roar of automatic weapons fire that told Jerry, even before Boone's voice confirmed it, that this was not a probe or a harassment raid but a genuine assault, mounted with intention and numbers behind it.

"Full assault!" Boone's voice cut through the chaos from somewhere near the operations bunker, carrying the same supernatural clarity Jerry remembered from his first firefight. "All positions, report status!"

The northeast line, Jerry's own sector, held a string of fighting positions manned by a mix of Americans and strike force troops, and Jerry moved along it in a low crouch, confirming each position's readiness, until he reached the forward listening post — a small, exposed bunker positioned thirty meters outside the main wire, manned that night, Jerry realized with a cold drop in his stomach, by Baxter and a strike force private named Y'Sen.

The listening post's job was early warning, not defense, and it was never intended to hold against a determined assault — but the sheer speed and coordination of the enemy's opening barrage had apparently caught the position before its two occupants could withdraw to the main line, and Jerry, watching from the relative safety of the forward bunker, could see muzzle flashes now converging on the small, isolated position with a concentration that told him plainly the enemy commander understood exactly what that listening post represented and intended to eliminate it before pressing the main assault.

* * *

"Baxter!" Jerry's shout carried across the thirty meters of open, fire-swept ground separating the main line from the listening post, and the response that came back — a burst of return fire and a voice, thin and strained but alive — told him at least that his young charge had survived the opening barrage, for now.

"Pinned down, Sergeant! Y'Sen's hit — can't move him alone!"

Jerry felt the decision arrive not as a deliberation but as something closer to certainty, the same trained instinct that had carried him through the ambush at the bridge now presenting him with a single, obvious course of action that his conscious mind barely had time to evaluate before his body was already responding to it.

"Halvorsen, cover me!" He was moving before Halvorsen had finished acknowledging, vaulting the low sandbag wall of the main bunker line and sprinting into the thirty meters of open ground between the main position and the listening post, every instinct in his body screaming at the sheer exposure of it even as his training kept his legs moving, kept his weapon up, kept him weaving in the broken, unpredictable pattern that made a man harder to hit than a straight line ever would.

Rounds cracked past him closer than anything he'd experienced even in the bridge ambush, close enough that he felt the wind of at least two passages against his face, and he registered, distantly, the

specific and total clarity that seemed to descend over him in exactly these moments — the world narrowing to a single point of focus, the listening post ahead of him, the ground beneath his boots, the next three strides and the three after that, everything else burned away by an urgency too large for fear to fully occupy the same space.

He was perhaps halfway across when a mortar round impacted close enough to his left to lift him briefly off his feet, the concussion slamming through his chest like a physical blow, and Jerry hit the ground hard, rolling once, ears ringing with a high, sustained whine that swallowed every other sound for several disorienting seconds. He forced himself back up through sheer will, spitting dirt, one knee screaming where he'd landed wrong, and kept moving, because the alternative — staying down, staying safe, leaving two frightened young men to face the rest of the assault alone — had never actually presented itself to him as a real option, not for one full second since Baxter's voice had first come across the noise.

He reached the listening post in what felt like both no time at all and considerably longer than the fifteen or so seconds his watch would later confirm, and dropped into the shallow, sandbagged position to find Baxter crouched over Y'Sen, the young private's face white with a fear he was visibly fighting to master, and the strike force soldier bleeding heavily from a wound in his thigh that Baxter's improvised field dressing was only partially containing.

"Sergeant—" Baxter's voice cracked on the word, relief and terror mixed together in equal measure.

"I've got you both. Listen to me." Jerry kept his own voice level with an effort that cost him more than the sprint across open ground had, understanding, even in the chaos, that his own steadiness was the single most important resource available to stabilize the two frightened young men in front of him, exactly as Boone's steadiness had once stabilized him on a ridge many months earlier. He could feel his own pulse hammering, could feel the raw animal urge to simply flatten himself against the sandbags and wait for the storm to pass, and set both aside with a deliberate act of will that cost him more than he let show on his face. "We're not staying here. This position's not holding. We're going to move Y'Sen together, and you're going to trust me on the timing, same as I've trusted you the last three weeks. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

* * *

The thirty meters back to the main line took considerably longer than the thirty meters out had, weighted now by Y'Sen's full body between them, Jerry taking the wounded man's weight across his own shoulders in a fireman's carry that Alvarez had drilled into every man on the team as standard casualty evacuation procedure, while Baxter laid what covering fire he could manage with hands that Jerry could see, even through his own tunnel-vision focus, were not entirely steady.

They made it perhaps ten meters before the enemy fire found them in earnest, a burst stitching across the ground close enough that Jerry felt the impacts through his boots, and he dropped flat, dragging Y'Sen down with him, Baxter following a half-second behind, all three of them pressed into what meager cover a shallow depression in the earth provided against fire that seemed, in that suspended moment, to be converging from every direction at once.

"Sergeant, we're not gonna make it in the open like this!" Baxter's voice had gone thin with a fear Jerry recognized completely, having felt an identical version of it on a ridge eight months earlier watching a muzzle flash he couldn't yet identify as friend or foe.

Jerry felt his own heart hammering against his ribs with a violence that matched the young private's fear almost exactly, and understood, in the small analytical corner of his mind that seemed to survive even the worst chaos, that the difference between himself and Baxter in this moment was not the absence of fear but simply nine more months of practice at functioning inside it.

"We are going to make it," Jerry said, with a certainty he did not entirely feel but had learned, over nine months, was sometimes more important to project than to fully possess. "Halvorsen's laying suppressing fire on that treeline right now — listen, you can hear it. Boone's got the mortar pit adjusting fire to cover our position. We move in short bounds, low, and we do not stop moving once we start. You copy?"

"Copy, Sergeant."

They moved in three more bounds across the remaining twenty meters, Jerry's shoulders and lower back screaming with the strain of Y'Sen's full weight, his lungs burning, sweat and mud mixing into his eyes until the world had reduced to a blurred, adrenaline-soaked tunnel with a single fixed point at its far end — the sandbagged wall of the main bunker line, growing agonizingly slowly closer with each desperate stride.

A round struck the sandbag directly beside Jerry's head as they reached the wall, close enough that fragments of burlap and sand sprayed across his face, and for one suspended half-second Jerry Gatchell understood, with a clarity that felt almost peaceful in its totality, exactly how close he had just come to dying in the mud thirty meters outside his own camp's wire, carrying a wounded stranger's weight on shoulders that had somehow, despite everything, refused to buckle.

Then hands were pulling them over the wall — Mercer's hands, and Halvorsen's, and Boone's good arm reaching down to haul Y'Sen the last few feet — and Jerry collapsed against the inside of the bunker wall with Baxter beside him, both of them gasping, alive, and Y'Sen already being worked over by Alvarez with the same calm urgency Jerry remembered from Y'Blul's wound so many months earlier.

* * *

The assault raged for the better part of two more hours before the enemy commander, apparently concluding that the camp's defenses had not collapsed as quickly as the opening barrage had likely been calculated to produce, broke contact and withdrew under the cover of a second, smaller mortar barrage designed to screen the retreat rather than press the attack further. Air support arrived twenty minutes too late to catch the withdrawing force in any meaningful way, and the dawn that finally broke over Camp Dak Lien revealed a compound scarred by mortar craters and small-arms damage but, remarkably, intact — no American killed, four wounded including Y'Sen, and the strike force troops reporting two dead and six wounded among their own ranks, a cost heavy enough to grieve and light enough, given the scale of the assault, that Reyes would later describe the outcome in his after-action report as a defensive success by any reasonable measure.

Jerry sat against the bunker wall in the gray dawn light, still catching his breath, still feeling the particular full-body ache of having carried a wounded man's weight across thirty meters of fire-swept ground, and found Baxter sitting beside him in an identical state, the young private's face streaked with dirt and sweat and, Jerry noted without comment, the tracks of tears that had come and gone sometime during the chaos and that Baxter seemed neither embarrassed by nor inclined to hide, a rawness that Jerry recognized, with real affection, as exactly the kind of honest reckoning with fear that would serve the young man well over whatever remained of his tour.

"You saved my life out there, Sergeant," Baxter said quietly. "Both our lives. Wasn't any hesitation in you at all. Just went."

"Plenty of hesitation," Jerry said. "Just didn't have the luxury of feeling it until we were both back over that wall." He looked over at the young man, feeling something protective and paternal move through him that surprised him with its intensity, given how briefly he'd actually known this particular soldier. "You did good out there too, Baxter. Kept your head on Y'Sen's wound. Kept firing when firing was what the moment needed. That's not nothing, for a man three weeks into his first tour."

"Didn't feel like I did good. Felt like I was about two seconds from falling apart the whole time."

"That's what good looks like, most days, out here," Jerry said, and meant it with the whole of an experience that had taught him, over nine hard months, exactly how thin and how meaningless the line between fear and courage actually was, once a man got close enough to examine it directly.

* * *

Jerry found time that afternoon, once the immediate demands of consolidating the camp's defenses had settled into a more manageable rhythm, to sit with Y'Sen in the dispensary, where Alvarez had stabilized the leg wound well enough that the young strike force soldier was expected to make a full recovery, though he would carry a scar and, Alvarez suspected, a permanent slight stiffness in the joint for the rest of his life.

Y'Sen's English was less developed than Y'Blul's, but he managed enough to communicate his gratitude directly, gripping Jerry's hand with a strength that belied his condition and speaking a string of Rade words that Y'Blul, summoned to translate, rendered with visible emotion of his own.

"He says his mother will light incense for you at the family altar, though you are not of his people and do not share his beliefs," Y'Blul said. "He says a debt like this one is not the kind that words repay, only the kind a man carries the rest of his life and repays through his own actions toward others, when the chance comes. He asks that you accept this, even though it is not the American way of saying thank you."

"Tell him I accept it," Jerry said, feeling something thick and unexpected rise in his own throat. "Tell him I understand it better than he might think. We've got a word for it too, where I come from. Grace. A debt too large to repay directly, so a man just tries to pass it forward instead, to whoever needs it next."

Y'Blul translated, and Y'Sen's tired, pained face broke into something that was unmistakably a smile, and he said one more thing, brief, that Y'Blul rendered simply: "He says then you already understand his people better than most Americans who come through this valley ever do."

* * *

Boone found him later that morning, once the wounded had been evacuated and the camp had settled into the exhausted, watchful quiet that always followed a major contact, and sat down beside Jerry with the particular gravity Jerry had come to recognize as preceding one of the older man's more considered pieces of wisdom.

"Whole camp's talking about that run you made," Boone said. "Thirty meters of open ground, under a coordinated assault, to bring back a man who wasn't even yours to lose. Reyes is already drafting the paperwork. Won't surprise me if this one outranks the bridge, in terms of what the Army decides it's worth."

"Wasn't thinking about medals out there, Sergeant. Wasn't thinking much of anything, if I'm honest. Just went."

"I know." Boone's voice carried none of the celebratory tone the rest of the camp had apparently adopted, something more searching in it instead. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about, Gatchell, on account of I've watched this particular thing happen to good men before, and I want you walking into whatever comes next with your eyes open to it." He turned to look at Jerry directly. "There's a verse I've been sitting with since I heard what you did out there this morning. John, chapter fifteen. Jesus is talking to his disciples, the night before the cross, and he tells them, 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Then he goes and does exactly that himself, not twenty-four hours later." Boone let that settle a moment. "What you did today, running out to get Baxter and Y'Sen — that's about as close as a man gets, this side of eternity, to living out exactly what that verse is describing. I don't say that lightly, and I don't say it to inflate your head, because I've watched that same inflation ruin better soldiers than either of us. I say it because I think you need to

understand what you're actually building, out here, one act of costly love at a time — a reputation, sure, the camp's already calling you fearless, and Reyes's paperwork will make it official soon enough. But underneath the reputation, if you let it, there's something truer and more durable trying to take root in you. Not fearlessness. Love willing to pay whatever the moment demands. Those aren't the same thing, Gatchell, even though this valley will keep handing you situations that make them look identical from the outside."

"Feels like a fine distinction, Sergeant, standing here with my whole body still shaking."

"It's not fine at all. It's the whole difference." Boone's voice sharpened slightly, an intensity Jerry hadn't heard from him even in the worst moments of combat. "A man chasing fearlessness for its own sake is a man building his identity on a foundation that's going to crack the first time real fear gets through his defenses — and it will, someday, no matter how many times he's proven himself before. But a man who understands what he did today as love, not fearlessness — a man who understands that he ran out into that fire not because he wasn't afraid but because Baxter and Y'Sen mattered more to him than his own fear did — that man's got something that holds up even on the days fear wins. Even on the days he can't make himself run out into the fire at all. Love doesn't require a man to be fearless every single time, Gatchell. It only requires him to have loved enough, when it mattered most, that the fear didn't get the final word. You've already got that. Don't let this camp's admiration talk you into needing to be fearless instead. That's a much heavier and much less true thing to have to carry."

"What happens to a man who does chase the fearless version instead?" Jerry asked, genuinely curious, sensing that Boone's warning came from somewhere more specific than abstract theory. "You've watched it happen. I can hear it in how you're talking."

Boone was quiet for a long moment, his eyes distant in a way that told Jerry he was reaching back across more years and more men than he typically allowed himself to reference directly. "Knew a captain, my second tour in Korea, who'd done something not unlike what you did today — pulled two wounded men out of a Chinese assault, decorated for it, whole regiment talking about him inside a week. Man decided, somewhere along the way, that the reputation was who he actually was now, instead of understanding it as one true thing he'd done on one hard day. Started taking risks the mission didn't call for, chasing the same feeling, trying to prove the reputation over and over like it was a debt that kept coming due. Got himself killed eight months later doing something reckless that had nothing to do with love and everything to do with needing to still be the man everybody had decided he was." Boone's jaw worked. "Good man, underneath it. Buried him myself, matter of fact. I think about him more than I let on, every time I watch a young sergeant do something as remarkable as what you did today. Same fork in the road sits in front of every man who's ever earned this kind of admiration, Gatchell. One path, the admiration stays a true story about one hard day. Other path, it becomes a debt a man thinks he owes the whole rest of his life, and debts like that have a way of getting collected whether a man's ready to pay or not."

Jerry sat with that a long while after Boone finally left him alone at the wire, turning the dead captain's story over alongside his own morning, and made himself a quiet promise, there in the fading light, that he intended to keep for the remainder of his tour and, though he could not have known it yet, would find far harder to keep across the following two decades than he could possibly have imagined on this particular evening.

* * *

Jerry thought about Boone's words for a long while that evening, sitting alone at the edge of the wire watching the sun set over a valley that had, once again, tried and failed to take something essential from him, and found himself returning, as he so often did now, to the small, worn New Testament he still carried folded against his heart alongside Sarah's photograph and the carved bead from Rmah's mother.

He read the fifteenth chapter of John slowly, by the fading light, following the verse Boone had quoted back to its full context — Jesus washing his disciples' feet, teaching them to love one another as he had loved them, promising them a peace the world could not give, and then, at the center of it all, the verse itself, greater love has no one than this, spoken not as an abstract moral teaching but as a plain description of what Jesus himself was, within a day, actually going to do.

What struck Jerry most, reading it slowly for perhaps the first time in his life rather than simply hearing it recited, was how ordinary the setting had been for such an extraordinary promise — not a battlefield, not a moment of dramatic crisis, but a quiet meal shared among friends, Jesus kneeling to wash dirt from ordinary feet before ever speaking a word about laying down his life for them. Jerry thought of Boone's own quiet, unglamorous acts across the past nine months — the patient Sunday evening studies, the eleven years of accumulated wisdom handed down one plain sentence at a time, the willingness to trust a young sergeant with a patrol before that sergeant had fully trusted himself. He thought of Reyes stepping back from his own command to let Jerry grow into it. He thought of Alvarez's steady hands, of Chaplain Foss's monthly visits crossing hostile jungle in a small aircraft, of a dozen small, patient acts of love that had, together, built the foundation beneath the one dramatic morning everyone now wanted to talk about. The dramatic act, he began to understand, had never actually been separate from all those quiet ones. It had simply been where they all, together, finally came due.

He found something in the specific, concrete reality of that promise that steadied him more than the abstract courage the camp's admiring talk kept trying to attribute to him — not a call to be fearless, which he now understood, thanks to Boone, he had never actually been, but a call to let love outweigh fear when the moment demanded it, exactly as it had, however briefly and however imperfectly, thirty meters outside his own camp's wire that morning. Jerry found something in the specific, concrete reality of that promise that steadied him more than the abstract courage the camp's admiring talk kept trying to attribute to him — not a call to be fearless, which he now understood, thanks to Boone, he had never actually been, but a call to let love outweigh fear when the moment demanded it, exactly as it had, however briefly and however imperfectly, thirty meters outside his own camp's wire that morning.

He wrote Sarah that night, working to capture something of what Boone had helped him understand, though he found the words harder to produce than usual, the experience still too close and too raw to fully translate into sentences.

They're calling me a hero around camp today, he wrote, and I want you to know, since I've promised you honesty about everything, that the word sits uneasy on me, heavier than I expected a compliment to feel. I ran out under fire this morning to bring back a wounded private and a wounded strike force soldier, and everybody keeps telling me it proves I'm fearless, and I keep wanting to correct them, though I haven't quite found the right way to do it yet without sounding like I'm fishing for a different kind of praise. I wasn't fearless out there, Sarah. I was terrified the whole time, same as I've been terrified in every firefight I've survived since landing in this country. What I was, I think — and our team sergeant helped me find this word today, so I can't take full credit for it — was loving. Loved that scared eighteen-year-old private enough, and loved that wounded strike force soldier enough, that the fear didn't get to make the final call about what I did next. I think that might be the truest thing anybody's ever taught me about courage, and I think it might be the truest thing the Gospel's ever taught me about Christ too, now that I sit with it — that love, not fearlessness, is what carried Him to a cross He was fully allowed to avoid, and that whatever small, imperfect echo of that love got worked out in me today, in the mud outside our wire, I owe entirely to Him going first.

He wrote his father too, that same week, once the news of the Silver Star recommendation had made its way through channels Jerry didn't fully understand and Everett Gatchell had, evidently, already heard some garbled version of it from a neighbor whose own son served in a different unit entirely.

Heard you might be getting another medal, his father's own letter had arrived saying, crossing Jerry's in transit the way their letters sometimes did. Your mother's about ready to frame the newspaper clipping before the article's even been written. I'll admit some pride myself, son, though I expect you already know pride was never a thing I was much good at showing plainly. I want to tell you something I should have told you before you ever left this house, and I'm ashamed it's taken a war and a medal to finally shake it loose from me. I was proud of you the day you told me you were enlisting, standing there across that kitchen table looking me in the eye instead of looking away, the way I know now took more courage than anything I did in Korea. I didn't say it then because I was scared for you, and scared men don't always say the true thing, they say the safe thing instead. I'm saying the true thing now. Whatever you did out there to earn this medal, I already know the shape of the man who did it, on account of I watched him get built, one hard year at a time, right here on this farm, long before the Army ever got its hands on him. Proud of you, Jerry. Always have been. Sorry it took me this long to say it plain.

Jerry read his father's letter three times before he could make himself write a reply, and when he finally did, it was shorter than he intended, most of what he wanted to say proving too large to fit inside the small space a page allowed.

Didn't need the medal to know you were proud, Daddy, he wrote. But I won't pretend it doesn't mean something, hearing you say it plain like that after all these years of guessing at it. I love you. I'm coming home, and when I do, I don't want either one of us to need a war or a medal to say the true thing to each other anymore. I think we both know how now. Let's not forget it, once I'm back on ground that isn't trying to kill either one of us.

He sealed the letter and looked out at the darkening treeline, thinking of Baxter's tear-streaked face, of Y'Sen's wound closing under Alvarez's steady hands, of his father's long-withheld pride finally spoken plain across an ocean of distance, of Boone's weathered certainty that love, not fearlessness, was the truer name for whatever this valley kept drawing out of him, and found himself, for the first time since the assault had begun eighteen hours earlier, finally able to rest.

* * *

Chaplain Foss made his own monthly visit fall two weeks after the assault, and sought Jerry out specifically once the service and communion had concluded, settling onto an ammo crate across from him with the same unhurried directness Jerry had come to associate with every good chaplain and sergeant this valley had introduced him to.

"Boone tells me you've been wrestling with what to make of all this attention," Foss said, without much preamble.

"Some, Chaplain."

"Good. A man who wasn't wrestling with it would worry me more." Foss considered his next words carefully. "I want to offer you something from Second Corinthians, if you'll hear it, on account of I think it speaks to exactly the tension you're carrying. Paul writes about a thorn in his flesh, something that kept him from becoming conceited over the extraordinary revelations he'd been given, and he says the Lord told him, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Boone quoted you that same verse once before, I understand, after your first contact."

"He did."

"I think it applies here from the opposite direction now," Foss said. "Then, it was meant to comfort you in your weakness. Now, I'd offer it to guard you against the opposite danger — the temptation to believe that what happened at that listening post was your strength on display, rather than God's power made perfect through a weak and frightened man who happened to be willing. Paul had every reason to boast about his own credentials, Sergeant. Chose instead to boast about his weaknesses, so that Christ's power would rest on him rather than his own. I'd encourage you to consider the same posture, going

forward, every time this valley hands you another chance to be admired for something that terrified you while you were doing it."

Jerry turned that over alongside everything Boone had already given him, feeling the two pieces of counsel fit together like a matched set. "Feels like everybody's handing me the same warning lately, Chaplain, just in slightly different words."

"That's usually how a man knows it's worth listening to," Foss said, with the ghost of a smile. "When the Lord wants a lesson to land, He doesn't usually settle for saying it once."

* * *

The commendation came through three weeks later — a Silver Star, considerably higher than the Bronze Star from the bridge operation, and word of the citation spread through the wider Special Forces community with a speed that brought visitors to Dak Lien Jerry had never expected to meet: a battalion commander flown in specifically to shake his hand and tour the camp's defenses with a thoroughness that struck Jerry as only partly professional interest and partly, he suspected, simple curiosity about the young sergeant whose name had started circulating well above his actual pay grade; a reporter from an Army newspaper who spent two awkward hours trying to get Jerry to describe his own courage in terms grander than the plain, unglamorous account Jerry kept offering instead, visibly disappointed each time Jerry redirected credit toward Baxter or Alvarez or Boone's years of accumulated training; and, strangest of all to Jerry's own sense of himself, a steady trickle of younger soldiers rotating through the region who had heard some version of his story and wanted, in the particular way soldiers always wanted from men whose reputations preceded them, simply to shake his hand and stand near him for a moment, as though courage were a communicable thing that might rub off through proximity alone.

One visitor in particular stayed with Jerry longer than the rest — a young sergeant named Aldous, barely two weeks in-country, who found Jerry at the demolitions range one afternoon and stood awkwardly at the edge of it for several minutes before working up the nerve to approach.

"Sorry to bother you, Sergeant Gatchell. Heard the story about the listening post. Wanted to ask you something, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

"How'd you know you wouldn't freeze?" Aldous's question came out in a rush, the particular urgency of a man who had clearly been carrying it for some time and needed, badly, to finally voice it to someone who might actually know the answer. "I keep running it in my head, imagining my own first real contact, and I can't make myself believe I'd do what you did. I'm scared I'll just freeze up, when the moment comes, and let people down who needed better from me."

Jerry set down the charge he'd been working on and studied the young man for a long moment, recognizing, in the raw honesty of the question, an echo of his own fear standing in a bunker at Bragg the night before his own first jump. "I didn't know," he said finally. "Not for certain. Nobody knows for certain until the moment actually arrives, Aldous, and anybody who tells you different is selling you something. What I did know, going into it, was that I'd trained hard enough, and trusted the men around me enough, that when the moment came, my body had somewhere solid to stand even if my mind hadn't caught up yet. That's not the same as knowing you won't freeze. It's just about giving yourself the best possible chance not to." He held the young sergeant's gaze. "And for what it's worth — the fear you're describing right now, worrying this hard about whether you'll show up for the men counting on you? That's not weakness. That's exactly the kind of fear that tends to produce the opposite of freezing, once the moment actually comes. It's the men who never worry about it at all who scare me more."

Aldous left considerably steadier than he'd arrived, and Jerry watched him go, remembering Boone's counsel from months earlier and understanding, freshly, exactly how much this valley's

inheritance of hard-won wisdom depended on men like himself being willing to hand it forward honestly, without polishing away the fear to make the story more impressive in the retelling.

Jerry endured the rest of the attention with a discomfort that never fully faded, understanding, thanks to Boone's counsel, exactly how easily this kind of admiration could calcify into an identity a man felt obligated to keep proving, over and over, at whatever cost the valley chose to demand next. He tried, in the moments the attention grew heaviest, to redirect it — toward Baxter, who had held his position and his nerve under a company-strength assault three weeks into his very first tour; toward Alvarez, whose steady hands had saved Y'Sen's leg and very likely his life; toward Boone himself, whose eleven years of accumulated wisdom had shaped every instinct Jerry had drawn on in those thirty desperate meters of open ground.

The reporter, in particular, left Jerry more unsettled than any of the other visitors, pressing repeatedly for language Jerry simply refused to provide — words like fearless and hero and born for this, phrases that fit neatly into the kind of story an Army newspaper wanted to print but that Jerry, mindful of everything Boone and Foss had already given him to consider, felt increasingly certain would do him and every man who read them a genuine disservice.

"Give me something a little more dramatic, Sergeant," the reporter said, notebook open, visibly frustrated by Jerry's insistence on describing his own fear in plain, unglamorous terms. "Readers want to hear about courage, not about a man admitting he was scared the whole time."

"Then your readers are gonna get the wrong idea about what courage actually is," Jerry said, with more edge than he usually allowed himself with a stranger. "I wasn't fearless out there. I was terrified. If you print that I wasn't, you're not just exaggerating a story — you're teaching some eighteen-year-old private reading this paper back home that real courage means not being afraid, and that's a lie that gets men killed, on account of it makes them think something's wrong with them the first time they feel real fear in combat. Print the truth, or don't print my name in it at all."

The reporter did not, in the end, print the story quite the way Jerry had hoped, softening his blunt honesty into something closer to modest understatement rather than the full unglamorous truth Jerry had tried to hand him. But Jerry felt, reading the printed version weeks later when a copy finally reached the camp, a measure of satisfaction that at least the word fearless had not appeared anywhere in the finished piece, a small victory against a mythology he had come, with Boone's help, to actively distrust.

"You keep trying to give the credit away," Mercer observed one evening, watching Jerry deflect yet another visiting officer's praise with a redirection toward the rest of the team. "Gonna run out of places to put it eventually, Georgia. Some of it's just yours. Man's allowed to own what he actually did."

"Doesn't feel like mine to own," Jerry admitted. "Feels like something that happened through me, not something I built on my own. Boone's got a word for it. Grace, maybe, working through a man who didn't have time to think his way out of it."

"Grace or not, you're the one who ran the thirty meters," Mercer said. "God can work through a man same as through anybody, Jerry, but He still needed your legs moving to get it done. Don't let humility talk you all the way out of the credit you earned. Might be its own kind of pride, refusing to let yourself be honored for something real."

Jerry turned that over for a long while, understanding the truth in it even as some deeper instinct resisted fully accepting it, and settled, eventually, on something like a middle ground — gratitude for whatever combination of training and love and grace had carried him across that open ground, alongside an honest acknowledgment that his own two legs, his own choice in the half-second before he moved, had been real and had mattered and were, in whatever small way, genuinely his to claim. It was a balance he would spend the rest of his tour, and in truth the rest of his life, trying to hold steady — neither claiming more credit than the moment deserved, nor refusing so much of it that he denied the plain fact of his own courage, however imperfect and however thoroughly mixed with fear it had actually been.

Baxter, for his part, seemed to settle into his own understanding of the assault more quickly than Jerry expected, and it was watching the young private's transformation over the following weeks — the way he carried himself with a new, hard-earned steadiness, the way the other men on the team had begun to include him in their easy camaraderie as something closer to an equal than a green replacement — that gave Jerry the clearest evidence yet that Boone's counsel had been exactly right. The reputation, left alone, could calcify into something false and heavy. But the actual event underneath it, understood rightly, could become instead a foundation something true and lasting got built upon, in more than one man's life at once.

"You've changed some since that morning," Jerry told him, the two of them cleaning weapons together on a quiet afternoon two weeks later, the same ordinary domestic rhythm that had once loosened Mercer's own guarded history into the open.

"Feel different," Baxter admitted. "Hard to explain how. Like some part of me that was still waiting to find out if it was really cut out for this finally got its answer, and now I don't have to carry the question around anymore." He glanced over at Jerry, something more serious in his young face than had been there on his first day at Dak Lien. "I know now I won't freeze, Sergeant. Whatever else happens the rest of this tour, I know that much for certain. Feels like solid ground to stand on, having that settled."

"That's worth more than any medal, if you ask me," Jerry said, and meant it fully, understanding, in the young man's quiet confidence, an echo of exactly what Boone and Reyes had both been trying to hand him across the whole length of his own tour — that the truest reward this valley offered was never the recognition, however earned, but the durable, load-bearing knowledge of who a man actually was, once tested past the point where pretending was still possible.

He did not know yet, sitting in the fading light of that evening with Mercer's words settling alongside Boone's, how much this same reputation — fearless, the men had started calling him, a word he had never once claimed for himself and had never quite managed to fully shed — would eventually cost him in a different valley entirely, decades removed from this one, when the same men who had once watched him run toward danger without visible hesitation would watch him, twenty years later, unable to run toward anything at all, trapped instead beneath a weight no Silver Star had ever been designed to measure. He did not know that the very story he was living right now — the young sergeant who ran into fire for love rather than fear — would someday become a story his own children only half believed, told to them secondhand by a mother trying to explain to two confused kids why the broken man asleep on the couch had once, a lifetime earlier, been called a hero by men who would have followed him anywhere.

He knew only, that evening, that whatever this valley had drawn out of him thirty meters outside the wire, it had been real, and it had been costly, and it had been, in the truest sense Boone's verse could offer, love. He closed his eyes, listening to the ordinary night sounds of a camp settling back into its uneasy rhythm, and allowed himself, for the length of one long breath, simply to be grateful — for Baxter's life, for Y'Sen's recovering leg, for a father's long-withheld pride finally spoken plain, for a team sergeant and a chaplain and a friend all working in their different ways to keep him honest about what he had actually done and why, and for whatever grace, larger than any single man's courage, had carried all of them through one more impossible morning in a valley that showed no sign yet of running out of ways to test them.

CHAPTER 7

THE WEIGHT OF COMMAND

"Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

— 2 Timothy 2:3

The promotion orders came through in the same resupply pouch as a letter from Sarah and a small tin of cookies from his mother that had, mercifully, survived the journey intact, and Jerry read the single typed page three times before the words fully settled into something he could believe applied to him.

Staff Sergeant Jerry W. Gatchell. Effective immediately.

"Congratulations," Boone said, reading over his shoulder with none of the surprise Jerry himself still felt, his weathered face carrying an expression closer to quiet satisfaction than genuine astonishment. "Been a long time coming, far as I'm concerned. Reyes put the paperwork in after the assault. I signed off on it myself, and I don't sign off on much without meaning every word of my endorsement."

"Feels early," Jerry admitted. "Ten months in-country. Some men wait years for this rank."

"Some men never earn it the way you have, ten years in or ten months." Boone's voice carried none of its usual dry understatement. "Higher's also decided, effective the same orders, that you're taking over as acting team sergeant once my rotation date comes up next month. I'll still be here another few weeks to hand things off proper, but from here on, most of the day-to-day is yours to carry, Gatchell. Wanted you to hear the shape of that from me directly, not read it cold off a piece of paper."

Jerry felt something in his chest that was not quite the pride he expected, a heavier and more complicated sensation settling in alongside it — the recognition, arriving all at once, that the small margin of remove he'd still enjoyed as a senior sergeant under Boone's ultimate authority was about to disappear entirely, replaced by a weight he had, until this exact moment, only ever carried temporarily, for the length of a single patrol or a single crisis, always with the knowledge that it would eventually be handed back. He thought of his own father, briefly, standing at a different kitchen table a lifetime ago, describing command in Korea in the sparse, reluctant fragments Everett Gatchell had ever been willing to offer, and understood, for the first time with anything approaching real clarity, exactly what his father might have meant by the particular silences that had always surrounded those fragments — not evasion, necessarily, but simply the plain difficulty of finding language adequate to a weight this specific and this total.

"You're leaving me the whole team," Jerry said slowly, the reality of it still assembling itself in his mind. "Not just a patrol. The whole team, permanent, for however long I've got left in-country."

"That's about the size of it." Boone studied him with the same unhurried thoroughness that had, over ten months, become as familiar to Jerry as his own reflection. "You ready for that?"

Jerry considered the question honestly, the way this valley had taught him to consider every honest question put to him. "Don't know yet, Sergeant. Guess I'll find out."

"That's the only honest answer there is," Boone said. "Every man who's ever taken this job has given that same answer, whether he said it out loud or not. Nobody's ever ready, not fully. You just find out, one hard day at a time, whether you're carrying it right."

He wrote Sarah that night with a lightness he hadn't felt in weeks, the promotion still fresh enough to outweigh, for the moment, the deeper weight he could sense gathering somewhere just beyond it. Staff Sergeant now, he wrote. Team sergeant inside the month, once Boone rotates home. I keep waiting to feel as proud as I probably ought to feel, and mostly what I feel instead is a kind of vertigo, like a man who's climbed higher up a ladder than he meant to and has only just now looked down to measure the distance. I trust the men who decided I was ready for this more than I trust my own read on

it some days. I suppose that's probably a healthy kind of humility, and I suppose it might also just be plain fear. Hard to always tell the two apart out here.

Sarah's reply, when it finally caught up with him, carried the particular steadiness he had come to rely on more than he sometimes admitted even to himself. I don't doubt for one minute that you're ready, she wrote. I've watched you grow into this, one letter at a time, for almost a year now, and the man writing me these days is not the same boy who left Georgia so certain of everything because he hadn't yet been tested on any of it. Certainty was never really the mark of readiness, Jerry. I think humility might be a far better one, and by that measure, you're more ready than you'll probably ever fully believe yourself to be.

* * *

The weeks that followed Boone's announcement brought Jerry's first real taste of what full command actually meant, stripped of even the partial cover a senior sergeant's presence had always provided, and he discovered, faster than he expected, that the weight Boone had warned him about was not a single dramatic burden but something more insidious — a thousand small decisions accumulating hour by hour, each one small enough to seem manageable in isolation and heavy enough, taken together, to press down on a man's chest like something physical.

There was the daily calculus of patrol assignments, deciding which men went where and on what missions, knowing that every choice carried some fraction of risk he was, in effect, assigning to other human beings on his own authority. There was the endless administrative weight of supply requisitions and training schedules and intelligence assessments, work that had none of the clarity of combat and all of the consequence, since a poorly scheduled resupply or an overlooked intelligence report could cost lives just as surely as a mistake made under fire. There was the delicate, constant work of managing relationships — between the Americans and the strike force troops, between individual personalities within his own small team, between Dak Lien and the layers of higher command whose priorities did not always align with what Jerry, on the ground, understood the valley to actually require.

A typical day, once Boone had begun formally handing off his own responsibilities, ran from before first light until well past dark, and Jerry found himself, more than once, genuinely startled by how much of command had nothing whatsoever to do with the combat that had defined his first ten months in-country. There were requisition forms to review and sign, arguing on paper with a supply officer three echelons up the chain who seemed convinced Dak Lien's demolitions consumption rate was excessive despite Jerry's careful documentation of every gram expended. There was a dispute between two strike force squad leaders over patrol rotation fairness that required the better part of an afternoon and Y'Blul's careful translation to fully untangle, each man convinced his own squad had drawn a disproportionate share of the most dangerous routes. There was intelligence to review, cross-reference, and weigh against operational plans that Jerry alone now bore final responsibility for approving, work that carried none of combat's clarity and all of its consequence, a mistake buried in a stack of paperwork every bit as capable of costing lives as a mistake made under fire.

And there was, underneath all of it, a loneliness Jerry had not fully anticipated, a specific and total isolation that came from being the man every other man on the team now looked to for the final word on every question that mattered, with no one above him in the immediate chain who fully shared the particular texture of what he was carrying.

The squad-leader dispute, in particular, taught Jerry something about command he had not anticipated needing to learn — that fairness itself, under conditions of genuine scarcity and genuine danger, was rarely a simple matter of splitting risk evenly down the middle. One squad leader, a proud and capable young Rade fighter named Y'Ngo, argued forcefully that his men had drawn the harder routes three patrols running. The other, older and more soft-spoken, countered that Y'Ngo's squad was simply better rested, having missed the worst of the recent malaria outbreak that had thinned his own

squad's available manpower. Jerry listened to both arguments in full, resisting the urge to simply split the difference for the sake of expediency, and ultimately ruled in Y'Ngo's favor on the immediate rotation while committing, in writing, to a revised schedule that accounted for both squads' actual manpower rather than their nominal strength. Neither man left entirely satisfied, which Jerry was beginning to understand was often the actual signature of a fair decision rather than evidence against one.

"You've gone quiet lately," Mercer observed one evening, three weeks into Jerry's new responsibilities, the two of them sharing a rare off-duty hour that Jerry had spent, Mercer pointed out, mostly staring at nothing rather than actually resting. "Used to talk my ear off some nights. Lately I have to drag two full sentences out of you."

"Lot on my mind," Jerry said, which was true and also, he recognized even as he said it, a deflection of exactly the kind Boone had once warned him against.

"That's not an answer, Georgia. That's a door closing." Mercer's voice carried an edge of genuine concern beneath the familiar teasing cadence. "We said something to each other, back during the flood, about not carrying things solo. I'm starting to wonder if you've forgotten it, now that you've got sergeant's stripes and a whole team looking to you."

Jerry felt the observation land harder than he expected, a small, uncomfortable recognition of exactly the pattern he'd been slipping into without fully noticing it — the particular, seductive logic that told a man in command that his burdens were now categorically different from an ordinary soldier's, too large and too consequential to hand to anyone else, even a brother who had already proven, in a flood-swollen stream, exactly how far he was willing to go to carry a piece of Jerry's weight. It was a logic that felt, from the inside, less like a choice than like simple maturity — the sober recognition, he told himself, of a rank and a responsibility that genuinely had changed, rather than a retreat dressed up to look like growth. It would take him considerably longer than this single conversation to recognize how thoroughly those two things could resemble each other from the inside, and how much damage a man could do to himself and everyone who loved him while sincerely believing he was simply being strong.

"Haven't forgotten it," Jerry said slowly. "Just — it's different now, Bulldog. Every decision I make, somebody's life is riding on it, one way or another. Feels wrong, somehow, handing pieces of that off to anybody, even you. Feels like I'm the one who's supposed to carry it, on account of I'm the one the Army decided should be carrying it."

"That's pride talking, same as it was pride talking when I first told you about my daddy," Mercer said, not unkindly, but with a directness that Jerry recognized as the particular gift of a friendship old enough to survive real honesty. "Command don't mean you're the only one allowed to feel the weight of it, Jerry. Means you're the one who has to make the final call. Different thing entirely. You can still hand me the fear, and the doubt, and the three in the morning worrying you're doing this wrong, without handing me the actual authority to decide. I'm not asking to make your calls for you. I'm asking you to let me carry some of what carrying them costs you."

* * *

The distinction Mercer drew that evening lodged in Jerry's mind, but it would take a harder lesson than a single conversation to fully teach it to him, and that lesson arrived twelve days later, on a resupply run that should have been, by every measure Jerry's ten months of experience could offer, entirely routine.

It was a simple mission — escorting a supply convoy of strike force porters along a well-traveled trail to a smaller outpost eight kilometers south, ground the team had covered dozens of times without significant incident, and Jerry had assigned it to a four-man element led by a young sergeant named Corporal Walt Higgins, a demolitions specialist who had rotated in six weeks earlier and had, in that

short time, impressed Jerry with a competence and steadiness that made the assignment feel, at the time Jerry made it, like the least risky decision on that day's entire roster.

Jerry had briefed Higgins himself that morning, running through the route and the timeline with the same careful thoroughness he brought to every mission he assigned, and had felt, watching the young corporal shoulder his ruck and move out through the wire with the easy confidence of a man who had already completed a dozen similarly routine missions, nothing but ordinary professional satisfaction at a job properly prepared for. That was, Jerry would understand only in retrospect, exactly the problem — that ten months of routine had worn smooth a specific vigilance that the trail itself no longer seemed to require, a complacency so gradual and so reasonable that no single point along the way offered itself as an obvious place where a different decision might have changed anything.

The mine had been buried recently enough that the strike force point man's careful scanning had missed it, an improvised device triggered by pressure rather than tripwire, positioned with a patience and precision that told Jerry, reviewing the after-action details later, that whoever had planted it had studied this particular stretch of well-worn trail and understood exactly how routine and unremarkable it had become to the patrols that used it. The radio traffic that followed came through in the flat, controlled cadence every man on the team had learned to use for exactly this kind of report, a discipline that Jerry had once found reassuring and now, receiving it about a man he had personally briefed six hours earlier, found almost unbearably clinical.

Higgins died before the med-evac chopper could reach him.

* * *

Jerry received the radio report at the operations hut, and felt something drop through the center of his chest that was entirely unlike anything he had experienced in the ambush at the bridge or the assault on the camp itself — not the acute, adrenaline-fueled fear of active combat, but something colder and more total, the specific horror of a commander learning that a decision he had made at a desk, in the ordinary quiet of an ordinary morning, had resulted in the death of a man under his authority.

Baxter found him there too, that same evening, drawn by some instinct or by word already spreading through the camp of what had happened, and sat down without asking permission, in an echo of exactly the gesture Mercer had once used with Jerry himself.

"Heard about Higgins, Sergeant. I'm sorry. I know he trained you some, back when you were still finding your feet with demolitions."

"He did." Jerry hadn't expected the young private's presence to help, and found, a little to his own surprise, that it did anyway, simply by being there. "You're not on duty. Didn't need to come find me."

"Figured somebody ought to sit with you a while, same as you sat with me after the assault, back when I still had blood and mud all over my hands and didn't know what to do with what was in my chest." Baxter's voice carried a steadiness that had grown considerably since his first uncertain weeks in-country. "Don't have to talk, if you don't want to. Just didn't think you should be out here by yourself tonight, Sergeant, whatever rank you're carrying now."

Jerry looked at the young man beside him — steadier now, more capable, a small living testament to everything Jerry had poured into him over the preceding months — and felt something in his chest ease slightly, the particular relief of watching an investment of love and patience pay dividends he hadn't expected to see returned quite so directly, quite so soon.

* * *

"It's not your fault," Boone told him that evening, finding Jerry sitting alone outside the operations hut long after the rest of the camp had settled into its uneasy nighttime rhythm. "That trail's been swept a hundred times without incident. Wasn't a reckless call. Wasn't even an unusual one. Enemy got lucky,

or patient, or both, and a good man paid for it. That's the valley, Gatchell, same as it's always been. Not your failure."

"Feels like my failure." Jerry's voice came out rougher than he intended, the accumulated strain of the past weeks finally cracking through whatever composure he'd been maintaining. "I picked that route. I picked Higgins for that patrol. If I'd sent somebody else, or routed it different, or—"

He stopped, unable to finish the sentence, and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes for a long moment, the posture of a man trying, physically, to hold something together that had already come apart somewhere inside him. "I keep running it back, Sergeant. Every version. What if I'd sent the patrol an hour later. What if I'd rotated Higgins onto a different mission and put somebody else on that trail instead. What if I'd trusted my gut when it flagged that stretch as slightly overdue for a fresh sweep, three weeks back, instead of letting it slide down the priority list on account of nothing had happened there in months. There's a hundred different versions where he's still alive tonight, and I can't find my way past any of them."

"And if you had, the mine would've killed whoever else you sent instead, most likely, on account of it was planted for that trail generally, not for Higgins specifically." Boone's voice held firm, refusing to let Jerry's spiraling logic take hold uncontested. "I need you to hear something plain, son, on account of I've watched this exact kind of thinking eat good commanders alive from the inside, worse than any bullet ever could. Command means you make the best decision available to you with the information you actually have. It does not mean you become personally responsible for every possible outcome that decision might have produced, including the ones no reasonable man could have foreseen. That's not humility, thinking that way. That's a kind of pride dressed up as guilt — the pride of believing you should have had God's own foreknowledge available to you, sitting at a desk with a map and a radio."

* * *

Writing the letter to Higgins's family fell to Jerry, as the young sergeant's immediate commander, and it proved to be, in its own quiet way, harder than anything the past ten months of combat had demanded of him.

He sat with a blank page for the better part of an hour before the first sentence would come, understanding, with a weight that settled into his chest like a physical thing, that whatever words he chose next were going to become, for a mother and perhaps a wife or sweetheart back in some town Jerry had never visited and would never see, the single most important account they would ever receive of exactly how their son or husband had died, and exactly what kind of man had been in command of him when it happened.

He wrote of Higgins's competence, his steadiness under the pressures of a war that spared no one the particular strain of adjusting to it. He wrote, carefully, of the routine nature of the mission, wanting the family to understand that their son had not died through recklessness or poor judgment, his own or anyone else's, but through the plain, indiscriminate cruelty of a war that made no promises about which missions carried genuine risk and which did not. And he wrote, near the end, something he had not originally planned to include but that arrived, once he began writing it, with a certainty he trusted completely.

Your son died doing exactly what he was trained to do, competently and without hesitation, on a mission that a hundred other patrols had completed safely before his. I was his commanding officer, and I want you to know that I have thought of little else in the days since, and that I will carry the weight of this loss for the rest of my own life, alongside whatever weight you are now carrying yourselves. I do not say this to ask anything of you, or to make my own grief your burden on top of everything else this letter is already asking you to carry. I say it only because I believe you deserve to know that your son's death was not received here as a statistic, or a line in a report, but as the loss of a genuinely good man, mourned by every soldier who served alongside him.

He sealed the letter and sat with it a long while before finally sending it forward through the appropriate channels, understanding, in the particular ache that settled over him afterward, exactly how many more letters like this one he might be called upon to write before his tour, or this war, was finally finished.

A reply came back nearly two months later, forwarded through the same slow military mail system that carried everything else across the ocean, and Jerry opened it with hands that were not entirely steady, uncertain what kind of response a grieving family might send back to the officer whose decision had, however unavoidably, resulted in their son's death.

Higgins's mother had written it herself, in a careful, old-fashioned hand that reminded Jerry, with a small ache, of his own grandmother's letters. Thank you for your honesty, Sergeant Gatchell, she had written. I have received other letters from other commanders, for other losses in this family across two wars now, and I want you to know that yours was the first that did not read like a form filled out by a stranger. My Walter spoke of you in his own letters home, more than once, always with respect, sometimes with something close to admiration. He believed he was serving under a good man. I choose to believe my son's judgment on that score, even now, especially now. I do not blame you for his death, Sergeant. I hope, in time, you will find your way to not blaming yourself either, though I understand from my own husband, who carried similar weight home from his own war, that this kind of hope is easier extended to others than claimed for oneself.

Jerry read the letter more times than he could later account for, and carried it, from that day forward, alongside Sarah's photograph and his New Testament and the small carved bead from Rmah's mother, one more weight that had become, through the strange alchemy this valley kept working on him, something closer to a gift than a burden — not because it erased the grief, which it did not, but because it confirmed, in Higgins's mother's own careful hand, that the honesty Jerry had fought so hard to offer had actually landed where it was needed, rather than simply disappearing into the vast, impersonal machinery of a war that swallowed so many individual griefs into anonymous statistics.

* * *

The nightmares began that same week, though Jerry did not immediately recognize them for what they were, dismissing the first few disrupted nights as ordinary exhaustion rather than the beginning of something that would, in one form or another, follow him for the rest of his life.

They took no single consistent shape. Some nights it was Higgins's face, unremarkable in life and somehow more vivid in dream than Jerry's waking memory could produce, asking questions Jerry had no adequate answer for — a simple, repeated why, delivered without accusation, which somehow made it harder to bear than anger would have. One recurring version placed Jerry back at the morning briefing, running through the route with Higgins exactly as he actually had, except that in the dream he could see the buried mine clearly, obviously, impossible to miss, and yet found himself unable to make his dream-self's mouth form the warning, watching his own silence send the young corporal walking toward it anyway, again and again, the same fifteen seconds looping without mercy until Jerry woke gasping, disoriented, uncertain for several long seconds which version of the morning had actually been real.

Some nights it was a formless dread with no specific content at all, simply the sensation of being responsible for something catastrophic that he could not quite identify or prevent, waking with his heart hammering and his sheets soaked through despite the relatively mild highland nights. And some nights, worst of all, it was simply the accumulated weight of every decision he had made since taking command, replaying itself in an endless, anxious loop that offered no resolution and no rest — every patrol assignment, every route selected, every man's name on every roster he now bore final responsibility for, cycling through his exhausted mind with a relentlessness that daylight activity, however demanding, never quite managed to fully silence.

He said nothing of it to anyone for nearly two weeks, out of a stubbornness he was only partially aware he was practicing, until Mercer — who had begun, without saying so directly, watching Jerry with the particular attentiveness of a man tracking a friend's decline — finally forced the issue on a slow afternoon between patrols.

"You're not sleeping," Mercer said, no preamble, the two of them alone at the demolitions range. "I can see it in your face, Jerry. Same look my uncle used to get, back home, after he came back from his own war. Man wears exhaustion different than ordinary tired. You've got the different kind."

Jerry considered denying it, the same instinct that had kept him silent for two weeks already, and found, looking at his friend's honestly worried face, that he no longer had the energy to maintain the deflection. "Nightmares," he admitted. "Higgins, mostly. Sometimes just — everything, all at once. Hard to explain."

"Don't need to explain it perfect. Just need to stop carrying it alone." Mercer's voice had none of its usual lightness, replaced entirely by the same steady seriousness Jerry remembered from the flood-swollen stream, from the ridge above the ambush. "Remember what I told you, about the fear and the doubt not needing to be yours alone to carry, even if the decisions are? This is exactly what I meant, Georgia. You've been sitting up every night with Higgins's ghost by yourself, when you've got a whole team of men who'd gladly sit up with you, if you'd let them."

"Doesn't feel right, waking you up at three in the morning to sit with a nightmare I can't even fully explain."

"Didn't ask you to wake me up at three in the morning. Asked you to stop pretending you're managing fine at breakfast the next day when you're plainly not." Mercer's jaw set in the particular stubborn line Jerry recognized from every card game the man had ever refused to concede gracefully. "There's a whole lot of room between suffering alone in silence and waking a man up in the middle of the night, Jerry. You could just — talk to me. In the daylight. Same as I've talked to you, about my daddy, about all of it. Costs you something to say it out loud, I know that. Costs less than what it's currently costing you to keep swallowing it whole, though, if the look on your face most mornings is any honest measure."

Jerry sat with that a long moment, turning it over, and found the resistance in him finally cracking, not from any single argument but from the plain accumulated weight of a friend who had already proven, more than once, exactly how far he was willing to go to help carry a burden that wasn't technically his to carry. "Higgins was maybe twenty-three," he said finally, the words coming slow at first and then faster, as though a valve somewhere in his chest had finally given way. "Had a girl back in Ohio he talked about all the time, wanted to marry her the second he got home. I keep seeing his face in the dream, asking me why, and I don't have an answer for him, Bulldog. Don't have an answer I actually believe, even though Boone and Reyes both keep telling me there isn't supposed to be one."

"There isn't one," Mercer said quietly. "Not the kind you're looking for. War doesn't hand out answers, Jerry, just costs. But you don't have to sit with that cost by yourself at three in the morning anymore. That much I can actually do something about."

* * *

Jerry brought the burden, finally and fully, to Boone two nights later, in what would prove to be one of their last extended conversations before Boone's rotation date arrived, and found the old team sergeant waiting for the confession with the particular patience of a man who had clearly been expecting it for some time.

"Took you longer to come to me than I figured it would," Boone said, settling onto the familiar ammo crate outside the commo bunker. "Wondered if you'd let this fester till it broke something important before you finally said anything."

"Didn't want to seem weak," Jerry admitted. "Team's looking to me now, Sergeant. Feels like the wrong time to start showing cracks."

"That right there is exactly backward, and I want to correct it plain before I rotate out of here and you're carrying this without me able to correct it in person anymore." Boone's voice carried a real urgency, the particular intensity of a man determined to leave behind the most important lesson he had left to give. "Paul writes to Timothy — young man, first real command of his own, church at Ephesus, more responsibility than his years had prepared him for, not unlike your own situation — and he doesn't tell him command means suffering alone to prove his fitness for the job. He tells him something else entirely. 'Endure hardship with us, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.' With us, Gatchell. Not alone. Not in some private silence a commander's supposed to maintain to look strong for his men. Paul's letting Timothy know that even an apostle, even a man commissioned directly by the risen Christ, understood hardship as something meant to be endured in company, not solitude."

"Everybody I've ever watched command men well — Reyes, you, even Voss back at Bragg — carried it quiet," Jerry said. "Never saw any of you fall apart in front of the team."

"Carrying it quiet in front of the team and carrying it entirely alone are two different things, and I think you've confused them, these past two weeks." Boone leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "I don't fall apart in front of this team, that's true. But I've had a chaplain I write to every month, same as you have. I've had my own version of Mercer, over eleven years, different men in different postings, somebody I trusted enough to hand the weight to when it got past what one man's shoulders were built for. Reyes has his own wife back home he writes things to that never make it into an official report. Every man worth following has a place he sets the weight down, Gatchell, even if his team never sees him do it. The mistake isn't showing strength in front of your men. The mistake is believing strength means having nowhere at all to set the weight down, ever, ever, for the whole length of a war. That's not strength. That's just slower suicide, dressed up in a uniform."

* * *

Jerry sat with that phrase — slower suicide, dressed up in a uniform — longer than almost anything else Boone had ever handed him, understanding, even without fully grasping the shape of what still waited for him decades down the road, that his old team sergeant had just named something true and dangerous that Jerry would need considerably more than one conversation to fully absorb.

He began, in the weeks that followed, small and deliberate practices that felt, at first, almost embarrassingly simple against the scale of what he was carrying — a nightly habit of actually speaking his day's weight aloud to Mercer, rather than simply enduring it in silence, even on nights when nothing particularly dramatic had happened to report. The two of them fell into a rhythm of sitting together for twenty minutes each evening before final watch rotations, Jerry running through whatever had weighed on him that day, sometimes at length and sometimes in only a sentence or two, and Mercer mostly just listening, occasionally offering a question or an observation but rarely trying to solve what didn't need solving so much as simply sharing.

There was a return, too, to Boone's Sunday evening studies, now led by Chaplain Foss's own recommendation by a soft-spoken supply sergeant named Corwin who had, it turned out, once studied for the ministry himself before enlisting, and who brought his own careful, thoughtful reading to texts Jerry had grown accustomed to hearing exclusively in Boone's flat, unhurried cadence. The studies felt different under Corwin's leadership, gentler in places where Boone had tended toward blunt directness, but Jerry found, attending with the fuller attention his exhausted weeks had previously made difficult, that the underlying nourishment remained essentially the same — a room full of frightened, tired men choosing, week after week, to remind each other that they were not carrying any of this entirely alone.

And there was a commitment, made privately and kept imperfectly, to write Sarah with more of the real texture of his days rather than the carefully managed version he'd begun defaulting to as

command's demands increased, a discipline that cost him something every time he sat down to practice it, the old instinct to protect her from the weight still fighting, most evenings, against the newer instinct Boone and Mercer had both worked so hard to instill in him.

Reyes called him into the operations hut the following week, and Jerry arrived expecting another operational briefing, only to find the young captain seated behind his desk with an unusually personal expression, a bottle of whiskey Jerry had never seen produced on the compound before sitting unopened between them.

"Sit down, Sergeant. This one's not official business." Reyes poured two careful measures once Jerry had settled into the chair across from him. "I'm rotating home in six weeks. Figured you should hear it from me directly, same as Boone gave you the courtesy, rather than reading it off orders."

Jerry felt a fresh wave of the same vertigo he'd experienced at his own promotion, the ground shifting yet again beneath a structure he'd only just begun to feel steady standing on. "Who takes over the team, sir?"

"Captain coming in from Fifth Group headquarters, good reputation, I'm told, though I don't know him personally." Reyes turned his glass slowly, not yet drinking. "I want to say something to you before I leave this valley, Gatchell, and I want you to actually hear it rather than filing it away as just another commanding officer's parting speech." He met Jerry's eyes directly. "I've watched you carry more in the past two months than most sergeants carry in a full career, and I've watched it cost you something real — I'm not blind, whatever you've managed to keep off your face in front of the men. Higgins's death wasn't your failure. I've read every page of that after-action report myself, three times over, looking specifically for anything I could have flagged differently in how I structured this command, anything that might shift even a fraction of that weight off your shoulders and onto mine, where some of it honestly belongs. I couldn't find it. That mission was sound. The mine was simply patient, and the war is simply cruel, and neither of those facts is yours to carry as personal failure, whatever your own conscience keeps insisting in the middle of the night."

"Doesn't always listen to reason, my conscience," Jerry admitted.

"No conscience worth having ever does, entirely," Reyes said. "But I'd rather leave this valley knowing you're at least fighting it with the right ammunition, instead of alone and unarmed." He finally lifted his own glass. "To Higgins. And to every man who walks out that wire under your command from here forward, that they'd have the good fortune of a sergeant who takes their lives as seriously as you take yours."

Jerry drank the toast, the whiskey harsh and unfamiliar in his throat, and felt, in the small ceremony of it, something that was neither quite comfort nor quite absolution, but a kind of company in the weight that made the weight itself, for one quiet evening at least, marginally easier to bear. He would think back on that evening many times in the years ahead, in circumstances he could not have imagined sitting across from Reyes in that operations hut — a glass raised in shared grief, among men who understood exactly how much a single drink could and could not accomplish, was a different thing entirely from the version of drinking that would, decades later, nearly cost him everything he had left to lose. The difference, he would come to understand far too late to spare himself the hardest years of learning it, lay not in the whiskey itself but in whether a man drank it in company, to honor a real and specific grief, or alone, to escape one that had gone too large and too formless to name.

* * *

Chaplain Foss, on his next monthly visit, spent the better part of an hour with Jerry specifically, once word of Higgins's death and its aftermath had reached him through the usual channels, and offered a piece of counsel that Jerry would return to many times over the following months.

"A commander who believes he must be invulnerable is a commander setting himself up to eventually fail the men who need him most," Foss told him, "on account of invulnerability is not

actually available to any human being, however senior his rank, and the longer a man pretends otherwise, the harder and more total the eventual collapse tends to be, when it finally comes. Paul's word to Timothy wasn't a suggestion, Sergeant. It was a command, same as any order you'd give one of your own men. Endure hardship with us. Not might, if convenient. With us. I'd encourage you to treat it with the same seriousness you'd treat any direct order from someone senior to you, because in every meaningful sense, that's exactly what it is."

"I keep thinking about the rest of that chapter too," Jerry said. "Paul goes on to talk about a soldier not getting entangled in civilian affairs, an athlete competing according to the rules, a farmer working hard before he gets his share of the harvest. Feels like he's building toward something bigger than just enduring hardship."

"He is," Foss agreed, clearly pleased that Jerry had pressed further into the text than the single verse Boone had first handed him. "Three pictures, one right after another — soldier, athlete, farmer — and each one's teaching something slightly different about what faithful endurance actually looks like in practice. The soldier reminds you that your job is to please the one who enlisted you, not to please yourself or even, always, the men around you, when those two things pull in different directions. The athlete reminds you that hardship endured outside the rules doesn't count for anything — a man can suffer plenty and still be suffering for the wrong reasons, chasing glory instead of faithfulness. And the farmer reminds you that some harvests are slow, Sergeant. A man plants in one season and reaps in another, and the waiting in between isn't wasted time, however much it might feel that way to a farmer standing in an empty field in the dead of winter." Foss studied him. "I suspect you're standing in your own empty field right about now, Gatchell, wondering whether any of what you're planting — the patience, the honesty with Mercer, the discipline of carrying this well instead of carrying it alone — is actually going to amount to a harvest worth having. I can't promise you when that harvest comes. I can promise you Paul wasn't wrong about the principle. Faithful endurance, in season, reliably produces a harvest in its own time. Doesn't always look like what a man expects it to look like, when it finally arrives."

* * *

The team held an informal send-off for Boone the evening before his departure, a considerably more subdued affair than the Fourth of July celebration months earlier had been, though it carried its own particular warmth — Mercer producing a bottle he'd been saving for exactly this occasion, Alvarez offering a toast that started humorous and ended, unexpectedly, with the normally unflappable medic's voice cracking slightly on the last few words, and Y'Blul, on behalf of the strike force troops, presenting Boone with a hand-carved walking stick that the old sergeant accepted with a gravity that told Jerry plainly how much the gesture meant to him, whatever gruff understatement he offered in response.

"Eleven years I've been doing this," Boone told the assembled group, his own composure cracking just slightly around the edges as the evening wore on. "Watched a lot of teams come and go. Buried more men than I ever want to count again, and carried a fair number of them home in my own memory even after their bodies made the trip without me. This team—" He stopped, cleared his throat, and started again. "This team's the one I'll carry longest, I expect. Not on account of anything special about the mission, or the terrain, or the enemy we've faced here. On account of the men. Every single one of you." His eyes found Jerry's across the fire, and held there a beat longer than the general remarks required. "Watching a green sergeant grow into the kind of commander I'd trust with my own life, without hesitation, in the space of less than a year — that's not something a man forgets, wherever the Army sends him next. Take care of each other after I'm gone. That's the whole of my parting order, gentlemen, and I expect every one of you to follow it same as you'd follow any other."

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Boone rotated out three weeks later, on a gray, humid morning that felt, to Jerry, considerably heavier than the occasion of a routine departure should have warranted, though he understood, watching his old team sergeant's chopper lift away from the pad for the final time, that the weight belonged less to the morning itself than to everything the departure represented — the last visible link to the version of command Jerry had once been allowed to share, however partially, with someone more experienced than himself.

"You've got this, Gatchell," Boone told him, in the last private moment before the chopper's arrival cut their conversation short. "Not on account of you're fearless, or invulnerable, or any of the things this valley likes to pretend a good commander needs to be. On account of you've learned, faster and more honestly than most men manage in a full career, that the weight of command was never meant to be carried solo. Keep leaning on Mercer. Keep writing that girl the truth. Keep showing up to whatever Sunday study Reyes lets somebody else run once I'm gone. And when the weight gets past even all of that — and it will, someday, no war lets a man off that easy — keep remembering there's a Commander over both of us who already carried a cross so that neither one of us would ever have to carry our own weight entirely alone, whatever the Army's org chart might suggest otherwise." He extended his hand, and Jerry gripped it hard, the gesture, the inheritance, passed now fully and finally into his own keeping. "Endure hardship with us, son. Not instead of us. With us. However far apart this war eventually scatters every man who's ever stood beside you."

He wrote Sarah that same evening, the letter coming easier than most of his recent correspondence had, the weeks of deliberate practice finally producing something like fluency in the particular honesty he had once found so difficult to sustain.

Boone left today, he wrote. I stood at the wire and watched his chopper climb away and felt something I wasn't fully prepared to feel — not just gratitude, though there was plenty of that, but something closer to grief, the specific grief of losing daily access to a man who taught me nearly everything I know about carrying weight without being crushed by it. I'm the team sergeant now, fully, with nobody left standing between the decisions and me. I won't pretend that doesn't scare me. But I think, for the first time since this whole promotion started, that I actually believe I can carry it — not alone, which is the whole point Boone spent his last weeks here trying to drill into me, but with the people this valley has given me. Mercer, mostly. Some nights just sitting with him for twenty minutes, telling him the plain truth of a hard day, does more to steady me than anything else I've tried. I used to think command meant becoming the kind of man who didn't need that. I understand now it means becoming the kind of man honest enough to keep needing it anyway, and wise enough not to let pride talk him out of asking.

I lost a good man three weeks ago, Corporal Higgins, on a mission I sent him on myself. I wrote his family a letter I hope did some small justice to the kind of soldier he was. I still think of him most nights, some version of guilt that logic keeps telling me isn't fully mine to carry and that some deeper, less reasonable part of me carries anyway. Our chaplain tells me that's not weakness, that no commander gets to fully escape it, and that the goal was never to stop feeling the weight but to learn to carry it without it eventually crushing something essential in me. I'm trying, Sarah. Some days better than others. I wanted you to know the real shape of what these past weeks have looked like, not just the version that fits neatly into a proud letter home. I trust you with all of it, same as I've trusted you with everything else this war has handed me so far.

That evening, sealing the letter, Jerry found himself thinking back over the whole arc of the day — the chopper's final departure, Mercer's quiet presence beside him in the swirling dust, the particular ache of a debt too large to ever fully repay directly — the same ache Y'Sen had once tried to name for him, a debt a man could only pass forward, to whoever needed it next, for as long as he had strength left to keep passing it.

He did not know yet how many more such debts this valley intended to hand him before his tour was finished, or how many more letters like Higgins's he would be called upon to write, or how

thoroughly the lesson Boone had just left him — endure hardship with us, not alone — would eventually be tested by losses even this hard-won wisdom would struggle to absorb. He did not know that the very practices he was building now, so deliberately and at such cost — the twenty minutes with Mercer each evening, the Sunday studies, the honest letters home — would one day be the exact practices a different kind of war stripped away from him first, isolating him long before the addiction itself ever fully took hold, a man who had once known precisely how to carry hardship in company slowly forgetting, over twenty hard years, that he had ever known it at all.

He knew only, watching the empty sky where the chopper had disappeared, that he intended to carry Boone's final counsel as faithfully as he had carried every other piece of wisdom this valley had handed him, one impossible day at a time, for as long as the war required it of him, and for however long afterward it turned out he still needed it, in a life he could not yet begin to imagine on the far side of this one.

CHAPTER 8

BLOOD IN THE RIVER

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way."

— Psalm 46:1-2

The intelligence that brought Jerry's team to the banks of the Dak Poko River arrived with a confidence that, in hindsight, should have worried him more than it did — a reported NVA logistics element, understrength and lightly defended, moving supplies across a ford that had been used for exactly this purpose for at least two months without significant American interference. Higher wanted the crossing interdicted and the supply column destroyed, and Jerry, three months into full command of the team, planned the operation with the same careful thoroughness Boone had once drilled into him, running every contingency he could imagine through a mind that had grown considerably more disciplined than the one that had planned the bridge demolition a year earlier.

He could not have imagined, studying the map in the operations hut two nights before the mission, that the "understrength" element higher's intelligence described was, in fact, a full company reinforced with heavy weapons, positioned not to move supplies across the ford but to defend it, having anticipated with unsettling precision exactly the kind of interdiction mission Jerry's team had been tasked to run.

Captain Marsh Weller, the officer who had replaced Reyes three months earlier, brought a different command style than Jerry had grown accustomed to under his predecessor — more deferential to higher headquarters' assessments, less inclined to push back on intelligence he had no independent way to verify, a pattern Jerry had noted with quiet unease more than once since the new captain's arrival but had not yet found sufficient cause to formally challenge.

"Higher's confident in this one, Sergeant," Weller told him, reviewing the operational plan a final time. "Aerial reconnaissance corroborates the ground source. Should be a clean interdiction."

"With respect, sir, aerial recon missed a full company dug in at that camp assault eight months back," Jerry said, choosing his words with the particular care he'd learned to bring to disagreements

with an officer he did not yet know well enough to fully trust with his own unfiltered instincts. "I'd like to build in a wider margin for reassessment once we're on the ground, if that's agreeable."

"Approved," Weller said, though something in his tone suggested he considered the caution more procedural formality than genuine necessity. "You've got a strong record out here, Gatchell. I trust your judgment on the ground. Just don't let caution cost us the window higher's given us for this window. There's real value in that supply column if intelligence has it right."

Jerry left the briefing with the same uneasy compromise he would spend the following days regretting — a captain's trust in his judgment, undermined by that same captain's subtler pressure toward the timeline over the instinct, and no Boone or Reyes left in the chain of command with enough accumulated authority to have overridden either one of them before the crossing began.

Y'Blul reviewed the plan with him the evening before, the young lieutenant's own instincts sharpened by eighteen months of hard-won experience into something Jerry had come to trust nearly as fully as he'd once trusted Boone's. "Something troubles me about this ford," Y'Blul said, tracing the map with a finger that had grown steadier and more confident since the frightened young private Jerry had first carried out of a listening post over a year earlier. "Too quiet, in the reports. My hunters who move through this valley speak of much traffic near this crossing these past weeks. Traffic large enough to need many soldiers guarding it, not few."

"Higher's confident in the source," Jerry said, though he heard, even as he said it, an echo of the same uneasy deference to timeline pressure that would haunt him in the days ahead. "We'll move cautious regardless. Staggered crossing, security on both flanks, and if anything looks wrong, we fall back before we're committed."

"I trust your caution, Sergeant, more than I trust higher's source." Y'Blul's eyes carried a weight that Jerry would only fully understand in hindsight, a warning delivered as plainly as this careful, respectful young officer knew how to deliver one without directly contradicting an operational order from an ally he had come to genuinely admire. "My father taught me this before the war took him. A river that looks empty is sometimes only a river that has learned patience."

Jerry studied the young lieutenant a long moment, weighing the warning against the operational pressure Weller had already made plain, and felt the familiar tension of a commander caught between two legitimate claims on his judgment — a superior officer's confidence in intelligence Jerry had no independent means to verify, and a trusted ally's instinct, honed by a lifetime in this valley, that something about the coming mission did not sit right. He would replay this exact moment more than once in the weeks that followed, wondering whether a different decision, made here in the quiet of an evening briefing rather than at the chaotic edge of a swollen river, might have spared eleven families the grief that was, at this moment, still three days away and entirely unknown to any of them.

"We'll build in every margin of caution the mission allows," Jerry said finally. "I hear you, Y'Blul. I take it seriously. I just don't have grounds yet to override the operation entirely, not without more than an instinct to set against a confirmed aerial source."

"I understand, Sergeant. I only ask that you remember I offered the warning, whatever comes of the crossing." Y'Blul's voice carried no accusation, only a plain, sober honesty that Jerry would carry with him long after the young lieutenant had finished speaking. "Not to blame you, if trouble finds us. Only so that trouble, if it comes, does not surprise you entirely unprepared for the shape of it."

* * *

"Whatever's waiting for us at that ford," Chaplain Foss told him, on a visit that happened to fall the evening before the operation, "I want to leave you with something before you cross it." He found the passage in his own worn Bible, Isaiah, and read it slowly, the words settling over Jerry with a weight that felt, even before the mission began, like preparation for something larger than an ordinary patrol. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will

not sweep over you.' I don't offer that as a guarantee against danger, Sergeant. I've buried too many good men to make that kind of promise to anyone. I offer it as a promise about presence, same as every other verse this valley's handed you these past fourteen months. Whatever waters you cross tomorrow, you will not cross them alone."

* * *

They moved out before dawn, forty-one men total — Jerry's full American element of six, reinforced by two full strike force platoons under Y'Blul's command, now a seasoned young lieutenant in his own right after eighteen months of hard-won experience — and reached the ford a little after 0700, the Dak Poko running high and fast with the last heavy rains of the season, brown and swollen and considerably more formidable than the maps had suggested it would be at this time of year.

Jerry studied the crossing from the tree line with a caution that had become instinctive over fourteen months of learning this valley's particular cruelties, and found nothing in the far bank's quiet, unremarkable vegetation to suggest the concentration of force that intelligence had promised would be lightly guarded at most. Birds called undisturbed in the canopy across the water. The current moved with the same steady, unhurried indifference it had likely carried for a thousand years before this war existed, entirely unbothered by the human calculations about to unfold across its surface. That quiet, he would understand only in retrospect, was itself the clearest warning the morning had offered him, and he had, in the press of a mission already running behind its planned timeline, failed to weigh it as heavily as fourteen months of experience should have taught him to.

"Looks clear," Mercer said quietly, beside him, scanning the far bank through field glasses. "Too clear, maybe."

"Thought the same thing," Jerry admitted. "Command's confident in the intelligence, though, and we're already running late on the window higher wants this hit inside." He felt, even as he said it, a small private unease at deferring to timeline pressure over his own instinct, a compromise he would spend a great deal of the rest of his life regretting having made. "We cross in two elements, staggered, security on both flanks the whole way. First sign of trouble, we fall back to this tree line and reassess."

* * *

The first element was perhaps two-thirds across the ford, water churning at chest height around the strike force troops in the lead, when the far bank erupted.

It was, from the very first seconds, an ambush of a scale and coordination Jerry had never faced — not the platoon-strength engagement of the bridge or the company-strength assault on the camp itself, but something closer to a full battalion's worth of prepared, disciplined fire opening simultaneously from concealed positions along nearly two hundred meters of the far bank, heavy machine guns interspersed with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades in a volume of fire that turned the river's surface, within the first ten seconds, into a churning field of impacts that made the water itself look as though it had come to a full, violent boil.

"CONTACT FRONT, MASSED FIRE!" Jerry's own voice, shouting the warning across chaos already too loud for any single voice to fully cut through, and he watched, with a horror that would remain the single worst image of his entire tour, as men in the water — his men, men he had trained and trusted and led across this same ford a hundred times in his own mind's careful planning — began falling, the current pulling wounded and dead alike downstream in a spreading, terrible stain that the brown water did nothing to hide.

Though the earth give way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam. Jerry did not consciously summon the verse; it simply arrived, unbidden, cutting through the chaos with a strange, terrible clarity, the words from Boone's psalm and now Foss's promise both

converging in his mind at the exact moment the earth, quite literally, seemed to be giving way beneath everything he had built and trusted over fourteen hard months.

A young strike force soldier named Y'Dhon, no older than seventeen and barely three months into his own service, had been carrying the point element's radio pack when the ambush erupted, and Jerry watched, in the strange suspended clarity that seemed to descend over him in exactly these moments, as the boy turned back into the worst of the fire to drag a wounded comrade twice his size toward the nearer bank, absorbing two rounds himself in the process before finally collapsing into the shallows still gripping the wounded man's harness, refusing even in his final moments to let go of the life he had chosen to save. Jerry would learn Y'Dhon's name only that evening, at the accounting of the dead, and would carry the image of that small, fierce refusal to release his grip for the remainder of his own life, one more debt this valley had handed him that no medal would ever adequately repay.

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"Fall back! Fall back to the tree line, second element cover the withdrawal!" Jerry's orders came fast and clear despite the roaring chaos, fourteen months of accumulated instinct producing a tactical response his conscious mind barely had time to fully formulate before his voice was already broadcasting it, but the withdrawal, when it came, proved far more costly than any of the fighting withdrawals he had led before — the open water offering no cover at all, every foot of retreat conducted under fire from a position that had every advantage of preparation, elevation, and numbers.

Halvorsen's automatic weapon chattered from the near bank in long, sustained bursts, buying precious seconds for the men still struggling through the current, and Baxter — no longer the wide-eyed private of a year earlier but a hardened, capable soldier in his own right now — moved along the shallows dragging wounded men toward cover with a steadiness that Jerry, even in the middle of his own desperate crossing, registered with a fierce and complicated pride. Whitfield worked the radio from a shell crater he'd dropped into for cover, his voice never once losing the flat, controlled cadence Jerry had first admired in him over a year earlier, calling for air support with a discipline that would, in the after-action review, earn him a commendation of his own.

Jerry moved back and forth across the shallows twice more before Mercer's wound pulled his full attention away from the broader tactical picture, hauling a wounded strike force soldier clear on one pass and helping a young strike force squad leader recover a fallen comrade's weapon on another, every trip back into the open water a fresh negotiation with a fear that never once fully receded, only ever got set aside for the length of the next desperate task.

He saw Delgado go down midway through the crossing, the young radio operator who had served alongside him since Robin Sage, since a lifetime ago in a North Carolina training exercise that had felt, at the time, like the hardest thing either of them would ever face — struck twice in rapid succession, first in the shoulder and then, as he struggled to keep his head above the churning water, a second round that took him clean through the chest, and Jerry watched, from forty meters away and utterly unable to close the distance in time, as his friend's body went still and the current carried him under.

There was no time to grieve it, not then, not with a dozen other men still fighting for their lives in the water around him, and Jerry felt something in himself go cold and terribly efficient in a way that frightened him even as it kept him functioning — a version of himself he had never met before, capable of watching a friend die and simply continuing to issue the orders that might yet save the men still living.

The current itself seemed almost complicit in the carnage, Jerry would think later, dragging bodies and wounded men alike downstream with the same indifferent force it had always carried, brown water running progressively darker as the battle wore on, until the river itself had become, by the time the fighting finally slackened, a physical record of exactly how much this single morning had cost — a

sight Jerry knew he would carry in his mind for the rest of his life, however many decades separated him from this particular stretch of jungle water.

He would remember, in the days that followed, small fragments of Delgado that had nothing to do with the manner of his death — the young radio operator's habit of humming old Mexican folk songs under his breath during long stretches of radio silence on patrol, the careful, patient way he'd once spent an entire off-duty afternoon teaching Baxter to properly maintain a PRC-25, the letter he'd shown Jerry proudly six months earlier announcing the birth of a niece back in San Antonio he would now never meet. These fragments arrived unbidden and out of order in the days ahead, a mind's stubborn insistence on remembering a whole person rather than simply the moment of his ending, and Jerry found himself grateful for them even as they compounded the grief, understanding that a man reduced only to the manner of his death had been robbed of something further, something Jerry refused to let this war take from Delgado's memory if he could help it.

* * *

Mercer took his wound perhaps ninety seconds later, a burst of automatic fire catching him across the chest and shoulder as he laid covering fire for a strike force squad struggling to drag a wounded comrade toward the near bank, and Jerry's whole world narrowed, in that instant, to a single point of absolute, overriding focus that burned away every other consideration entirely.

"BULLDOG!" The scream tore out of him with a rawness he had never produced before, not even in the worst moments of the bridge ambush or the camp assault, and he was moving before the scream had fully left his throat, plunging into the churning, blood-darkened water with a disregard for his own safety that he would only fully understand, examining it afterward, as the precise inverse of the calculated courage he had shown at the listening post months earlier — not love outweighing fear in careful balance, but something closer to a man who had, for one total and consuming moment, stopped weighing anything at all.

He reached Mercer in the water and found his friend conscious but fading fast, blood spreading dark through the river's already crimson current, and hauled him toward the near bank with a strength he did not know his exhausted body still possessed, every round cracking past them both a fresh, specific terror that Jerry simply refused to let slow him down, the same instinct that had once carried him thirty meters of open ground now carrying him through water that fought his every stride.

The current worked against him constantly, dragging at both their bodies with a force that made every step forward cost twice what it should have, and Jerry felt his boots slipping on a riverbed made treacherous by silt and blood alike, going down once to his knees and hauling Mercer's full weight back up with a desperate, wordless effort that tore something in his shoulder he would not fully assess until days later. Rounds stitched the water on either side of them, close enough that he felt the impacts as much as heard them, small violent geysers erupting inches from his face, and somewhere in the chaos he became distantly aware that he was still praying, the words tumbling out disjointed and half-formed between labored breaths — Lord, my refuge, my strength, an ever-present help, don't let go, don't let go of either one of us.

"Stay with me. Stay with me, Bulldog. I've got you. I've got you." He repeated it like a prayer, because it was one, the same desperate, unpolished honesty that had once carried a young Y'Blul's name through the mud months earlier, and found himself murmuring, without conscious decision, the verse that had lodged itself in his chest the night before. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. You hear me? Not letting the waters sweep you under. Not today."

* * *

They made the near bank with Alvarez already waiting, having established a hasty aid station the moment the ambush erupted, working over three other wounded men simultaneously with a triage

discipline that Jerry, even in his own desperate focus on Mercer, registered with a distant, grateful awe — the medic's hands never once fumbling, his voice never once losing its clipped, essential calm even as the casualties mounted around him faster than any single man should reasonably have been expected to manage. Two strike force medics worked alongside him, trained originally by Alvarez himself over the preceding year, moving with a competence that spoke to exactly how much this team had built, together, in the time since Jerry's own first uncertain months in-country. Jerry watched the medic's hands move over Mercer's wounds with a speed and focus that carried none of Alvarez's usual measured calm, a clear signal, even through Jerry's own adrenaline-flooded senses, of exactly how serious his friend's condition actually was.

"Sucking chest wound," Alvarez said, working a seal over the entry point with hands that, despite the urgency, did not shake. "Collapsed lung, maybe both. I need him on a bird in the next fifteen minutes or I lose him, Jerry. I mean that plain."

"Then get him on a bird." Jerry's voice came out with an authority he did not entirely feel, the tactical picture around him still catastrophically unresolved, gunfire still crashing across the river in waves, men still fighting and dying in the water and along both banks. "Whitfield! Where's my air support!"

"Inbound, Sergeant! Six minutes!"

Six minutes felt, in that moment, like the longest span of time Jerry had ever been asked to endure, kneeling beside Mercer with one hand pressed against his friend's good shoulder, watching the color drain steadily from a face he had known since a doorway at Fort Benning a lifetime and a war ago, while the rest of the engagement raged around them in a chaos Jerry could spare only fragments of his attention to manage.

"Don't you dare," Jerry told him, low and fierce, close enough to be heard over the noise. "Don't you dare leave me carrying this war without you in it, Tom. I mean it. Fight."

Mercer's eyes, glassy with shock and blood loss, found his and held, and something that might have been the ghost of his old easy grin moved across his gray face. "Told you," he managed, the words barely audible. "Two are better than one, Georgia. Ain't planning on breaking that arrangement over one bad river crossing."

* * *

The gunships arrived at the six-minute mark exactly, and the engagement's tide turned with a suddenness that felt, to Jerry's exhausted mind, almost disorienting after the sustained, total chaos of the preceding half hour — miniguns and rocket fire pouring into the far bank's prepared positions with a violence that finally, mercifully, began to suppress the volume of fire crashing across the river, and Jerry organized the withdrawal of every remaining man, wounded and unwounded alike, back into the tree line with a discipline that surprised even himself, given the raw grief already beginning to press up beneath the tactical focus he was fighting to maintain.

Mercer went out on the first med-evac flight, unconscious now but alive, and Jerry watched the chopper climb away with a desperation that felt, in its intensity, almost identical to the fear he'd felt watching a similar aircraft carry Boone away nearly a year earlier — except that this time, some deeper and more total part of him understood, with a certainty that made his knees nearly buckle, that he had come within a margin of seconds of losing the truest brother this war had ever given him.

The final accounting, assembled over the following exhausted hours, confirmed what Jerry had already begun to feel in his bones standing on that riverbank: three Americans killed, including Delgado, four wounded including Mercer; eleven strike force troops killed, seventeen wounded, out of the forty-one men who had crossed that ford at dawn believing they were interdicting a lightly defended supply column. Captain Weller, reviewing the numbers with Jerry that evening in a conversation considerably more subdued than their briefing three days earlier, offered no defense of the

intelligence that had led them there, only a quiet, genuine acknowledgment that the caution Jerry had requested and received should perhaps have carried more operational weight than either of them had ultimately allowed it. It was, by any measure this valley had yet offered him, the single bloodiest engagement of Jerry's entire tour, and he sat that evening at the edge of the wire, staring at the darkening water in the distance, understanding that no medal the Army might see fit to offer him for that day's leadership would ever come close to touching the actual weight of what the river had cost.

* * *

He wrote Delgado's family that same night, unable to sleep and unwilling to delay a task that felt, with every passing hour, like a debt he owed more urgently than any other. The letter came harder than Higgins's had, the grief still too raw and too total to fully organize into the careful, measured sentences a grieving family deserved, and Jerry rewrote it four times before he trusted the words enough to send them.

He was the steadiest radio operator I ever served alongside, he finally wrote, present at nearly every mission this team has run since I first arrived in this country, and I do not believe I would have survived my own first year in-country without his calm voice on the other end of a handset more times than I can count. He died doing his job with the same competence he brought to it every single day, in the middle of the worst engagement I have led in fourteen months of command, and I want you to know that his death was not in vain — his steadiness under fire that morning, right up until the moment he fell, held our formation together long enough to save considerably more lives than were lost. I do not say that to lessen your grief, which I know nothing I write can touch. I say it because I believe you deserve to know exactly what kind of soldier, and what kind of man, your son was in the moments that mattered most.

He thought, sealing the letter, of every previous letter he had written to a grieving family since taking command — Higgins's mother, and now this one — and understood that he had become, over these fourteen months, a kind of custodian of grief he had never trained for and never expected to carry, a role every bit as demanding as any tactical responsibility this valley had handed him, and one that would, he suspected, outlast the war itself in the particular way it had reshaped him.

He set the letter aside and sat for a long while with his own worn New Testament, turning past the passage Foss had given him to a psalm he had not yet fully explored, drawn to it now by an instinct he did not fully understand until he began reading. Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.

He thought, reading it, of David's own life at the time this psalm was apparently written — a man hunted, betrayed by those closest to him, drowning in circumstances no amount of faith had spared him from enduring in full. It struck Jerry as significant, turning the pages back and forth between this raw lament and the sturdier confidence of the forty-sixth psalm just a few pages earlier, that the same book could hold both truths without apparent contradiction — refuge and drowning, confidence and despair, sometimes within the very same volume of a single man's collected prayers. He understood, for the first time with any real clarity, that faith as this valley had taught it to him was never a single fixed posture a man adopted and maintained without variation, but something closer to a conversation, honest and ongoing, that made room for whichever psalm a given season of grief actually required.

Some nights, he suspected, a man needed Boone's sturdy confidence — God is our refuge and strength, though the earth give way. Other nights, like this one, he needed David's raw honesty instead — save me, for the waters have come up to my neck. Scripture, he was beginning to understand, offered both, not as contradictory options but as companions for the different terrains of the same long journey, and a wise man learned which one a given night actually called for, rather than forcing every grief into the same tidy shape.

He read it twice through, and found in its raw, unguarded desperation something he had not found in any of the sturdier, more triumphant psalms Boone had once favored — a permission, long overdue, to simply be as overwhelmed as he actually felt, without needing to immediately resolve that grief into some tidier lesson about God's faithfulness. The psalm did not rush toward comfort. It sat, for verse after verse, in the full weight of drowning, and Jerry understood, reading it in the aftermath of a river that had very nearly taken his closest friend and had, in fact, taken three good men including one he had known since before this war began, that Scripture itself seemed to make room for exactly this kind of unresolved grief, rather than demanding he move past it before he was ready.

* * *

Jerry flew down to Nha Trang two days later, the moment operational necessity allowed it, and found Mercer in the same hospital ward Boone had once occupied, pale and heavily bandaged but breathing on his own, awake, and — Jerry felt something in his chest finally, fully unclench at the sight of it — grinning weakly the moment he saw Jerry come through the door.

"Heard you dragged me clean across a river," Mercer said, his voice still thin but carrying enough of its old familiar warmth to bring Jerry, unexpectedly, to the edge of tears. "Heard you did it under about the heaviest fire this whole war's produced. Boone would've had something to say about a man risking that much for one wounded friend, I expect."

"Boone would've done exactly the same thing, and you know it." Jerry pulled a chair up beside the cot, his hands, he noticed distantly, still not entirely steady three days after the fact. "Lost Delgado out there, Tom. And eleven of Y'Blul's men. Worst day this team's ever had."

Mercer's grin faded, replaced by a grief that Jerry recognized as a mirror of his own. "I know. Alvarez told me, once I was steady enough to hear it." He was quiet a moment, his gaze drifting to the ceiling. "Feels wrong, being the one who lived, some days. Man Delgado's caliber, gone, and I'm lying here complaining about a chest tube."

"Don't do that," Jerry said, more sharply than he intended, recognizing in his friend's words the same corrosive logic that had nearly consumed him after Higgins's death months earlier. "Don't you dare start carrying guilt for surviving, Bulldog. That's not yours to carry, same as Boone told me Higgins wasn't mine alone to carry. You didn't take anything from Delgado by living. The war took him. Different thing entirely."

Mercer studied him for a long moment, something shifting behind his tired eyes. "That's rich, coming from a man who's spent the better part of a year trying to shoulder every loss this valley's handed him personally."

"Learning better," Jerry said, and found, saying it, that he mostly believed it. "Slowly. Boone's lessons take a while to fully land, some of them. Working on this one in real time, if I'm honest."

He stayed with Mercer the better part of that afternoon, the two of them trading fragments of the crossing between long, comfortable silences, and it was near the end of the visit that Mercer, his voice thin but steady, said something that stayed with Jerry longer than almost anything else from that hospital ward.

"You know I saw you coming for me, out there in the water. Before I went under all the way. Saw you plain as anything, fighting that current like it owed you money." He managed a weak, genuine smile. "Wasn't scared anymore, once I saw you. Knew right then I wasn't drowning alone, whatever else happened next."

"Wasn't going to let you," Jerry said, his own voice rough.

"I know that now. Knew it then too, matter of fact. Some promises a man doesn't have to say out loud more than once, Georgia. You made yours a long time ago, back when you carried Boone off that trail. Didn't need reminding." Mercer's eyes drifted half-closed, exhaustion finally catching up with

him. "Two are better than one. Preacher was right about that from the very first Sunday he read it to us. Right about near everything, matter of fact, ornery old goat that he is."

Jerry left the hospital that evening with something in his chest that felt, for the first time since the crossing, closer to hope than to grief — not a resolution of the grief, which he understood by now was not going to resolve quickly or perhaps ever fully, but a genuine, steadying gladness that sat alongside it, proof that this valley had not, this time, taken everything it might have. He walked the short distance back to the airstrip beneath a sky just beginning to color with the last of the evening light, and found himself, for the length of that quiet walk, simply grateful, without qualification, for a friend still breathing four thousand miles from home and a war he could not yet see the end of.

* * *

Chaplain Foss flew out on an unscheduled visit four days after the crossing, a break from his usual monthly rhythm that Jerry understood, the moment he saw the aircraft touch down, as a deliberate act of pastoral urgency rather than routine.

"Heard about the river through channels I probably shouldn't have access to," Foss told him, settling onto the familiar ammo crate outside the operations hut. "Figured a week was too long to wait, this time."

"Appreciate you coming, Chaplain."

"I gave you a verse before that crossing, Sergeant. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. I've been sitting with the fact that men still drowned in that promise, in every sense but the strictly literal one, and I wanted to come look you in the eye and make sure you weren't quietly deciding the promise had failed you." Foss's voice carried none of its usual measured calm, something rawer and more urgent beneath it. "It didn't fail, Jerry. I need you to hear that plainly, even though I know it doesn't feel that way yet. The promise was never that the water wouldn't be dangerous, or that men wouldn't die in it. It was that you would not cross it alone. And you didn't. Not for one single second of that crossing. Whatever else that morning cost this team, it didn't cost you the presence the promise actually offered."

Jerry sat with that a long moment, turning it over alongside everything else this week had handed him to carry. "Feels like a fine distinction some days, Chaplain, standing here with Delgado's letter already sent and Mercer still in a hospital bed."

"It is a fine distinction," Foss agreed. "Nearly every true thing worth holding onto in this life turns out to be a fine distinction, once a man's actually standing inside the grief that makes it hard to see clearly. I'm not asking you to feel the comfort of it yet. I'm only asking you to trust that it's there, waiting for you, the way solid ground waits for a man even while he's still treading water and can't yet feel it under his feet."

* * *

Boone's letter arrived a week later, forwarded from wherever the Army had stationed him stateside, having heard some version of the river crossing through channels Jerry never fully traced, and it carried, even across the distance of an ocean and a rotation home, the same unhurried certainty that had once steadied Jerry through his very first firefight.

I heard about the river, Boone wrote, in a hand considerably less practiced than his spoken counsel had always been, the words of a man more comfortable with a rifle than a pen. Wanted you to hear from me before too much time passed. What happened out there wasn't a failure of your command, Gatchell, whatever that voice in your head is currently telling you at three in the morning. Intelligence was wrong. Enemy was prepared and patient, same as they were for Higgins's mine, same as they always are when a valley's had enough time to learn a unit's habits. You made the calls available to you with the information you had, and you got considerably more men home alive than a lesser sergeant

would have managed under that volume of fire. I know that won't feel like comfort yet. Wasn't meant to, not yet. Just wanted it said plain, from a man who's watched enough rivers run red in his own time to know the difference between a commander's failure and a war's plain cruelty.

Remember the tenth verse of that psalm you're probably carrying around in your head right about now, if it's the one I think it is. Be still, and know that I am God. Hardest verse in the whole book, some days, for a man built the way you're built. Stillness doesn't come natural to a soldier, Gatchell, and it sure doesn't come natural to a commander still replaying every decision from a battle three days gone. But there's a season for stillness same as there's a season for action, and I think you're standing in it right now, whether you feel ready for it or not. Let yourself be still long enough to grieve Delgado proper, and to be grateful proper for Mercer still drawing breath, before the next mission asks something new of you. This valley will keep coming. It always does. But it can wait a few days for a man to grieve what it just took from him.

I think of Delgado plenty myself, since I heard. Good radio man. Better than good — steady enough that I never once had to double-check his traffic, which is about the highest compliment I know how to pay a commo sergeant. I remember him teaching a green private the proper way to net a radio during his very first week in-country, patient as anything, back before you'd even earned your own stripes on this team. Man leaves a mark on a valley like this one whether the Army ever writes it down in a citation or not. I want you writing his mark down anyway, Gatchell, in your own memory if nowhere else, same as I know you already did for Higgins. Don't let this war reduce him to a line in a report. That was always the whole point of everything I ever tried to teach you about carrying this weight rightly.

* * *

Jerry took Boone's counsel as seriously as he had ever taken anything, and spent the following week in a deliberate, disciplined stillness that felt, at first, almost as difficult as the battle itself had been.

He sat with Y'Blul in the strike force compound as the young lieutenant organized funeral rites for his eleven fallen men, a ceremony that stretched across two full days and drew mourners from villages Jerry had never visited, grief laid bare in the same unhidden, communal way he remembered from Rmah's funeral a lifetime earlier. Y'Blul spoke for a long while over the gathered dead, his own composure cracking more than once, and translated a portion of it for Jerry afterward, once the worst of the ceremony had passed.

"I told them what I believe, though not all here share my faith," Y'Blul said quietly. "I told them of a promise from your Scripture that a missionary once taught my mother, before the war took the mission from this valley. That weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes in the morning. I do not know when this morning comes, Sergeant, for eleven families who buried sons and husbands and fathers this week. But I choose to believe it comes, even so. My father taught me this too — that a man may plant grief in the evening and still, in some season he cannot yet see, reap a harvest of joy he was not wise enough to expect."

Jerry thought of Foss's own words about seasons and harvests, delivered weeks earlier in a different context entirely, and felt the two teachings converge into something larger than either alone had offered him. "I believe it too," he told Y'Blul, and found, saying it aloud beside a man who had just buried eleven of his own soldiers, that the words cost him something real to say and meant something real for having cost him.

He attended Corwin's Sunday study that same week with his full attention, writing Sarah a letter longer and more unguarded than any he had yet sent her, and returning, again and again, to the raw, unresolved honesty of the sixty-ninth psalm alongside the sturdier comfort of the forty-sixth, holding

both truths together the way this valley kept teaching him that faith, at its most honest, always eventually required.

I don't have a tidy lesson to offer you this time, Sarah, he wrote. I've tried, in every letter since I landed in this country, to find some way to make sense of what this war keeps costing, some verse or some piece of wisdom that resolves the grief into something bearable. I don't have that this time. We lost eleven strike force soldiers and three Americans at a river crossing five days ago, one of them a friend I've served beside since before I ever set foot in this country, and Mercer nearly died in the same water, and I am still, five days later, simply sitting in how much that costs, without any verse yet available to me that makes it make sense. I found a psalm this week that doesn't try to make it make sense either — just sits in the drowning, verse after verse, without rushing toward comfort. I think that might be the truest thing Scripture's ever handed me. Not every grief resolves quickly, or ever fully, into a lesson a man can carry forward neatly. Some of it a man just has to carry, unresolved, trusting that the God who promised to be with him in the water didn't stop being present just because the water turned out to be as deep and as bloody as it did.

I love you. I'm still standing, and Mercer's still breathing, and I'm trying to let that be enough gratitude for one week, without demanding it also be a lesson.

Sarah's reply to his letter arrived nearly six weeks later, having crossed an ocean the way all their letters did, and Jerry opened it expecting, based on her usual steady grace, some measure of comfort he did not entirely feel prepared to receive.

I don't have a tidy lesson for you either, she wrote, and I'm not going to pretend I do just to make this letter easier for either of us. I read about that psalm you found, the sixty-ninth, and I looked it up myself in my own Bible, and I want you to know I sat with it a long while too, four thousand miles away and unable to do one single thing to ease what you were carrying except read the same words you'd read and let them do whatever work they were going to do in me. I don't think grief like this is supposed to resolve quickly, Jerry. I think the men who taught you that — Boone, your chaplain — are right that some of it just has to be carried, unresolved, for a good long while, maybe forever, in some form. I don't say that to discourage you. I say it because I think there's a strange kind of relief in finally being told the truth about how heavy a thing actually is, instead of being handed false comfort that doesn't match the weight. I'd rather carry the real weight of loving a soldier who tells me the truth than the false lightness of one who protects me from it. You already know I feel that way. I'm just telling you again, because I suspect a man drowning in grief needs to hear a true thing more than once before it fully lands.

I'm grateful beyond words that Mercer is alive. I'm holding Delgado's family in prayer, and Y'Blul's eleven families too, though I never met a single one of them and never will. I'm holding you too, Jerry, every single day, exactly as heavy as you actually are right now, not some easier version I'd prefer to imagine instead.

He read her letter three times, the way he'd once read Higgins's mother's reply, and found in it something that steadied him more thoroughly than any single verse had managed on its own — the simple, durable knowledge that someone four thousand miles away had chosen, deliberately and at real cost to her own peace of mind, to carry the true weight of loving him rather than a comfortable fiction, and that this choice, repeated letter after letter across nearly two years now, had become its own kind of refuge, sturdier in its way than even the river had been dangerous.

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The Army, in its own separate accounting of the crossing, saw fit three weeks later to award Jerry a second Silver Star, this one with a citation describing his rescue of Mercer under sustained fire in language that struck Jerry, reading it, as almost obscenely tidy against the actual chaos and grief the words were meant to represent. The ceremony itself was brief and formal, conducted by a visiting

colonel in front of an assembled formation that included, prominently, the empty spaces where Delgado and Y'Dhon and the other fallen men should have been standing, and Jerry accepted the medal with a hollow, distant courtesy that surprised him with its own flatness, none of the complicated pride he'd felt after the listening post rescue a year earlier making any appearance at all this time.

"Feels different than the last one," he admitted to Baxter afterward, the two of them walking back from the formation together.

"Because it should," Baxter said, with a wisdom that Jerry noted, not for the first time, had grown considerably beyond his years over the preceding fourteen months. "Last time, everybody lived, Sergeant. Made the medal feel like it was celebrating something whole. This time—" He didn't finish the sentence, and didn't need to.

"This time it's just a piece of ribbon pinned onto a hole that's never gonna fill back in," Jerry said quietly.

"Something like that." Baxter was silent a moment. "Doesn't mean it wasn't earned, though. Doesn't mean what you did in that water wasn't real, or wasn't brave, or didn't matter. Just means the world's got a habit of handing a man tidy rewards for things that never come tidy in the first place. I don't think that's the medal's fault, or yours either. I think it's just the shape of this whole war, if I'm honest."

Jerry turned that over the rest of the walk back to his own quarters, understanding, in Baxter's plain assessment, something true about the entire arc of his tour so far — that every medal this valley had pinned on his chest had arrived, without exception, alongside a cost that made the recognition feel less like celebration and more like a marker, a small metal record of exactly how much a given morning had taken from him and from every man who'd stood beside him in it. He thought of his father's own unworn medals from Korea, kept in a small box at the back of a closet Jerry had discovered by accident as a boy and never mentioned to anyone, dusty and forgotten in a way that had once struck young Jerry as almost disrespectful, a treasure carelessly stored. He understood now, with a clarity that felt like inheritance rather than mere observation, exactly why a man might choose to keep such things out of sight rather than displayed with pride. Some honors, once truly earned, became too heavy to look at often, and too important to ever throw away — a paradox Jerry suspected he would spend the rest of his own life learning to hold, the same way his father apparently had, in a box at the back of some closet not yet built.

He sealed the letter and looked out at the river, invisible now beyond the dark treeline but present in his mind with a permanence he suspected would outlast this war by decades, and understood, sitting there in the deliberate stillness Boone had counseled him toward, that some scars this valley left behind were never going to be the kind a medal could touch, however earned, however deserved. They were simply going to be carried, the way this psalm was carried, unresolved and honest, for as long as memory itself endured.

CHAPTER 9

THE ONES HE COULDN'T SAVE

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

— Psalm 34:18

Captain Weller called it a routine reconnaissance, the kind of mission Jerry's team had run a hundred times over the preceding sixteen months, and on paper it read exactly that plainly: a five-man element, moving light and fast, tasked with confirming the location and strength of an NVA staging area ahead of a larger battalion-level operation planned for the following week. Eyes on, report back, avoid contact if humanly possible. Jerry had planned dozens of missions with a similar profile, and had led most of them himself.

This one, Weller informed him two days before it was scheduled to launch, Jerry would not be leading.

"I need you here coordinating the larger operation's logistics," Weller said, laying out the timeline with the brisk efficiency that had, over the preceding months, become his signature style. "Battalion wants your read on the staging area's terrain the moment the recon team reports back, and I need my team sergeant available at the radio, not three days out in the bush unreachable when I need his judgment most. Sergeant Baxter's ready for this. You've trained him yourself for nearly a year and a half. Trust your own work, Gatchell."

Jerry did trust his own work. That was, in the end, precisely why he agreed to the arrangement with less resistance than some deeper instinct, one he would spend the following two decades trying to fully articulate, was already quietly raising against it — a small, wordless unease that he dismissed, at the time, as nothing more than an old commander's reluctance to hand off responsibility he had simply grown too accustomed to carrying personally.

"Baxter can handle it," Jerry told Weller, and believed it fully. "He's earned this."

He had. That fact would make what followed no easier to carry, in all the years ahead. If anything, it would make it harder.

He found Baxter that same evening at the demolitions range, running a final equipment check with the same careful thoroughness Jerry had once drilled into him, and sat with him a while, going over the mission profile one more time out of an instinct he told himself was simple professional diligence.

"Nervous?" Jerry asked.

"Some. Good kind, though, I think." Baxter checked a magazine, seated it, checked it again. "Feels different, leading it myself instead of following your lead. Want to make sure I do it the way you'd do it."

"Don't do it the way I'd do it," Jerry said. "Do it the way you've learned to do it. You've got your own instincts now, Baxter. Trust them. That's the whole point of everything the past year and a half was building toward."

Baxter looked up at him, something steady and grateful in his young face. "Wouldn't have any instincts worth trusting if you hadn't spent that year and a half building them into me, Sergeant. Whatever happens out there, I want you to know I know that."

Jerry would return to that exact exchange more times than he could count in the years ahead, turning over the strange, unbearable weight of a young man expressing gratitude for training that would, within forty-eight hours, cost him his life — wondering, in his darkest hours, whether some better version of himself might have heard a warning in Baxter's words that the version of himself sitting on that ammo crate had entirely missed.

* * *

The recon team moved out at 0400 on a Tuesday, five men into a stretch of jungle Jerry had walked himself a dozen times before — Baxter in command, a strike force sergeant named Y'Kong as his second, three additional strike force troops rounding out the element, all of them men Jerry had trained personally, all of them soldiers he trusted as fully as he trusted his own instincts.

He watched them cross the wire from the operations hut, Baxter turning back once to offer a confident, easy salute that carried none of the anxious uncertainty of the frightened eighteen-year-old

private who had once stood on this same helipad barely able to hold Jerry's gaze, and felt, watching it, a swell of genuine pride that he would remember, in the terrible days that followed, with a particular and total anguish — pride that had felt, in the moment, like simple confirmation of a job well done, and that would come to feel, in retrospect, like the last unbroken thing he had possessed before the world came apart.

The five men disappeared into the treeline within minutes, swallowed by the same green wall that had swallowed Jerry's own first patrol nearly a year and a half earlier, and he stood at the wire a while longer than the moment strictly required, watching the empty trail as though some part of him already sensed, however faintly, that this particular departure carried a weight the others hadn't. He told himself it was simply the natural anxiety of handing off a mission he would ordinarily have led himself, and returned to the operations hut to begin the day's logistics work, unaware that he had just watched Kenny Baxter walk out of his life for the final time.

"They'll be fine," Mercer told him that evening, the two of them reviewing the larger operation's logistics together in the operations hut, Mercer fully recovered now from the river crossing but carrying, Jerry had noticed, a new gravity in his manner that the old easy humor no longer fully masked. "Baxter's sharp. You built him well, Georgia."

"I know," Jerry said. "Doesn't stop the feeling in my gut, though."

"What feeling?"

Jerry considered the question, trying to give shape to something that resisted clear articulation. "Like I should be out there instead of in here. Can't explain it better than that."

Mercer studied him a long moment. "That's just command, Jerry. Feeling like you should always be the one carrying the risk personally. You know that's not sustainable, long term. You taught me that yourself, back when I was worried sick every time you led a patrol without me."

"I know," Jerry said again, and tried, without much success, to let the reassurance settle the unease sitting low in his stomach.

* * *

The first radio contact came the following afternoon, routine and unremarkable, Baxter's voice crackling through the handset with the flat, professional cadence every man on the team had learned to use for exactly this kind of report — position confirmed, staging area located, enemy strength estimated at company size, moving to a secondary observation point to confirm numbers before returning to extraction.

The second contact came four hours later, and it was not routine at all.

"Contact! Contact! We are compromised, taking fire from multiple positions, request immediate extraction and air support!" Baxter's voice, still recognizable but stripped of every trace of its usual steady confidence, carrying instead a raw urgency that Jerry felt in his own chest like a physical blow. "Grid coordinates follow — we are pinned, repeat, we are pinned, taking casualties!"

Jerry was at the radio within seconds, Weller beside him, both men's attention narrowing instantly to the single unfolding crisis. "This is Gatchell, I copy your position, extraction and air support inbound, hold what you've got, Baxter. Talk to me."

"Compromised by what looks like a full company, Sergeant, moving to encircle our position — Y'Kong's hit, I've got two more wounded, we cannot hold this position much longer without support!"

Jerry's mind raced through every option available to him with a speed born of sixteen months of accumulated instinct, even as a colder, more analytical part of himself began, almost simultaneously, cataloging the obstacles standing between Baxter's desperate call and any meaningful help arriving in time to matter.

The first obstacle announced itself within minutes: a storm front that had been building over the mountains to the west all day had, in the preceding hour, closed in with a suddenness the weather

reports had failed entirely to predict, grounding every helicopter within range of Baxter's position under ceiling and visibility conditions that no pilot, however skilled or however willing, could safely fly through.

* * *

"I need those birds in the air," Jerry told the aviation liaison over a separate radio net, his voice carrying an intensity that he did not entirely recognize as his own. "I have five men pinned down and taking casualties."

"Copy your urgency, Sergeant, but ceiling's at two hundred feet and closing, visibility under a quarter mile. I've got three separate units in this valley requesting the same support right now, and I cannot in good conscience send a bird up into that weather. It's not a question of will. It's a question of physics. Any pilot who tries it right now doesn't reach your men. He just adds a downed aircraft to the casualty count."

Jerry understood the logic even as every instinct in him screamed against accepting it, and turned immediately to the second avenue available to him — artillery support from a firebase eleven kilometers distant, close enough, in theory, to range Baxter's position within minutes of a fire mission being approved.

"Fire mission's already committed," the artillery liaison told him, the apology in the man's voice doing nothing to soften the substance of what he was reporting. "Priority target, approved by Captain Weller himself two hours ago, supporting a different element already in heavy contact six kilometers north of your position. I can shift fires once that mission concludes, but I cannot service two priority fire missions simultaneously with the tubes I've currently got available."

Whitfield, working a second handset beside him, tried every alternate channel he could raise, cycling through frequencies for any nearby unit that might have air or artillery assets available outside the two committed channels, his own composure fraying visibly for the first time since Jerry had known him. "Nothing, Sergeant. Every asset in range is either grounded or already committed. I'm sorry — I'm trying every option I've got."

"Keep trying," Jerry told him, though some cold, analytical part of his mind had already begun to understand, even as he said it, exactly how narrow the remaining options had become. He returned to Baxter's frequency, forcing his own voice into a steadiness he did not fully possess. "Baxter, sitrep."

"Holding, Sergeant, but it's getting worse. They're working around our left flank. Y'Kong's losing a lot of blood. I don't know how much longer we hold this position." A burst of static, gunfire audible underneath it. "Just tell me you're working it, Sergeant. Just tell me that."

"I'm working it. Every second, I'm working it."

Jerry turned to Weller, standing beside him at the radio with an expression that had gone gray and taut. "Sir, I need that fire mission redirected. Now."

"That element's been in contact for forty minutes, Gatchell. I can't pull fire support off men already fighting for their lives to support a different element that just entered contact." Weller's voice carried a genuine, visible anguish, the weight of a decision Jerry understood, even in the desperation of the moment, that no commander should ever have to make between two sets of men equally deserving of rescue. "I'm sorry. I am. But I can't choose Baxter's team over Corporal Nash's, not when Nash's men have already been fighting longer and taking heavier losses. That's not a decision I can defend, choosing one dying element over another on anything but the merits."

* * *

Jerry returned to the radio with nothing to offer Baxter but the truth, and found it to be the hardest transmission of his entire tour.

"Baxter, air support's grounded by weather, artillery's committed to another priority mission. I am working every option I have, but I need you to hold and fight, and I need you to know I am not giving up on getting you out of there."

The silence that followed lasted only seconds, though it felt, to Jerry, like considerably longer, and when Baxter's voice came back, it had steadied into something that Jerry would carry with him, unchanged in its exact tone and cadence, for the rest of his life.

"Copy, Sergeant. We'll hold." A burst of gunfire, audible even through the radio's static. "Sergeant — if this goes bad — tell my folks I did the job right. Tell them I wasn't scared, even if that's not exactly true."

"You tell them yourself, Baxter. You're getting out of there." Jerry's own voice cracked on the words, the first time in sixteen months of command he had allowed anything resembling that crack to reach a radio transmission. "Hold on. Help is coming. I promise you help is coming."

He did not know, making that promise, whether it was true. He would spend the rest of his life wrestling with the fact that he had made it anyway, unable to determine, even decades later, whether the promise had been a mercy or a lie, or whether there had ever been any real difference between the two, in the particular circumstances of that terrible afternoon.

* * *

The weather broke, marginally, forty minutes later, and the first gunship lifted off into conditions still dangerous enough that Jerry heard, in the pilot's clipped acknowledgment of the mission, a courage he understood he would owe an unrepayable debt to for the remainder of his life, whatever the outcome. The artillery fire mission, six kilometers north, concluded twelve minutes after that, and the guns swung immediately onto Baxter's position, walking fire onto the encircling enemy force with a speed that the liaison officer, apologizing again even as he confirmed the shift, called the fastest redirect he had ever personally coordinated.

It was not fast enough.

The gunships arrived to find the position overrun, the enemy force already breaking contact and melting back into the jungle ahead of the incoming fire, and the extraction team that followed found three of the five men Jerry had watched cross the wire the previous morning still alive — Y'Kong, badly wounded but breathing; one of the strike force privates, wounded but stable; and a third man, unwounded but in a state of shock so total that he would not speak a coherent sentence for nearly a week afterward.

Baxter and the fifth man, a young strike force soldier named Y'Dro, were not among the survivors.

The extraction pilot, in a radio report Jerry would replay in his own mind more times than he could count over the following weeks, described finding Baxter's body positioned at the forward edge of the overrun perimeter, weapon still in hand, having fallen, by every physical indication the pilot could offer, defending the withdrawal of the men who ultimately survived. It was, in its own terrible way, exactly the kind of death Boone had once described to Jerry as the truest measure of a soldier — not fearlessness, but love outweighing fear at the moment it mattered most — and Jerry found no comfort whatsoever in the fact that his own carefully taught philosophy had, in the end, proven itself so completely true in the manner of his student's dying.

* * *

Jerry received the confirmation standing at the radio in the operations hut, Weller beside him, and felt something inside himself go entirely, permanently still in a way that no combat he had yet survived, however violent, however costly, had ever produced in him before.

He did not weep, not immediately. He did not rage, or curse the weather, or curse Weller's impossible choice between two equally desperate radio calls. He simply stood, for a long moment that

felt to him both instantaneous and endless, absorbing the specific and total weight of a fact that would never, for the rest of his life, fully stop being true: that he had sent a young man he loved like a son into a valley he had chosen not to enter himself, and that young man had died there, calling for help that arrived exactly forty minutes too late.

"Gatchell." Weller's voice, careful and low. "This wasn't your failure. The weather—"

"I know what the weather did, sir." Jerry's own voice came out flat, stripped of the particular urgency that had carried him through the preceding hours. "I need to go write his family."

Weller followed him partway to the door, his own face carrying a weight that Jerry, even in his own devastation, recognized as genuine rather than merely procedural. "Gatchell. I made the call on that artillery mission. Not you. If there's blame to assign in this command tonight, it starts with me, not with the sergeant who did everything right with the information and the assets he actually had available to him."

"Appreciate you saying it, sir." Jerry did not turn back around. "Doesn't change who trained him. Doesn't change who decided to stay behind instead of leading that patrol myself."

"No," Weller admitted quietly. "I don't suppose it does. I'm sorry, Sergeant. For whatever an apology from me is worth to you tonight, which I suspect isn't much."

Jerry left without responding further, understanding even in his own numbness that Weller's guilt, however genuine, was a separate grief from his own and not one he had the capacity, that particular evening, to help carry alongside everything already crushing his own chest.

* * *

He wrote the letter that same night, alone in his quarters, and found it, unsurprisingly, the hardest of the four such letters he had now written since taking command — harder than Higgins's, harder than Delgado's, harder in a way that had nothing to do with the words themselves and everything to do with the specific, unbearable intimacy of the loss.

Your son was the finest soldier I ever had the privilege of training, he wrote, and then stopped, staring at the sentence for a long while before he could make himself continue. I watched him arrive in this country eighteen months ago as a frightened boy, and I watched him become, through his own courage and discipline, one of the finest young men I have ever known, in or out of a uniform. I trusted him with a mission I would have led myself, under different circumstances, and I want you to know that trust was not misplaced. He held his position, and he fought for his men, and his last words to me, transmitted over a radio while he was surrounded and taking fire, were a request that I tell you he did the job right. He did, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter. He did the job better than nearly any soldier I have ever commanded. I am the officer who sent him on that mission, and I will carry that fact for the rest of my own life, whatever comfort or lack of comfort that admission offers you. I loved your son. I am so profoundly sorry.

He sealed the letter with hands that had, for the first time in his tour, gone entirely and uncontrollably unsteady, and sat for a long while in the dark, unable to summon the will to move toward his own bunk, unable to summon anything at all beyond the raw, wordless weight pressing down on his chest.

* * *

Chaplain Foss arrived two days later, on another unscheduled flight, and found Jerry in a state the older man had apparently never before witnessed in him — hollowed out, distant, moving through the ordinary motions of command with a mechanical competence that carried none of the underlying steadiness that had once defined him.

"I've buried plenty of men, Sergeant," Foss said, settling onto the familiar crate outside the operations hut. "I've never yet found the words that fully answer this particular kind of grief, and I

won't insult you by pretending I have them today either. But I want to offer you something anyway, because I believe it's true even in the moments it doesn't feel true." He found the verse in his worn Bible, though Jerry suspected he already knew it by heart. "'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.' Not distant from your grief, Gatchell. Not waiting for you to resolve it before drawing near. Close to it. Present inside the very crushing you're feeling right now, whether you can sense that presence or not."

"Doesn't feel close," Jerry said, his voice carrying an edge Foss had never heard from him before. "Feels like I made a promise I had no business making, and Baxter believed me, and then he died anyway, forty minutes too late for anything I did to matter."

"I understand why it feels that way."

"Does it get better, Chaplain? Higgins, I could tell myself was a random mine, bad luck, nothing I could have prevented. Delgado, the same — bad intelligence, an ambush nobody saw coming. This one's different. I made every call. I chose not to lead that patrol myself. I promised him help that came too late. There's no comfortable story here, no way to tell myself this wasn't, in some real way, mine."

Foss was quiet a long moment, and when he spoke again, his voice carried none of his usual measured composure, something rawer and more honest in its place. "I won't lie to you and tell you there's a comfortable story here, Jerry, because I don't believe there is one, and I think you'd see through it if I tried. What I'll tell you instead is this. You made the calls available to you, with the information and the constraints you actually had — a captain's impossible choice between two dying elements, a storm no forecast predicted, an artillery battery that could only service one crisis at a time. None of that is a comfortable story. But it is a true one, and I need you to hold onto the true one, even without the comfort, because the alternative — believing you simply failed Baxter through some flaw in your own character or competence — is a lie, and lies like that have a way of metastasizing into something that outlasts even a war, if a man lets them take root unchallenged."

"How do I keep it from taking root, Chaplain? Practically speaking. I don't know how to do that right now."

Foss considered the question with real seriousness, understanding, Jerry sensed, that a general answer would not adequately serve a man in this particular condition. "Same way you've fought every other lie this valley's tried to plant in you, near as I can tell from watching you these past sixteen months. You say the true thing out loud, to people who love you, over and over, until it drowns out the false thing's volume. You keep showing up to community even when isolation feels safer. You keep reading the promises even on the days you can't feel them landing. None of that makes the grief lighter, Sergeant. But it keeps the grief from calcifying into something worse than grief — into a settled, permanent belief about your own unworthiness that no future joy will ever be able to fully penetrate." He held Jerry's gaze. "I've watched that calcification happen to good men, in wars I served long before this one. It doesn't happen all at once. It happens exactly the way you're currently tempted to let it happen — one skipped Sunday study, one shortened letter home, one small retreat at a time, each one feeling reasonable in isolation. I'm asking you to notice the pattern before it fully sets, Jerry. That's the whole of what I can offer you today."

* * *

Jerry did not find, in the days and weeks that followed, the same clear path back toward steadiness that Boone's counsel had once provided after Higgins's death, or that his own deliberate practices had provided after the river crossing. Something in him had shifted, in a way he could not fully name even to Mercer, who tried, with a persistence that Jerry recognized and appreciated even as he found himself, for the first time in their long friendship, genuinely unable to fully receive it.

"Talk to me," Mercer said, more than once, in the weeks after Baxter's death. "Same as always, Georgia. Twenty minutes, end of the day, whatever's sitting on your chest."

"I don't have the words for this one, Bulldog," Jerry told him, honestly, on one of the rare evenings he attempted the conversation at all. "Higgins, Delgado — I could talk through those. Something about Baxter, I just — I can't find where to start."

"Then don't start with words. Just sit with me."

Jerry tried, some evenings, and found the sitting itself did not carry the same steadying effect it once had, a small and troubling data point that he did not yet have the perspective to recognize as significant — the first sign, however faint, that the practices Boone had taught him to lean on were beginning, under this particular weight, to fail him in a way they never had before.

Mercer confronted him directly about it nearly three weeks after Baxter's death, catching him alone at the demolitions range on an evening Jerry had deliberately chosen to work late, in what he told himself was simple diligence and what Mercer, arriving uninvited, plainly recognized as something else entirely.

"You're avoiding me," Mercer said, no preamble, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed. "Three weeks now. I've counted, Jerry, on account of it matters to me, whether you believe that or not."

"I'm not avoiding you. I've had operational demands—"

"Don't." Mercer's voice cut through the deflection with a sharpness Jerry rarely heard from him. "Don't hand me that, Georgia, not after everything we've been through together. I watched you almost drown pulling me out of that river. I've sat with you through nightmares about Higgins that you couldn't even fully explain to me. And now, on the one loss that's clearly hurt you worse than any of it, you're pulling away from the one person who's proven, over and over, that he's not going anywhere?" He stepped further into the room, his frustration visibly giving way to something more like fear. "I'm scared for you. I don't know how else to say it plain. Something's different this time, and I don't know how to reach whatever's changed, and it scares me more than any firefight this valley's ever thrown at us."

Jerry set down the charge he'd been working on, hands trembling slightly, and found himself, for the first time in three weeks, unable to maintain the careful distance he'd been constructing. "I don't know how to let you in on this one, Bulldog. That's the truth of it. Every other loss, I could find some way to hand you a piece of it. This one, I don't know where the edges are. Feels like if I start letting any of it out, all of it comes, and I don't know what's left of me on the other side of that."

"Then let it come," Mercer said quietly. "I'm not asking you to hand me a piece of it. I'm asking you to let me stand here while all of it comes, however much that is. That's what two are better than one actually means, Jerry, when it matters most. Not managing your grief into tidy, shareable pieces. Just not being alone in the flood."

Jerry looked at his friend for a long moment, feeling something in his chest strain against a dam he had been unconsciously reinforcing for three straight weeks, and found, for the first time since the confirmation had come over that radio, the first genuine crack in his own careful composure. He did not fully break that evening, not all the way, but he came closer than he had allowed himself to come with anyone since the loss, and Mercer stayed with him until well past midnight, saying little, simply present, exactly as he had promised to be.

* * *

He found himself, in the weeks that followed, retreating into the operational demands of command with an intensity that Mercer and Corwin and even Weller himself gently flagged as excessive, working past exhaustion on tasks that did not strictly require it, as though sheer activity could somehow outrun the grief pursuing him. He redrafted supply schedules that had functioned perfectly well for months, reorganized the demolitions range's storage system twice in as many weeks, and volunteered for perimeter watches beyond his own rotation with a frequency that Corwin, gently but pointedly, remarked on during one of the rare Sunday studies Jerry still managed to attend.

"A man can work himself toward healing," Corwin observed to the group at large, though his eyes rested on Jerry a beat longer than the general remark strictly required, "or a man can work himself away from feeling anything at all. Looks similar from the outside, gentlemen. Only the man doing it usually knows, deep down, which one he's actually practicing."

Jerry heard the observation land, and recognized its accuracy with an uncomfortable clarity, and found himself, even so, unable in the moment to fully change course. He stopped, almost entirely, attending Corwin's Sunday studies, offering excuses about operational demands that both men understood, without either saying so directly, were not the full truth. He found his letters to Sarah growing shorter and more guarded again, the hard-won honesty of the preceding months receding under a weight he did not yet know how to translate into words she could receive without breaking under it herself.

Sarah noticed, of course, across the four thousand miles her letters had to travel to reach him, and wrote back with a directness that cut through his deflection more effectively than anything else had managed.

Your letters have gone quiet again, she wrote. I know something has happened, Jerry, even though you haven't told me plainly what. I'm not asking you to protect me from it anymore — we settled that a long time ago, or I thought we had. I'm asking you not to disappear from me the way I fear you might be starting to disappear from yourself. Whatever this is, I want to carry it with you, even the parts that don't resolve into anything comfortable. Please don't shut me out now, of all the times this war has tested us. This feels different, and I need you to tell me why.

Jerry read her letter three times, and found himself, for the first time in nearly two years of correspondence, unable to produce an honest reply. He wrote three drafts and burned each one, unsatisfied, before finally sending a short, inadequate note promising a fuller letter once he'd found the words — a promise he would spend the following weeks failing, again and again, to fully keep.

Her next letter arrived without reproach, though Jerry had half expected one, carrying instead a patience that humbled him more than any frustration could have. I'm not going anywhere, she wrote. I told you that a long time ago, and I meant it then and I mean it now, whether you can find the words this month or next month or not until you're standing on a porch in Georgia telling me in person. I love you too much to demand you hand me your grief on my timeline instead of yours. I'll just keep writing, and keep loving you across whatever silence you need right now, and trust that the man who taught me the value of honesty two years ago hasn't actually disappeared, just gone quiet for a season he needs to survive first.

Her grace, arriving exactly when his own capacity for honesty had failed him most completely, would become, in the years ahead, one of the few threads connecting the man he had been before Baxter's death to whatever man eventually emerged on the other side of it — though that emergence, Jerry did not yet know, standing at the edge of this particular grief, was still two decades and a great deal of further ruin away.

* * *

Y'Dro's funeral, held three days after the loss, drew Jerry back to the same village where he had once stood beside Rmah's grieving mother a lifetime earlier, and he attended it in a state so raw that Y'Blul, sensing it immediately, kept close beside him throughout the ceremony without ever once requiring Jerry to explain why.

"I have buried too many young men from this valley," Y'Blul told him afterward, his own composure carrying the particular exhaustion of a leader who had absorbed grief on behalf of his people for far too many seasons running. "Y'Dro was cousin to Y'Sen, whom you once carried home wounded from a listening post. Small valley, Sergeant. Every loss touches a family already touched by a previous one."

"I keep thinking there should have been another option," Jerry said. "Some call I didn't make, some resource I didn't think to request."

"I have thought the same, about Rmah, about the eleven men we buried after the river. Every commander who loves his men thinks this, after a loss like this one." Y'Blul's eyes carried a depth of understanding that startled Jerry, coming from a man not yet twenty-five years old. "My father told me once that a leader who never wonders if he could have done differently has stopped caring enough to lead well. But he also told me a leader who believes he could always have done differently, every single time, eventually stops believing he is capable of leading at all. There is a narrow path between those two failures, Sergeant. I do not know if either of us has found it yet."

* * *

He visited Y'Kong in the hospital once the young strike force sergeant had stabilized enough to receive visitors, and found the young man carrying a guilt that mirrored Jerry's own so closely it startled him.

"Should have seen them sooner," Y'Kong said, his voice thin from blood loss and the several surgeries that had saved his life. "I was second in command, Sergeant. Baxter trusted my eyes on the flank. I did not see them soon enough."

"That's not on you," Jerry told him, hearing, even as he said it, the hollow echo of Boone's own long-ago counsel to him after Higgins's death — words that had once carried real weight, and that Jerry now found himself repeating with a conviction he was not entirely certain he still fully possessed himself. "The company that hit you was positioned and prepared. No amount of watching would have given you enough warning to prevent it."

"You believe this, Sergeant? Truly?"

Jerry considered the question longer than the moment probably called for, understanding that his answer mattered enormously to a young man carrying his own version of an impossible weight. "I believe it for you," he said finally, with complete honesty. "I find it harder to believe for myself, if I'm being truthful with you. Maybe that tells you something about how much stock to put in either one of our verdicts on ourselves, right now. We're not the most reliable judges of our own guilt, either one of us, this soon after."

Y'Kong studied him a long moment. "Then who judges rightly, if not the man who was there?"

Jerry did not have a satisfying answer, and told him so, and the two of them sat together a long while in a silence that offered neither of them full absolution but that Jerry found, at least, slightly more bearable than the isolation he had otherwise been carrying alone.

"May I ask you something else, Sergeant?" Y'Kong said, as Jerry rose to leave. "Something not about blame."

"Go ahead."

"Do you still believe what you taught us? About your God being close to broken things?" The young sergeant's voice carried a genuine, searching uncertainty. "I have heard the missionaries speak of this before the war drove them from our valley. I want to know if the man who taught me demolitions and small-unit tactics also believes the harder lessons, the ones about faith, or if those were only words for easier days."

Jerry considered the question with a seriousness it plainly deserved, understanding that his answer mattered to Y'Kong in ways that went beyond the immediate conversation. "I believe it," he said finally, slowly, testing each word as he said it. "I'll be honest with you, though — I believe it today more like a man believes a rope is still tied to something solid, even when he can't see the other end of it through the fog. I can't feel the comfort of it right now, Y'Kong, if I'm being fully honest. But I still believe the rope's there. I'm just holding on without being able to see where it leads, for the time being."

Y'Kong nodded slowly, as though this answer, imperfect as it was, satisfied something in him that a more confident response might not have. "Then I will hold the rope too, Sergeant, even without seeing it. Perhaps this is what faith actually is, for men in valleys like this one. Not seeing, only holding."

* * *

Boone's letter, when it finally arrived nearly a month later, carried none of the confident certainty that had steadied Jerry through every previous crisis of his tour, and Jerry understood, reading it, that even his old team sergeant recognized this particular loss as different in kind from everything that had come before.

I don't have easy words for this one, Gatchell, Boone wrote, and I won't insult you by pretending otherwise. What I'll tell you is what I know to be true, even without it fully touching the grief. You didn't fail Baxter. The Army's impossible arithmetic failed him — a storm, a captain forced to choose between two dying elements, an artillery battery that could only serve one crisis at a time. That arithmetic is uglier than any single villain a man could point to and blame outright, and I think that ugliness is part of what makes this one so much harder to carry than Higgins or even Delgado. There's no clean enemy to be angry at here, Jerry. Just a war that occasionally hands a commander two men drowning at once and only one rope long enough to reach either of them.

I want to tell you it gets easier. I've watched enough men carry losses like this one, across eleven years, to tell you honestly that it doesn't, not in the way easier usually means. What I've watched instead, in the men who came through it whole, is that the grief eventually stops being the only thing in the room. It doesn't leave. It just, eventually, learns to sit in a chair instead of standing over every single moment of a man's life, arms crossed, demanding his full attention. I don't know how long that takes for you, son. Might be different than it was for me. But I believe it happens, if a man keeps doing the hard, unglamorous work of staying close to the people who love him instead of pulling away from them, which I suspect is exactly what you're doing right now, whether you've fully admitted it to yourself yet.

I'll tell you something I've never told you before, on account of I don't think you needed to hear it until now. I lost a man like Baxter myself, my second tour in Korea — a young corporal I'd trained personally, sent on a mission I judged too risky to lead myself, on account of my commander needed me elsewhere that same day. He died calling for help that came too late, same as your Baxter, and I carried that particular grief different than any other loss in my whole career, for reasons I couldn't fully name at the time and can name now only imperfectly. I want you to know I came through it, Gatchell. Slower than I'd have liked, and not without real cost along the way. But I came through it, leaning on people who refused to let me carry it alone, however hard I tried to convince them I preferred it that way. I'd encourage you to let Mercer be that person for you, same as I once had my own version of him. Don't let pride or grief talk you into believing this one's too big to hand any of it to anybody. That's exactly the lie this particular kind of loss tells every man it visits, in my experience, and it's exactly the lie a man has to fight hardest against believing.

Jerry read the letter several times, and found himself unable, even with Boone's hard-won wisdom laid plainly in front of him, to fully act on its counsel — a gap between knowing and doing that he would spend the following two decades failing, again and again, to close, though he did not yet understand, reading this particular letter on this particular evening, exactly how far and how permanently that gap was about to widen.

He wrote back to Boone that same night, a shorter reply than his old team sergeant's letter deserved, but honest in the way every exchange between them had always managed to remain, whatever else this war had complicated.

I hear you, Sergeant, he wrote. I don't know yet if I can do what you're asking. I want to. Some part of me is already trying, same as you'd expect, on account of you built that part of me yourself, over a year of Sunday studies and hard lessons I didn't always want to hear at the time. But there's another part of me right now that just wants to be left alone with this, and I don't fully trust that part, and I don't fully know how to silence it either. I'll keep trying. That's the most honest promise I've got to offer you tonight.

He sealed the letter without rereading it, unwilling to second-guess the raw honesty of it, and understood, even as he did, that the promise he'd just made was already, in some small and largely invisible way, being contested by a quieter and more persistent instinct — the same instinct that had kept him at the demolitions range three weeks running instead of at Mercer's side, the same instinct that would, unchecked and unnamed, spend the coming decades slowly winning nearly every contest it was permitted to enter.

* * *

He sat a long while after sealing both letters, the operations hut quiet around him, the compound outside settled into the same uneasy nighttime rhythm it always carried, and found himself, for the first time since the confirmation had come over that radio weeks earlier, finally still enough to simply feel the full shape of what had happened, rather than working past it or around it toward the next task.

He did not know, sitting alone that night with Boone's letter and his own unfinished reply to Sarah both open in front of him, exactly what he was watching take root in himself — a guilt that behaved differently than the grief he had carried after Higgins or Delgado, less a wound that time and community might eventually close and more a seed, planted deep and largely unseen, that would spend the coming decades growing roots through every part of his life it could reach. He did not know that the small, wordless retreat he was currently practicing — the shortened letters, the skipped Sunday studies, the exhausting flood of work that kept grief at arm's length rather than inviting it into honest company — was the first quiet rehearsal of a much larger isolation still to come, one that would eventually cost him considerably more than a few weeks of guarded correspondence.

He knew only, staring at Baxter's empty bunk across the compound in the pale moonlight, that something essential in him had cracked in a way none of this valley's previous cruelties had managed, and that whatever verse or counsel or friendship this war still had left to offer him, some part of the weight from that single terrible afternoon was never, in this life, going to fully set itself down. He thought of Y'Kong's question — do you still believe — and of his own halting answer about ropes disappearing into fog, and understood that the honesty of that answer, imperfect as it was, might be the only kind of faith available to him for a good while yet: not the confident, unshaken certainty he had once carried out of his mother's kitchen in Georgia, but something rougher and more hard-won, a grip maintained through sheer stubborn will on a rope he could no longer clearly see.

He picked up his New Testament one last time before finally attempting sleep, turning to Foss's verse again, the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit, and read it slowly, testing it the way he had once tested every verse this valley had handed him, searching for the particular kind of belief that had steadied him through Higgins, through the river, through every previous loss this war had demanded he absorb. He read the surrounding verses too, the whole of the thirty-fourth psalm, David's own testimony of deliverance from real and desperate danger, and found himself lingering longest on a line a few verses earlier that he had somehow never fully registered before tonight: the righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. He wanted, badly, to believe that deliverance applied to Baxter too, somewhere beyond the reach of this valley's grief, even though the deliverance had plainly not arrived in the form or the timing anyone on that overrun position had been praying for that terrible afternoon. He did not find it, not fully, not that night. What he found instead, reading the words over and over in the guttering light of a single

bulb, was something closer to a held breath — not disbelief exactly, but a kind of suspended waiting, a faith stretched taut across a gap it could not yet see how to close. He would spend, though he did not know it yet, the next twenty years of his life inside that exact suspended breath, waiting for a closing that would not come the way he expected, in a place and a manner entirely different from anything this valley or this war could have prepared him to imagine.

CHAPTER 10

MEDALS AND SILENCE

"And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

— Micah 6:8

The ceremony took place at Nha Trang, in a proper formation with a brigadier general presiding and a small contingent of press photographers arranged along one side of the parade ground, and Jerry stood at attention in a freshly pressed uniform while an aide read the citation aloud in the flat, formal cadence such documents always seemed to require, describing actions Jerry recognized only distantly as his own — the bridge, the listening post, the river crossing, eighteen months of service compressed into three paragraphs of careful, bloodless prose that made no mention whatsoever of Higgins, or Delgado, or Baxter, or any of the men whose deaths had, in Jerry's own private accounting, cost considerably more than any medal could repay.

Distinguished Service Cross. Second only to the Medal of Honor itself, the general informed him afterward, shaking his hand with a warmth that Jerry received the way a man might receive sunlight through a thick pane of glass — visible, undeniably present, but somehow unable to fully reach him. He would replay that particular sensation many times in the years ahead, the strange, hollow disconnect of standing at the exact center of an honor meant to represent the highest recognition his country could offer a soldier, while some essential part of himself remained entirely elsewhere, unreachable, already beginning the long process of coming apart in a manner no formation, however precisely arranged, could have detected from the outside.

"Extraordinary record, Sergeant," the general said. "Bridge demolition, the listening post rescue, the river crossing. Damned fine soldiering, across the board. Your country owes you a debt."

"Thank you, sir," Jerry said, and meant it as far as the words went, though he found himself, standing on that parade ground with the medal's weight settling against his chest for the first time, unable to locate anything resembling the pride he understood he was supposed to be feeling.

The formation stood at parade rest around him, rows of pressed uniforms and polished boots baking under a sun that seemed, to Jerry's distant awareness, almost aggressively indifferent to the occasion's supposed significance. A photographer moved along the front rank, capturing the moment for whatever publication had sent him, and Jerry found himself performing the expected posture — chin level, shoulders back, the practiced stillness of a soldier receiving honor — while some deeper part of him remained entirely elsewhere, standing instead at the edge of a swollen river, or crouched in a listening post thirty meters outside a wire perimeter, or worst of all, kneeling beside a radio in an operations hut listening to a young man's voice go steady with a courage that had cost him everything.

He thought, instead of the ceremony unfolding around him, of a young man's face gone gray in a river's current, of a radio transmission that had arrived forty minutes too late, of a boy named Baxter

whose last request had been that Jerry tell his family he'd done the job right. The medal, he understood with a clarity that felt almost clinical in its detachment, had very little to do with any of that. It commemorated the parts of the story that photographed well.

Mercer found him afterward, in the relative privacy of the barracks assigned for the visiting team's brief stay in Nha Trang, and studied the medal pinned to Jerry's chest with an expression that carried more concern than congratulation.

"How's it sit?" Mercer asked.

"Heavy," Jerry said, which was the truest single word he could offer. "Heavier than the Silver Stars did. Feels like it's supposed to mean something's finished, some accounting settled. Doesn't feel that way at all."

"Maybe it's not supposed to settle anything," Mercer said quietly. "Maybe it's just supposed to say what happened. Rest is still yours to carry, medal or no medal."

Jerry said nothing, but the observation lodged itself somewhere he would return to often in the difficult weeks ahead.

* * *

Boone's letter arrived a week after the ceremony, having somehow already heard the news through whatever channels still connected him to this valley he'd left nearly a year earlier, and it carried, as Boone's letters always had, exactly the kind of unflinching honesty Jerry had come to rely on and, in recent months, had also come to quietly avoid.

Congratulations on the Cross, Boone wrote. Well earned, whatever complicated feelings I suspect you're carrying about it right now, on account of I know you well enough to know medals have never once sat easy on you. I want to give you something today, though, not about the medal itself but about the man wearing it, on account of I've been hearing things from Mercer's letters that worry me some. Micah, chapter six, verse eight. What does the Lord require of you — to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Three things, Gatchell, not one. A man can act justly and still fail to love mercy, if he lets justice curdle into something harder and colder than it was ever meant to be. A man can even manage both of those and still fail the third, if pride convinces him he doesn't need anybody else's company on the walking. I think you've got the first two down solid, son, better than most men I've served with in eleven years. I'm worried about the third. Mercer tells me you've gone quiet again, quieter than after Higgins, quieter even than right after the river. I want you to hear this plain, from a man who's watched this exact pattern before and knows exactly where it leads if it goes unchecked: walking humbly with your God is not a thing a man can do entirely alone. The word itself implies company. Don't let this valley's last months convince you otherwise, whatever silence feels like it's protecting you from right now.

Jerry read the letter twice and set it aside without immediately responding, telling himself he would write back once he'd found the words, a promise that felt, even as he made it to himself, uncomfortably familiar in its emptiness.

The nightmares that had first arrived after Higgins's death had, since Baxter, taken on a new and more insistent character, no longer content with a single recurring scenario but ranging now across nearly every loss Jerry had accumulated over eighteen months — Higgins walking toward an invisible mine he could not make his dream-self warn him about, Delgado's face going under the river's current in an endless, looping repetition, and now Baxter's voice, steady and terrible, asking him to tell his family he'd done the job right, over and over, in a radio transmission that never quite ended no matter how many times Jerry's dreaming mind replayed it.

He woke most nights now sometime past two, heart hammering, and had learned, in the weeks since the ceremony, that a glass of whiskey consumed before attempting sleep at all considerably reduced the frequency of these particular visitations — not eliminating them, but blunting their edges

enough that he could sometimes make it through a full night without waking at all, a small mercy that had, without his fully choosing it, become the primary justification he offered himself for a habit he otherwise refused to examine too closely.

* * *

The silence Boone described had crept into nearly every corner of Jerry's remaining months in-country by then, arriving not as a single dramatic withdrawal but as a slow, almost imperceptible narrowing — fewer words at the evening meal, shorter answers to Mercer's careful check-ins, a gradual thinning of the letters he sent Sarah until they carried little more than the barest scaffolding of news, dates, weather, operational generalities scrubbed of the honest texture that had once defined their entire correspondence.

He had discovered, somewhere in the weeks after Baxter's death, that a single glass of the whiskey Reyes had once shared with him after Higgins's death — kept now in a small private supply Weller had quietly made available to his senior NCOs, an unofficial accommodation the Army tacitly permitted in the particular pressure-cooker of long-range command — helped him sleep in a way that nothing else reliably managed anymore. It began as one glass, perhaps twice a week, a small and seemingly harmless concession to exhaustion that Jerry did not examine closely enough to notice its trajectory.

The progression, when he finally forced himself to look at it honestly many years later, followed a pattern so gradual and so reasonable-seeming at every individual step that he understood, in hindsight, exactly how a man could arrive somewhere he never intended to go without ever once making a single decision that felt, in the moment, like a decision to go there. One glass on a night the nightmares felt particularly close to the surface. Two glasses on a night the letters from home carried news he didn't know how to sit with. A standing habit, eventually, regardless of what the particular evening had or hadn't demanded, the whiskey no longer a response to a specific bad night but simply the mechanism by which every night now concluded, whether it needed concluding that way or not.

By the time of the ceremony, it had become most nights, and by the weeks following it, he did not permit himself to notice how much the amount had grown, or how thoroughly he had begun to structure his evenings around the specific, narrow relief it provided — arranging his final duties, without ever consciously naming the pattern to himself, so that he'd have privacy and quiet by a particular hour, the hour his body had begun to expect the whiskey's arrival with an eagerness that should have alarmed him considerably more than it did.

Mercer noticed first, as Mercer always noticed first.

"You're drinking more," Mercer said, finding Jerry alone outside the operations hut on an evening not unlike a hundred others they had shared over the preceding two years, except that this time Jerry's glass sat conspicuously between them, refilled twice already before Mercer had even arrived.

"Just helps me sleep, Bulldog. Nothing more to it than that."

"Didn't ask if it helped you sleep. Said you're drinking more." Mercer's voice carried none of its old easy humor, replaced by a directness that had, over the preceding months, become the primary register of their remaining conversations. "I've watched you since Baxter. Watched the letters get shorter. Watched you skip Corwin's studies more weeks than you attend them now. Watched you start reaching for that bottle most nights instead of reaching for me, same as you used to. I don't like the shape of what I'm watching, Jerry."

"I'm handling it."

"Are you?" Mercer's question carried no accusation, only a raw, searching worry that Jerry found harder to deflect than anger would have been. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you've found a quieter way to be alone with this than the one Boone already warned you about. Might feel different than pulling away from people directly. Comes to about the same place, though, near as I can tell."

"It's not the same, Bulldog. I'm still here. Still doing the job. Still standing right in front of you having this conversation."

"Are you, though?" Mercer leaned forward, his voice dropping, urgency replacing frustration. "Because the man having this conversation with me right now feels like he's already halfway somewhere else. Same as you were during the ceremony, from what I could see watching your face while that general talked. Same as you've been most evenings since Baxter, whether there's a glass in your hand or not." He was quiet a moment, visibly working to steady his own voice. "I made you a promise a long time ago, in a flood, that I'd go in after you if you were drowning. I don't know how to go in after this kind of drowning, Jerry. Can't see the current. Can't get my hands around what's actually pulling you under. All I can do is stand here on the bank telling you I see it happening, and hope that's enough to make you fight it yourself, on account of I genuinely don't know what else is left for me to try."

Jerry felt something in his chest tighten at the raw fear in his friend's voice, an emotion that briefly cut through the careful numbness he'd been cultivating for weeks. He looked down at the glass in his own hand, half-full still, and set it aside on the crate between them, a small and largely symbolic gesture that nonetheless cost him something real to make. "I hear you," he said quietly. "I don't have a good answer for you tonight, Bulldog. But I hear you."

"That's something," Mercer said, though his expression suggested he understood, as clearly as Jerry did, that hearing and changing were two very different accomplishments, and that only one of them had actually been demonstrated so far.

They sat together a while longer in the settling dark, the untouched second half of Jerry's drink sweating on the crate between them, and Jerry found himself, for the first time in weeks, simply present with his friend rather than performing presence while some larger part of him remained elsewhere. It was a small thing, that single unfinished glass, and Jerry understood even then that it represented no lasting victory over whatever was taking root in him — but it was, at least, a single evening where the old pattern had bent rather than simply continuing its steady, unexamined trajectory, and he chose, walking back to his own quarters afterward, to count that bending as worth something, however modest.

* * *

Jerry did not have a satisfying answer for him that evening, and the conversation ended, as several similar conversations had over the preceding weeks, in a silence that neither man fully knew how to break — Mercer unwilling to abandon his friend to an isolation he could see forming clearly, Jerry unable to fully explain, even to himself, exactly what he was protecting by maintaining it.

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Captain Weller raised the subject too, in a conversation considerably more formal than Mercer's but carrying an undertone of genuine personal concern that Jerry recognized, even through his own careful deflection, as sincere.

"I'm not going to pretend I haven't noticed some changes, Sergeant," Weller said, the two of them reviewing final handoff paperwork in the operations hut. "Your performance remains excellent, on every metric I can measure. That's not in question. But I've commanded enough men rotating toward the end of a hard tour to recognize certain patterns, and I want to ask you plainly — are you getting the support you need, going into these final weeks?"

"I appreciate the concern, sir. I'm managing."

"That's what every soldier tells his commanding officer right before he stops managing entirely," Weller said, with a directness that caught Jerry slightly off guard. "I'm not asking as your commander right now, Gatchell. I'm asking as a man who watched you carry this team through losses that would

have broken plenty of officers twice your rank. I'd like to see you carry yourself half as carefully as you've carried every man under your command these past eighteen months. Is there anything I can do, in these final weeks, to make that easier?"

Jerry considered the offer, genuinely touched by it despite his own resistance to fully accepting help from any quarter these past months. "Just get me home in one piece, sir. That's about all I know how to ask for right now."

"That much I can promise you," Weller said. "The rest, I suspect, is going to be a longer project than either of us can finish inside the weeks you've got left in this valley."

* * *

He wrote Sarah that same night, the whiskey's particular effect on him not yet the numbing he would come to rely on it for in later years but already something more than simple relief, a loosening of whatever remained of his careful self-control, and found the letter, when he read it back the following morning with a clearer head, considerably more raw than he had intended.

I don't know how to tell you what's happening to me, he had written, the handwriting noticeably less steady than his usual careful script. I got a medal today. Distinguished Service Cross, second highest they give short of the Medal of Honor itself, and I stood there while a general shook my hand and told me my country owed me a debt, and all I could think about was Baxter's face and how none of what I did in that river or at that listening post amounted to a single thing that could have saved him. I think something in me broke after that, Sarah, in a way that none of the earlier losses managed to break. I've been drinking more than I should, most nights now, just to get some sleep that doesn't come with dreams attached. I haven't told Mercer the full truth of it, though I suspect he already knows more than I've admitted. I don't know who I'm going to be when I finally get home to you. I used to be so certain I'd come back the same man who left, just tested and proven. I'm not certain of that anymore, and it terrifies me more than any firefight this whole war has thrown at me.

He almost burned the letter, the way he'd burned so many failed drafts in recent weeks, and found himself, in the end, sending it anyway — the last honest impulse of a man who had promised, nearly two years earlier, to give this woman the truth even when the truth was heavier than either of them would prefer, an impulse that was, even now, still fighting a losing battle against the quieter and more persistent instinct toward silence that had been steadily gaining ground in him since Baxter's death.

He spent the following days in a state of considerable anxiety about how the letter might land, half-regretting its rawness, half-relieved to have finally set the truth down on paper rather than continuing to carry it in careful, unspoken isolation. He found himself, waiting for her reply, drinking somewhat less than his recent pattern had established, as though some part of him understood that whatever answer arrived across that ocean would matter more to his actual trajectory than any amount of whiskey could hope to influence.

* * *

Sarah's reply arrived faster than usual, a testament, Jerry understood, to exactly how urgently she had felt the need to answer it, and it carried none of the gentle patience her previous letters had offered during his months of guarded correspondence.

I am not going to pretend that letter didn't frighten me, she wrote, because it did, more than anything you've sent me in nearly two years overseas. But I want you to hear something plain, Jerry, because I think you need it said without softening. The man who wrote me that letter — raw, honest, terrified, admitting the whiskey and the silence and the fear of who he's becoming — that man is not broken. That man is still fighting, still telling the truth even when it costs him something real to tell it. I am far more frightened of the letters you might start sending me if this silence wins completely, the careful, empty ones that tell me nothing true at all. Please don't let it win, my love. Please keep sending

me the true ones, however hard they are to write, however hard they are for me to read. I would rather grieve alongside the real shape of what this war did to you than be protected from a fiction that leaves me loving a man who no longer exists.

I've spoken with my uncle about what you're describing — the drinking, I mean, and the silence both. He served in the last war, as you know, and he tells me these are not uncommon wounds among men who've seen what you've seen, and that they are treatable wounds, Jerry, not permanent verdicts on your character. He says the men who recover are, almost without exception, the ones who refuse to carry it entirely alone, same as your Boone and your chaplain have both been telling you all along. I am asking you, as plainly as I know how, to let that be true for you. Let Mercer in. Let your chaplain in. Let me in, across whatever ocean still separates us. You do not have to solve this before you come home to me. You only have to keep refusing the silence, one honest letter at a time, until you're standing on my porch and we can finish this conversation face to face.

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Jerry carried Sarah's letter with him for days afterward, reading it again each evening before he permitted himself to reach for the bottle, and found, in the discipline of that small ritual, a modest but real counterweight to the trajectory Mercer and Boone had both flagged with such concern. He did not stop drinking entirely — the habit had already dug in deeper than he was prepared to fully confront in the handful of weeks remaining in his tour — but he found himself drinking less some nights, and talking to Mercer more, a fragile and imperfect correction that felt, even to Jerry himself, considerably more precarious than the steadier ground he'd once stood on before Baxter's death.

Chaplain Foss, on what would prove to be his final visit before Jerry's own rotation date arrived, found him in a state the older man clearly recognized as different from the raw devastation of their conversation weeks earlier — not healed, but engaged in an active, visible struggle rather than the silent retreat that had characterized the intervening months.

"Micah's verse again," Foss said, once they'd settled into their familiar positions outside the operations hut. "Boone tells me he already sent it to you."

"He did."

"I want to add something to it, if you'll let me, on account of I think there's a piece of that verse's context worth hearing that often gets left out when people quote just the one line." Foss found the passage in his worn Bible. "The verses right before it describe God's people asking what sacrifice would be sufficient to satisfy Him — thousands of rams, rivers of oil, even their own firstborn children. Desperate, extravagant gestures, offered in a kind of panic, trying to purchase forgiveness through sheer magnitude of sacrifice. And the prophet's answer cuts straight through all of it. He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. Not thousands of rams. Not some extravagant, unbearable sacrifice. Just this — justice, mercy, humility. I think you've been offering this valley thousands of rams these past few months, Jerry. Working yourself past exhaustion. Punishing yourself with silence. Even, if I'm reading what Mercer's told me correctly, reaching for a bottle as a kind of penance disguised as relief. None of it was ever required of you. The Lord already told Micah's people what He actually wanted, and it was never the extravagant self-punishment they kept trying to offer instead."

Jerry sat with that a long moment, feeling something in the observation land with an uncomfortable accuracy. "Feels strange, hearing drinking called a sacrifice, Chaplain."

"Doesn't feel like relief to you either, does it? Not really. Not underneath the surface." Foss's voice carried no judgment, only a probing gentleness. "I think it's become a way of punishing the part of yourself that believes it doesn't deserve rest, dressed up as something that helps you get it. That's a common enough disguise, in my experience, for men carrying guilt as heavy as yours. I'd encourage you to consider whether actual rest — the kind that requires vulnerability instead of numbing — might serve you better than the counterfeit kind, going forward."

"I don't know how to get the other kind anymore, Chaplain. Feels like I used to know. Boone taught it to me, and I taught it back to myself after Higgins, after the river. Something about Baxter broke the mechanism, though. I keep reaching for the tools that used to work, and they just — don't, the way they used to."

Foss nodded slowly, unsurprised by the admission. "That's not uncommon either, in my experience, though I wish I could tell you it was rare. Some griefs simply exceed the capacity of whatever tools a man's built up to that point, and force him to build new ones, often at considerable cost, often over a much longer timeline than he'd prefer. I don't think the old tools are broken forever, Jerry. I think they've just been overwhelmed, temporarily, by something larger than anything you'd faced before. That's worth distinguishing, going forward. A broken tool needs replacing. An overwhelmed one just needs time, and probably help beyond what you've been willing to accept lately, before it can bear weight again the way it once did."

"What kind of help, Chaplain? I've got Mercer. I've got you, when you can fly out. I don't know what else there is, out here."

"Out here, perhaps not much more than that," Foss admitted. "But you're going home soon, Jerry, to a country with considerably more resources than this valley can offer — doctors who specialize in exactly this kind of wound, pastors trained to walk alongside men carrying it, a wife who's already proven, letter after letter, that she intends to stay close through whatever this becomes. I'd encourage you not to assume the fight ends the moment your plane lands. I suspect, honestly, that the real work of this particular battle is only just beginning, and that the tools available to fight it will look different on the other side of that flight than anything this valley's been able to offer you so far."

Jerry did not know, hearing this counsel on a quiet evening outside an operations hut in the Central Highlands, how prophetic and how tragically unheeded it would prove to be — how completely, in the chaotic and unsupported months following his actual homecoming, the resources Foss described would fail to materialize in any form Jerry knew how to access, and how far the gap between this good advice and its eventual application would stretch before anyone managed to close it.

"Will I see you again, Chaplain? Once I'm home?"

"Not out here, I shouldn't think, unless the Army sends me somewhere considerably more comfortable than this valley in my next assignment." Foss allowed himself a small, tired smile. "But I'll write, if that's welcome. And I'd encourage you, once you're settled, to find a congregation, a pastor, someone local who can offer you in person what I've only ever been able to offer across these occasional flying visits. A man carrying what you're carrying needs more regular company than a monthly chaplain's chopper can provide, however much I've valued these conversations myself."

"I'd like that, Chaplain. The writing, I mean. And I'll look for a church, once I'm settled."

"See that you do," Foss said, echoing, without either of them fully realizing it, almost the exact words Jerry had used with young Wren only days earlier. "The Lord's people were never meant to walk this kind of road alone, Jerry, whatever this particular valley's isolation has sometimes tempted you to believe otherwise."

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The final weeks of Jerry's tour passed in a strange, suspended quality that he would struggle, in later years, to fully describe to anyone who hadn't lived through the particular experience of a combat tour's ending — the daily rhythms of command continuing exactly as they had for eighteen months, even as every one of those rhythms now carried the added weight of being, for Jerry, the last time.

The last Sunday study with Corwin, which Jerry attended with a deliberate, effortful presence that cost him something to maintain but that he considered, afterward, worth every bit of the cost. The last

patrol he led personally, a routine security sweep that produced no contact at all, and that Jerry found himself, walking it, unexpectedly grateful for — a quiet, uneventful farewell to the jungle that had shaped him more completely than any other place or experience of his young life. The last evening at the demolitions range with Halvorsen, running through inventory and handoff procedures for the incoming replacement NCO, a competent young sergeant named Wren who reminded Jerry, in small and startling ways, of himself eighteen months earlier — earnest, capable, and entirely unprepared for what this valley was about to teach him.

"You'll do fine," Jerry told Wren, on the young sergeant's first full day at Dak Lien, echoing words Boone had once offered him on nearly the same helipad. "This valley will test you in ways no classroom back at Bragg could have prepared you for. Lean on the men around you when it does. That's the only piece of advice that's actually held up for me, across the whole of my tour."

"Yes, Sergeant." Wren studied him with the particular wide-eyed attentiveness Jerry remembered so clearly from his own first days in-country. "Any regrets, looking back on your tour? Anything you'd have done different?"

Jerry considered the question longer than the young sergeant probably expected, understanding that an honest answer would require more vulnerability than the moment strictly demanded, and chose, in the end, to offer at least a fragment of the truth. "One decision," he said finally. "A patrol I sent somebody else to lead, when some part of me knew I should have led it myself. Don't ever talk yourself out of that instinct, Wren, when it shows up. It's usually trying to tell you something worth hearing."

"How do you carry it, Sergeant? A decision like that?"

Jerry was quiet a long moment, weighing how much of the truth this earnest young stranger deserved to hear on his very first day in a valley that would, soon enough, teach him plenty of hard lessons of his own without Jerry's help. "Some days better than others, if I'm honest with you," he said finally. "I've had good men around me helping me carry it — a team sergeant before me, a chaplain, a friend who's stood by me through every hard thing this valley's handed either of us. That's the real answer, Wren, if you want it plain. Not some trick for making the weight lighter on your own. Just people, refusing to let you carry it entirely by yourself, even on the days you'd rather they didn't try."

"I'll remember that, Sergeant."

"See that you do," Jerry said, and found himself hoping, with a sincerity that surprised him, that this earnest young man would actually manage to hold onto the lesson better than Jerry himself had managed to hold onto it these past several months.

* * *

Corwin marked Jerry's final Sunday study with a departure from his usual careful, methodical teaching style, closing his Bible early and simply speaking to the small gathered group from memory instead.

"We've read a lot of Scripture together this past year," Corwin said, his eyes finding Jerry's more than once as he spoke. "Studied our way through John, through Romans, through a fair chunk of the Psalms. I want to leave Sergeant Gatchell with something simpler tonight, before he heads home to a life none of the rest of us get to fully witness." He paused, choosing his words with evident care. "First John, chapter one. 'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.' I think the fellowship part matters most, Jerry, of everything in that verse. Not the purification alone, though that matters too. The fellowship. Walking in the light isn't a solitary business, whatever it might feel like some nights. It's the walking together that lets the purifying happen at all, that lets a man's darkest confessions find air and light instead of staying buried where they only fester. I hope you find people to walk that light with, back home. I hope you let them see the parts of you that are still in shadow, instead of only showing them the parts already photographed for medals."

Jerry received the verse with a weight he did not fully know how to carry that evening, understanding, even as Corwin spoke it, exactly how far his own recent months had drifted from the fellowship the supply sergeant was describing, and how much work remained before he might fully close that gap.

* * *

Y'Blul organized a farewell gathering for Jerry's final week, drawing strike force troops from across the valley, many of them men Jerry had trained personally over eighteen months, and the ceremony carried a weight that the formal Distinguished Service Cross presentation, for all its pomp, had entirely lacked.

"You came to us a stranger," Y'Blul told him, in front of the assembled gathering, "and you leave us as a man this valley will remember for generations, whatever the American Army writes in its own reports. You taught us to fight, yes. But you also taught us that an American soldier could kneel beside a dying friend and weep without shame, could sit with a grieving mother and bow his head in her own tradition rather than insisting on his own, could carry a wounded man's weight across open fire without counting the cost first. These are the things my people will tell their children about you, Sergeant Gatchell, long after the details of any particular battle have faded from memory."

He presented Jerry with a gift that undid him more completely than the general's handshake ever had — a small, carved wooden box, containing within it a collection of items Jerry recognized immediately: a photograph of Rmah, taken before his death and preserved by his mother; a small stone from the riverbank where Delgado and eleven strike force soldiers had fallen; a strip of cloth from the uniform Y'Dro had been wearing on his final patrol. Each item had been contributed, Y'Blul explained, by a family who wanted this departing American sergeant to carry a piece of their own grief and gratitude home with him, a physical record of everything this valley had cost and everything it had, despite the cost, still managed to give.

"I cannot carry this," Jerry said, his voice breaking for the first time in front of the assembled men, the careful composure of eighteen months finally, publicly cracking. "It's too much. I don't deserve—"

"It was never about deserving, Sergeant." Y'Blul's voice carried the same patient wisdom that had steadied Jerry through so many of the tour's hardest moments. "It is about remembering. My people believe a man honors the dead not by refusing gifts offered in their memory, but by carrying those gifts forward, into whatever life still waits for him. Take it. Carry Rmah, and Delgado, and Y'Dro, and all of them, with you back to Georgia. Let them travel with you, rather than staying buried only in this valley's ground."

The young lieutenant embraced him then, a gesture that carried none of the formal reserve Jerry had grown accustomed to across eighteen months of careful cross-cultural respect, and held on a long moment before finally stepping back.

"I have one more thing to say, Sergeant, and I ask that you hear it as a friend rather than as the officer I once served under." Y'Blul's eyes carried a directness that Jerry recognized, with a small ache, as an echo of the same warning he'd once offered before the river crossing. "I have watched you these past months. I have watched the silence grow in you, the same way I once watched grief grow in men of my own village after losses too heavy to speak of easily. My people have a saying — a wound hidden beneath the skin festers longer than a wound left open to the air. I do not know what waits for you in Georgia, Sergeant. I hope it is healing. But I ask that you not hide this wound the way you have sometimes hidden it here, in these last months. Let the people who love you see it, even when it is difficult. This is the only medicine I know that has ever actually worked, for grief of this size."

Jerry found himself unable to speak for a long moment, the young lieutenant's words landing with a precision that cut through every careful deflection he had constructed. "I'll try," he finally managed. "I promise you I'll try, Y'Blul."

"Then I am satisfied," Y'Blul said simply, and the ceremony continued around them, the assembled strike force troops singing a song Jerry did not understand but felt, in its mournful, beautiful cadence, all the way to the bottom of his chest.

* * *

Alvarez found him alone the following evening, packing the last of his gear by lamplight, and sat down on the edge of the cot without ceremony, in the easy, unhurried way that had characterized every interaction Jerry had ever had with the steady medic.

"Gonna miss you, Sergeant," Alvarez said. "Watched you grow up some, out here. Green kid I patched up after a river crossing, into the man who ran this whole team the past ten months." He was quiet a moment, his usual professional composure giving way to something more personal. "I also want to say, doctor to patient, more or less — I've noticed the drinking. Noticed the weight loss too, if I'm honest, and the way you don't quite meet a man's eyes the way you used to. I'm not going to lecture you on your last few days in this country, Jerry. But I want you to know somebody besides Mercer's been watching, and worrying, and hoping you find your way through whatever this is once you're home and this whole valley's finally behind you."

"Appreciate you saying it, Doc."

"Don't just appreciate it. Do something with it." Alvarez's voice carried an uncharacteristic firmness. "I've seen what happens to men who carry this kind of weight home unaddressed, Jerry. Watched it in my own family, matter of fact — an uncle who came back from the Pacific different, and never did find his way back to the man he'd been before. I don't want that story for you. You've got too much good left in you to let this valley's worst moments write the rest of your life's ending."

Jerry sat with that a long while after Alvarez finally left him alone to finish packing, the medic's warning settling alongside Y'Blul's and Mercer's and Boone's, a chorus of good men who had each, in their own way, seen something in him that he was still struggling to fully see in himself. He counted them silently, sitting there among his half-packed gear — Boone, Mercer, Alvarez, Y'Blul, Foss, Corwin, even Weller in his own more formal way — a small army of witnesses who had, across eighteen months, offered him more honest concern than he suspected most men received across an entire lifetime. It struck him, counting them, that he was leaving this valley considerably richer in the specific currency of people who genuinely cared what became of him than he had arrived, whatever else the valley had also taken. He did not yet know how much of that richness he would manage to carry forward once the ocean and the demands of an ordinary civilian life stood between him and the daily proximity that had made such honesty possible out here. He only knew, sitting there in the lamplight, that he intended to try.

* * *

His final letter to Sarah before boarding the transport home carried a different quality than nearly everything he had written her over the preceding months, less guarded, though still marked by an uncertainty he no longer tried to hide from her.

I don't know exactly who's getting off that plane in a few weeks, he wrote. I know he's not the same boy who left Georgia two years ago certain of everything because he hadn't yet been tested on any of it. I know he's carrying more weight than I think either of us fully understands yet, some of it wearing medals, most of it wearing silence, and I know I've been fighting that silence imperfectly these past months, some days better than others. I don't have a tidy ending to offer you, Sarah, the way I once hoped I might when I first imagined this letter, back before this war taught me how rarely tidy endings actually arrive. What I have instead is a promise I intend to keep with everything I've got left in me — that whatever man steps off that plane, he's going to keep trying to be honest with you, the same way he's been trying, imperfectly, these past difficult months. I love you. I'm coming home. I just wanted

you to know the real shape of the man you're getting, rather than the polished version the newspapers back home might prefer to print instead.

Sarah's reply reached him just before he sealed his own duffel bag for the final time, forwarded urgently through the last available mail run before his transport date, and he read it standing amid the half-packed chaos of his quarters, a warmth steadying him more than he expected.

Two years is a long time to love someone through paper alone, she wrote, and I won't pretend I don't have my own fears about what it will be like, finally standing across from you instead of just imagining you from four thousand miles away. But I have loved the man in these letters more completely than I ever expected to love anyone, Jerry, including the frightened, uncertain, sometimes broken versions of him these past difficult months have shown me. I am not expecting a finished man to step off that plane. I am expecting the man who wrote me the truth about a bottle and a silence he was frightened of, because that honesty, even in its hardest moments, has been the truest gift you've given me this whole war. Come home. Bring whatever weight you're still carrying. I intend to help you carry it, for as long as it takes, starting the moment I see your face.

He folded her letter carefully into the same breast pocket where Rmah's carved bead and Higgins's mother's letter had ridden for so many months, one more piece of this valley's accumulated weight now traveling home with him, alongside whatever hope Sarah's steady, unwavering love still offered against it.

He looked around his quarters one final time, the small carved box from Y'Blul already packed carefully at the top of his duffel bag alongside his mother's Bible, Sarah's photographs, and the small collection of tokens this valley had given him across eighteen months of service — Rmah's bead, Higgins's mother's letter, the medal he still did not fully know how to feel about wearing. Micah's verse ran through his mind unbidden as he closed the bag, act justly, love mercy, walk humbly, and he understood, standing there on the last morning of his tour, that he had managed the first perhaps well enough, had fumbled toward the second more often than he'd fully succeeded at it, and had failed the third — walking humbly, in company rather than isolation — more completely than he had yet found the courage to fully admit, even to the people who loved him most.

His final night in-country, Mercer sat with him long past midnight, the two of them saying little, the easy silence of old friends who no longer needed constant conversation to feel the fullness of each other's company. Mercer's own rotation date was still four months distant, a fact that hung between them unspoken for most of the evening until Mercer finally addressed it directly.

"Gonna feel strange, this place without you in it," Mercer said. "Four more months, and I don't rightly know who I talk to at the end of a hard day, once you're gone."

"Corwin. Alvarez. Weller, even, if you catch him at the right hour." Jerry tried for lightness and only partially managed it. "You'll find your people, Bulldog. Same as I found mine, walking off that plane eighteen months ago not knowing a soul."

"Not the same as having you here, though." Mercer's voice carried a rare seriousness. "I need you to promise me something, Georgia, before you get on that plane tomorrow. Promise me you'll write. Not the short, careful letters you've been sending Sarah these past months. The real kind. I want to know how you're actually doing, once you're home and this valley's behind you and there's nobody left out here to see the cracks if you decide to hide them again."

"I promise," Jerry said, and meant it as fully as he had meant any promise across the whole of his tour, though some quieter, more honest part of himself already understood exactly how hard that particular promise was going to prove to keep, once an ocean and a civilian life and a silence with considerably more room to hide in stood between him and the friend currently asking for his word.

They embraced at the helipad the following morning, the same platform where their friendship had first been tested against a firefight's brutal randomness, where Jerry had once carried Boone's wounded body toward a med-evac chopper, where a young private named Baxter had once stepped off his own

arriving flight with wide, uncertain eyes. Mercer held on a long moment, and when he finally stepped back, his eyes were bright with tears he made no effort to hide.

"Go home, Jerry. Go home and be the man Sarah's been writing to for two years. She's earned that man, whatever it costs you to become him again."

* * *

The plane lifted off from Nha Trang two days later, carrying him away from a valley that had taken more from him than he would ever be able to fully catalog and had given him, in exchange, a brotherhood and a faith and a hard-won understanding of his own capacity for both courage and grief that he suspected he would spend the rest of his life still learning to fully carry. He did not know, watching the coastline recede beneath the aircraft's wing, how thoroughly the silence he was leaving this valley still fighting would follow him home, or how many more years it would take before that fight resolved itself one way or the other. He did not know that the small carved box in his duffel bag, and the medal folded into his dress uniform, and Sarah's letter riding warm against his heart, represented not the end of a difficult chapter but merely the closing of its first act — that a considerably longer and more painful reckoning still waited for him on the far side of this ocean, one that no valley, however cruel, and no war, however costly, could have adequately prepared him to survive alone.

He knew only that he was going home changed, in ways both visible and invisible, wearing medals that photographed well and carrying a silence that did not, and that the country waiting for him on the other side of this flight had very little idea, yet, of exactly what kind of man it was about to receive back into its keeping.

CHAPTER 11

THE LONG WAY HOME

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

— Psalm 137:4

The transport landed at Travis Air Force Base on a gray California morning, and Jerry Gatchell stepped off the aircraft expecting, without having fully examined the expectation, something that resembled the homecomings he had grown up hearing about secondhand — his father's stories of Pusan, softened and worn smooth by years of retelling, of ticker tape and brass bands and a grateful nation lining the streets to welcome its soldiers home.

What he found instead was a processing terminal, fluorescent and indifferent, staffed by clerks who processed his separation paperwork with the same flat efficiency they had presumably applied to the man ahead of him and would apply to the man behind, and a low, persistent hum of tension in the air that Jerry did not fully understand until an older sergeant, processing out alongside him, offered a piece of advice that struck Jerry, at the time, as almost absurd in its necessity.

"Change out of your uniform before you head into the terminal proper," the man said, nodding toward a restroom near the processing counter. "Trust me on this one, son. Civilian clothes'll save you some grief you don't need on your first day home."

Jerry did not fully understand the warning until he'd changed and made his way toward the main terminal to catch his connecting flight, passing a small cluster of protesters gathered near the base's

public entrance, their signs bearing slogans Jerry had seen only in secondhand newspaper photographs during his eighteen months overseas — BRING THEM HOME, END THE WAR, NOT ANOTHER LIFE FOR NIXON'S LIES. One young man, perhaps Jerry's own age, caught his eye for a moment as he passed, and something in the exchange — not hostility exactly, but a kind of blank, uncomprehending assessment, as though Jerry were an artifact from a war the young man had already decided did not deserve his empathy — settled into Jerry's chest with a weight he had not anticipated needing to carry on top of everything else this valley had already handed him.

He thought of Boone's psalm, the twenty-third, and found it offered him little comfort standing in an airport terminal that felt, in its own quiet way, considerably more hostile than anything he had expected the actual homecoming to produce.

* * *

The flight to Atlanta gave him hours to sit with a disorientation that had nothing to do with jet lag and everything to do with the sheer, dissonant strangeness of finding himself, within the span of a single day, transported from a jungle valley where death had been a daily, tangible possibility to a pressurized cabin serving coffee and peanuts to passengers reading magazines and discussing dinner reservations, entirely unaware or entirely unbothered by the fact that a war was still grinding on, four thousand miles and one uncomfortable connecting flight away.

He caught fragments of a news broadcast playing on a television in the Atlanta terminal during his layover — footage of protests, of draft card burnings, of a divided Congress arguing about troop withdrawal timelines — and found himself standing frozen before the screen for several long minutes, absorbing a version of his war that felt almost unrecognizable from the one he had actually lived, reduced to abstract political argument by commentators who had, Jerry suspected, never once carried a wounded friend across open ground under fire or written a letter to a dead soldier's grieving mother.

A middle-aged man standing near him at the gate, noticing Jerry's uniform-cut haircut and the particular watchful stillness that eighteen months in-country had trained into his posture, offered an unsolicited opinion that Jerry would remember, with a specific and lasting bitterness, for years afterward.

"Damn shame, all those boys dying over there for nothing," the man said, not unkindly, though the carelessness of it landed on Jerry like a blow all the same. "Whole thing's a lost cause. Ought to just pull everybody out and be done with it."

Jerry said nothing, understanding that any response he might offer would require explaining a weight this stranger had no framework to receive — Higgins, and Delgado, and Baxter, and Rmah, and Y'Dro, and eleven strike force soldiers who had died defending a river crossing this man would never once think about again after this brief airport encounter. He simply nodded, the small, closed nod he had already begun to recognize, within hours of touching American soil, as his primary tool for navigating a country that seemed to have very little genuine interest in understanding what it had actually asked of him.

* * *

Sarah was waiting at the gate in Atlanta, and the sight of her — taller than he remembered, her dark hair longer, wearing a yellow dress he would remember in precise detail for the rest of his life — cut through the accumulated numbness of the preceding hours with a suddenness that nearly staggered him.

She ran to him before he'd fully processed that she was real, and he caught her, and for a long moment neither of them said anything at all, simply standing in the middle of a crowded terminal holding on to each other with a desperation that drew glances from passing travelers that neither of them had any capacity, in that moment, to notice or care about.

"You're here," Sarah said finally, pulling back just far enough to study his face, her own eyes bright with tears she made no effort to hide. "You're actually here."

"I'm here." Jerry heard his own voice come out rougher than he intended, thick with an emotion he had not expected to hit him quite this hard, quite this fast. "God, Sarah. I've dreamed about this moment for two years and it still doesn't feel real."

She studied his face a moment longer, and Jerry watched something flicker behind her eyes — not disappointment exactly, but a kind of careful, searching assessment that told him, even in this first joyful moment, that she had already begun to notice something different in him, some quality his letters, however honest, had not fully managed to convey.

"You look tired," she said gently.

"I am tired," Jerry admitted. "Tired in a way I don't think sleep's gonna fix anytime soon. But I'm here, and you're here, and that's more than I let myself hope for on some of the harder nights this past year." He took her hand, marveling at the simple, ordinary miracle of it — a hand he had imagined holding for two years, finally real and warm in his own. "Take me home, Sarah. I've had about all the strange I can handle for one day."

* * *

The drive from Atlanta to Coweta County passed in a blur of green Georgia countryside that Jerry found himself drinking in with an intensity that surprised even him — pine forests and red clay banks and small towns with courthouse squares that looked, to his eye, almost impossibly peaceful after eighteen months of jungle and wire and constant, low-grade vigilance.

"Everything looks smaller," he said, at one point, watching a familiar stretch of highway pass by the car window. "Same roads I grew up on. Everything's just — smaller than I remember it being."

"You're not smaller, though," Sarah observed, glancing over at him with the particular perceptiveness that had first drawn him to her on a church porch swing a lifetime ago. "Bigger, if anything. Whatever that place did to you, it didn't shrink you down, Jerry. I can see that much already, just watching how you're taking all this in."

Jerry did not fully know how to respond to that, understanding the truth in it even as he also understood, with a private unease he did not yet share with her, that whatever had grown in him over the preceding eighteen months had grown alongside something else considerably less easy to name — a silence, a weight, a habit he had not yet found the courage to fully confess to her in person, whatever he had managed to admit on paper.

His parents were waiting on the porch when the car finally pulled into the familiar dirt drive, and Jerry felt his throat tighten at the sight of them — his father standing straight-backed and stiff with an emotion he was visibly fighting to contain, his mother already moving down the porch steps before the car had fully stopped, her hand pressed to her chest in the exact gesture Jerry remembered from the bus platform two years earlier, as though she could hold her own heart in by force of will alone.

"My boy," Ruth Gatchell said, reaching him before he'd even fully closed the car door, pulling him into an embrace that carried the full accumulated weight of two years of prayer and worry finally, mercifully released. "My boy, you're home. You're really home."

"I'm home, Mama." Jerry held her tight, feeling something in his own chest crack open in a way he had not permitted it to crack since Baxter's death, tears finally arriving that he had held back through the airport, through the flight, through the drive down familiar Georgia roads. "I'm home."

* * *

Everett Gatchell waited his turn with a patience that Jerry recognized, watching him, as its own kind of restraint — the same restraint Jerry himself had learned to practice, over eighteen months of

command, though his father's version had been forged across a considerably longer and lonelier stretch of years.

When Jerry finally turned to him, his father did not offer the formal handshake Jerry had half expected, the kind of careful, contained greeting that had characterized so much of their relationship before Jerry's own war had taught him a different way of being with the man who'd raised him. Instead, Everett simply pulled his son into an embrace as fierce and as unguarded as Ruth's had been, holding on for a long moment before finally speaking.

"Proud of you, son. Told you that in a letter once. Telling you again now, plain, to your face, the way I should have been telling you your whole life instead of waiting for a war to shake it loose from me."

"I know, Daddy. I got the letter." Jerry pulled back enough to look his father in the eye, understanding, in the moment, exactly how much distance the two of them had already closed across an ocean of separation and two years of honest correspondence. "I want to talk more, while I'm home. About Korea. About all of it. I think I understand some of what you carried now, in a way I never could have before."

Everett's jaw worked for a long moment, the same gesture Jerry remembered from a kitchen table conversation two years earlier, and something moved behind his father's eyes that looked, unmistakably, like relief mixed with a grief too long deferred to fully name. "I'd like that, Jerry. Been a long time coming, I expect. Both of us, probably, if I'm honest."

* * *

The kitchen that evening carried a warmth that Jerry had forgotten, across eighteen months of C-rations and mess tent meals, a home-cooked dinner assembled from his mother's careful memory of every dish he'd once mentioned missing in his letters — fried chicken, butter beans, cornbread still warm from the oven, and a peach cobbler that Jerry ate with an emotion that had very little to do with actual hunger.

But even in the warmth of that first family meal, Jerry found himself noticing small dissonances he had not anticipated — the way a car backfiring on the road outside sent his whole body into an instant, involuntary alertness that took several long seconds to stand down from, the way his mother's careful questions about his time overseas felt, despite her obvious love, entirely inadequate to the scale of what he would have needed to answer them honestly, the way the ordinary rhythms of a Georgia evening — crickets, a radio playing softly in the next room, his father's newspaper rustling — felt subtly wrong in a way he could not fully articulate, a peace his body had not yet learned to trust as genuinely safe.

"You alright, son?" Everett asked, noticing Jerry's hand still gripping his fork with more tension than the moment required, several long seconds after the car outside had passed.

"Fine, Daddy. Just — takes some adjusting, I think. Being back somewhere this quiet." Jerry set the fork down deliberately, working to relax hands that did not want to fully relax. "Didn't realize how much my body got used to a different kind of alert, over there. Might take some time to unlearn it."

His father studied him a long moment, and Jerry watched something pass behind Everett's eyes that he recognized, with a small jolt, as the specific and total understanding of a man who had once carried an identical adjustment home from his own war, twenty years earlier, largely alone and unacknowledged. "Take whatever time you need," Everett said quietly. "Wish somebody had told me the same thing, back when I came home from Korea. Might have made the adjustment easier, having a little grace extended for it instead of everybody just expecting a man to slot right back into his old life like nothing had happened."

* * *

Sunday dinner at the Whitcombs' brought Jerry face to face with Sarah's family for the first time as something more than a soldier writing letters from overseas, and he found himself, sitting at their long oak table beneath a portrait of Sarah's late grandfather, working harder than he expected to simply hold up his end of an ordinary conversation.

Sarah's father, Douglas Whitcomb, a deacon at their church and a man Jerry had exchanged perhaps a dozen sentences with before shipping out, studied him across the table with the particular careful appraisal of a father assessing the man who intended to marry his only daughter. "Sarah tells us you're thinking about the sawmill, or maybe finishing up some schooling on the GI Bill," Douglas said, passing a bowl of butter beans down the table. "Either one's a fine start, son. Man's got to have some ground to stand on, coming back from a thing like that."

"Haven't fully decided yet, sir. Still getting my feet under me." Jerry accepted the bowl, aware of Sarah watching him from across the table with the same searching attentiveness she'd shown him at the airport gate. "Everything still feels a little unsettled. Trying not to rush into a decision I haven't thought all the way through."

"Wise policy," Douglas allowed. "Rushed decisions rarely serve a man well, in my experience."

The conversation drifted, as Sunday dinners tended to, toward safer ground — the church building fund, a cousin's upcoming wedding, the unseasonable heat — and Jerry found himself grateful for the ordinary rhythm of it even as some part of him remained, almost against his will, half listening for sounds that did not belong at a peaceful Georgia dinner table, a habit of vigilance eighteen months in the making that showed no immediate sign of loosening its grip.

He woke that night, back in his own boyhood bed at his parents' house, from a dream he would not remember clearly by morning, only that his heart was hammering and his sheets were damp with sweat and some part of him, for several disoriented seconds, still believed himself to be lying in the wet grass above the river crossing, waiting for Baxter's radio to crackle back to life. He sat on the edge of the bed a long while afterward, praying in fragments, asking a peace he did not yet fully trust to actually settle over a body that seemed to have forgotten, for the moment, how to simply rest.

Sarah noticed the shadows beneath his eyes the next morning, when he met her for breakfast at the diner in town, though she did not press him for an explanation he was not yet ready to offer. "Rough night?" she asked simply, sliding a cup of coffee across the table toward him.

"Something like that." Jerry wrapped both hands around the cup, grateful for its warmth. "I'll tell you about it. Just — not all of it, not yet. Some of it I haven't found the words for."

"Take whatever time you need finding them," Sarah said, echoing, without knowing it, the exact words his father had offered a few nights earlier. "I'm not going anywhere, Jerry. Whatever pace this takes."

* * *

The weeks that followed brought Jerry face to face, again and again, with a country he found himself struggling to fully recognize as the same one he had left two years earlier — a nation consumed by an argument about the very war he had just returned from, an argument that seemed, from where Jerry stood, to have almost nothing to do with the actual valley, the actual men, the actual costs he had personally witnessed and carried.

He encountered, more than once, a particular species of well-meaning ignorance from neighbors and old acquaintances who wanted, sincerely, to honor his service, and who did so with a hollow enthusiasm that felt, to Jerry, almost as alienating as the outright hostility he'd encountered at the airport. Men at the feed store shook his hand and called him a hero without knowing a single true thing about what that word had actually cost him. Women at church pressed casserole dishes into his hands and told him how brave he must be, phrases that Jerry received with the same careful, practiced nod

he'd developed at the airport, understanding that neither the hostility nor the hollow praise offered him anything close to the genuine reckoning he actually needed.

* * *

He spent the better part of two weeks turning his own future over in his mind, understanding that the discipline he'd built across eighteen months of command would need to find some new channel now that there was no unit left to lead, no strike force soldiers depending on his next decision. The sawmill his father had mentioned was hiring, and Jerry drove out one Tuesday morning to speak with the foreman, a heavysset man named Curtis Boyd who looked him over with an assessing eye that reminded Jerry, uncomfortably, of a supply sergeant checking equipment for serviceability.

"Gatchell. You're Everett's boy. Heard you got yourself a chestful of medals over there." Boyd did not look up from the clipboard he was studying. "Question is whether a man who's spent two years soldiering can settle into the kind of work we do around here. Steady, unglamorous. No bugles."

"I can do steady work, Mr. Boyd. I did plenty of unglamorous work overseas too, when I wasn't doing the parts that end up in medal citations." Jerry kept his voice even, understanding that this interview, however small, mattered more to him than its modest stakes might have suggested to an outside observer — some part of him needed proof that he could still be useful in a world that did not organize itself around firefights and casualty reports. "I'm not looking for glory, sir. I'm looking for honest work and a paycheck, same as any man."

Boyd studied him a moment longer, something in his expression softening slightly. "My brother came back from Korea a different man than the one who left. Took him the better part of three years to find his footing again. I'll tell you what I told him, if it helps any — a job's not going to fix whatever that place left in you. But it might give you somewhere steady to stand while you work the rest of it out." He extended a broad, calloused hand. "Start Monday, if you're of a mind to. We'll see how it fits."

Jerry shook the offered hand, feeling a small, unexpected lift of gratitude at being met, for once, not with hollow praise or careless dismissal but with the plain, honest appraisal of a man who understood, from personal proximity if not personal experience, exactly what kind of adjustment Jerry was actually navigating.

* * *

That night he sat up late at the small desk in his boyhood room and began a letter he was not entirely sure he would ever finish or send, addressed to Boone, the medic whose steady faith and steadier hands had carried him through more of the valley's darkest hours than Jerry had ever properly thanked him for.

Boone, he wrote, I keep thinking about that verse you gave me before the river crossing, the one from Isaiah about mounting up with wings like eagles. Didn't understand it then the way I think I'm starting to understand it now. Figured it was a promise about strength for the fighting. Now I wonder if it was always more a promise about strength for the coming home, since that's turning out to be its own kind of exhausting in ways I never once anticipated standing in that valley.

He paused, pen hovering over the page, and found himself thinking of the specific weight of each name he had carried out of that country with him — Higgins, Delgado, Baxter, Rmah, Y'Dro — a list that had grown, across eighteen months, into something closer to a psalm of its own, recited privately in the hardest hours the way another man might recite the Lord's Prayer.

Everybody here wants to know what it was like, he continued, but I've found there's no good way to tell them without it either sounding like a war movie or scaring them half to death with the parts that were actually true. So I've mostly settled on saying it was hard and leaving it there, which feels like its own kind of dishonesty even if it spares everybody the parts they can't really carry anyway. You're

about the only man I know who'd understand both halves of that without me having to explain which is which.

He closed the letter with a line he had debated including, then decided, in the end, that Boone above almost anyone would understand exactly what he meant by it: Trying to sing the Lord's song in this foreign land they call home. Some days managing a few notes. Other days just humming and hoping the Lord fills in the rest. Write when you can. Your brother, Jerry.

He sealed the envelope and set it on the desk to mail in the morning, and sat a long while afterward in the quiet of his boyhood room, praying — not the formal, careful prayers of a man reciting Scripture but the plain, unguarded kind, the kind Boone himself had modeled in a jungle clearing two years earlier, asking simply for enough strength to make it through one more day of a homecoming that was, in its own unglamorous way, turning out to be nearly as demanding as the war itself had been.

* * *

Worse, in its own quiet way, was an encounter at the barbershop three weeks into his leave, where a younger man — a former classmate Jerry vaguely remembered from high school, now a college student home for the summer — engaged him in a conversation that started innocuously enough and turned, within minutes, into something considerably more pointed.

"You really think that war's worth what it's costing us?" the young man asked, not unkindly, but with the particular confident certainty of someone who had read a great deal about a war he had never actually fought in. "All those guys dying over there for a government that can't even keep its story straight about why we're fighting in the first place?"

Jerry considered his answer carefully, understanding that anything he said would land differently coming from a man who had actually held a dying friend's wound closed with his own hands than it would from a newspaper columnist offering the same opinion from a safe distance. "I think the men I served with were some of the finest people I've ever known," he said finally, his voice carefully level. "I think whatever this country decides about the politics of it, those men deserve better than being reduced to an argument. That's about as far as I can speak to it, and about as far as I'm interested in speaking to it, if it's all the same to you."

The young man had the grace, at least, to look slightly abashed, and the conversation ended there, but Jerry left the barbershop that afternoon carrying a new and unwelcome weight — the specific loneliness of having survived something his own countrymen, for all their opinions about it, seemed almost entirely unequipped to actually understand.

* * *

Everett took him, the following Friday evening, to the local VFW post, a low cinderblock building on the edge of town where a handful of older men gathered most weeks to drink coffee, play cards, and trade the particular unhurried company of veterans who no longer needed to explain themselves to one another. Jerry had expected, walking in, something like fellowship — a shared language of experience that might, for once, spare him the exhausting labor of translating his war for an audience that had never lived anything like it.

What he found instead was a more complicated welcome than he had anticipated. Most of the men were veterans of the second war or of Korea, and while several greeted him warmly, shaking his hand and asking after his father, Jerry caught, more than once, an undercurrent of skepticism in the room that he did not fully understand until an older man named Sully, a heavysset veteran of the Pacific campaign, spoke it plainly over a hand of cards.

"No disrespect to what you boys went through," Sully said, not unkindly, studying Jerry over the rim of his coffee cup, "but it wasn't a real war, the way we fought a real war. No lines. No islands to

take. Just chasing shadows through a jungle for a cause nobody back home can even agree on. Different animal altogether."

Jerry felt something tighten in his chest, a familiar defensive heat he had learned, over eighteen months, to manage rather than release. "With respect, sir, I buried friends in that jungle same as you buried friends on whatever island you fought on. Don't figure the shape of the war much changes the weight of that."

The room went quiet a moment, and Everett, sitting beside his son, set his own coffee cup down with a deliberateness that carried its own quiet authority. "My boy's right, Sully. A grave's a grave, however you cut it. I came home from a war folks called a police action, like that made the losses smaller somehow. Learned a long time ago that kind of talk does more harm than the fighting itself, sometimes."

Sully studied Jerry a long moment, something in his expression shifting toward a grudging respect. "Fair enough, son. Fair enough. Deal you in on the next hand, if you're of a mind to sit a spell."

Jerry sat, and played cards, and found, by the end of the evening, that the fellowship he'd hoped for had arrived after all, however imperfectly, in the plain, unglamorous form of old men willing to make room for a young one at their table — a small but genuine mercy in a homecoming that had offered him precious few of them so far.

* * *

There was one visit Jerry had been putting off since the day he'd landed, a promise made in the mud beside a dying man that he had carried, unfulfilled, across the entire distance of his homecoming, and on a Saturday morning three weeks after his return he finally worked up the nerve to drive the two hours to Macon to keep it.

Private Wade Baxter's mother lived alone in a small frame house on a quiet street, and when she opened the door to find a young man in a dress uniform standing on her porch, Jerry watched her face pass through a full sequence of emotions in the space of a few seconds — hope, then recognition that this was not her son, then a grief so raw and immediate that Jerry very nearly lost his own composure before he'd managed to say a single word.

"Mrs. Baxter. My name's Jerry Gatchell. I served with Wade. I was there." He held out the small bundle he'd carried the entire drive, wrapped carefully in brown paper — Baxter's pocket Bible, recovered after the ambush, along with a letter Jerry had written and rewritten a dozen times in the weeks since his return, trying to find words equal to a debt he knew, even as he wrote them, no words could actually settle. "I promised him, ma'am, if I made it home and he didn't, that I'd come see you myself. Tell you what kind of man he was over there. Wasn't something I felt right doing through the mail."

She invited him in, and they sat for the better part of two hours at her kitchen table while Jerry told her, as gently and as honestly as he knew how, about the boy from Macon who'd kept a photograph of her taped inside his helmet, who'd shared his last chocolate bar with a hungry village child without a second thought, who had, in his final conscious moments, asked Jerry to tell his mother he wasn't scared — a small mercy of a lie Jerry had told him in return, holding his hand in the wet grass, that he was going to be just fine.

"He wrote about you all the time," Jerry told her, watching her hands turn the small Bible over and over on the table between them. "Said you made the best peach preserves in the state of Georgia. Said he was gonna bring me home with him someday so I could try them for myself." He felt his own voice thicken. "I'm sorry I couldn't keep him safe, Mrs. Baxter. I've turned that failure over more times than I can count, and I don't expect there's anything I can say that touches the size of what you lost. But I wanted you to know he mattered. He mattered to every man in that unit, and he's going to matter to me for the rest of my life."

Mrs. Baxter cried, and Jerry cried with her, and somewhere in the shared grief of that small kitchen a fragment of Scripture rose up in him that he had not consciously reached for — the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit — and he found himself repeating it aloud to her, quietly, the closest thing to comfort he had left to offer a woman whose loss he could witness but never fully carry on her behalf.

"Thank you for coming," she told him at the door, holding his hand in both of hers with a grip surprisingly strong for a woman who looked, in that moment, entirely hollowed out by grief. "Thank you for keeping your promise to my boy. That means more than you know, Sergeant Gatchell. More than you'll probably ever know."

Jerry drove the two hours home in a silence that felt, for once, less like the numb, defended silence he'd carried since the airport and more like the honest, exhausted quiet of a man who had finally set down a piece of the weight he'd been hauling, even if only a fraction of it, even if the setting-down had cost him nearly everything he had left to give. He understood, driving those familiar Georgia roads in the fading afternoon light, that there would be other visits like this one still waiting for him — Delgado's family in south Texas, Higgins's people up in the Carolinas — each one its own small, necessary reckoning he owed the dead, and he found himself praying, somewhere around the county line, for the strength to keep every promise he'd made in that valley, however long the keeping of them took.

* * *

He found himself, in the quiet hours of those first weeks home, returning often to a psalm he had not expected to need again so soon after leaving the valley where he'd first come to rely on it — not the twenty-third, or the ninety-first, or the eighteenth, all of which had carried him through combat's specific terrors, but the hundred and thirty-seventh, a psalm of exile he had encountered once, briefly, during Corwin's Sunday studies and had not fully understood until now.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

He read it one evening on the porch swing where he'd once sat with Sarah as a nineteen-year-old boy, and found the ancient words landing with a specificity that startled him — the strange, disorienting grief of exile, not from a foreign land this time but from his own homeland, a country that looked exactly like the one he'd left and yet felt, in ways he could not fully articulate to anyone who hadn't experienced the particular disjunction himself, entirely foreign to the man he had become.

"You've been quiet tonight," Sarah observed, joining him on the swing, close enough that her shoulder pressed warm against his own.

"Was just thinking about a psalm. Feeling like a stranger in a strange land, except the land's the same one I grew up in." Jerry closed the small New Testament he'd been holding, the same worn copy that had traveled with him through eighteen months of combat, now feeling almost absurdly out of place on a peaceful Georgia porch. "Everybody keeps asking me how it feels to be home, Sarah, and I don't have a good answer for them. Doesn't feel like home yet. Feels like I'm visiting a place that used to be home, wearing a body that doesn't quite fit the life waiting for it here anymore."

Sarah was quiet a long moment, considering his words with the same careful attention she brought to everything. "Give it time," she said finally. "I don't think a man crosses back over that kind of distance in a matter of weeks, Jerry. Maybe not even in a matter of years. But I don't think it means this can't become home again, eventually. Just means the crossing's going to take longer than either of us probably hoped."

* * *

A photographer from the county paper came out to the farm one afternoon to take Jerry's picture for a feature on local servicemen returning from Vietnam, and Jerry stood stiffly beside the porch rail in his dress uniform while the young reporter scribbled notes about his decorations, his rank, the bare outline of his service that would run, two days later, under a headline calling him a HOMETOWN HERO in bold type that made Jerry faintly uneasy every time he looked at it.

That same evening, the family gathered around the television for the evening news, and Jerry watched, in the space of a single half-hour broadcast, footage of a large antiwar demonstration in Washington intercut with a Pentagon briefing on troop strength, followed immediately by a segment on returning POWs that dissolved, without any apparent sense of the whiplash it produced, into an advertisement for laundry detergent. He sat very still through all of it, aware of his own photograph sitting on the side table not six feet away, HOMETOWN HERO in bold type, and found himself struck by the strange, vertiginous sense of being simultaneously celebrated and argued over by a country that seemed, from where he sat, to have very little actual agreement about what either gesture was supposed to mean.

"Doesn't seem like the same war, watching it on the television," Everett observed quietly, from his chair near the window. "Course, I remember Korea getting the same treatment. Folks back home fighting their own war about it, entirely separate from the one we were actually fighting."

"Feels like there's two different countries some days," Jerry admitted. "The one that put my picture in the paper, and the one that spit on a fella at the airport for wearing the same uniform. Hard to square the two of them into one place I'm supposed to call home."

Ruth reached over and patted his hand, not offering an answer so much as simple, wordless comfort, and Jerry thought, not for the first time since his return, of the exiles beside the rivers of Babylon, caught between the land they remembered and the land they had actually been given to live in — and of the quiet, stubborn hope, buried somewhere in that same old psalm, that a song might yet be sung in a foreign land, however strange the key.

* * *

They were married six weeks after Jerry's return, in the same small clapboard sanctuary where Pastor Whitfield had once given a nineteen-year-old boy a verse from Deuteronomy before sending him off to war, and the old pastor, visibly frailer now but carrying the same warm, unhurried presence Jerry remembered, presided over the ceremony with an evident joy that moved Jerry more than he expected.

"I watched this young man leave for war two years ago," Whitfield told the assembled congregation, his voice carrying the particular gravity of a man who understood exactly how much weight a homecoming like this one actually represented. "I gave him a verse that day about the Lord going with him wherever he went, and never leaving him nor forsaking him. I want to offer that same promise today, to both of you, standing here at the start of a marriage that I suspect will need it every bit as much as Jerry needed it walking off to a war he could not yet imagine the shape of. Marriage is its own kind of foreign land, sometimes, gentlemen and ladies. Takes two people willing to keep singing the Lord's song even when the ground beneath them feels unfamiliar, to make a true home out of it."

Jerry stood at the altar in his dress uniform, the Distinguished Service Cross pinned to his chest alongside his other decorations, and watched Sarah walk toward him down the aisle in a white dress her mother had spent months sewing, and felt, for the length of that single suspended moment, something close to the pure, uncomplicated joy he remembered from before the war — a joy that did not erase the silence and the weight he was still carrying, but that sat alongside it, for once, without being crushed beneath it entirely.

He had permitted himself a single drink before the ceremony, alone in the small room behind the sanctuary where he'd waited to be called forward, telling himself it was simply nerves, an ordinary bridegroom's ordinary anxiety, and had not examined too closely why a nervous young man on his own wedding day had reached first for a bottle rather than for prayer, or for his own father waiting just outside the door, or for any of the honest company Boone and Foss and Mercer had all, across two years, worked so hard to teach him to seek out instead.

* * *

They exchanged vows Pastor Whitfield had helped them write together, drawing on the same passage from Ecclesiastes that had once shaped Boone's teaching about brotherhood in the jungle, two are better than one, for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion, and Jerry spoke his own portion of the promise with a full and genuine intention, understanding even as he said the words that he was making a vow considerably larger and more demanding than the simple romantic promise it might have appeared to an outside observer.

"I promise to carry what's heavy alongside you," Jerry told her, his voice steady despite the emotion thick in his throat, "and to let you carry what's heavy alongside me, even on the days I'd rather carry it alone. I promise not to let the silence win, Sarah, not with you, not ever, however hard this valley's aftermath sometimes makes that promise to keep."

Sarah's own vows carried an equal weight, spoken with the same steady conviction that had carried her through nearly two years of honest, unflinching correspondence with a man fighting a war she could only witness from a distance. "I promise to keep asking the honest questions," she told him, "even when the honest answers are hard to hear. I promise to be the kind of home you can actually rest in, not just a place you return to. And I promise, Jerry Gatchell, to love the whole of you — the parts that came home whole, and the parts that are still finding their way back."

The congregation's applause, when Pastor Whitfield finally pronounced them married, carried a warmth that Jerry received more fully than almost anything else this homecoming had offered him so far — a community, however imperfectly it understood the particulars of what he'd survived, genuinely celebrating the fragile, hopeful thing he and Sarah were building together, and for one afternoon, at least, the weight of the preceding eighteen months receded far enough that Jerry could simply, fully, be a young man marrying the woman he loved.

* * *

The reception spilled out onto the church lawn beneath strings of paper lanterns Ruth and several of the church women had spent the better part of a week assembling, and Jerry moved through the gathering in a state that felt, for the first time in months, almost entirely unguarded — accepting congratulations, dancing an awkward first dance with Sarah to a song the church pianist had learned specially for the occasion, watching his father and Douglas Whitcomb fall into an easy conversation near the punch table as though they had known each other for years rather than months.

A telegram arrived partway through the reception, delivered by a Western Union boy on a bicycle who seemed faintly bewildered to be interrupting a wedding, and Jerry read it standing near the edge of the lawn with a smile that only grew as he made his way through the brief message. CONGRATULATIONS BROTHER STOP WISH I COULD BE THERE STOP TELL THE BRIDE SHE'S MARRYING THE BEST DAMN SERGEANT I EVER SERVED UNDER STOP STILL OWE YOU THAT FISHING TRIP STOP MERCER.

"Bulldog," Jerry said, half to himself, folding the telegram carefully and tucking it into his jacket pocket, a small, warm ache moving through him at the thought of the big Alabama farm boy who had once carried him, quite literally, out of a burning ambush. "Sends his regards. Says he owes me a fishing trip."

"Well," Sarah said, appearing at his elbow with two cups of punch, having caught the tail end of his explanation, "sounds like we'd better make room on the calendar, once he's settled back stateside himself."

"I'd like that," Jerry said, and meant it, understanding even as he said it that some part of the war's true reckoning still waited on the far side of reunions he had not yet had — with Mercer, with the men who'd served alongside him, with a version of himself he had not yet finished becoming.

Pastor Whitfield found him near the end of the evening, pulling him aside for a private word beneath the old oak tree at the edge of the churchyard. "I meant what I said up there today, Jerry. About marriage being its own foreign land. I've buried enough young couples' hopes over the years to know it takes real work, and real honesty, to keep a marriage from drifting the way so many do." The old pastor's eyes carried a gentleness that had steadied Jerry once before, on a porch two years earlier, and steadied him again now. "Whatever this valley left in you, son, don't carry it alone. That's the whole of my counsel, distilled down as plain as I know how to say it. Let your wife in. Let your God in. A man who tries to carry a war home by himself usually finds it's heavier than he bargained for."

Jerry nodded, tucking the words away alongside the telegram in his jacket pocket, two small pieces of counsel and connection he would find himself returning to, in the difficult years ahead, more often than he could have anticipated on this one bright evening. "I'll try to remember that, Pastor. I surely will."

* * *

That evening, alone with Sarah for the first time as husband and wife, Jerry found himself thinking of Boone's old counsel about the weight of command — that a man was never meant to carry hardship entirely alone, that the whole secret of surviving this valley's cruelties had always been community rather than isolation — and understood, holding his new wife close in the quiet of their first shared home, that the same lesson now applied to an entirely different and in some ways more demanding battlefield.

"I'm scared," he admitted to her, in the honest dark of that first married night, a confession he would not have permitted himself to make even a few months earlier. "Not of you. Of me, some. Of whatever this war left in me that I haven't fully figured out how to carry yet. I don't want to bring that into this marriage and let it become something that hurts you, Sarah, the way I've watched it already threaten to hurt some of the people I love most."

Sarah held him a long moment before answering, her own voice steady and unafraid. "I already know what I signed up for, Jerry. I've read every letter. I've seen the parts you tried to hide and the parts you finally let me see instead. I'm not marrying a finished man, and I never expected to. I'm marrying the man who keeps choosing honesty, even when honesty costs him something. That's enough for me. That's always going to be enough for me, whatever this next part of the road turns out to require of both of us."

He did not know, holding her in the dark of that first married night, exactly how hard the coming years would test the particular promise they had both just made — how thoroughly the silence he was still fighting would eventually threaten to overwhelm even this hard-won, hopeful beginning, or how many more years would pass before the full weight of Vietnam's aftermath finally came due, in ways neither he nor Sarah could yet imagine from the vantage point of this one bright, hopeful evening. He knew only that he had, for the first time since stepping off that transport plane in California, found something in this country that felt, if not entirely like the home he remembered, then at least like the beginning of one worth fighting to build.

CHAPTER 12

A STRANGER IN HIS OWN HOUSE

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed.

— Ecclesiastes 4:1

Three years had passed since Jerry Gatchell stood at the altar of the small clapboard church and promised Sarah he would not let the silence win, and on a humid August morning in 1971, standing at the kitchen sink of the modest frame house they'd bought outside Newnan with money saved from his foreman's wages at the sawmill, Jerry understood, with a clarity that arrived without warning and without mercy, that the silence had been winning for longer than he had allowed himself to admit.

Michael, not yet three, sat in his high chair working determinedly at a bowl of oatmeal, and Emily, barely eight months old, fussed in Sarah's arms across the kitchen, and the ordinary domestic noise of his own household — a noise Jerry had once imagined, from a jungle valley half a world away, as the very definition of everything worth surviving for — moved past him this morning like weather he could observe but not quite enter.

"You're a thousand miles away again," Sarah said, not accusingly, just naming a fact she had grown practiced at naming over the preceding three years. "Where'd you go this time?"

"Nowhere in particular." Jerry rinsed his coffee cup, aware even as he said it that the answer was not entirely true, that some fraction of him remained, most mornings now, in a valley he had physically left four years earlier but had never fully managed to put down. "Just thinking about the mill. Boyd wants me to look at the new saw before the shift starts."

Sarah studied him a moment with the same searching attentiveness she'd shown him at the airport gate three years before, an attentiveness that had not dulled with time so much as sharpened into something closer to worry. "Michael asked me last night why his daddy doesn't play with him the way Mr. Sully's grandson's daddy does. I didn't have a good answer for him, Jerry. I've been searching for one for a while now, if I'm honest."

Jerry felt the words land somewhere beneath his ribs, a wound considerably more precise than anything the valley had ever managed to inflict on him. "I hear you," he said quietly, and meant it, and understood, even as he said it, that hearing was not the same as the changing Sarah was actually asking of him — a distinction that had come to define, more than either of them wanted to admit, the shape of their marriage's first three years.

* * *

Emily had taken her first steps two weeks earlier, a Tuesday afternoon Jerry had missed entirely, working a double shift to cover for a man out sick, and Sarah had told him about it that evening with a carefulness that Jerry recognized, even then, as her trying not to make him feel worse than the news itself already made him feel.

"She just let go of the coffee table and went for it," Sarah had said, holding Emily on her hip while the baby gummed contentedly at her own fist, entirely unaware of the small domestic drama her achievement had already produced. "Four whole steps before she sat down. I wish you could've seen it, Jerry. I tried to hold the moment in my head as best I could, so I could tell it to you right."

"I wish I could've seen it too," Jerry had said, and meant it with an ache that surprised him, understanding even as he said it that wishing had become, over the preceding three years, something close to his primary mode of participating in his own children's lives — wishing he'd been there,

wishing he could get the time back, wishing the valley had left him with a different set of instincts than the ones that kept sending him, again and again, toward the clear, achievable tasks of the mill floor instead of the murkier, more frightening work of simply being present.

He had asked Sarah to show him, that evening, and she had set Emily down on the living room rug and coaxed her forward with an outstretched hand, and Jerry had watched his daughter take four wobbling steps toward her mother with a joy that very nearly matched, in its intensity, the grief of having missed the original moment entirely — a joy shadowed by loss, which had become, Jerry was beginning to understand, something close to the defining emotional key of his life since coming home.

* * *

Jerry found himself thinking, more than once that summer, of the Christmas eight months earlier, the last one before this particular slow unraveling had become impossible to ignore — the whole family gathered at Everett and Ruth's, the house strung with the same lights he remembered from his own childhood, Michael tearing through wrapping paper with an abandon that had made even Jerry laugh out loud, a sound Sarah had noted, privately, as having grown rare enough by then to feel almost startling when it arrived.

For a few hours that December afternoon, sitting in his parents' living room with a fire in the hearth and Michael proudly displaying a new toy truck to anyone who would look, Jerry had allowed himself something close to the uncomplicated contentment he remembered from Christmases before the war — no watchfulness, no private ledger, just the ordinary warmth of a family gathered together in a season built, however imperfectly the world usually managed it, around the promise of God arriving to dwell among His people.

Reverend Halloway's Christmas Eve sermon had leaned on a verse from Isaiah that stayed with Jerry through the following day, the people walking in darkness have seen a great light, and he had found himself turning the words over as he watched his son play beneath the tree, wondering whether the light the prophet promised might yet reach even the particular darkness he'd been carrying since Travis Air Force Base — a darkness that had, admittedly, receded some over that one bright afternoon, if not fully lifted.

Everett had caught him alone in the kitchen that evening, fetching more eggnog, and set a hand on his son's shoulder with a gentleness that had become, over the preceding years, considerably more natural between them than it had ever been in Jerry's boyhood. "You look lighter today than I've seen you in a while, son."

"Feels good to just be here, Daddy. Simple as that." Jerry had accepted the small compliment without his usual reflexive guardedness, grateful for once to simply receive it. "Wish I could bottle up a day like today. Carry it with me into the harder ones."

"Every good day's worth carrying forward a little," Everett had told him. "Doesn't erase the hard ones. But it does prove something, I think — proves the man underneath all that trouble is still very much in there, still capable of a Christmas like this one. Don't lose sight of that fella on the harder days ahead, whenever they come."

Jerry had carried his father's words with him through the winter and into this present, harder summer, but he understood now, standing at his own kitchen sink eight months later, that a single good day, however bright, had not been enough on its own to reverse whatever current kept pulling him back under — a lesson in the limits of a single Christmas's grace that he was still, slowly and painfully, learning to accept.

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The sawmill had become, over those same three years, the one place Jerry felt something close to competent, a domain of clear tasks and measurable outcomes that stood in sharp relief against the

murkier, more demanding work of simply being present with the people he loved most. Curtis Boyd had promoted him to floor foreman within eighteen months, citing a discipline and attentiveness to detail that Jerry recognized, privately, as the same command instincts that had once kept eleven men alive through a river crossing — instincts that translated, it turned out, quite efficiently into keeping a lumber operation running smoothly, and considerably less efficiently into the softer, more ambiguous work of fatherhood.

"You've got a gift for this," Boyd told him one afternoon, watching Jerry walk the floor checking blade tension with the same methodical thoroughness he'd once applied to checking a squad's weapons before a patrol. "Best foreman I've had in fifteen years running this place."

"Appreciate you saying so, sir." Jerry accepted the compliment with the same careful, closed nod he still deployed for most praise, uncertain, even after three years, how to receive warmth without some part of him bracing against it. "Try to run a tight operation."

"Tight's the word for it, alright." Boyd studied him a moment, something in his expression carrying a familiar note of concern Jerry had grown accustomed to seeing in the faces of people who cared about him. "Man runs his floor about as tight as you run yourself, from what I can tell. Might do you some good to loosen the grip some, now and again. Man wasn't built to hold that kind of tension forever, son. Something's got to give eventually."

Jerry did not fully know how to respond to that, understanding the truth of it even as he understood, with the same private helplessness that had characterized so much of the preceding three years, that he did not yet possess the tools to actually loosen a grip that had kept him alive through eighteen months of combat and had not, in the years since, received any convincing evidence that it was now safe to release.

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The truck backfired in the mill yard on a Thursday afternoon in September, a sharp, flat crack that sent Jerry down behind a stack of green lumber before he had consciously registered deciding to move, his heart hammering, his breath coming in the same short, controlled bursts he had once used to steady himself before a firefight. It took perhaps four seconds for the mill yard to resolve back into itself — the ordinary clatter of the saw, a truck idling near the loading dock, two of his men staring at him with an expression that mixed concern and a carefully suppressed alarm — but four seconds was long enough for every man on that floor to have witnessed their foreman drop to the ground like a man dodging gunfire.

"You alright, Sarge?" asked Dwight Pruitt, one of the younger hands, using the nickname the crew had adopted for Jerry sometime during his second year at the mill, half in genuine respect and half, Jerry suspected, in the easy, unthinking way young men reach for whatever label seems to fit.

"Fine," Jerry said, straightening, brushing sawdust from his trousers with hands that were not quite steady. "Backfire caught me off guard is all. Get back to it."

The men returned to their stations, and Jerry retreated to the small foreman's office at the edge of the yard, closing the door and sitting for a long moment with his head in his hands, humiliation and a familiar, helpless anger churning together in his chest. He had commanded men in actual combat without his hands shaking like this. He had held a dying friend's wound closed with steady fingers while mortar rounds walked closer with every impact. And now a truck backfiring in a Georgia lumber yard could still, four years later, put him flat on the ground in front of a dozen men who depended on him to be the steadiest presence in the building.

He thought of a verse Boone had once quoted to him, in a different kind of dark moment, though he found himself, that afternoon, unable to summon the full comfort of it — when I am afraid, I put my trust in you — and sat with the words a long while, less as comfort than as a kind of stubborn

discipline, repeating them until his hands, at least, had stopped their trembling enough to let him walk back out onto the floor and finish the shift.

He did not tell Sarah about the incident that evening, adding it instead to a private ledger of moments he had decided, without ever quite articulating the decision even to himself, were better carried alone than shared — a ledger that had grown, over three years, considerably longer than either of them yet fully understood.

Curtis Boyd found him still sitting in the foreman's office twenty minutes later, the shift long since back to its ordinary rhythm outside the window, and closed the door behind him with a quiet deliberateness that told Jerry this was not going to be a conversation about blade tension.

"Saw what happened out there," Boyd said, lowering himself into the chair across from Jerry's desk without waiting for an invitation. "Wasn't the first time I've seen a man go down like that over a loud noise, son. Won't be the last, working a place like this with the mix of men we hire. My brother did the same thing at a Fourth of July picnic, first summer he was home from Korea. Whole family acted like nothing happened. Wasn't kindness, looking back. Was just nobody knowing what else to do."

"I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Boyd." Jerry kept his eyes on the desk, humiliation still sitting heavy in his chest. "Wish I could promise you it won't happen again. Can't honestly make that promise."

"Wasn't asking you to." Boyd's voice carried no judgment, only a steady, patient weight. "I'm asking you something else. You got anybody you're actually talking to about all this? Not managing. Not gritting your teeth through it. Actually talking to."

Jerry considered the question longer than he expected to, turning it over with an honesty the day's events had left him little energy to deflect. "Not really, sir. Not the way you mean."

"Didn't figure." Boyd stood, straightening his cap. "There's a fella I know, runs a little group over at the Baptist church in town, mostly veterans, meets Wednesday nights. Nothing fancy. Just men talking plain about things their families can't always carry for them. I went a few times myself, after my brother's troubles got bad enough that I needed somewhere to put my own worry about him. Might do you some good. Might not. But I'd rather see you try it than see you go down behind a lumber stack every time some fool backfires his truck in my yard." He paused at the door. "You're too good a man, and too good a foreman, for me to watch you carry this alone, Gatchell. Think on it."

Jerry did think on it, turning the invitation over for the remainder of the shift and much of the drive home, understanding that Boyd had just offered him something considerably more valuable than sympathy — a door, however small, that he had not yet worked up the courage to walk through, though the wednesday night meetings would linger at the edge of his thinking for weeks before he found himself finally willing to attend one.

He nearly mentioned it to Sarah that evening, sitting across from her at supper, and found the words dying somewhere between his mind and his mouth, the same old reflexive caution reasserting itself before he could fully overrule it. Some other night, he told himself. Once I've thought it through a little more. It was a familiar postponement, one he recognized even as he made it, and he ate the rest of his meal in a silence Sarah did not press, though he caught her watching him once or twice with the particular patient attentiveness of a woman waiting for a door she could sense had come open somewhere just out of her sight.

* * *

The nightmare came for him three or four nights a week, by that point, a fact Sarah had learned to navigate with a weary, practiced patience that Jerry recognized, on his better days, as its own quiet form of heroism. He woke that particular night in late August with his heart hammering and his hands already reaching for a weapon that was not there, and it took several long, disoriented seconds —

Sarah's hand on his shoulder, her voice low and steady in the dark, Jerry, you're home, you're safe, it's alright — before the valley receded enough for him to remember where and when he actually was.

"I'm sorry," he said, sitting up, his shirt soaked through with sweat, his breathing still ragged. "I'm sorry, Sarah. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't wake me. Emily did, about twenty minutes before you started thrashing." Sarah's voice carried no accusation, only a tired, honest weariness that struck Jerry harder than anger might have. "This is the fourth time this week, Jerry. I'm not complaining. I just — I want you to know I've noticed. I've been noticing for a long while now."

Down the hall, Michael's small voice called out, frightened by whatever noise had carried through the thin walls of the house, and Jerry felt something in his chest crack open with a shame more acute than almost anything the valley itself had ever managed to produce in him — the specific horror of understanding that his own war, four years distant, was still reaching into his children's bedrooms in the middle of the night, disturbing a peace they had done nothing whatsoever to forfeit.

"I'll go to him," Jerry said, already moving, grateful for a task with a clear and achievable outcome. He found Michael sitting up in bed, small and frightened in the dark, and gathered him into his arms with a tenderness that came, in these narrow, unguarded moments, more easily than it seemed to in the ordinary daylight hours of their life together.

"Bad dream, Daddy?" Michael asked, his voice small against Jerry's shoulder.

"Something like that, buddy. I'm sorry it woke you up." Jerry held him a long moment, rocking gently, and found himself murmuring a fragment of Psalm 34 into his son's hair, the Lord is close to the brokenhearted, without fully deciding to say it aloud. "Daddy's got some old memories that still give him trouble sometimes. Nothing for you to worry about, though. I promise you that."

But even as he said it, Jerry understood the promise was not entirely honest, and the understanding sat with him long after Michael had drifted back to sleep in his arms — the awareness that a war he had fought to protect a country he loved had followed him home in a form he had not anticipated and did not yet know how to defeat, and that the people paying the steepest price for that failure were the two small, innocent people asleep down the hall who had never once asked him to fight anything at all.

* * *

He had started keeping a six-pack in the old icebox out in the garage sometime that spring, telling himself it was nothing more than a man's ordinary habit of unwinding after a long shift, a single beer or two consumed alone among his father's old tools while the rest of the house settled into its evening rhythms without him. He told himself, most nights, that the habit was harmless, even useful — a controlled, private release valve for a tension that had nowhere else sanctioned to go.

He was out there most nights by nine, after the children were down and Sarah had settled in with her mending or a book, and he told himself each time that this would be the last night he needed it, a claim that had, by that September, worn thin enough that some quieter part of him had stopped fully believing it even as he kept making it.

Sarah found him out there one evening earlier than usual, drawn by the light still burning past ten o'clock, and stood in the garage doorway a long moment before speaking, taking in the small collection of empty bottles lined up with a neatness that Jerry understood, even through the beer's soft blur, as its own kind of quiet warning sign.

"You've been out here a lot lately," she said, not quite an accusation, though Jerry heard the concern threading beneath it.

"Just unwinding. Long day at the mill." Jerry heard the defensiveness in his own voice and did not fully know how to soften it. "Everybody needs some way to come down off a long shift, Sarah."

"I'm not saying you don't. I'm just saying I've noticed the number of bottles has been climbing some, is all. And I've noticed you're out here more evenings than not, when it used to just be a Friday

thing." She crossed her arms, not in anger so much as in the particular self-protective posture of a woman bracing for a conversation she wasn't certain she had the strength for that night. "I'm not trying to pick a fight, Jerry. I just want you to know I've noticed. Same as I notice everything else."

"I hear you," Jerry said again, the same phrase he'd used that morning at the kitchen sink, and felt, even as he said it, the hollow, repetitive inadequacy of it — a phrase that had become, over the preceding months, less an actual promise to change and more a kind of verbal placeholder, offered in place of the harder work Sarah kept asking of him.

She did not press further that night, retreating instead back into the house with a tiredness that carried its own quiet eloquence, and Jerry sat alone in the garage a while longer, looking at the neat row of empty bottles with an unease he chose, in the moment, not to examine too closely — a small, private postponement that would cost him, in the years just ahead, considerably more than he yet understood.

* * *

Sunday services that fall carried Jerry through a passage from Ecclesiastes that Pastor Whitfield's successor, a younger man named Reverend Holloway, preached on with an earnestness Jerry found himself unable to fully receive, seated in the pew beside Sarah with Emily dozing against her shoulder and Michael squirming restlessly between them.

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun, Holloway read, his voice carrying clearly through the small sanctuary. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors, and they have no comforter.

"The Preacher isn't only describing oppression that comes from outside a man," Holloway continued, "though certainly there's plenty of that kind in this world. Sometimes the oppression a person carries comes from inside — a grief, a fear, a burden they cannot set down, one that isolates them even in the middle of the people who love them most. And I want to say to anyone sitting here this morning carrying that kind of weight: you are not meant to carry it without a comforter. The Lord does not intend for His people to weep alone."

Jerry sat very still through the remainder of the sermon, aware of Sarah's hand finding his on the pew between them, aware of the particular way the words had landed on him with a precision that felt almost uncomfortably personal — the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter — and found himself wondering, not for the first time, whether the comfort Holloway was describing was something he had simply failed to accept rather than something genuinely unavailable to him.

He prayed, in the quiet after the benediction, a short and honest prayer he did not fully know how to extend into the rest of his week: Lord, I don't know how to let anybody close enough to comfort me. Show me how, if You're willing. I don't think I can keep doing this alone much longer, and I don't think it's fair to Sarah or the children that I've been trying to.

* * *

Sarah drove out to see Ruth and Everett the following week, without telling Jerry beforehand, carrying a worry she had not yet found the words to raise directly with her husband but could no longer fully carry alone either. Ruth put on coffee and listened, her weathered hands folded on the kitchen table, while Sarah described, as carefully and as fairly as she knew how, the growing distance she felt from a man she loved as much as ever but understood less with each passing month.

"He's not unkind," Sarah said, turning her coffee cup slowly on its saucer. "He's never once raised his voice to me or the children. That's not the trouble. The trouble is he's just — gone, some large part of him, even when he's sitting right across the table. I don't know how to reach the part of him that's still gone, Mrs. Gatchell, and some days I'm not sure he knows either."

Everett, who had been quiet through most of the conversation, finally spoke, his voice carrying the particular weight of a man revisiting old, difficult territory. "Took me the better part of six years to

come all the way home from Korea, Sarah. Six years, and your mother-in-law here bearing the worst of that distance the whole while, same as you're bearing it now." He glanced at Ruth, something passing between them that spoke to decades of shared, hard-won understanding. "I'm not proud of how long it took me, or how much I made her carry in the meantime. But I'll tell you what finally moved the needle, if it's any use to you. Wasn't scolding him into it. Wasn't even loving him harder, though the Lord knows Ruth never once stopped doing that. What finally moved it was somebody looking me square in the eye and naming what they saw, plain and honest, without flinching from it. Sometimes a man buried that deep can't find his own way up without somebody willing to call down to him first."

"I've tried naming it," Sarah said quietly. "I don't know if I've done it plain enough, or honest enough."

Ruth reached across the table and took Sarah's hand. "You keep trying, dear. Keep praying, and keep naming it, and keep loving him besides. That boy loves you and those babies more than he knows how to show yet. I watched him grow up not knowing how to show it to his own daddy either, and look how far the two of them have come since he got home. It's slow work. But it's not hopeless work. I promise you that much."

Sarah drove home that afternoon with something steadier in her chest than she'd carried on the drive out, not a solution exactly, but a kind of companionship in the difficulty — the knowledge that she was not the first woman to love a man carrying an invisible war home with him, and that the distance, however wide it currently felt, was not necessarily a permanent feature of the marriage she had chosen.

* * *

She found her own version of that same companionship a few weeks later in Carol Ann Deese, a woman two pews over at church whose husband had come home from the Navy the same year Jerry had come home from the Army, and whose own marriage, Sarah had begun to suspect from small, careful comments dropped over coffee after Sunday service, carried some of the same weight hers did.

"Does Ray ever just — go somewhere else, while he's sitting right in front of you?" Sarah asked one Tuesday morning, the two of them shelling peas on Carol Ann's back porch while their children played in the yard below. "I don't mean daydreaming. I mean really gone. Somewhere you can't follow him to."

Carol Ann's hands stilled over the bowl in her lap. "Every single day, some weeks. Took me the better part of a year to stop taking it personal. Longer than that to stop being angry about it, if I'm being fully honest with you." She resumed shelling, her voice carrying the particular steadiness of a woman who had made a kind of uneasy peace with a difficulty she had not chosen. "I used to think it meant he loved me less than he let on. Took me a while to understand it wasn't about love at all. Man's just trying to survive something none of us can see, best way he knows how."

"How do you keep from feeling so alone in it?" Sarah asked, the question carrying more urgency than she'd intended to reveal.

Carol Ann considered the question a long moment, her eyes drifting to the yard where her own two children chased Michael in some improvised game whose rules seemed to exist only in their heads. "I used to think the answer was waiting for Ray to change enough that I wouldn't need to feel it anymore. Waiting for him to come all the way back so the lonesome would just quit on its own." She shook her head slowly. "Took me a long while to understand that wasn't fair to put on him, or on myself. The lonesome doesn't wait for him to fix himself, Sarah. Has to be tended some other way, alongside whatever healing he's doing, not after it."

"Some days I don't, if I'm honest with you." Carol Ann reached over and squeezed Sarah's hand, a small, sturdy gesture of solidarity. "But I've got you now, don't I? And a few other wives around this church who understand it without me having to explain the whole of it. That's worth something, Sarah."

More than I expected it to be, when Ray first came home and I felt like the only woman in Coweta County carrying this particular kind of lonesome."

Sarah drove home that afternoon turning Carol Ann's words over, understanding, with a clarity that felt both comforting and sobering in equal measure, that her own private ledger of worry had a counterpart in houses up and down the county, other women loving other men home from other corners of the same war, each of them learning, in their own halting way, that the burden of loving a wounded man was not meant to be carried in total isolation either — a lesson Halloway's sermon on the oppressed and their absent comforters had only begun, that Sunday, to fully illuminate for her.

She began, in the weeks that followed, meeting Carol Ann for coffee most Tuesday mornings, a small standing ritual that grew, almost without either woman fully deciding it, into something like the very comfort Halloway had preached about — two women shelling peas or folding laundry together, trading small honest accounts of their husbands' struggles and their own private exhaustion, neither one offering solutions so much as simple, steady company in a difficulty that had, until then, felt like hers alone to carry. Sarah found herself praying differently after those Tuesday mornings, less for Jerry to simply change and more for the patience and wisdom to keep loving him well while he found his own slow way toward it, a shift in her own praying she recognized, looking back, as its own quiet answer to a prayer she had not consciously known she was praying.

She thought, some Tuesdays, of a verse Ruth had once shared with her, from the same Ecclesiastes that Halloway had preached that fall — two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor — and understood it now as speaking not only to marriages but to friendships like the one she was building with Carol Ann, a fellowship of women learning together how to love men who had come home carrying more than any one wife could fully bear alone.

* * *

The distance came to a head on a Saturday in October, Michael's third birthday, a day Sarah had planned for weeks with a careful attention to detail that reflected, Jerry understood even in the moment, her own quiet determination to build the kind of ordinary, joyful family life that the war had made so much harder for both of them to simply inhabit.

Jerry arrived late from the mill, having lost track of time overseeing a repair on the new saw, and walked into a yard full of neighborhood children and a cake already half-consumed, Michael's small face falling, for just a moment, at the sight of his father's absence from what should have been the party's central moments.

"You missed the candles," Sarah told him afterward, in the kitchen, her voice carrying a controlled evenness that Jerry recognized, with a sinking dread, as considerably more dangerous than outright anger. "You missed him blowing them out. You missed him looking around the yard for you before he did it."

"Sarah, I'm sorry. The saw needed—"

"I know what the saw needed, Jerry. I've heard about what the saw needed, and what the floor needed, and what a dozen other things at that mill have needed, for three years now." Sarah set down the dish towel she'd been holding, her hands trembling slightly with an emotion she had clearly been containing for longer than this single afternoon. "I need to say something, and I need you to actually hear it this time, not just nod at me the way you nod at everybody else who tries to reach you these days."

Jerry felt something in him go very still, the same watchful stillness that had once kept him alive in a jungle valley now deployed, uselessly, against his own wife in his own kitchen. "I'm listening."

"Are you, though?" Sarah's voice carried an edge Jerry rarely heard from her, three years of accumulated patience finally cracking under the specific weight of a missed birthday cake. "Because I feel like I've been saying versions of this same thing since the week you came home, and every time I

say it you go quiet and careful, just like you're doing right now, and then a month later we're right back in the same kitchen having the same conversation. I don't know how many more times I can say it before I stop believing you're actually hearing any of it."

"I hear every word, Sarah. I promise you that." Jerry heard the defensiveness rising in his own voice and tried, with limited success, to soften it. "I don't know what else you want me to say. I know I've got trouble I haven't licked yet. I'm working on it the best way I know how."

"Are you, though? Because from where I stand, it looks a lot like you're managing it, Jerry. Managing it real well, in fact — keeping it contained, keeping it quiet, keeping the mill running and the bills paid and your temper in check. But managing a thing and actually working on it aren't the same, and I think you know that better than you're letting on." Sarah wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand, frustrated at her own tears. "I need working on, Jerry. I need less managing and more actually letting somebody in."

"I feel like I'm raising these children with a stranger, Jerry. A kind, good-hearted stranger who happens to live in this house and pay the bills and show up to church on Sundays, but a stranger all the same. You're here, and you're not here. I don't know how else to say it." Her voice broke slightly, and she pressed on despite it. "Michael doesn't know you, not really. Emily's not going to know you, if this keeps up. And I'm tired, Jerry. I'm so tired of being married to a man I have to work this hard just to reach."

* * *

The words hung in the kitchen a long moment, and Jerry found himself, for once, unable to retreat into the careful, closed silence that had become his default posture toward almost every difficult conversation of the preceding three years. Something in Sarah's voice — not anger exactly, but a grief too long deferred, an echo of the very oppression Halloway had preached about that morning, the tears of the oppressed who have no comforter — cut through his defenses with a directness the valley's own horrors had somehow never quite managed.

"You're right," he said finally, the admission costing him something he could not fully name. "You're right, and I don't have a good excuse for it. I keep telling myself I just need more time, that it'll get easier the further I get from that place, but it's been three years, Sarah, and some days it feels like it's getting harder instead of easier. Like I brought something back with me that's still growing instead of shrinking."

"Then let me help you carry it," Sarah said, her voice softening slightly, though the underlying urgency remained. "That's all I've ever wanted, Jerry, since your very first letter. Not for you to be fixed. Just for you to let me in far enough to actually help."

"I don't know how," Jerry admitted, and felt the confession land with an honesty he had rarely permitted himself since coming home. "I don't know how to let anybody that close anymore. Feels like every door I try to open, something in me slams it shut again before I've even finished turning the handle."

Sarah crossed the kitchen and took both his hands in hers, an act of simple physical courage that Jerry received with a gratitude too large for words. "Then we'll practice opening it, one door at a time, for as long as it takes. But you have to want to, Jerry. I can't want it enough for both of us forever. Eventually you have to meet me partway, or I don't know what happens to this family."

"I want to," Jerry said, and heard, in his own voice, an urgency he had not permitted himself to show her in longer than he cared to admit. "I don't know if wanting to is enough on its own, but I want to more than I've let you see, Sarah. I think I've been so afraid of failing at this that I stopped trying at all, which I'm only now hearing out loud how foolish that sounds."

"It's not foolish. It's just human." Sarah wiped at her eyes again, this time with something closer to a small, tired smile. "But you can't let the fear of failing keep you from trying anymore, Jerry. Michael

and Emily don't need a perfect father. They need a present one. That's a lower bar than the one you keep setting for yourself, if you'll let it be."

Jerry nodded slowly, turning the distinction over, understanding it as one of the truer things anyone had said to him since he'd come home. "A present one," he repeated. "I think I can try harder at that. I think I have to."

* * *

He found Michael later that evening, sitting alone on the back porch steps in the fading October light, still faintly sullen about the missed candles, and Jerry lowered himself down beside his son with a deliberateness that felt, in the moment, almost as demanding as anything he had once attempted under fire.

"I'm sorry I missed your candles, bud," Jerry said. "That wasn't right of me. You deserved your daddy there for that."

Michael studied him with the frank, unguarded scrutiny particular to small children, an expression that struck Jerry as uncomfortably similar to the assessing looks he'd once received from strangers at the airport four years earlier — the sense of being evaluated by someone trying to determine whether he could be trusted. "Are you gonna miss my next birthday too?"

The question landed with a force that nearly undid him. "No," Jerry said, and found he meant it with an intensity that surprised him. "No, buddy, I'm not. I'm gonna do better. I promise you that, and I mean to keep this promise better than I've kept some others lately."

"Okay," Michael said simply, with the easy, forgiving trust of a three-year-old, and leaned his small head against Jerry's arm, and Jerry sat there in the gathering dark with his son's weight against him, thinking of Boone's old counsel about carrying burdens in community rather than isolation, thinking of Pastor Whitfield's wedding-day warning about letting the silence win, thinking of Halloway's sermon that very morning about the oppressed who have no comforter, and understood, with a clarity that felt both hopeful and frightening in equal measure, that he stood at some kind of crossroads he could not much longer afford to keep avoiding.

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He made good on the promise two Saturdays later, waking Michael before dawn to drive out to a pond on the old Hutchins place where Everett had taught Jerry himself to fish nearly twenty years earlier, a small, deliberate act of passing something forward that Jerry hoped might begin to close some of the distance Sarah had named in the kitchen. Michael sat beside him on the bank in the gray early light, small hands wrapped around a cane pole nearly as tall as he was, radiating a patient, uncomplicated joy that Jerry found himself, for once, able to simply receive without some part of his mind standing guard against it.

"Grandpa Everett says you used to fish here when you were little like me," Michael said, watching his bobber with fierce concentration.

"He did. Taught me everything I know about it, right on this same bank." Jerry adjusted his son's grip on the pole, guiding his small hands with a tenderness he wished, not for the first time, came this easily to him in every moment rather than just these rare, unguarded ones. "Told me patience was about the most important thing a fisherman could learn. Figured that was as good a lesson as any to pass along to you."

They fished in a companionable quiet for the better part of an hour, Michael's occasional excited whispers about a nibble the only real interruption, and Jerry felt something in his chest loosen that he had not fully realized was clenched — a rare, sustained stretch of simply being present, unhaunted, in his own life. He thought of the telegram still folded in his dresser drawer, Mercer's promise of a fishing

trip once he was stateside, and found himself hoping, watching his son's face light up at a genuine bite, that some version of this same peace might someday extend to that reunion too.

It held for nearly the whole morning, right up until a distant crack of what was almost certainly a hunter's rifle, some field over, sent a jolt through Jerry's whole body that Michael, absorbed in reeling in his first small bream, did not even notice. Jerry sat very still afterward, breathing carefully, working to keep the moment from Michael's awareness, grateful his son's attention remained fixed entirely on the small fish flopping at the end of his line rather than on his father's suddenly rigid posture beside him.

"I caught one, Daddy! Look!" Michael held the fish aloft with a triumph that briefly eclipsed everything else, and Jerry made himself smile, made himself praise the catch with a warmth he had to reach for through the residual adrenaline still working its way out of his system.

"That's a fine one, bud. Best one I've seen caught off this bank in a long while." Jerry helped him unhook it, aware of the small, private cost this single rifle crack had extracted from a morning that had, until that moment, been going about as well as any morning had gone in longer than he cared to admit. He said nothing to Michael about it, tucking the incident away into the same private ledger that already held the mill yard backfire, and drove home that afternoon with a fish on a stringer and a fresh reminder, however quietly borne, of just how far he still had to travel.

* * *

That night, after the children were asleep, Jerry sat alone on the porch with his worn New Testament, the same copy that had traveled with him through eighteen months of combat, and turned to a passage in James that Boone had once quoted to him in a jungle clearing a lifetime ago — everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry — and found himself praying with an honesty he had rarely managed since his wedding night.

Lord, I don't know how to be the husband and father these two children deserve. I know how to survive. I know how to hold a line, and keep a schedule, and run a tight floor at the mill. I don't know how to just be still with the people I love without some part of me standing guard against a threat that isn't even there anymore. Teach me, if You're willing. Because I'm watching my own family start to slip away from me, the same way I watched men slip away from me in that valley, and I don't think I can survive losing this too.

He thought of the verse from Ecclesiastes that had anchored Halloway's sermon that morning, the tears of the oppressed, and understood, sitting alone in the dark with his prayer still hanging unanswered in the October air, that he had become, without ever quite intending it, both the oppressed and the oppressor in his own small household — a man weeping tears no one could fully see, while somehow, in his very silence, denying his wife and children the comfort they had every right to expect from him.

Sarah found him there an hour later, and sat down beside him without a word, and Jerry reached for her hand in the dark, a small, deliberate act of the very door-opening she had asked of him that afternoon. Neither of them spoke for a long while, but the silence between them, for once, felt less like a wall and more like a held breath — not a resolution, not yet, but something that might, with enough patience and enough grace, eventually grow into one.

"I love you," Jerry said finally, into the quiet. "I don't say it enough, or show it enough, but I love you and those children more than I know how to put into words most days. I want to be a stranger in this house less than I want almost anything else in this world. I just don't fully know the way back yet."

"Then we'll find it together," Sarah said, resting her head against his shoulder. "One door at a time, like you said. I'm not going anywhere, Jerry. I meant that the day I married you, and I mean it tonight, however hard tonight's conversation was for both of us."

"I keep thinking about Boyd's offer," Jerry admitted, into the quiet. "That Wednesday night group over at the Baptist church. Been carrying the idea around for weeks now without doing anything about it. Think I'm ready to finally go, if you'll still have me try."

Sarah lifted her head, searching his face in the porch light, something hopeful moving behind her tired eyes. "I think that sounds like exactly the kind of door we've been talking about, Jerry. I'll be proud of you for walking through it, whenever you're ready."

"Might not fix everything overnight," Jerry said. "Might not fix it for a long while yet, if Boyd's brother is anything to go by. But I think I'd rather be a man still working on it than a man just managing it, like you said. Figure that's the only place worth starting from."

They sat together on the porch a long while after that, past the point where either of them had anything left to say, and Jerry understood, watching the last light fade from the October sky, that he had not solved anything that night, not really — the nightmares would return, the silence would still tempt him, the distance would not close in a single honest conversation, however hard-won. But something had shifted, all the same, in the admission itself, in the simple, terrifying act of naming the trouble aloud instead of burying it further beneath another layer of careful, practiced silence.

Later, lying beside Sarah in the dark long after she'd drifted off, Jerry found himself thinking once more of the verse that had followed him home from that jungle valley four years earlier, the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit, and understood, turning it over in the quiet, that he had spent most of the intervening years assuming the verse was meant for other men — for Baxter's grieving mother, for the widows and orphans of that far-off war — without ever once considering that it might also, plainly and specifically, be meant for him. He was brokenhearted. He had been crushed in spirit, in ways he was only now beginning to have the courage to name aloud. And the Lord, the psalmist promised, was close to exactly that kind of man, not distant from him, not disappointed in him, but close — a nearness Jerry decided, somewhere in the small hours of that October night, he was finally ready to stop resisting.

It was not yet a homecoming, not fully. But it was, he thought, perhaps the first true step back toward one — a man beginning, however unsteadily, to find his way out of exile and into the house where his family had been waiting for him all along.

CHAPTER 13

THE GHOSTS THAT FOLLOWED

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.

— Psalm 91:5

The rain came hard and sudden that April afternoon, the kind of warm, drumming Georgia downpour that turned the mill yard's red clay to soup within minutes, and Jerry Gatchell was standing beneath the loading dock overhang, watching sheets of water curtain off the tin roof, when the smell of wet earth and crushed vegetation reached him and the world, without warning, simply came apart.

He was not, for the several long seconds that followed, standing in a Georgia lumber yard at all. He was crouched in wet elephant grass above a river he had not thought about directly in weeks, rain hammering the jungle canopy overhead, Baxter's radio crackling uselessly against his ear, the particular metallic taste of fear coating the back of his tongue. He heard, with a clarity that felt more real than the

actual mill yard around him, the specific overlapping shouts of a firefight he had survived nearly five years earlier — Delgado's voice, Y'Blul's voice, his own voice calling coordinates into a handset — and it was not until Dwight Pruitt's hand closed on his shoulder, shaking him hard, that the valley finally released its grip and let him back into the present.

"Sarge. Sarge, you with me?" Pruitt's face swam into focus, young and alarmed, rain plastering his hair to his forehead. "You've been standing there talking to somebody who ain't there for near a full minute. Scared the devil out of me."

Jerry blinked, his heart still hammering, his shirt soaked through with a sweat that had nothing to do with the humidity. "I'm fine," he managed, though his voice came out rougher than he intended. "Just — the rain. Reminded me of something, is all."

Pruitt did not look convinced, and word of the incident moved through the mill floor by the end of the shift with the particular efficiency small workplaces reserved for their foreman's most alarming moments, and Jerry drove home that evening carrying a fresh, cold dread that had nothing to do with the valley itself and everything to do with the growing suspicion that whatever was happening to him was not merely getting managed, as he'd told Sarah for years now, but was in fact getting worse.

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He expected, walking onto the floor the next morning, some measure of the awkward distance men tended to keep from a thing they didn't understand and half feared themselves, and found instead, to his considerable surprise, that his crew had closed ranks around him with a quiet, unspoken loyalty that moved him more than he knew how to properly acknowledge. Dwight Pruitt said nothing further about the incident, simply nodding a greeting same as any other morning, and it was one of the older hands, a taciturn man named Silas Coker who had lost a brother at Okinawa, who finally addressed it directly, catching Jerry alone near the saw.

"Wife had a cousin came back from the Pacific different than he left, same as you," Coker said, not quite meeting Jerry's eyes, his big hands busy checking a blade guard that didn't especially need checking. "Whole family just went on like nothing happened, on account of nobody knowing what else to do about it. Don't imagine that served him too well, looking back. Figured I'd just tell you plain, whatever that spell was yesterday, don't none of us on this floor think less of you for it. Man who runs into gunfire to drag a wounded soldier out gets some grace from me the rest of his days, whatever else comes with it."

Jerry did not fully know how to receive the comment, unaccustomed as he still was to being seen so plainly by men who had, until that point, known him only as a capable and exacting foreman. "Appreciate you saying so, Silas. Means more than I can easily put into words."

"Didn't say it for thanks. Said it 'cause it's true, and true things are worth saying out loud sometimes, whether or not a man's built to hear them easy." Coker returned to his work without further ceremony, and Jerry carried the brief exchange with him through the rest of that shift and for some while afterward, a small, unlooked-for mercy from a quarter he had not expected one — further evidence, arriving in its own quiet way, that the isolation he'd feared since the fireworks was not, perhaps, as total or as inevitable as it had felt in his darkest recent hours.

* * *

Gordon Teague ran the Wednesday night group out of a small classroom in the education wing of the Baptist church, a wiry, gray-haired man who had served with the First Marine Division at the Chosin Reservoir and carried himself with the particular unhurried steadiness of a man who had made a long peace with his own worst nights. Jerry finally walked through that door on a Wednesday in May, nearly seven months after Boyd's original invitation, driven less by readiness than by a mounting fear that the alternative was watching his own family slip entirely out of reach.

Six other men sat in a loose circle of folding chairs — two from Korea, three from Vietnam, one from a war Jerry didn't immediately place — and Teague welcomed him without ceremony, simply nodding toward an open chair as though Jerry's arrival were the most ordinary thing in the world rather than the culmination of seven months of avoidance.

"We don't require a man to talk his first night," Teague said, once the group had settled. "Sometimes a fella just needs to sit and listen a spell before he's ready to add his own voice to it. Either way's welcome here."

Jerry sat mostly silent that first evening, listening to a Vietnam veteran named Ellis Prater describe, in a flat, careful voice, a recurring dream about a firefight near Pleiku that ended, every single time, with him unable to reach his rifle before the dream simply stopped, cutting off before he ever learned whether he lived or died in it — a detail that struck Jerry with an uncomfortable specificity, since his own worst nightmares followed an almost identical structure, the valley replaying itself right up to the point of maximum dread before mercifully, cruelly, releasing him back into consciousness.

Another man, a heavyset Korea veteran named Dale Simmons who worked the counter at the hardware store on Main Street, spoke next, his big hands folded tightly in his lap. "Mine's not even a battle. Just a hallway. Long hallway in some building that never existed, far as I can tell, and I'm walking it looking for a door that's never where I remember it being. Wake up every time before I find it, heart going like I outran something. Thirty years now, same hallway."

"Thirty years," Jerry repeated, unable to keep the dismay from his voice. "Does it ever let up?"

"Some. Not all the way." Simmons met his eyes with a plain, weathered honesty. "I won't lie to you and tell you it goes away entire, son. What I will tell you is it gets easier to carry, the more a man quits trying to carry it by himself. That much I know for certain, whatever else I don't."

"Anybody else's mind do that?" Teague asked the group. "Loop the worst part over and over, like a reel of film stuck on the same frame?"

Several men nodded, Jerry among them, and Teague continued, his voice carrying the patient authority of long personal experience. "I used to think that meant something was broken in me permanent. Took me the better part of a decade to understand it different — that a mind does that because some part of it is still trying to solve a problem it never got the chance to finish solving in the moment. Trying to protect you, even now, however unhelpful it feels. Doesn't make the nights any easier. But it helped me some, understanding it wasn't just meaningless torment. There was a kind of broken logic to it, once I looked at it square."

Jerry drove home that night turning the words over, understanding, for the first time since Travis Air Force Base, that he was not alone in the specific architecture of his own haunting — a recognition that offered him less comfort than he'd hoped for, but more, he suspected, than he had managed to find anywhere else in the preceding five years.

* * *

The nightmare that returned him to the valley most often was not, as Sarah sometimes assumed, the ambush that had earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, nor even Baxter's death beside the river, but a quieter, more private horror — the moment, three days after the crossing, when he had written home to eleven different families explaining, in his own careful hand, exactly how their sons had died. His dreaming mind returned to that moment with a fidelity that daylight memory could never quite match, each letter unfolding itself again in exhausting, granular detail, Higgins's mother's face rising up from a photograph he'd never actually seen but which his sleeping mind had constructed anyway, complete and devastating.

He woke from it that particular June night with a violence that frightened even him, his arm swinging out before he was fully conscious, catching Sarah across the shoulder hard enough to knock

the wind from her, and it was her cry of pain, more than anything else, that snapped him fully awake, horror flooding through him even faster than the adrenaline had.

"Sarah. Sarah, I'm so sorry, I didn't—" He reached for her in the dark, and felt her flinch, just slightly, before she allowed the contact, a flinch that lasted less than a second but that Jerry would carry with him, replaying it, for weeks afterward. "Are you hurt? Sarah, please tell me if I hurt you."

"I'm alright," she said, though her voice shook. "You caught me by surprise more than anything. I'm alright, Jerry."

He sat up, unable to stop trembling, horrified at himself in a way that eclipsed even the nightmare's original terror. "I could have really hurt you. Or one of the kids, if they'd been in here." He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "I don't know what to do about this anymore, Sarah. I've been going to Teague's group for a month now and it hasn't stopped any of it. Maybe it's not something that stops."

Sarah was quiet a long moment, rubbing her shoulder gingerly, and when she spoke her voice carried a fear Jerry had not heard from her before, not even in the darkest stretches of the preceding years. "I need you to sleep in Michael's old crib room for a while, Jerry. Just until we figure something out. Not as punishment. I just — I can't risk the children being in reach if this happens again, and I can't lie next to you every night wondering if I need to."

The request landed on Jerry with a devastation more total than almost anything the valley itself had inflicted on him, a confirmation of the very isolation he had feared since the first night he'd woken thrashing beside her — the war had followed him home, and now, however necessarily, it was pushing him out of his own bed.

* * *

Sarah called Carol Ann the following morning, before Jerry had even left for the mill, and drove over with both children still in their pajamas rather than wait through another day carrying the fear alone. Carol Ann listened without interrupting, her own two children occupying Michael and Emily in the side yard, and when Sarah finally finished describing the previous night — the swinging arm, the flinch she hadn't been able to stop, the request she'd made that still sat like a stone in her chest — Carol Ann reached across the table and gripped both her hands.

"You did right, asking for the space," Carol Ann said firmly. "Don't you dare let anybody, including your own conscience, tell you different. Protecting yourself and those babies isn't the same as giving up on him, Sarah. I need you to hear that plain, because I know how that request is probably eating at you."

"It feels like giving up," Sarah admitted, her voice small. "Feels like I'm the one building the wall now, instead of him."

"It's not a wall. It's a fence with a gate in it, and you're the one holding the key, same as you've always been." Carol Ann's voice carried the hard-won authority of a woman further down this same road. "Ray slept on our living room couch the better part of a year, after a night not so different from the one you just described. Wasn't punishment. Was just plain safety, for a season, while he did the harder work of getting well enough to come back to our bed without either of us lying there afraid. He came back, Sarah. Took longer than either of us wanted. But he came back, and I think some of what let him come back was knowing I hadn't abandoned him, even while I kept myself and the children safe in the meantime."

Sarah held onto those words through the following weeks with a fierce, private gratitude, repeating them to herself some nights when the empty side of the bed felt less like a boundary and more like an accusation she hadn't meant to level — a reminder, borrowed from a friend who understood this particular exile firsthand, that protecting herself and loving Jerry through his recovery were not, in fact, opposing choices, however much the ache of the empty mattress sometimes argued otherwise.

* * *

He moved his things into the small spare room that week, and the physical distance, small as it was — a single wall separating him from his own wife — began working on him in ways he had not anticipated, a literal architecture of the emotional exile he had been fighting since his return five years earlier. He heard Michael ask Sarah, one Saturday morning, why Daddy slept in a different room now, and heard Sarah's careful, incomplete answer — Daddy's just having some trouble sleeping, sweetheart, nothing for you to worry about — and understood that his son, not yet five, was already old enough to sense that something fundamental had shifted in the architecture of their family, even without the words to name it.

He began, in the weeks that followed, arriving home later from the mill than strictly necessary, volunteering for shifts he didn't need to cover, finding reasons to linger at the sawmill's small office finishing paperwork that could easily have waited until morning — not consciously avoiding his family so much as instinctively minimizing the hours during which he might, through some unguarded moment, cause them further harm. He skipped two consecutive Sundays at church, telling Sarah he wasn't feeling well, when the truer explanation was that he could no longer sit in a pew surrounded by people who might notice, in his face, the particular hollowed-out exhaustion of a man who had not slept a full night in nearly a month.

Teague noticed the withdrawal before almost anyone else did, catching Jerry after a Wednesday session in early July. "You've gone quiet on us these last few weeks, Gatchell. Quieter than even your first night here."

"Been better," Jerry admitted, the closest thing to full honesty he'd offered anyone in weeks. "Had an incident with Sarah. Hurt her in my sleep, or near enough. Now I'm sleeping down the hall from my own family like some kind of stranger in the house I pay the mortgage on."

Teague's expression did not carry the shock Jerry had half expected, only a grave, weathered recognition. "I did the same thing myself, for the better part of two years, after Korea. Sleeping in the spare room, telling myself it was protecting my wife when really, if I'm honest looking back, some part of it was also just easier than facing her every morning with what I'd become." He studied Jerry a long moment. "The isolating feels like the safe choice, son. Every instinct tells you it's the responsible thing, keeping your trouble contained where it can't touch anybody else. But I'll tell you plain, the isolating is the trouble multiplying itself, not containing itself. A wound left alone in the dark doesn't heal near as well as one somebody's actually tending."

* * *

He drove out to see his father that same week, finally making good on the promise he'd made on his very first night home five years earlier — I want to talk more, while I'm home, about Korea, about all of it — a promise that had waited, unfulfilled, through a wedding and two children and a foreman's job, until the spare room down the hall from his own wife finally made the waiting feel unaffordable.

Everett listened to the whole of it on the back porch, the nightmare that had sent Jerry's arm swinging out in his sleep, the request that had followed, the shame that had chased him ever since, and when Jerry finally finished, his father sat a long while in silence before speaking.

"I never told your mother the whole of what happened at the reservoir," Everett said finally. "Not the whole of it, even now. Told her enough to explain the nightmares, but not enough that she'd have to carry the actual weight of the images herself. Used to think that was mercy, keeping the worst details to myself." He turned his coffee cup slowly in his hands. "I've come to believe, these last years, it was more cowardice than mercy. I was protecting myself from having to watch her face while I said it out loud, as much as I was protecting her from hearing it."

"Did you ever tell anybody the whole of it?" Jerry asked.

"Eventually. Told a chaplain, years after the fact, more than I'd ever told your mother in one sitting. Felt like setting down a sack of rocks I hadn't realized I was still hauling." Everett met his son's eyes.

"I'm not saying you owe Sarah every last detail of that valley, Jerry. Some things a woman doesn't need carried into her own mind just because you're carrying it in yours. But I am saying find somebody — that Teague fellow, a chaplain, somebody — and tell the whole of it to at least one living soul. A man wasn't built to carry the whole of a war entirely alone, however capable he is at pretending otherwise."

Jerry sat with that a long while, the porch swing creaking gently beneath them, and felt something in his chest loosen slightly at the sight of his father — a man who had carried his own war silently for the better part of two decades — finally admitting, plainly and without excuse, the cost of that silence. "I've started telling Teague's group some of it," Jerry said. "Not the whole of it yet. But some."

"That's a start," Everett said. "A real one. Took me till your mother's hair had gone half gray to manage what you're managing at not yet thirty. Don't let anybody, including yourself, tell you that's slow progress. It's not slow. It's just honest, and honest is harder, and harder is usually worth more in the end."

* * *

The Fourth of July that year brought the incident Jerry had been quietly dreading since April, though he had not consciously anticipated the specific shape it would take. The town's small fireworks display, held each year over the lake at the edge of the county fairgrounds, drew most of Coweta County out onto blankets and lawn chairs for an evening Jerry had once loved as a boy, and Sarah had insisted, gently but firmly, that the family attend together, a small act of hopeful normalcy she was still determined to build despite everything.

The first few low fireworks passed without incident, Michael and Emily both delighted, Sarah's hand finding Jerry's in the dark with a tentative hopefulness he recognized and tried, with everything in him, to honor. But the finale arrived in a concentrated barrage of overlapping explosions, sound and light crashing together in a way that bore, Jerry understood only in retrospect, an unmistakable resemblance to sustained mortar fire, and he found himself, without any memory of the intervening seconds, flat on the ground behind their blanket, arms covering his head, heart hammering with a terror that had nothing to do with the actual, harmless fireworks bursting overhead.

He came back to himself to find Sarah kneeling over him, her face white with fear and mortification in roughly equal measure, and a small cluster of neighbors nearby who had clearly witnessed the entire episode, their expressions ranging from concern to a poorly concealed alarm that cut Jerry more deeply than almost anything since the airport encounter five years earlier. Michael was crying, frightened by the sight of his father on the ground, and it was that sound, more than the stares of his neighbors, that finally broke through the fog enough for Jerry to sit up.

"I'm alright," he said, to no one and everyone, brushing grass from his shirt with hands that would not stop shaking. "I'm alright. Just tripped is all."

Nobody believed the explanation, least of all Michael, who clung to Sarah's leg the rest of the evening and would not come near his father again until well after they'd returned home, and Jerry drove them back through the dark county roads in a silence heavier than almost any he had carried since coming home — the specific, complete humiliation of having his private war made suddenly, unmistakably public, witnessed by half the families he'd grown up among.

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Michael's wariness did not fade with a single night's sleep, as Jerry had quietly hoped it might. For nearly two weeks afterward, his son kept a careful, watchful distance whenever Jerry entered a room, offering the polite, guarded courtesy of a child who had learned, however dimly, that his father's steadiness could not always be trusted, and it was a Tuesday evening in mid-July, watching Michael flinch at the ordinary bang of the screen door in the wind, that the full weight of what he had done finally landed on Jerry with its complete force.

"Hey, bud," Jerry said gently, crouching to Michael's eye level in the kitchen. "You've been keeping your distance from me lately. I noticed. I want you to know it's alright to tell me if I scared you at the fireworks."

Michael studied him with the same frank, searching scrutiny Jerry remembered from the birthday-night porch conversation nearly two years earlier, though something more guarded had entered it since. "You fell down and wouldn't get up for a long time. Mama looked really scared. I got scared too."

"I know, buddy. I'm sorry." Jerry felt his throat tighten, understanding that no explanation he could offer a five-year-old would fully account for what had actually happened. "Sometimes Daddy's brain gets confused by loud noises, on account of some scary things that happened before you were born. It's not your fault, and it's not something you did wrong. I'm working real hard on it, with some other men who understand, so it happens less."

"Is it gonna happen again?" Michael asked, the question carrying a child's plain, unguarded need for certainty.

Jerry wanted, badly, to promise him no, the same way he'd once promised never to miss another birthday, but he had learned enough about broken promises in the preceding years to choose a harder, truer answer instead. "I don't know for certain, bud. I wish I could tell you no and mean it completely. What I can tell you is I'm not going to stop trying to get better, and I'm not going anywhere, however scared it makes you sometimes. I'll always come back around, even on the hard days."

Michael considered this with the particular grave seriousness small children sometimes brought to matters far beyond their years, and after a long moment climbed, tentatively, into Jerry's lap — a small, deliberate act of trust that undid Jerry more completely than almost anything else that difficult summer had produced, and that he understood, holding his son close, as a mercy he had done very little to deserve and everything to be grateful for.

* * *

Sarah began reading aloud from the Ninety-First Psalm most Sunday evenings that summer, a small family ritual she introduced not long after the fireworks, gathering both children onto the living room rug while Jerry sat nearby, close enough to listen without the demand of full participation, a compromise Sarah had proposed with a gentleness that told Jerry she understood exactly how much even this small nearness was costing him some weeks.

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty," Sarah read one particular Sunday in late July, Emily already dozing against her shoulder, Michael tracing the psalm's words with one finger though he could not yet fully read them himself. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge."

"What's that mean, Mama? Feathers and wings?" Michael asked, looking up from the page.

"It means the Lord's the kind of protector who gets in close, sweetheart. Not just watching from far off, but right up near you, covering you the way a mother bird covers her babies." Sarah glanced over at Jerry as she said it, a small, deliberate invitation he recognized and, for once, did not deflect.

"Your daddy used to say this exact psalm helped him feel less scared, over in Vietnam," Sarah continued. "Didn't you, Jerry?"

Jerry felt the familiar reflex to demur, to keep the conversation at its usual careful distance, and found himself, instead, moving closer to the little circle on the rug. "I did, bud. A friend of mine, a man named Y'Blul, taught it to me beside a river, right before some of the scariest fighting I ever saw. Told me the Lord's the kind of shelter you don't have to earn your way into. Just have to be willing to run toward it when the terror comes."

"Is the terror still coming for you, Daddy?" Michael asked, with the plain, searching honesty children reserved for questions adults usually knew better than to ask outright.

Jerry considered the question a long moment, understanding it deserved better than a reflexive reassurance. "Some nights, yeah. Some days too, if I'm honest. But I'm getting better at running toward the shelter instead of trying to outrun the terror on my own. That's the whole of what your mama and Mr. Teague and your Grandpa Everett have been teaching me this summer, near as I can tell."

Sarah reached over and took his hand, and for a long moment the four of them sat together on the living room rug in a silence that felt, for once, less like the strained, careful silence of the preceding years and more like something closer to genuine rest — a small, ordinary Sunday evening that Jerry recognized, even as he lived it, as the very shelter the psalm had been describing all along.

* * *

He drove to the VA hospital in Atlanta the following week, alone, without telling Sarah where he was actually headed, and sat for the better part of two hours in a crowded waiting room lined with men in various states of the same unspoken struggle — a young amputee working his way slowly through a paperback, a much older man Jerry took for a World War II veteran staring fixedly at nothing, and beside Jerry himself, a lanky Vietnam veteran perhaps two years his junior who introduced himself as Wendell Hooks and struck up a conversation with the easy, unguarded directness of a man who had simply run out of patience for small talk.

"First time here?" Hooks asked, noting Jerry's stiff posture, the way his eyes kept tracking the room's exits.

"First time," Jerry admitted. "Not sure what to expect, honestly."

"Don't expect much," Hooks said, not unkindly, just plainly. "I've been coming here going on eight months now. Best I've gotten is a pamphlet and a suggestion I take up a hobby. Third doctor I've seen, and every one of them treats it like I'm the first fella who ever mentioned nightmares to them." He shook his head. "Not their fault, entirely. I read somewhere they don't even have a proper name for what we've got yet. Whole thing's still getting sorted out by folks smarter than either of us, someplace up north."

"You keep coming back, though," Jerry observed.

"Keep coming back 'cause the alternative's worse." Hooks studied his own hands a long moment. "Figure eventually the paperwork adds up to something. Figure eventually enough of us showing up forces somebody to take it serious. Might not be soon enough to help me much. Might help some fella coming home ten years from now, though. Seems worth the wait in the lobby, from where I'm sitting."

"You got family?" Jerry asked, wanting to keep the conversation going, grateful for the small, unexpected companionship of the waiting room.

"Wife, and a little girl not much older than a year." Hooks's expression softened at the mention of them. "She's the reason I keep coming back here, honestly, more than any real hope the doctors will fix me quick. Want to be able to tell her someday I did everything I could to get well, even when the well wasn't easy to find. Figure that's worth something, even on the days the waiting room feels like a wasted afternoon."

"That's about the same reason I finally started going to a group myself," Jerry said. "Fella at my mill kept after me near seven months before I finally walked through the door. Wish I'd listened sooner."

"Most of us wish that, one way or another." Hooks extended a hand as a nurse called his own name from across the room. "Good luck in there, Gatchell. And with whatever group you've found. Sounds like it's doing you some good, even from the little I can tell."

Jerry turned the man's words over long after his own name was finally called, understanding them as their own quiet kind of faith — a belief that showing up, again and again, to a system not yet built to receive you, was its own act of stubborn hope rather than futility.

"Combat fatigue," the doctor said finally, not quite meeting Jerry's eyes, in the tone of a man reciting a diagnosis he'd delivered a hundred times that month alone. "Common enough among returning servicemen. Tends to improve with time, in most cases. I can note it in your file, but I'll be honest with you, Sergeant, we don't have much in the way of resources here beyond that. Backlog's considerable, and frankly the research on this kind of thing hasn't caught up to the need yet, not for your war especially. Best I can offer today is some literature and an encouragement to keep active, stay busy, lean on your church and family where you can."

Jerry left the hospital with a thin pamphlet on stress management and a hollow, furious disappointment that took him most of the walk back to his car to name accurately — not disappointment in the young doctor, who seemed genuinely if inadequately sympathetic, but in a country that had sent him to a war it argued about incessantly and now, having gotten him home, seemed to possess almost no coherent understanding of what that war had actually cost the men who fought it, nor any real infrastructure prepared to help them carry it.

He found, tucked into a rack of dated magazines in the lobby on his way out, a several-months-old newsmagazine article describing a handful of psychiatrists up in New York running informal gatherings for Vietnam veterans, small groups meeting in borrowed church basements to talk plainly about nightmares and rage and the particular numbness that seemed to follow so many of them home, and Jerry read the piece twice through, sitting in his car in the hospital parking lot afterward, with a recognition so complete it left him briefly unable to start the engine.

The article did not offer him a diagnosis, exactly — the doctors quoted in it seemed to still be arguing over what precisely to call the condition, some reaching for language borrowed from the old shell shock of his father's war, others groping toward something newer that hadn't yet found its settled name — but it offered him something nearly as valuable: proof, printed and circulated to strangers a thousand miles away, that Teague's little Wednesday circle in a Baptist church basement was not some isolated Georgia peculiarity but a small outpost of something larger, a whole scattered nation of men quietly discovering, at roughly the same moment, that they were not broken in some singular, shameful way but wounded in a manner that increasingly had a shape, a pattern, even a name working its way toward existence.

He tore the article out carefully and folded it into his shirt pocket, intending to show it to Teague at the next Wednesday meeting, and drove home that afternoon with something steadier in his chest than he'd carried into the city that morning — not a cure, but a map, however incomplete, of the territory he'd been wandering blind through for five years.

He wrote to Boone that same evening, the medic's most recent letter still tucked in his desk drawer alongside two years of accumulated correspondence, describing the magazine article and the VA doctor and the whole exhausting shape of that particular summer, and Boone's reply arrived three weeks later carrying its own hard-won wisdom, written in the same steady, unhurried hand Jerry remembered from a jungle clearing years earlier.

Jerry, Boone had written, I've had some of the same trouble you're describing, though mine shows up different — mine's less nightmares and more a kind of fog some mornings, like I can't quite locate myself in the day until I've been awake an hour or better. Wish I could tell you it gets simple. What I can tell you is the men I know who are doing best with it are the ones who quit trying to fight it alone, same as you're finding with that Wednesday group. Doesn't surprise me a bit that Y'Blul's psalm keeps finding its way back to you. Some promises are built to get used more than once in a man's life. Write when you can. Still your brother in this, whatever miles are between us.

Jerry read the letter twice through on the back porch that evening, and found himself grateful, not for the first time, that the valley had given him at least this one enduring gift alongside all its wounds — a brotherhood that had not evaporated the moment the war itself had ended, a scattered handful of men across the country who understood, without lengthy explanation, exactly what he was carrying.

He thought of Psalm 91, the psalm Y'Blud had once quoted to him beside a different river in a different country — you will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day — and found the ancient promise landing, that particular afternoon, less as comfort and more as an aspiration he had not yet found any reliable way to actually inhabit, though the magazine article folded in his pocket had, if nothing else, made the aspiration feel slightly less solitary than it had that morning.

* * *

Curtis Boyd called him into the mill office the Monday after the fireworks, and Jerry braced himself, walking in, for some version of the conversation he'd been quietly dreading since word of the incident had inevitably reached the mill floor through the same efficient channels that carried every other piece of county gossip.

"Heard about the Fourth," Boyd said without preamble, settling behind his desk. "Figured you'd rather I say it plain than have you wondering all week whether I'd heard."

"I understand if this changes things, Mr. Boyd," Jerry said, already rehearsing, in his mind, the shape of whatever demotion or dismissal might be coming. "I know a foreman's supposed to be the steadiest man on the floor, and I haven't exactly been that lately."

Boyd studied him a long moment, something almost like offense crossing his weathered features. "Is that what you think I called you in here for? To cut you loose over a bad night at a fireworks show?" He shook his head slowly. "Son, I've watched you run the tightest, safest floor this mill's had in fifteen years. I've watched you train up three green hands into good, careful workers. None of that got undone by falling down at a fireworks display, however it looked to the neighbors."

"Then why'd you call me in?" Jerry asked, some of the tension easing from his shoulders.

"Wanted to tell you I talked to a fellow I know runs the mill over in Carrollton, lost his own boy in that same war, and he mentioned they've started letting a couple of their veteran hands keep radios or transistor sets going quiet on the floor near the loading dock — something about a familiar, steady noise helping drown out the sudden ones. Might be worth trying here, if you're of a mind to. I'll clear it with the front office." Boyd's voice carried a plain, unadorned kindness that Jerry received with a gratitude too large to fully voice. "I'm not looking to cut you loose, Gatchell. I'm looking for ways to keep a good man working here as long as I possibly can, however much accommodating that takes. That's the whole of why I called you in."

Jerry left the office that morning carrying something he hadn't expected to find at the start of the conversation — not shame, for once, but the specific, steadying knowledge that at least one corner of his working life remained solidly, generously in his corner, whatever the rest of the county might be whispering about the man who'd gone down at the fireworks.

* * *

Teague's group met that Wednesday in a smaller circle than usual, two of the regular men absent, and Jerry found himself, for the first time since joining, actually speaking at length, describing the VA visit and the fireworks and the spare room down the hall from his own marriage bed with an unguarded honesty that surprised him even as he offered it.

"I keep thinking Psalm 91 is supposed to be a promise," Jerry said, near the end, his voice rough. "You will not fear the terror of night. But some weeks it feels more like an accusation. Like I'm failing at something everybody else seems to manage."

Teague considered the words a long moment before answering. "I don't think the psalm's promising you won't feel the terror, son. I think it's promising you won't be left alone in it — that whatever comes at you in the night or in the day, you've got a shelter to run to, even when running to it doesn't come natural. Difference between the terror disappearing and the terror not having the final word. Took me years to understand which one the promise was actually making."

Ellis Prater, quiet until then, spoke up from across the circle. "For what it's worth, Gatchell, that fireworks story — near identical thing happened to me at my own boy's Little League game, two summers back. Whole bleacher section watched me go down when somebody's truck backfired in the parking lot. Felt like the whole town saw exactly how broken I was that day. Didn't feel less broken telling you that story just now. But felt a little less alone in it, saying it out loud to somebody who wasn't going to look at me different for it."

Teague nodded slowly, tapping his own worn Bible where it rested on his knee. "That's the whole of what that verse in the Ninety-First is naming, near as I've come to understand it — the terror of night, and the arrow that flies by day. Two different kinds of ambush, but both of them ambush all the same. Night terror's the nightmare, the thing that gets you when your guard's down asleep. Arrow by day's the fireworks, the backfire, the smell of rain — the thing that gets you wide awake, in broad daylight, when you'd swear you ought to have seen it coming." He looked around the circle. "Took me years to understand the psalm wasn't promising a man he'd never get hit by either one. It was promising he wouldn't face either one without a shelter to run to. Difference between never getting shot at and never fighting the battle alone."

"Wish somebody'd explained it to me plain like that, five years ago," Jerry admitted. "Might have saved me some of the shame I've been carrying, thinking I was the only man dropping to the ground over a truck backfiring."

"None of us in this room are the only man," Teague said simply. "That's about the whole point of this circle, if you boil it down."

Jerry drove home that night through the same dark county roads he'd driven a week earlier in silent humiliation, and found the drive, this time, carrying something closer to a fragile companionship than despair — not a cure, not yet, not even a clear path toward one, but the small, hard-won recognition that Teague's circle of broken, honest men had become, without his fully choosing it, the first place in five years where he did not have to manage his ghosts entirely alone.

* * *

He found Sarah waiting up when he got home, sitting in the living room with a single lamp burning, and something in her posture told him she had been waiting specifically for this conversation rather than simply awake by chance.

"How was tonight?" she asked.

"Hard. Good, too, in a way I'm still working out how to explain." Jerry sat down across from her, close enough to reach her hand but not yet reaching for it. "I told them about the fireworks. About the VA. About sleeping down the hall from you and the kids." He met her eyes, forcing himself not to look away. "I'm sorry, Sarah. For all of it. For scaring Michael, for scaring you, for not finding my way to that classroom seven months before I finally did."

"I'm not asking for an apology," Sarah said gently. "I'm asking for exactly what you just did — telling me the truth of it instead of managing it alone in a room down the hall." She studied him a long moment. "I miss you next to me, Jerry. I understand why we made the change. But I miss you, and I want to know when you think it might be safe to try again."

"I don't know yet," Jerry admitted. "I don't want to risk hurting you again before I've got a better handle on it. But I promise you I'm not giving up on finding my way back to that bed, Sarah. Same as I'm not giving up on finding my way back to the rest of it."

"There's more, if you'll hear it," Jerry said, and pulled the folded magazine article from his shirt pocket, smoothed flat now from weeks of being carried. "Found this at the VA. Fellas up north starting to figure out what to even call what we've got. Made me feel less crazy, reading it. Wanted you to see it too, so you know I'm not the only one, and so you know there's actual folks out there working on understanding it better, even if the doctor I saw wasn't much use himself."

Sarah took the article and read it slowly by the lamplight, and when she looked up her eyes were bright. "I've been so afraid it was just us, Jerry. Just some flaw in you nobody else carries, and some failure in me for not knowing how to fix it. This helps. I don't know exactly how to say why, but it helps."

"Boone wrote back too," Jerry added. "Said some of the same. Said the men doing best with it are the ones who quit fighting it alone." He reached for her hand again, this time without hesitation. "I've got Teague's group. I've got Boyd looking out for me at the mill. I've got Daddy, finally, after five years of neither of us saying much of anything true to each other. And I've got you, and Michael climbing back into my lap today like maybe he doesn't think I'm quite so broken after all." His voice caught slightly. "I don't feel alone in it tonight, Sarah. First time in longer than I can rightly remember."

"That's the whole of what I've wanted for you," Sarah said quietly. "Not for the ghosts to disappear overnight. Just for you to stop facing them by yourself in the dark."

"I keep thinking about Coker, one of my older hands at the mill," Jerry added. "Told me straight out he didn't think less of me for the flashback. Said true things are worth saying out loud, whether or not a man's built to hear them easy." He shook his head slightly, still faintly amazed by it. "Five years I've been assuming the whole county would think less of me if they saw the truth of what this war left in me. Turns out at least some of them think more of me for it, not less. Wish I'd learned that lesson a good deal sooner than I did."

"Maybe you learned it exactly when you were ready to," Sarah offered. "Some lessons don't take root until the ground's been broken up enough to receive them. Doesn't mean the waiting was wasted, even if it felt that way going through it."

They sat together a long while in the lamplight, not fully resolved, the ghosts that had followed him home from the valley still very much present in the empty space between the two chairs, but Jerry found himself returning, in the quiet, to Teague's reframing of the old psalm — not a promise that the terror would vanish, but a promise that he would not, finally, be left to face it entirely alone.

He thought, before they finally rose to head to their separate rooms that night, of everything the summer had cost him and everything it had, unexpectedly, also given him — the shame of the fireworks and the mortifying flatness of the VA waiting room set now against Boyd's quiet accommodation, Silas Coker's plain words on the mill floor, Teague's steady wisdom, his own father's long-overdue honesty on the back porch, Michael's tentative return to his lap, Sarah's Sunday psalm readings drawing the whole family back into a single shared shelter one verse at a time. None of it undid the nightmares waiting for him down the hall, or guaranteed some quieter fireworks display next July. But it was, taken together, considerably more than he had possessed at the start of that same summer, and Jerry understood, walking Sarah to the door of what was still, for now, his own separate room, that more was not nothing. More, in fact, might be exactly the shelter the psalm had been promising him all along.

He did not yet know how many more nightmares waited for him down the road ahead, how many more fireworks and backfires and rain-soaked afternoons would still catch him by surprise before whatever healing was coming ever fully arrived. But he understood, sitting in that small circle of lamplight with his wife's tired, loving eyes still fixed on his, that he had finally stopped trying to survive the terror of night entirely on his own — a small, unglamorous mercy, but a real one, and the first honest foothold he had found in a long, exhausting climb back out of the dark.

CHAPTER 14

DROWNING THE MEMORIES

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

— Proverbs 20:1

The Wednesday night meetings held for the better part of a year, and Jerry Gatchell would look back on that stretch, in his more honest moments, as the closest he came to genuine healing before everything came apart again — not because the ghosts stopped visiting him, but because he had, for a season, stopped facing them entirely alone. What he could never quite explain to Sarah afterward, no matter how many times she asked him to try, was exactly when the six-pack in the garage icebox had stopped being an occasional release valve and started being the only thing standing between him and a darkness he no longer trusted Teague's circle, or Scripture, or his own family to hold back on its own.

It began, so far as he could ever reconstruct it, with a Wednesday he simply didn't feel like going. Nothing dramatic had happened that week — no flashback, no incident at the mill, nothing Sarah would have flagged as cause for concern — just a bone-deep exhaustion that made the thought of sitting in a folding chair describing his nightmares to six other broken men feel, for the first time since he'd started attending, like more work than he had the reserves to offer. He told Sarah he wasn't feeling well, drank three beers alone in the garage instead, and told himself, climbing into bed that night, that a single missed meeting meant nothing at all.

Ellis Prater called the following Sunday, after church, to check on him, having noticed the empty chair. "Teague had us talk through Isaiah 43 this week," Prater said, his voice carrying easy warmth over the phone line. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Fella named Simmons broke down some, talking about his brother. Wished you'd been there, Gatchell. Felt like the kind of night that could've done you some good."

"Sorry I missed it," Jerry said, and meant it, in the moment, with a sincerity that made the second missed Wednesday, two weeks later, all the harder to explain even to himself.

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The missed Wednesdays multiplied slowly enough that Jerry never experienced any single moment of clear decision, only a gradual erosion he did not fully register until Teague showed up at the mill one afternoon in late autumn, waiting by Jerry's truck at the end of a shift with an expression that carried more concern than reproach.

"Haven't seen you in six weeks, Gatchell," Teague said, without preamble. "Wanted to check whether that was on account of you not needing us anymore, or on account of something else."

Jerry felt a flush of shame move through him, the particular heat of being caught in a decline he'd been carefully not naming even to himself. "Been busy. Extra shifts at the mill, mostly. Family stuff." The excuses sounded thin even as he offered them, and Teague's steady, patient expression told Jerry the older man wasn't buying a word of it.

"I've watched enough men walk this particular road to recognize the shape of it," Teague said quietly. "A fella starts skipping the meeting because he tells himself he doesn't need it as bad anymore. Meanwhile something else has usually moved in to take its place — something that promises the same relief without asking near as much of him. I'm not accusing you of anything, son. Just asking you to be honest with yourself about what's actually filling that Wednesday-night hour these days."

Jerry did not have a ready answer, in part because he was not yet fully willing to examine the true answer himself, and he drove home that evening turning Teague's words over with a discomfort that lasted exactly as long as it took him to reach the garage icebox, where the discomfort dissolved, as it increasingly did these days, into a familiar and reliable numbness.

* * *

He wrote Boone a shorter letter than usual that November, skating over the details Boone's careful, probing questions usually drew out of him, and Boone's reply, when it came, carried a directness that cut through Jerry's careful evasions with an ease that unsettled him.

Something's different in your last two letters, Jerry, Boone had written. Can't put my finger on exactly what, but eighteen months in that valley taught me to trust the feeling when a brother's letters start going thin. You mentioned missing some Wednesday meetings. You didn't say why. I'm not going to lecture you from four states away, but I am going to ask you plain — are you drinking more than you're telling Sarah, or me, or yourself? I ask because I've watched two men from my own unit go down that exact road since we got home, and both of them started with letters that sounded a lot like yours have started sounding lately.

Jerry read the letter twice, felt the accuracy of it land somewhere he did not want to examine too closely, and wrote back a reply considerably more evasive than honest, assuring Boone that everything was fine, the missed meetings were just a busy season at the mill, nothing to worry over — a lie he told a man who had once carried him bodily out of an ambush, and one that cost him something in the telling that he would not fully reckon with until much later.

* * *

By the following spring, the six-pack had become closer to a case, replenished twice weekly rather than once, and the garage sessions had crept steadily earlier, beginning some evenings before the children were even down for the night, a fact Sarah noted with a mounting alarm that Jerry, deep in his own careful denial, dismissed with increasing irritation whenever she raised it.

"You were out there before supper again," Sarah said one April evening, finding him at the kitchen table afterward, his eyes carrying a glassy heaviness she had grown to recognize with a sinking familiarity. "Michael asked why Daddy smelled funny when he came in to say goodnight."

"I had a couple of beers, Sarah. It's not a crime." Jerry heard the defensiveness sharpen his own voice, an edge that had not been there in the earlier, more honest years of their marriage. "Man works a hard week, he's entitled to unwind some."

"I'm not saying you're not entitled to a beer now and then. I'm saying this isn't now and then anymore, and I think you know that better than you're letting yourself admit." Sarah's voice carried a controlled fear that Jerry, in his softened, defended state, registered only distantly. "You stopped going to Teague's group. You've stopped talking to your father the way you were. It's like watching you build all that progress and then quietly take it apart again, one beer at a time, and I don't know how to reach you when you're like this."

"I'm the same man I've always been," Jerry said, though even as he said it some sober corner of his mind recognized the claim as considerably less true than he wanted it to be.

* * *

Sarah found the discrepancy in the household ledger on a Sunday afternoon in late May, sitting at the kitchen table with the checkbook she still balanced with the same careful diligence she'd maintained since their wedding, and called Jerry in from the yard with a quiet urgency that told him, before she'd said a word, that something significant had surfaced.

"There's nearly sixty dollars unaccounted for this month," she said, the ledger open before her, her finger tracing a column of figures that no longer added up the way they once reliably had. "I'm not trying to accuse you of anything, Jerry. I just need to understand where it's going, because it isn't going toward anything I can find in this house."

Jerry felt a familiar tightening in his chest, the same defensive reflex that had been governing so many of these conversations lately. "Bought some things for the truck. Parts, mostly."

"Show me the receipts, then." Sarah's voice remained level, though something in her eyes told Jerry she already suspected the answer and was simply waiting to see whether he would tell her the truth or compound the original problem with a second one. "I'm not trying to trap you, Jerry. I just need the truth. I think I deserve at least that much, whatever else has been going on."

He did not have the receipts, because there were none, and the silence that followed his failure to produce them told Sarah everything the missing sixty dollars had already suggested. "It's the bar, isn't it," she said quietly, not quite a question. "Jerry, we've got a mortgage and two children and you're spending grocery money at a bar."

Jerry had no defense that would survive the plain arithmetic laid out on the table between them, and the conversation ended, that afternoon, in a silence considerably more damning than any argument could have been — the specific, sinking recognition, for both of them, that the drinking had moved beyond a private struggle and into territory that now directly threatened the family's basic stability.

* * *

The incident at the mill came in June, on a Thursday afternoon when Jerry, nursing the particular fogged carelessness of a man who had started supplementing his evening drinking with a nip from a flask kept in his truck during lunch breaks, misjudged the clearance on a load he was overseeing and very nearly cost a young hand named Terry Voss two fingers when a stack of green lumber shifted faster than either man anticipated. The sound of it — a sharp crack of shifting timber, Voss's shout, the scrape of green lumber sliding across the concrete floor — froze Jerry for a full, terrible second before his training finally kicked in and he hauled Voss backward by the collar a half-instant before the stack settled where the young man's hand had been. Voss escaped with a bad bruise and a considerable fright, sitting white-faced on an overturned crate while the floor crew gathered around him, but the near miss shook the whole floor, several men exchanging glances that told Jerry, even through his own residual fog, that this incident would not stay quietly contained the way the April flashback had. Curtis Boyd called Jerry into the office that same afternoon with an expression Jerry had never once seen the older man wear in six years of working under him.

"I smelled it on you at lunch, Gatchell. Didn't want to believe what I was smelling, but a man nearly lost two fingers this afternoon on my watch, and I can't keep pretending I don't know why the margin got that thin." Boyd's voice carried a controlled, disappointed fury considerably more painful to Jerry than outright anger would have been. "I gave you grace after the Fourth of July. I found you a radio for the loading dock. I told that fellow in Carrollton how proud I was of the progress you were making. And now I've got a young man near losing fingers because his foreman's been drinking on shift."

"Mr. Boyd, I—"

"I'm not finished." Boyd's tone cut through whatever explanation Jerry had been reaching for. "I'm suspending you two weeks, unpaid, effective today. When you come back, if you come back, there'll be no more flasks in the truck, no more lunchtime nips, no exceptions of any kind. I like you, son. I've believed in you since the day you walked in here asking for honest work. But I run a business where men could lose their lives to somebody else's carelessness, and I won't have that carelessness wearing your name on it. You understand me?"

Jerry understood him completely, and drove home that afternoon carrying a shame heavier than almost anything he'd experienced since the fireworks the previous summer — compounded, this time, by the sick knowledge that the danger had not been some involuntary flashback beyond his control but a choice, made and remade, drink by drink, that had very nearly cost another man his fingers.

* * *

Silas Coker found him clearing out his locker before he left the mill that afternoon, and Jerry braced himself, remembering the older man's plain kindness the previous summer, for whatever verdict was coming.

"Heard what happened," Coker said, his weathered face carrying none of its usual easy warmth. "Told you once I didn't think less of you for a flashback you couldn't help. This here's a different matter, and I won't pretend otherwise to spare your feelings. Terry Voss has got a wife and a baby coming. Man could've lost the fingers he needs to earn his living, on account of choices you made of your own free will, not on account of anything that jungle did to you against your say-so."

"You're right," Jerry said quietly, unable to summon any defense against the accusation, knowing it for the plain truth it was. "I don't have an excuse for it, Silas."

"Didn't ask for one." Coker's expression softened, fractionally, though the disappointment remained plain in it. "I still don't think less of the man who dragged a wounded soldier out of gunfire. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't reconsidering some of what I think about the man who's been coming to work with whiskey on his breath. Those don't have to be the same man forever, Gatchell. But right now, they're looking an awful lot alike, and that troubles me some, coming from a fella I'd started to genuinely respect."

Jerry carried Coker's words with him out to his truck, understanding them as a considerably heavier verdict than Boyd's suspension itself — the specific grief of watching a hard-won piece of respect erode in real time, undone not by the war but by his own choosing.

* * *

He did not tell Sarah the full truth about the suspension that evening, offering instead a vague explanation about a slow stretch requiring temporary layoffs, a lie that sat in his stomach like a stone through the following two weeks, made heavier by the fact that he spent a portion of those unpaid, idle afternoons not in prayer or repentance but at a roadhouse off Highway 34 called the Rusty Anchor, where he had discovered, almost by accident one lonely Tuesday, a small community of men not unlike himself — several of them veterans, all of them nursing some version of the same restless unease Jerry carried, none of them offering the kind of accountability Teague's circle had specialized in, only the easy, undemanding companionship of shared drinking.

The Rusty Anchor itself bore little resemblance to Teague's classroom, its walls lined with beer signs rather than folding chairs arranged in a careful circle, its jukebox playing country ballads over the low murmur of men who had, in various ways, come to treat the place as a kind of church of their own devising — a sanctuary with no altar call, no accountability, no plain-spoken elder like Teague asking a man to name his trouble honestly before he could take his seat. Jerry recognized, even on his first visit, some faint echo of the fellowship he'd found in that Baptist church basement, though he would not fully understand, for some while yet, how different a fellowship built around shared numbing could prove from one built around shared honesty.

"You're new around here," said a heavyset man named Dutch Calloway, sliding onto the stool beside Jerry on his second visit, a Korea veteran with a laugh too loud and a temper Jerry would only later learn ran considerably hotter than his own. "What's your poison, and what's your war?"

"Vietnam," Jerry said. "And whatever's cheapest, most nights."

Dutch laughed, a short, ugly bark that Jerry would come to recognize as his most common register. "Cheapest works. This place'll drown whatever you're carrying just fine, long as your money holds out." He raised his own glass in a mock toast. "To the ones that didn't make it home, and to the rest of us too damn stubborn to admit we didn't fully make it back either."

Jerry drank to that, and to several subsequent toasts whose specifics he would not clearly remember by the following morning, and drove home well past midnight with a recklessness that frightened him more, looking back on it later, than almost any single moment of actual combat had —

the particular terror of understanding, in the cold clarity of the following dawn, exactly how close he had come to never making it home at all, killed not by an enemy in a foreign jungle but by his own hand on a familiar Georgia road.

A county sheriff's deputy pulled him over on the county line road that same drive, blue lights flooding the truck's cab with a suddenness that sent Jerry's pulse spiking with an old, combat-trained alertness even through the whiskey's fog, and it was only the deputy's flashlight in his face, and the young man's familiar voice, that finally placed the encounter back in its proper, mundane context.

"Sergeant Gatchell?" The deputy, a young man named Roy Petitt who Jerry recognized as a former Sunday school student from Reverend Whitfield's old classes, lowered his flashlight slightly, clearly startled by the recognition. "Didn't expect to see you out here this time of night."

"Just heading home, Roy." Jerry heard the slur in his own voice and understood, with a fresh wave of cold dread, exactly how thin the ice beneath him actually was.

Petitt studied him a long moment, clearly weighing a decision that Jerry understood, even through the fog, could reshape the remainder of his life in either direction. "I'm gonna let you finish getting home tonight, Sergeant. But I want you to hear me plain — I won't do this again if I catch you out here like this a second time. You've got a wife and kids depending on you making it home in one piece, and depending on you not putting somebody else's family in the ground on the way there. Man who did what you did for this country deserves better than ending up a name in the paper for something like this. Get yourself home safe, and get yourself some help, if you don't mind an old Sunday school student saying so."

Jerry drove the rest of the way home at a crawl, Petitt's headlights trailing at a discreet distance until Jerry's own driveway came into view, and sat afterward in his own truck for a long while, shaking, understanding that he had just been handed a mercy he had done nothing to earn and had no guarantee of receiving twice.

He returned to the Rusty Anchor a third time that same week, and a fourth the week after, and it was on that fourth visit that he witnessed, firsthand, the particular volatility Dutch Calloway carried beneath his loud laugh — a shouting match over a spilled drink that escalated, within the space of a few charged seconds, into Dutch throwing the first punch of an actual brawl, glass shattering, two other patrons wading in before the bar's owner finally broke it up with a baseball bat kept for exactly that purpose behind the counter.

Jerry sat frozen through the entire episode, his own pulse hammering with an adrenaline uncomfortably similar to combat's old familiar rhythm, and watched Dutch get hauled out to the parking lot by two friends, blood streaming from a cut above his eye, still shouting threats at a man he'd been laughing with not twenty minutes earlier. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler," Jerry murmured to himself, the old proverb surfacing unbidden, and understood, watching the scene through a haze he recognized even then as inadequate to fully process what he'd just witnessed, that he was watching a preview of some version of himself he had not yet become, but might, if the road he was currently walking continued unchecked in the same direction.

He did not stop going to the Rusty Anchor after that, a fact that troubled him more, in his rare sober moments, than almost anything else about that entire difficult year — the specific, sick recognition that even a genuine warning, witnessed firsthand, had not proven sufficient to turn him back.

* * *

Boyd took him back at the end of the two-week suspension, though the older man's warmth had cooled into something considerably more guarded than the easy mentorship Jerry had grown accustomed to over the preceding years. "You're on notice, Gatchell," Boyd told him, on his first morning back, his voice flat and businesslike in a way Jerry had rarely heard him use. "Next incident,

drinking-related or otherwise, and I won't have a choice about letting you go, whatever affection I've got for you personally. I've got Terry Voss's family to answer to as much as I've got you to answer to. Understand that plain."

"I understand, sir." Jerry accepted the terms without argument, understanding he had forfeited any claim to negotiate them. He thought, standing there receiving his own quiet sentence, of every warning that had preceded this one — Boyd's grace after the fireworks, the radio on the loading dock, Silas Coker's steady kindness — and understood, with a clarity that did nothing to soften the moment, that he had spent nearly a year burning through a reservoir of goodwill that had not been infinite after all.

"I hope you do." Boyd studied him a long moment, something almost sorrowful moving behind his businesslike exterior. "I meant what I said before all this happened, about not wanting to lose a good man. Still true. But a mill full of blades and green lumber isn't a place where good intentions count for much against a man who's stopped being reliable. Prove me wrong about where this is headed, son. I'd like nothing better than to be proven wrong."

Jerry worked the following weeks with a careful, deliberate sobriety during shift hours, determined to keep at least this single remaining pillar of his life standing, even as the evenings themselves continued sliding, almost without his conscious participation, back toward the Rusty Anchor's undemanding company — a compartmentalization that felt, for a time, like a workable solution, though it was, in truth, simply a more sophisticated version of the same denial that had been steering him for the better part of a year.

* * *

The Rusty Anchor became, over the following months, a habit nearly as regular as the Wednesday meetings it had effectively replaced, though Jerry told himself, each time, that this particular evening would be his last — a promise that had, by late summer, worn as thin and as unconvincing as every other promise he'd been quietly breaking for the better part of a year. He missed Emily's second birthday entirely, arriving home three hours after the small family celebration had concluded, unable afterward to fully reconstruct where those missing hours had actually gone. Emily herself, still too young to fully understand the specific shape of her father's absence, had nonetheless begun flinching at his raised voice on the evenings he did come home unsteady, a small, wordless wariness in a not-yet-three-year-old that Sarah pointed out to him once, gently but devastatingly, watching Emily retreat behind her mother's legs at the sound of Jerry's key in the door.

The Vacation Bible School incident arrived on a Tuesday afternoon in July, the second time in a month Jerry had promised to collect Michael and lost track of the hour instead, this time at the Rusty Anchor rather than the garage, three beers deep in an argument with Dutch Calloway about a football game neither of them particularly cared about. Reverend Halloway waited with Michael on the church's front steps for the better part of forty-five minutes past the scheduled pickup time, the boy's initial patience curdling slowly into a small, contained anxiety Halloway would later describe to Sarah with obvious reluctance, not wanting to worsen an already painful situation.

"He kept asking if his daddy had been in an accident," Halloway told Sarah, when she finally arrived, breathless and apologetic, having rushed over the moment the church secretary reached her by phone. "I didn't know what to tell him, Sarah. I didn't want to lie to the boy, but I surely didn't want to voice my own suspicions either, not to a six-year-old."

Michael, for his part, said little on the drive home, staring out the car window with an expression considerably older than his years, and it was that particular silence — not tears, not anger, just a small, resigned quiet — that Sarah would later tell Jerry had frightened her more than almost anything else that entire difficult summer.

That evening, cleaning Michael's room, Sarah found a drawing tucked beneath his pillow — a crayon rendering of their family standing outside the house, four stick figures beneath a bright yellow

sun, except the figure meant to be Jerry stood apart from the other three, separated by a wide gap of blank white paper that Michael had clearly, deliberately left empty. She did not show it to Jerry that night, uncertain she could bear watching his reaction, but she kept it folded in her apron pocket for the rest of that week, a small, devastating piece of evidence that their son's understanding of the family's fracture had progressed well beyond anything either parent had directly told him.

"Where were you?" Sarah asked that particular evening, her voice carrying a rawness that told Jerry she had moved past anger into something considerably more frightening — a controlled, exhausted resignation.

"Lost track of time. I'm sorry, Sarah." The apology came automatically now, worn smooth from overuse, and Jerry heard, even as he offered it, how little weight it actually carried anymore.

"Michael asked Reverend Halloway if his daddy forgot about him on purpose," Sarah said quietly. "He's six years old, Jerry, and he's already learning not to fully trust that you'll show up when you say you will. I don't know how to explain to him that his father loves him when the evidence keeps telling him something different."

Jerry had no answer for that, none that would survive contact with the accumulated weight of everything Sarah had just named, and he retreated instead to the garage, the reflexive shelter that had, over the preceding year, replaced almost every other coping mechanism he had once possessed — Teague's group, his father's counsel, Scripture, even Sarah herself — with the single, reliable numbness of another cold bottle.

* * *

The verse found him anyway, even in the garage, on a particular August night when he'd had enough to loosen his guard but not enough to fully quiet his conscience — a fragment of Proverbs surfacing from some Sunday sermon years earlier, wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise, arriving with an unwelcome clarity that cut through the evening's fog with unusual precision.

A mocker. He turned the word over, sitting alone among his father's old tools with a bottle sweating in his hand, and understood, with a sick, sudden lucidity, exactly how accurately the ancient word described what he'd built for himself over the preceding year. The drink had promised him relief from the valley's ghosts and had delivered, instead, a whole new catalog of failures to be ashamed of — a suspension he'd lied to his wife about, a night driving drunk that could have orphaned his own children, a birthday and a church pickup both missed, a son already learning to distrust his father's word. The drink had mocked him precisely by keeping its promise just long enough, each time, to make the next bottle feel reasonable — a brawler dressed up as a comfort, exactly as the old proverb warned.

He poured the rest of the bottle out onto the garage floor that night, a small, dramatic gesture that felt, in the moment, like genuine resolve, and told himself, climbing into bed in the spare room, that he was finished with it — a promise he fully intended to keep.

* * *

Everett showed up at the mill unannounced two days into that resolve, waiting in the parking lot after Jerry's shift with a grimness Jerry had rarely seen his father wear. "Sarah called your mother," Everett said, without preamble, once Jerry had climbed into the passenger seat of his father's truck at his gesture. "Told her about the suspension. About Terry Voss. Your mother's been beside herself with worry, and I figured it was past time I said my piece directly instead of leaving it to worry alone to do the talking."

Jerry braced for a lecture, and instead received something considerably harder to absorb — his father's own long-buried confession, offered with a plainness that cost the older man visibly to produce. "I never told you the whole truth about how I handled my own trouble after Korea," Everett said,

staring out the windshield rather than at his son. "Told you I was distant, closed off. Didn't tell you I spent the better part of two years drinking near every evening, same as you're doing now. Didn't tell you your mother came within a hair's breadth of taking you and leaving, when you were still too small to remember any of it."

"Why didn't you ever tell me that?" Jerry asked, genuinely stunned.

"Shame, mostly. And some foolish notion that a father's supposed to only ever hand his son the finished lessons, not the messy road that got him there." Everett finally turned to face him. "I'm telling you now because I watched a version of this exact story almost cost me everything that mattered, and I'll be damned if I sit quiet and watch it actually cost you everything instead of just almost. Your mother saved our marriage by refusing to accept the drinking as just something a war does to a man. Sarah's doing the same thing right now, near as I can tell, and I'm asking you, as your father, to make it easier on her than I made it on your mother. Don't make her fight you for years the way I made your mother fight me."

Jerry sat with the confession a long while, the mill parking lot emptying slowly around them as the shift ended. "How'd you finally stop, Daddy?"

"Wish I could tell you there was one clean moment. Truth is it took your mother threatening to leave, twice, and a long stretch of white-knuckling it with more failures than successes, before it finally took root for good." Everett's voice carried a hard-won honesty. "I'm not telling you that to discourage you. I'm telling you because I don't want you thinking one poured-out bottle means you've solved it. It's going to take longer and cost more than that, most likely. Wanted you walking into it with clear eyes instead of false confidence."

Jerry sat with his father's warning a long while after Everett finally drove off, understanding it as a gift even as some stubborn part of him hoped, quietly, that his own case might yet prove the exception to it.

* * *

Sarah found the poured-out bottle's aftermath the next morning, the sticky residue still faintly visible on the garage's concrete floor despite Jerry's efforts to rinse it away, and said nothing about it directly, though Jerry caught her studying him across the breakfast table with an expression that mixed a fragile, cautious hope with a wariness that had, by that point, become her default posture toward him.

That hope lasted nine days, and its collapse, when it came, arrived with a particular cruelty Jerry had not anticipated. He came home from the Rusty Anchor on a Tuesday night in late August considerably more impaired than he'd intended, having told himself, driving over after work, that he would have just one, and found Sarah waiting up in the living room, her face carrying an expression he had never once seen her wear in the whole of their marriage — not anger, not even disappointment, but something closer to a settled, exhausted grief, as though she had already grieved this exact moment in advance, over and over, until its actual arrival felt almost anticlimactic.

"I called the mill this afternoon," she said quietly, before he'd even fully closed the door behind him. "Mr. Boyd told me about the suspension. Told me about Terry Voss's hand. I've been sitting here for three hours trying to understand why you'd let me believe a lie about layoffs instead of just telling me the truth, however hard the truth might have been to hear."

Jerry felt the floor of his careful denial finally, completely give way beneath him, every carefully maintained excuse of the preceding months collapsing at once under the plain weight of what Sarah had just laid out. "Sarah, I can explain—"

"I don't think you can, actually. I don't think there's an explanation that makes this better." Her voice remained quiet, which frightened Jerry considerably more than shouting would have. "I've watched you build this back up for a year now, Jerry — the garage, then the flask, then wherever you've actually been going these past months instead of Teague's meeting. I kept telling myself it was still

manageable, that you were still fundamentally the man who promised me at our wedding you wouldn't let the silence win. I don't know how to keep believing that tonight."

* * *

"I'm taking the children to my parents' for a while," Sarah continued, before Jerry could fully process the first blow, her voice carrying a terrible, deliberate steadiness that told him she had rehearsed this moment, alone, more than once. "Not forever, Jerry. I want to be clear about that, because I need you to hear it as what it actually is and not as some final abandonment. But I can't keep Michael and Emily in a house where their father might be drinking on any given evening, where a suspension for endangering another man's safety gets hidden from me for two weeks, where I genuinely don't know some nights whether the man coming home is going to be the Jerry I married or a stranger I don't recognize and can't predict."

"Please, Sarah. Don't do this. I'll stop. I'll go back to Teague's, I'll—"

"You said that nine days after you poured a bottle out on the garage floor, Jerry. I believed you then. I wanted so badly to believe you then." Sarah's composure finally cracked, grief breaking through in a way that struck Jerry harder than any anger could have. "I don't know how many more times I can watch you make that same promise and believe it fresh each time, like it hasn't already failed a dozen times before. I love you. That's not in question, and it's not going to stop being true just because I'm driving to my parents' house tomorrow. But loving you isn't the same as being able to keep trusting you with our children's safety, not while this is still going on unchecked."

"What do you need from me?" Jerry asked, his voice breaking. "Tell me what would actually be enough to prove it, and I'll do it."

"I don't know that there's a single thing that proves it, Jerry. I think it's going to have to be built back, slowly, the same way the trust got torn down — one honest day at a time, with nothing hidden, nothing explained away. I can't hand you a checklist. I wish I could. I just need to see it, sustained, over time I can actually trust, before I bring Michael and Emily back into a house where I'm not certain what version of you is going to walk through that door on any given evening."

Jerry nodded slowly, understanding there was no argument left in him that could soften what the evening had already made plain. "I'll call Teague tomorrow," he said. "I know that promise doesn't mean much tonight, after everything else I've promised and broken this year. But I mean to keep this one, whatever it costs me to actually do it."

"I hope you will. I truly do." Sarah's voice softened, just slightly, though her resolve about the children did not waver. "I'm not leaving because I've stopped loving you, Jerry. I need you to understand that distinction, even tonight. I'm leaving because loving you and protecting our children have finally pulled in two different directions, and I have to choose the children first. That doesn't mean I've given up on there being a way back to all three of us under one roof again someday."

"I hope you do. I hope you do all of that, Jerry, with everything in me." Tears finally broke through her composed exterior once more, though her resolve did not waver. "But I can't keep hoping you will while also keeping our children in the direct path of what happens if you don't. This isn't a punishment. It's the same kind of protecting-with-a-gate-in-it Carol Ann once described to me about the spare room, except the gate's a lot wider this time, because the stakes have gotten a lot higher than a startled flinch in the dark."

Jerry sank into a kitchen chair, the full weight of what he'd built finally, completely visible to him — a foreman's suspension, a lie to his wife, a roadhouse full of men drowning the same sorrows he was drowning, a poured-out bottle and a broken nine-day promise, and now, arriving as the accumulated cost of all of it, the specific and devastating sight of his own family preparing to leave the house he had promised, at his wedding, would never become a place where the silence — or anything else — won.

* * *

He drove Sarah and the children to her parents' place himself two days later, insisting on it despite Sarah's uncertain hesitation, understanding it as perhaps the last small act of responsibility he could still offer before whatever came next. Michael sat quietly in the back seat, his small face unreadable in a way that struck Jerry as its own kind of verdict, and it was only as they pulled into the Whitcombs' driveway that his son finally spoke.

"Are you gonna get better, Daddy?" Michael asked, the same plain, unguarded question he'd asked once before on a birthday-night porch, though the trust that had accompanied it then had grown considerably more guarded in the two years since.

Jerry turned to face his son fully, understanding this answer mattered more than almost any he had ever given. "I don't know for certain, bud. I want to, more than I know how to tell you. I'm going to try harder than I've tried at almost anything in my whole life. But I'm not going to promise you something I might not be able to keep, not again. I've broken too many of those already."

"That's the most honest thing you've said to me in longer than I can remember," Sarah said quietly, from the front seat, and something in her voice, even amid the wreckage of that particular afternoon, carried a fragile thread of something that was not quite hope but was not yet full despair either.

Jerry watched them carry their bags into Sarah's parents' house, watched the door close behind them, and sat alone in his truck in the driveway for a long while afterward, the late August evening settling gold and ordinary around a moment that felt, to him, like the specific, unglamorous bottom of everything he had spent the preceding year quietly building.

* * *

Teague called that same evening, having heard about the separation through Ellis Prater, who had heard it in turn through his own wife's connection to the Whitcomb family's church circle — the same efficient grapevine that had once carried news of the fireworks incident, now carrying this considerably heavier piece of news through the county with equal speed.

"I'm not calling to lecture you," Teague said, once Jerry had picked up, his voice carrying the same steady patience it always had, undiminished by however many months had passed since Jerry had last shown his face at a Wednesday meeting. "I'm calling because I meant what I said the day I found you in that mill parking lot. Whatever's been filling that Wednesday hour instead of us, I expect it's not serving you the way you need serving right now, and I wanted you to know the door's still open, same as it always has been."

"I don't know if I've got it in me to walk back through it, Gordon." Jerry's voice came out rougher than he intended, the day's events finally catching up with him in full. "Feels like I'd be walking in as a different kind of failure than the one who walked in the first time."

"Every man in that circle walked in as some kind of failure, son. That's the whole of what qualifies a fella for the folding chairs." Teague's voice remained gentle but unyielding. "I'm not going to pretend the road back is short, or that it doesn't run through some real accounting for what's been lost this past year. But I'd rather see you walk it than watch you try to manage the rest of this alone, the way managing it alone got you to an empty house tonight in the first place."

Jerry did not commit to anything that evening, telling Teague only that he'd think on it, a phrase that had become, over the preceding year, his most practiced form of postponement. But he found himself, after hanging up the phone, sitting with the invitation a good deal longer than he expected to, turning it over alongside everything else the day had cost him.

He thought, sitting there with the receiver still in his hand, of Roy Petitt's flashlight in his face on the county line road, of Silas Coker's plain disappointment in the mill parking lot, of Michael's drawing he did not yet know existed, of a whole accumulating ledger of mercies extended and warnings given that he had, time and again, failed to fully heed. He wondered, not for the first time that year, how many more such warnings a man was typically granted before they simply stopped coming — before

the county line road produced a different deputy, or a less patient one, or no deputy at all, only a tree, or an oncoming truck, or some other final arithmetic he would not survive to regret.

* * *

The house that evening carried a silence unlike any Jerry had experienced since his own homecoming six years earlier — not the charged, watchful silence of a man guarding his own trouble, but the flat, echoing emptiness of rooms that had, until that morning, held the ordinary noise of a family and now held nothing at all. He walked through Michael's room, the small bed still unmade, a stuffed rabbit abandoned on the pillow in the rush of packing, and through Emily's room, her crib stripped bare, and found himself, in the kitchen afterward, staring at four place settings' worth of cabinet space that would tonight, for the first time in his marriage, serve only one.

He did not drive to the Rusty Anchor that night, a small mercy he would later recognize as significant even though it did not feel, in the moment, like any kind of victory. He sat instead at the kitchen table with his worn New Testament, the same copy that had traveled with him through eighteen months of combat and every difficult year since, and found himself unable, for a long while, to make himself open it, the weight of the day pressing down with a force that made even Scripture feel like more than he could currently bear.

When he finally did open it, his hands trembling slightly, he did not turn to Proverbs, not yet ready to sit directly with the mocker and the brawler, but to a psalm he had leaned on before, in an airport terminal six years earlier and in a hundred harder moments since — the twenty-third, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want — and read it slowly, aloud, in the empty kitchen, his own voice sounding strange and small in a house built for four and currently holding only him.

He thought of Teague, and of the Wednesday meetings he had abandoned nearly a year earlier, and understood, sitting alone at that kitchen table, that the road back to his family very likely ran directly through that small classroom in the Baptist church's education wing — a door he had walked through once before, seven months late, and would need, it seemed, to walk through again, however much later this second time proved to be.

He found Michael's stuffed rabbit still sitting on the abandoned pillow when he finally climbed the stairs to bed, and carried it downstairs instead, setting it on the kitchen table across from his own single place setting, an odd, private gesture he could not have fully explained to anyone but that felt, in the moment, like a small refusal to let the house's emptiness go entirely unmarked. He thought of Emily's crib, stripped bare, and of the specific ache of having built, brick by brick, exactly the isolated exile he'd spent years fighting his way back from after Vietnam — only this time the exile was not a country's indifference but his own doing, a distinction that made the ache, if anything, considerably sharper to sit with.

He did not sleep well that first night alone, waking twice from dreams that were not, for once, about the valley at all, but about an empty house he could not find his way out of, hallways that led only to more empty rooms, no ambush waiting at the end of them, only silence — a silence he understood, lying awake in the dark afterward, he had built for himself with a thoroughness the war itself had never quite managed.

* * *

He thought of Proverbs 20:1, the mocker and the brawler, and understood now, with a clarity considerably more costly than the one that had come to him pouring out that first bottle, that he stood at a genuine crossroads — one road leading back toward Teague's circle and his father's hard-won honesty and whatever remained of the man Sarah had married, the other leading toward a darkness he did not yet have language for but could feel, unmistakably, gathering at the edges of his vision like weather rolling in off a gulf he couldn't yet see.

He closed the New Testament that night without any clean resolution to offer himself, no poured-out bottle, no dramatic vow he already half suspected he lacked the strength to keep. He simply sat a while longer at the kitchen table with Michael's rabbit across from him and Emily's absence pressing in from down the hall, and prayed the only honest prayer he had left in him that night — not a promise, not yet, but a plea. Lord, I don't know if I've got the strength left to choose the right road on my own. If You're still willing to meet a man exactly where his own choices have left him, I could use the meeting tonight, because I'm not sure I can find my own way back from here without it.

He did not know, sitting alone in an empty house for the first time in his marriage, which road he actually had the strength left to choose.

CHAPTER 15

THE SERPENT'S BITE

In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.

— Proverbs 23:32

The back injury came in October, four months into the careful, provisional sobriety Jerry Gatchell had maintained during working hours since Boyd's final warning, a genuine effort that had held steady enough to earn him cautious hope, if not yet Sarah's return, when a green oak log shifted wrong on the loading ramp and drove him hard into a support post, crushing two vertebrae in a way that left him unable to stand upright without a considerable, grinding pain for the better part of two weeks.

Dr. Alvin Fetch, the same physician who had set Silas Coker's broken arm some years earlier and delivered half the babies in the county besides, prescribed a bottle of Percodan with an easy generosity that reflected, more than any particular carelessness on his part, the ordinary medical practice of the era — a physician doing his honest best to manage a workingman's pain, with little apparent awareness of how precisely that particular relief might interact with a man already fighting a war against his own numbing instincts.

"Take these as needed for the pain," Fetch told him, writing the prescription without much ceremony. "Should have you back on your feet within the month, long as you don't push it too hard too soon."

Jerry filled the prescription that same afternoon, and swallowed the first pill with a wariness he did not fully examine, some instinctive part of him recognizing, even then, the particular danger of introducing a new and powerful relief into a body already so thoroughly practiced at chasing relief wherever it could be found.

He called Teague that same evening, more out of habit than any clear intention, and mentioned the prescription almost in passing, expecting little more than a sympathetic word about the injury itself.

"You watch yourself with those, Jerry," Teague said, his voice sharpening with a concern that caught Jerry somewhat off guard. "Had a man in my own outfit, years back, came home from Korea and got hooked on morphine they'd given him for a wound. Watched it take him apart slower than any bullet ever could have. I'm not saying Doc Fetch is wrong to prescribe you something for a crushed vertebra. I'm saying a man with your particular history ought to treat that bottle like it's got a live grenade rolling around inside it."

"I hear you, Gordon. I'll be careful." Jerry meant it, in the moment, with the same sincerity he'd once meant every other promise he'd since broken, and hung up the phone without fully registering how thin that particular reassurance had already worn, even to his own ear.

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The pills worked, at first, with a thoroughness that startled him — not merely dulling the physical pain in his back but reaching, with an unsettling completeness, into the older, deeper ache that whiskey had only ever managed to blur rather than truly silence. For the first few days, Jerry experienced something he had not felt in nearly a decade: a total, floating absence of both the valley's ghosts and his own accumulated shame, a relief so complete it frightened him even as he found himself, almost against his own will, already anticipating the next dose before the previous one had fully worn off.

He kept the drinking mostly in check that month, an irony he would only recognize much later — trading one numbing agent for a more potent one, telling himself the pills were different because a doctor had prescribed them, because they came in an amber bottle with his own name typed on the label rather than poured from a bottle at the Rusty Anchor. The distinction, he would eventually understand, had never been as meaningful as he needed it to be.

* * *

Boyd noticed the change before Jerry was willing to name it himself, catching him nodding at his desk on a slow Tuesday afternoon in November, his pupils pinpricked in a way the older man recognized, having watched enough returning servicemen pass through his mill over the years to know the signs when he saw them.

"Those the pills Doc Fetch gave you for your back?" Boyd asked, not unkindly, though his voice carried the particular wariness of a man who had already extended more grace than he had originally budgeted for.

"Yes, sir. Just took my dose a bit ago." Jerry straightened in his chair, working to shake off the fog. "Back's still giving me trouble some mornings."

"Your back healed up three weeks ago, near as Fetch himself told me at church last Sunday." Boyd's gaze held steady, patient but unmistakably knowing. "I'm not going to pretend I don't recognize what I'm looking at, Gatchell. I watched my own brother go through something similar after his knee surgery, some years back. Started with a legitimate prescription same as yours. Didn't end there."

Jerry felt the familiar defensive heat rise in his chest, though something in Boyd's plain concern kept the reflex from fully hardening into denial. "I hear you, sir. I'll talk to Doc Fetch about tapering off."

"See that you do. I meant what I told you back in the summer. I don't have another warning left in me to give you, son. Next slip, whatever shape it takes, and I'm going to have to let you go, and it's going to break something in me to do it." Boyd's voice carried a weary sorrow that Jerry recognized, even through the pill's soft distance, as genuine rather than merely procedural. "You're a good man buried under an awful lot of bad luck and worse choices. I'd like to see the good man dig his way back out before I run out of runway to keep protecting him."

* * *

He did not, in the end, taper off, the pills instead becoming, over the following months, a habit considerably more entrenched than the drinking had ever managed to be, and when Dr. Fetch finally declined to renew the prescription in February, citing both Jerry's fully healed back and a general unease about the quantities Jerry had been requesting, Jerry found himself facing, for the first time, the particular desperate arithmetic of a man whose body had come to depend on a substance his legitimate channels no longer supplied.

He drove to the Rusty Anchor that same week, not for the whiskey this time but for a different kind of help, having overheard enough bar talk over the preceding year to understand that Dutch Calloway's circle included men who could supply considerably more than beer to a customer willing to pay for it.

It was there, on a rain-soaked February evening, that Jerry first encountered Ray Dawson, a lean, watchful man perhaps five years his junior who had served with a different unit in a different province but carried the same particular hollowness Jerry had come to recognize, over the preceding years, in every genuinely broken man he'd met since coming home — a hollowness considerably deeper and more advanced, Jerry would soon understand, than his own.

"Heard you're looking for something stronger than what Doc Fetch's been rationing you," Dawson said, sliding into the booth across from Jerry with an easy, unhurried confidence that Jerry would only later recognize as a predator's patience. "I might know a fella who could help with that. Costs more than pills, but it works considerably better, and considerably longer, if you're careful with it."

"What unit were you with?" Jerry asked, more out of old habit than genuine curiosity, some remaining soldier's instinct still cataloguing the men he encountered.

"Ninth Infantry, down in the Delta. Different war than yours, near enough, all that water and no jungle canopy to speak of." Dawson's eyes carried a flatness Jerry recognized, uncomfortably, as a more advanced version of something he suspected lived in his own gaze these days. "Lost my whole squad to a mine in a rice paddy eleven months into my tour. Only reason I wasn't walking point that particular morning was a bum knee from three days earlier. Been trying to outrun that particular piece of luck ever since, best I can tell you."

"Sorry," Jerry said, and meant it, recognizing in Dawson's flat recitation an echo of his own carefully guarded grief over Baxter, over Higgins, over all the names that still visited him some nights.

"Everybody's sorry. Doesn't buy back a single one of them." Dawson shrugged, the gesture carrying a practiced, hardened indifference. "I've found something that helps more than sorry does, though. You interested, or not?"

Jerry hesitated, some last, weakening resistance still flickering somewhere beneath the pills' pull, and then nodded, a small, fatal motion that would reorder the whole remainder of his life.

* * *

Jerry's first experience with heroin came two weeks later, in a back room above a defunct feed store on the edge of Newnan that Dawson used as a kind of informal clubhouse, and the relief it delivered made the pills' relief feel, by comparison, like a distant and inadequate memory — a totality of numbness so complete that Jerry understood, even in the haze of that first use, exactly how dangerous a thing he had just introduced into his already fracturing life.

"Told you it works better," Dawson said, watching Jerry's reaction with the satisfied expression of a man who had just successfully recruited a new and reliable customer. "Whatever you're carrying, brother, this'll set it down for a good long while. Question's just whether you can afford to keep it set down, once you've felt what it's like."

Jerry could not, as it turned out, afford it — not on a foreman's wages, and certainly not once Boyd, discovering a second and unmistakable relapse in March, made good on his warning and let Jerry go with a grief so evident that the firing itself felt, to Jerry, almost more painful than the job loss it represented.

"I'm sorry, son. I truly am." Boyd's eyes were wet as he said it, six years of mentorship collapsing into a single, unavoidable conclusion. "I hope to God you find your way back from wherever this is taking you. But I can't keep a man on my floor who's putting other men's safety at risk, however much affection I've got for him personally. You understand that, I know you do."

Jerry did understand it, completely, and drove away from the mill that final afternoon with a devastation that outstripped almost everything that had preceded it — the last remaining pillar of his

pre-addiction life, the mentor who had believed in him since his very first week home from war, now closed to him by his own repeated choosing.

* * *

He attempted a visit with Michael and Emily that same week, arriving at the Whitcombs' at the appointed hour Sarah had arranged, and the visit lasted less than twenty minutes before Sarah, watching him with a growing alarm she could not fully hide from the children, gently but firmly asked him to leave.

"You're not right today, Jerry," she said quietly, walking him to his truck while Michael watched from the porch with an expression Jerry would carry with him for a long time afterward — not anger, but a wary, careful blankness that told Jerry his son had already learned to protect himself by expecting less. "I can tell. I don't know exactly what it is this time, but I know enough to know the children shouldn't be around it."

"I just wanted to see them, Sarah. I miss them so much it's like a physical ache some days." Jerry heard the pleading in his own voice and hated it, hated the whole shape of what he'd become, standing in his former father-in-law's driveway begging for scraps of a life he'd once possessed in full.

"I believe that you miss them. I don't doubt your love for them, not for one second." Sarah's voice carried real grief beneath its firmness. "But loving them isn't enough right now, Jerry. They need you well, not just present. I need you well too, if I'm honest, though I've stopped letting myself hope for that most days."

He drove away that afternoon without a clear next visit scheduled, and it would be nearly four months before he saw either child again, a gap that widened, in the difficult year that followed, into something considerably longer and more painful than either of them could have anticipated standing in that driveway.

* * *

The house went next, the mortgage payments lapsing through the spring as Jerry's savings dwindled and his new habit's costs climbed, and by early summer the bank's notices had progressed from polite reminders to a final, formal warning that gave him thirty days to vacate before foreclosure proceedings would begin in earnest. He called Sarah, still living at her parents' with the children, to tell her before the bank's letter could reach her through some other channel, and the conversation that followed was the shortest and most painful of their entire marriage.

He had walked through the house one final time before making the call, room by room, running his hand along the kitchen counter where Sarah had once shelled peas while Emily napped in her arms, standing in the doorway of Michael's room where the abandoned stuffed rabbit had long since been collected and taken to the Whitcombs', standing longest in the bedroom he and Sarah had shared, briefly, before the spare room had become his permanent address within his own marriage. The house that had once represented the whole hopeful architecture of his return from war — a foreman's wages, a mortgage he'd been proud to carry, two children's rooms filled with the ordinary clutter of a family he had built — now stood nearly empty, most of the furniture already sold or repossessed, waiting only for the bank's final formal seizure of what remained.

"I'm losing the house, Sarah," he said, unable to soften the announcement with any of his old, worn evasions. "I don't have a way to stop it. I wanted you to hear it from me before you heard it from anybody else."

The silence on the line lasted long enough that Jerry began to wonder if she'd hung up. "I filed for divorce this morning, Jerry," she said finally, her voice carrying none of its old warmth, only a flat, exhausted finality that told him this decision had not arrived suddenly but had been building, in private,

for longer than he'd realized. "I was going to call you tonight to tell you myself. Guess we've both got hard news to share today."

"Sarah, please. Give me more time. I know I can still—"

"I gave you time, Jerry. I gave you a year of time, praying every single day you'd find your way back before it came to this. I can't give the children any more of it. Michael's seven years old and he's stopped asking when you're coming to get him, because he's stopped expecting an answer." Her voice broke, just slightly, the first crack in an otherwise controlled delivery. "I still love the man I married. I don't know how to find him anymore inside whoever you've become this past year, and I can't keep our children waiting for me to figure that out."

* * *

He signed the divorce papers in August, in a lawyer's office in downtown Newnan, Sarah sitting across the table with an expression Jerry could not fully read — grief, certainly, but also a kind of settled resolve that told him this door, once closed, was not going to reopen through any pleading he still had strength left to offer. Michael and Emily were not present, a small mercy Jerry understood even as it compounded his shame, and the whole transaction took less than twenty minutes, the legal dissolution of a marriage that had once stood at an altar with Pastor Whitfield's blessing now reduced to a handful of signatures and a notary's stamp.

"I still want you to see the children, Jerry," Sarah said, gathering her copies of the paperwork, her voice carrying a fragile, deliberate kindness that Jerry did not feel he deserved. "When you're able to see them safely. I'm not trying to erase you from their lives. I just need you to actually be well enough, first, for those visits to do them good instead of harm."

"I understand," Jerry said, though understanding and accepting proved, in the months that followed, to be two entirely different achievements, and he left the lawyer's office that afternoon carrying a grief so total it felt almost indistinguishable from the physical withdrawal already beginning to claw at the edges of his consciousness — the last threads of his old life, wife and home and honest work, all severed within the same brutal season.

* * *

Everett and Ruth drove to Atlanta the following week, having heard about the divorce from Sarah's mother, and found Jerry in a rented room above a laundromat that smelled of stale cigarettes and something harder to name, a space so far removed from the life Jerry had once built that Ruth wept openly at the sight of it.

"Come home with us, son," Everett said, his voice carrying none of its old reserve, only a plain, desperate plea. "Whatever this is, we'll face it together, same as I should have let somebody face mine with me all those years ago. Your mother and I have got room. We've got love enough left for this too, whatever shape it takes."

Jerry wanted, badly, to accept, and found himself unable to, some tangled combination of shame and the pills' own relentless pull keeping him rooted in place. "I can't, Daddy. Not like this. I don't want you and Mama watching what I've become up close, day after day. I couldn't stand it."

"We'd rather watch it up close and be able to help than sit at home imagining it from a distance," Ruth said, taking his hand, her own trembling slightly. "Please, Jerry. Let us try."

But Jerry could not yet accept the offer, some final, stubborn remnant of pride or shame or the addiction's own cunning insistence that he did not deserve rescuing keeping him from the very door his parents had traveled two hours to open for him, and Everett and Ruth drove home that evening with an ache neither of them had words adequate to describe, leaving behind a promise from Jerry that he would call if things got worse — a promise that would, like so many others, prove considerably harder to keep than to make.

Ruth wrote him a letter that same week, care of the laundromat address, a letter Jerry would carry with him, folded and refolded until the creases wore soft, through every relocation that followed. My son, she had written, I have prayed over every hard season of your life since before you could walk, through Vietnam and your homecoming and every year since, and I am not going to stop now on account of this being the hardest season yet. Whatever door you finally choose to walk through, know that your father and I will be standing on the other side of it, however long the walking takes you. You are still my boy, Jerry, medal or no medal, job or no job, married or not. Nothing you have done or will do changes that plain fact. Come home when you're ready. We'll be here.

He read the letter more times than he could count over the months that followed, in shelters and doorways and the rare quiet moment between one desperate need and the next, and though it did not prove sufficient, on its own, to break the addiction's hold, it remained, alongside Boone's letter and the beret and the chaplain's card, part of a small collection of tethers he could not quite bring himself to fully sever — evidence, however faint, that love had not yet entirely given up on him, whatever he had come to believe about his own worthiness to receive it.

* * *

He pawned his watch first, then his good boots, then a small collection of tools his father had given him, each transaction chipping away at the material remnants of a life he no longer had the means to maintain, and it was on a particular desperate afternoon in September, standing in a pawnshop on the edge of Atlanta where he'd relocated after losing the house, that he finally laid his medals on the counter — the Distinguished Service Cross, the Purple Heart, the whole collection of ribbons and commendations that had once hung framed on his den wall, a testament to a version of himself that felt, by that point, like it belonged to an entirely different man.

The pawnbroker, an older man with tired eyes who had clearly seen this particular transaction before, studied the medals a long moment before speaking, turning the Distinguished Service Cross over once in his weathered hands with something like reverence, an odd contrast to the transactional flatness of the shop around them. "You sure about this, son? These don't come back easy, once they're gone. Man doesn't always get a second chance at redeeming what a medal like this cost him to earn."

"I don't have much choice left in the matter," Jerry said, the admission costing him more than he let show in his voice.

"There's always a choice, far as I've seen, even when it doesn't feel that way." The pawnbroker set the medal down gently, almost tenderly, on the felt-lined counter. "My own boy did two tours in that same war. Came home with some trouble of his own, though the Lord's been merciful and he's found his footing since. I've had more men than I can count set medals like these on this counter over the years, and I've never once forgotten how much each of them looked like they were setting down a piece of their own soul alongside the metal. Just wanted you to know somebody behind this counter sees that, even if the cash in the register can't reflect it."

"I'm sure," Jerry said, though his voice carried none of the conviction the words claimed, and he took the money without meeting the pawnbroker's eyes, understanding, even as he pocketed the cash, that he had just sold a piece of himself he would spend considerable time afterward trying and failing to fully mourn.

He kept the beret. He could not have fully explained why, standing in that pawnshop with everything else spread across the counter — perhaps because it carried no resale value to a stranger, or perhaps because some last, stubborn fragment of the man who had earned it still refused to let it go the way of the medals. He folded it and tucked it into his jacket pocket, and it would remain there, through everything that followed, the single physical thread still connecting him to Sergeant Jerry Gatchell of the Fifth Special Forces Group.

He stood outside the pawnshop a long while afterward, the cash from the medals folded in his pocket alongside the beret, and found himself thinking of the day the Distinguished Service Cross had been pinned to his chest at Fort Bragg, the band playing, his fellow soldiers standing at attention, a moment that had felt, at the time, like the pinnacle of everything he had suffered and sacrificed to achieve. He thought of Colonel Reeves's words that day, something about courage and sacrifice and a grateful nation's debt, words that felt, standing outside a pawnshop with the medal itself now reduced to a stranger's cash drawer, like they had been spoken about an entirely different man in an entirely different lifetime. He did not cry, though some part of him understood he probably should have — the addiction had, by that point, worn even his grief down to a strange, hollow flatness that made even his own losses feel distant, observed rather than fully felt.

* * *

The apartment he'd rented after losing the house lasted only until October, the rent lapsing the same way the mortgage payments had, and by November Jerry found himself sleeping some nights in his truck, until the truck itself was repossessed in December, leaving him with no vehicle, no home, and an addiction that had, by that point, become the organizing principle of every single day's activity — not a choice anymore, in any meaningful sense, but a physical and psychological need that governed him with the same absolute authority the valley's ambushes had once governed his own survival instincts.

He wrote to Boone that winter, a short, fragmented letter he barely remembered composing by the time he mailed it, and Boone's reply arrived weeks later at a shelter address Jerry had used only briefly before moving on, the letter eventually finding him secondhand through a series of forwards that took nearly two months. Jerry, Boone had written, I don't know the whole of what's happened, only what your last letter hinted at, and it scared me enough that I've been praying for you every day since. Whatever this has become, brother, it hasn't erased what you did in that valley, and it hasn't erased what God can still do with you now. I'm not close enough to help you the way I wish I could. But I haven't stopped believing there's a way back, even from wherever you are right now. By the time the letter reached him, Jerry had already moved three more times, and he carried Boone's words folded alongside the beret, a small scrap of hope he was not yet able to fully receive.

* * *

Ray Dawson found him again that same winter, in an Atlanta flophouse where addicts of every stripe cycled through in various states of desperation, and their reunion carried none of the predatory charm of their first meeting at the Rusty Anchor, only the flat, transactional recognition of two men who had traveled considerably further down the same road together.

"You look rough, Gatchell," Dawson said, though his own appearance offered little room for judgment, his once-lean frame now gaunt in a way that spoke to years Jerry had not yet fully caught up to. "Word of advice, seeing as we're something like war buddies at this point. This life doesn't let a man out easy, once it's got him good and hooked. I've watched better men than either of us go out on a bad batch, never even see it coming."

Jerry attempted to quit entirely that same week, alone in the rented room above the laundromat, locking the door and telling himself he would simply endure whatever came until the poison finally worked its way out of him, a resolve that lasted less than thirty hours before the withdrawal's full force arrived — a violent, full-body sickness that left him shaking on the bathroom floor, unable to keep down water, convinced at several points during that endless night that he was actually going to die alone in that room with no one even aware enough to notice for days.

He crawled to the telephone in the hallway sometime past three in the morning, fully intending to call Boone, or his father, or anyone who might talk him through the remainder of the night, and found

himself instead, guided by the addiction's own relentless logic, dialing the number Dawson had given him weeks earlier, unable to summon the strength to make any other call while his whole body screamed for the one relief it had come to depend on absolutely.

Dawson arrived within the hour, and the relief that followed felt, in that desperate moment, indistinguishable from rescue, though Jerry understood, even as the sickness finally receded, exactly what he had just proven to himself — that whatever remained of his own willpower was no longer sufficient, on its own, to break whatever this thing had become in him. He thought of Proverbs 23:32 that night, in the shaking, sweating hours before Dawson's arrival, and understood the verse's warning with a visceral, bodily clarity he had not previously possessed — the serpent's bite delivered its poison slowly, but once fully seated in a man's blood, it did not release its hold merely because he wished it would.

Jerry heard the warning and filed it away alongside a dozen others he had failed to fully heed over the preceding years, and it was less than a month later, in that same flophouse, that he very nearly became one of the men Dawson had described — a batch cut wrong, a dose that hit harder than expected, and a period of several minutes that Jerry would only ever reconstruct secondhand, through the frightened account of another addict who had found him unresponsive and summoned help from a pay phone down the block, uncertain whether the ambulance would arrive before or after it stopped mattering.

He woke in an Atlanta emergency room two days later, weak and disoriented, a nurse informing him with a professional flatness that he'd very nearly died, and Jerry lay in that hospital bed turning the fact over with an odd, hollow detachment — not gratitude, not yet, not even fear, but a kind of exhausted recognition that the road Boyd had once warned him about, and his father, and Teague, and Sarah, herself, had finally delivered him to precisely the ledge each of them had tried to keep him from reaching.

A hospital chaplain visited him that same afternoon, a young man barely out of seminary who introduced himself as Chaplain Reese and pulled a chair beside the bed with the particular unhurried patience of someone who had learned not to rush a man freshly returned from the edge of his own mortality.

"Nurse tells me you had a Bible in your bag when they brought you in," Reese said, nodding toward the small bundle of Jerry's possessions on the bedside table, the worn New Testament visible among them. "Carried a long way, by the look of it."

"Vietnam, and every hard year since." Jerry's voice came out thin, scraped raw. "Doesn't feel like it's done me much good lately, if I'm honest with you, Chaplain."

"Maybe not the good you were hoping for. Doesn't mean it's done you no good at all." Reese's voice carried a gentleness that did not flinch from the reality of Jerry's circumstances. "You're still here, Sergeant. Whatever brought you to this bed, you're still here to receive whatever comes next. I've sat with men who weren't given that mercy. I don't take it lightly when I see it handed to somebody, even under circumstances as hard as yours."

"I don't know if I've got anything left in me to do with the mercy," Jerry admitted, the words costing him more than he expected. "Feels like I've burned through every chance anybody's given me these past two years. My foreman, my father, my own wife — I keep asking them for one more chance, and I keep proving I don't deserve the ones they've already given me."

"Grace was never much concerned with deserving, far as I've read the Book," Reese said gently. "That's rather the whole point of it, if I understand my own faith correctly. Doesn't mean the people in your life aren't allowed their own limits, their own wisdom about what they can safely offer you right now. But it does mean the door itself doesn't close just because you've used up what you think you deserve. That's not how grace tends to work."

"Might feel that way. I'd gently suggest it's not entirely true, though I understand if you can't fully believe that today." Reese left a small card on the bedside table before he rose to leave, a mission

address printed beneath a verse from Isaiah. "There's a fellow runs a rescue mission not far from here, does good work with men in your particular circumstance. No obligation to use it. Just wanted you to have it, in case a day comes when you're ready."

Jerry did not use the card that day, tucking it instead into his jacket pocket alongside the beret and Boone's unanswered letter, though he did not throw it away either — a small, undecided mercy he was not yet capable of naming as anything more than that.

* * *

Everett received the call from the Atlanta hospital, listed as Jerry's emergency contact from some earlier, more stable season of his son's life, and drove down immediately with Ruth beside him, arriving to find Jerry still groggy but conscious, propped against thin hospital pillows in a gown that hung loose on a frame considerably diminished from the one that had once filled out a foreman's work shirt.

"We nearly lost you," Ruth said, gripping his hand with a fierceness that belied her small frame, tears already falling freely. "Jerry, we nearly lost you for good this time."

"I know, Mama." Jerry's voice came out barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for all of it." He looked at his mother's tear-streaked face, at his father's stricken stillness by the foot of the bed, and felt the full accumulated weight of everything his choices had cost the people who loved him most — not just Sarah and the children, but these two, who had already buried enough of their own hopes for him without also having to bury the man himself.

Everett said little, standing at the foot of the bed with an expression Jerry had never seen his father wear, not even in their hardest conversations of the preceding years — a naked, undefended grief that made the older man look, for the first time in Jerry's memory, genuinely old. "The room's still open, son," Everett finally said, his voice rough. "Whenever you're ready. Doesn't matter how many times you've said no already. The offer doesn't expire."

Jerry could not yet say yes, even faced with his own near-death and his parents' undiminished love, some final knot of shame and addiction's own cunning logic still holding him in place, and Everett and Ruth left the hospital that evening carrying a grief made only heavier by having watched, up close, exactly how close they had come to burying their only son — a grief they carried home to Sarah as well, who received the news with a silence Ruth would later describe as more frightening than tears, a mother already steeling herself for the possibility of explaining, someday, to Michael and Emily, that their father had not made it back from wherever this addiction had finally taken him.

* * *

He had nowhere to return to once the hospital discharged him, no apartment, no truck, no family willing or able to take him in without conditions he did not yet have the strength to meet, and he spent that following spring and summer in a slow, grinding cycle of shelters and street corners and the occasional relapse into Dawson's circle whenever the withdrawal's pull outweighed whatever fragile resolve he'd managed to gather in between, a cycle that cost him, by autumn, the last of his physical health, a persistent cough and a gauntness that made him nearly unrecognizable to anyone who had known Sergeant Jerry Gatchell in his prime.

He thought, on the clearer nights, of Proverbs 23:32, a verse he did not remember learning but that surfaced anyway, unbidden, from some deep well of Sunday mornings decades past — in the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper — and understood, with a clarity considerably more costly than any he had achieved on the easier side of this particular fall, exactly how precisely the old proverb had described the whole arc of the preceding two years. The pills and the needle had promised him relief from a war that had never fully released him, and had delivered, in exchange, a poison that had cost him his marriage, his children, his mentor, his home, his medals, his health, and very nearly his life

— a serpent's bite delivered slowly enough, at first, to feel like mercy, and only revealing its true venom once there was almost nothing left of him for it to consume.

* * *

The shelters that autumn offered their own particular humiliations, cots lined in rows beneath fluorescent lights, communal meals eaten in a silence broken only by the coughing and murmured conversations of men carrying their own versions of Jerry's collapse, and it was standing in line outside one such shelter on a raw November evening, waiting for a bed that might or might not still be available by the time the line reached the door, that Jerry first fully understood the specific, grinding indignity of the life addiction had built for him.

An older woman passing on the sidewalk pressed a dollar into his hand without breaking stride, mistaking him, not unreasonably, for simply another anonymous unfortunate rather than a decorated combat veteran who had once commanded eleven men through a burning ambush, and Jerry stood holding the crumpled bill for a long moment after she'd passed, understanding, with a clarity that briefly cut through even the withdrawal's persistent ache, exactly how completely his own choices had erased every marker of the man he had once been.

* * *

He shared a doorway some nights that same autumn with an older man named Otis, a Second World War veteran perhaps thirty years his senior whose own long collapse had predated Jerry's by nearly two decades, and it was Otis, more than any of the shelter workers or well-meaning strangers Jerry encountered that season, who offered him the closest thing to genuine companionship he found in that entire bleak stretch.

"You were Special Forces," Otis observed one cold November night, nodding at the faded outline still visible on Jerry's jacket where an insignia patch had once been sewn, long since removed but leaving its ghost behind in the fabric's uneven fading. "Green Beret. I can always tell. Something in how a man still stands, even after everything else has gone."

"Long time ago now," Jerry said. "Feels like it happened to somebody else, most days."

"Don't ever fully feels like somebody else, if you ask me. That soldier's still in there, buried under all this." Otis gestured vaguely at their shared doorway, the cardboard flattened beneath them against the cold concrete. "I was infantry, myself. Landed at Normandy, if you can believe it, looking at what's left of me now. Spent thirty years telling myself I didn't need help for what that beach left in me. Cost me a wife, three kids who don't return my letters anymore, and about every good year I had left in me." He studied Jerry with an unexpected gentleness. "You're still young enough to not end up where I ended up, son. I'd get out of this life if there's any door still open to you. Don't wait thirty years like I did, telling yourself you don't need the help."

Jerry thought of the chaplain's card still folded in his jacket pocket, and of Boone's letter, and of his father's offered room, and understood, listening to Otis describe three decades of a war that had never released him, exactly the shape of the future still waiting for him if he continued as he currently was — not a single catastrophic ending, but a long, grinding accumulation of exactly this kind of loss, doorway by doorway, decade by decade, until there was nothing recognizable left of the man who had once earned a Distinguished Service Cross for running into gunfire to save a wounded friend.

* * *

He found himself, on a cold night in late November, walking the streets of downtown Atlanta with no particular destination, his few remaining possessions carried in a canvas duffel slung over one shoulder, the tattered green beret still folded carefully in his jacket pocket where it had ridden, unsold and unsundered, through every collapse of the preceding fourteen months. He did not know, that

particular night, how many more nights like it remained ahead of him, or whether any road still existed that could lead him back to the man he'd once been — husband, father, foreman, soldier — or whether that man had simply been consumed, the way the serpent's poison consumed everything it touched, beyond any hope of recovery.

He passed a lit storefront window and caught his own reflection in the glass, hollow-eyed and gaunt in a coat too thin for the November cold, and did not, for a long moment, fully recognize the man staring back at him. He thought of Sarah, and of Michael and Emily, growing up now in a house he would likely never see again, and of his own father's hard-won sobriety, achieved only after nearly costing him everything Jerry himself had now actually lost. He thought of Teague's circle, and Boone's unanswered faith in him, and Boyd's grief-filled goodbye, and Otis still huddled somewhere back in that shared doorway, thirty years further down a road Jerry now understood himself to be walking.

He reached into his jacket pocket, past the beret, and found the chaplain's small card still there, its printed address nearly worn illegible from months of handling, a verse from Isaiah beneath the mission's name that he could no longer fully read in the streetlight's dim glow but had, by that point, half memorized anyway from all the nights he'd turned the card over without acting on it. He thought of Otis's warning, of thirty years spent telling himself he didn't need the help, and felt something in him — some small, stubborn ember he had not expected to find still burning, buried beneath everything the preceding two years had stripped away — resist, if only faintly, the thought of letting his own story end the same way.

He thought, too, of his mother's letter, folded soft with handling in the same pocket as the card, come home when you're ready, we'll be here, and of his father standing at the foot of a hospital bed with a grief too large for words, and of Boone's steady, unwavering faith arriving from four states away in careful, hopeful sentences. None of it had yet proven sufficient to break the addiction's grip, not fully, not permanently. But taken together, walking through that cold November night with nothing left to his name but a duffel bag and a beret, they amounted to something Jerry had not expected still to find waiting for him at the very bottom of everything he had lost — a scattered, stubborn constellation of people who had not yet given up on him, however completely he had, by every outward measure, given up on himself.

He did not walk toward the mission that particular night, his feet carrying him instead toward another doorway, another cold concrete bed, the addiction's pull still stronger, for now, than whatever fragile resolve the card's presence had briefly kindled. But he did not throw the card away either, tucking it back into his pocket alongside the beret with a care that surprised him, a small, wordless prayer he was not yet capable of praying aloud: not yet, Lord, but maybe. Not yet, but maybe someday soon.

He thought, walking on, of Y'Blul beside a different river a decade earlier, of Boone's steady hands and Teague's folding chairs and his own father's late, hard-won confession on a mill parking lot bench — a long chain of men who had each, in their own season, found some way back from a darkness that had once seemed just as total as the one Jerry currently found himself standing in. He did not yet know if his own chain would hold. But he understood, for the first time in longer than he could clearly remember, that it had not yet fully broken either.

He found Otis again near the same doorway they'd shared before, the older man coughing badly in the cold, and settled down beside him without much conversation passing between them, two broken soldiers from two different wars sharing what little warmth their combined presence could offer against the November night. Otis did not ask where Jerry had been, or what had kept him away those few days since their last conversation, only shifted slightly to make room, a small, wordless welcome that Jerry received with more gratitude than he had words to express.

"Still carrying that card?" Otis asked eventually, nodding at Jerry's jacket pocket.

"Still carrying it," Jerry confirmed. "Haven't worked up the nerve to actually use it yet."

"Nerve's a funny thing to need for accepting help," Otis said, not unkindly. "Took nerve to run into that gunfire you got your medal for, I'd wager. Different kind of nerve, maybe, walking through a door and admitting you can't do this alone anymore. But I don't figure it's a lesser kind. Might even be the harder one, when it comes down to it."

Jerry sat with that observation a long while, the cold seeping up through the cardboard beneath him, Otis's labored breathing a steady, mortal rhythm beside him in the dark, and felt, for the first time in longer than he could clearly remember, something that was not quite hope but was no longer pure despair either — a small, flickering possibility that the harder kind of nerve Otis had just described might, someday soon, prove to be exactly the kind he still had left in him to summon.

"You ever think about your family?" Jerry asked, after a long silence. "The ones who quit writing back?"

"Every day. Every single day for thirty years." Otis's voice carried a grief worn smooth by decades of carrying it. "That's the other thing I'd tell you, if you're willing to hear an old man's regret. Don't let it get to thirty years, son. Don't let the shame convince you it's too late to try reaching back toward the ones you love. It's a lie shame tells a man, that the door's already closed for good. Doors stay open a lot longer than shame wants you to believe they do."

Jerry thought of Michael's careful, guarded eyes on the Whitcombs' porch, of Sarah's fragile kindness even amid the divorce, of his own parents' unwavering offer of a room, and understood, sitting in that cold doorway beside a man who had waited three decades too long to test whether his own doors were still open, that he did not yet know how much time he had left before his own chances hardened into something as permanently closed as Otis's had become.

He thought, walking on through the cold, of a verse that had followed him across nearly a decade now, through jungle and homecoming and marriage and every collapse since — the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit — and understood, with the last clear fragment of faith he still possessed that November night, that he had perhaps never in his entire life been more thoroughly brokenhearted, more completely crushed in spirit, than he was at this exact moment, walking homeless through an Atlanta night with nothing left to his name but a duffel bag and a beret. If the promise held any truth left in it at all, he thought, then the Lord's nearness to a man like him would have to be closer now than it had ever been before — a thought he could not yet fully believe, but one he found himself, despite everything, unable to entirely let go of either, and felt, walking through that cold Atlanta night with nothing left to his name but a duffel bag and a beret, the full, crushing weight of exactly how far he had fallen — and no clear sense, not yet, of whether he possessed anything left inside him capable of climbing back out.

CHAPTER 16

A BITTER NIGHT, AN OPEN DOOR

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

— Luke 15:20

The years between that cold November night with Otis and the night Jerry Gatchell finally collapsed outside New Hope Rescue Mission blurred together, in his own memory, into a single long, gray stretch he could not always place in proper sequence — a decade and more of shelters and doorways and relapses, of brief stretches of fragile sobriety that never quite held, of jobs taken and lost

within weeks, of a body that had once carried a wounded soldier out of gunfire growing steadily more frail beneath the accumulated weight of nearly two decades' abuse. Otis had died somewhere in the middle of that long stretch, in a charity ward Jerry had learned about only secondhand, months after the fact, and Jerry had grieved him privately, in a doorway not far from the one they'd once shared, understanding even then that he was watching a preview of his own likely ending.

He had stopped writing to his parents sometime in the early eighties, the shame of his own silence compounding, year over year, into something that felt considerably easier to maintain than the vulnerability of reaching out again after so long a silence. He did not know, drifting through those lost years, whether Everett and Ruth were even still living, whether Michael and Emily — grown now, surely, strangers to him in every way that mattered — ever thought of him at all, or whether Sarah had remarried, built some new and better life with a man capable of the steadiness Jerry himself had never managed to sustain. He carried Boone's old letters and his mother's last one, worn nearly illegible from handling, folded alongside the tattered green beret in whatever bag or pocket currently held his few remaining possessions, a small, stubborn archive of a life he no longer felt he had any right to claim.

There had been one attempt at recovery, somewhere in the middle years of that long decline, a ninety-day residential program in Macon that a well-meaning social worker had helped him enter after a particularly bad winter, and Jerry had emerged from it clean for the better part of eight months — long enough to briefly imagine, in his more hopeful moments, that he might actually manage to rebuild something resembling a life. He had even worked up the nerve to call the Whitcombs' number, the same number he'd once known by heart, only to find it disconnected, no forwarding information available, a small, silent confirmation that whatever life Sarah and the children had built in the intervening years had moved on without leaving him any visible trail to follow. The disappointment of that single phone call, more than any single relapse trigger he could later identify, had unraveled the eight months of sobriety within a matter of weeks, and he had returned to the needle with a bitter, self-fulfilling conviction that the door back to his old life had simply ceased to exist.

He thought of that failed call often, in the years since, understanding it now as one of a hundred moments where a different choice, a harder patience, might have altered everything that followed — though understanding this so many years later offered him considerably less comfort than genuine foresight might once have provided.

* * *

The particular night of his collapse arrived in late October, nearly twenty years to the month since he had first stepped off a transport plane at Travis Air Force Base believing, however briefly, that the hardest part of his life was already behind him. He had been sick for the better part of a week, a deep chest congestion he lacked the resources to treat, compounded by a body that had gone days without adequate food and considerably longer without any real sleep, and he remembered, of that final walk through the Atlanta streets, only fragments — a streetlight buzzing overhead, the specific ache in his knees, a growing tightness in his chest that made each breath a separate, deliberate labor.

He did not remember falling. He understood only, much later, that he had gone down on the sidewalk directly outside a squat brick building with a hand-lettered sign reading NEW HOPE RESCUE MISSION, a building he had passed a hundred times over the preceding years without ever once finding the nerve to walk through its door, and that his body had simply chosen, on this particular bitter night, to make the decision his own will had spent nearly two decades refusing to make for him.

He would remember, in the fragments that survived that night's fever, a strange, almost peaceful clarity in the instant before he lost consciousness entirely — a fleeting awareness that he had walked past this exact building on countless previous nights, always finding some reason to keep moving, some fresh supply of shame convincing him he had no right to whatever waited behind its doors. He would remember thinking, in that last conscious moment, of Otis's voice from a doorway years earlier

— don't let it get to thirty years, son — and of a small, stubborn hope that perhaps this bitter, unplanned collapse, however far short it fell of the deliberate choice Otis had once urged him toward, might yet prove to be the door opening anyway, whether or not Jerry himself had finally found the courage to knock on it.

* * *

Pastor Rodney Noblit found him there a few minutes past ten, stepping out to lock the mission's front gate for the night, and did not hesitate the way so many passersby had learned to hesitate at the sight of a collapsed man on a city sidewalk — did not step wide around him, did not assume the worst and simply keep walking, but knelt immediately beside Jerry's unconscious form with a swiftness that spoke to long practice.

"Hey. Hey, friend, can you hear me?" Noblit's voice carried a warmth that cut through even Jerry's semiconscious fog, and Jerry felt, dimly, a hand checking for a pulse at his throat, gentle and unhurried despite the evident urgency. "Somebody get Deacon Wallace, tell him we need the cot by the door and a call to the clinic!"

Jerry surfaced into a hazy, fragmented awareness of being lifted, of warm light replacing the cold sidewalk, of voices moving around him with a calm efficiency that felt, even through his own confusion, entirely unlike the indifference he had grown accustomed to expecting from strangers. He caught, in that first disoriented stretch, only a single clear image — a heavysset man with kind, weathered eyes leaning over him, speaking words Jerry could not yet fully process but that carried, in their tone alone, more genuine concern than he had received from anyone but Otis in longer than he could clearly remember.

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He woke properly some hours later on a cot in a long, dim room lined with a dozen similar cots, most of them occupied by sleeping forms, a single low lamp burning near a desk where the same heavysset man sat writing in a ledger, glancing up periodically toward Jerry's bed with the patient attentiveness of someone keeping a careful watch.

"There he is," the man said, setting down his pen and moving to Jerry's bedside with an unhurried warmth. "Had us a little worried there for a spell, friend. You went down pretty hard outside my front gate. I'm Rodney Noblit. This is New Hope Rescue Mission. You're safe here, whatever else is going on."

"How long—" Jerry's voice came out cracked and unfamiliar, disused in ways that went beyond mere thirst.

"Best part of six hours. Doc Willis came by, looked you over. Says you've got a bad chest infection on top of what looks like a fair amount of general malnutrition, but nothing that rest and some proper meals won't start setting right." Noblit pulled a chair beside the cot and settled into it with the unhurried ease of a man who had nowhere more urgent to be. "You've got a name, friend?"

"Jerry," he managed. "Jerry Gatchell."

"Well, Jerry Gatchell, I'm glad you found your way to my sidewalk tonight, hard as that particular way of finding it must have been." Noblit's eyes carried an unmistakable, unhurried kindness, entirely free of the judgment Jerry had braced himself to receive. "You're welcome to stay as long as you need to get your feet back under you. No questions asked tonight. Plenty of time for those later, if you're of a mind to answer them."

* * *

Doc Willis, a volunteer physician who spent two mornings a week at the mission's small clinic, examined Jerry more thoroughly the following day, and the assessment that followed carried a gravity

Jerry received with a strange, hollow detachment, as though the body under discussion belonged to someone else entirely.

"You've got advanced bronchitis bordering on pneumonia, malnutrition significant enough that I'd like to see you gaining weight steadily over the next month, and liver function that concerns me considerably, given what I understand about your history." Willis did not soften the assessment, though his voice carried no judgment either, only the plain, professional concern of a man who had delivered similar news to a great many men in that same clinic over the years. "You're forty-one years old, Jerry, and your body's showing me the wear of a man twenty years older. I won't lie to you and tell you that's easily reversed. But it's not beyond reversing, either, if you're willing to give it the chance."

"What's the alternative, if I don't manage it?" Jerry asked, wanting the full picture rather than a softened version of it.

"Continued decline, most likely, along the same trajectory that brought you to my sidewalk. Your liver's already compromised. Another year or two of the life you've been living would likely finish the job it's started, one way or another." Willis's directness carried no cruelty in it, only the plain respect of a man who trusted his patient to handle an honest accounting rather than a comforting evasion. "I've had this exact conversation with a great many men in your circumstance, Jerry. The ones who make it through tend to be the ones who hear the hard truth clearly enough that it actually changes something in how they approach the road ahead. I'd rather you hear it plain from me than discover it the hard way somewhere down the line."

"What would that take?" Jerry asked, genuinely uncertain he wanted to hear the full answer.

"Time, mostly. Rest, food, and staying entirely clear of whatever you've been putting into your body these past years, which I understand isn't a simple thing to ask of a man in your circumstance." Willis studied him a moment, not unkindly. "I've seen men come back from worse than this, Jerry. I've also buried men who didn't get the chance to try. Which one you turn out to be depends considerably more on what happens in this building over the coming months than on anything I can do with a stethoscope this morning."

Jerry absorbed the assessment in silence, understanding it as its own kind of Proverbs 23:32 made plain in clinical terms — the serpent's poison had, indeed, very nearly finished what it had started, and the margin between recovery and ruin, Willis's careful words suggested, remained considerably narrower than Jerry had allowed himself to fully consider.

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A man in the cot beside Jerry's, a wiry, sun-weathered fellow perhaps ten years his senior who introduced himself simply as Cooper, struck up a conversation on Jerry's third night at the mission, once the fever had broken enough for him to sit up and take real interest in his surroundings.

"You're the soldier that went down outside the gate," Cooper said, not quite a question. "Whole place has been talking about it. Noblit doesn't usually carry a man in himself. Must've seen something in you worth the extra trouble."

"Don't know what he saw. Felt like nothing much myself, that particular night." Jerry studied the older man, noting the same particular hollowness he'd learned to recognize in every broken man he'd met since Vietnam, though Cooper's carried a different quality — softer, somehow, less predatory than Dawson's had been, more resigned. "What's your story, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Railroad man, thirty years. Lost my job to the cutbacks, lost my wife not long after to a cancer that took her quick, and lost the rest of it to a bottle I couldn't seem to put down once I'd started leaning on it too hard." Cooper shrugged, the gesture carrying no particular self-pity, just plain accounting. "Been at this mission going on four months now. Noblit's got me working the kitchen most mornings. Says honest work rebuilds a man's sense of his own worth faster than near anything else he's tried over the years running this place."

"Does it work?" Jerry asked.

"Some. Slow, though. Nothing about this particular road moves fast, near as I've found." Cooper's eyes carried a hard-won, weathered wisdom. "But I'll tell you this much, soldier — first month I was here, I couldn't have told you a single thing I still had to offer this world. Four months in, I make a decent pot of grits and I've got three fellas in this room who'd call me a friend if you asked them. Wasn't expecting even that much, back when I first walked through that gate. Wasn't expecting to still be walking at all, if I'm honest."

"You got family somewhere, Cooper?" Jerry asked, thinking of his own scattered, silent years.

"A daughter, up in Chattanooga. Hasn't spoken to me in six years, last I knew, and I don't much blame her for it, given what she watched the bottle turn me into before her mother passed." Cooper's voice carried a plain, unselfpitying grief. "Wrote her a letter last month, first one in all that time. Haven't heard back yet. Might never hear back. But Noblit tells me the writing itself matters, whether or not the answer ever comes — that a man owes the people he's hurt his own honest effort at repair, regardless of whether they're ready to receive it yet. I've decided to believe him on that one, on account of I don't have a better idea of my own to try instead."

Jerry thought of his own long silence toward Everett and Ruth, toward Sarah and the children, a silence he had not yet found the nerve to break, and felt a fresh kinship with the older man beside him — two soldiers of a different sort, each still weighing whether they possessed the courage to reach backward across years of silence toward people who owed them nothing and might, understandably, choose not to answer.

* * *

It was Deacon Henry Wallace, a lean, silver-haired man who served as Noblit's right hand at the mission, who discovered the green beret two mornings later, gathering Jerry's few possessions to launder his single remaining set of clothes while Jerry slept off the worst of the fever. He brought it directly to Noblit rather than simply returning it to Jerry's bag, turning the faded, tattered garment over in his hands with an expression that carried real surprise.

"Rodney, you'll want to see this." Wallace held the beret out, its once-vivid green long since faded to a dull, weathered gray, a small tab of insignia still faintly visible where a flash had once been pinned. "Fifth Special Forces, near as I can make out from what's left of the patch. Green Beret, Rodney. This fella outside our gate two nights back was Army Special Forces."

Noblit took the beret carefully, studying it a long moment with an expression that shifted from simple surprise into something closer to recognition. "I served two tours myself, Henry. Different branch, different corner of that same war. I know exactly what it costs a man to earn one of these." He set the beret down with a deliberate gentleness. "Explains some of what I saw in his face out there on that sidewalk, before we ever got him inside. I've learned to recognize a particular kind of exhaustion in a man's eyes, over the years running this place. The kind that isn't just about the addiction. The kind that goes considerably deeper than that."

* * *

Jerry woke fully the following afternoon, the fever finally broken, to find Noblit sitting beside his cot again, the beret resting on the small table between them, and felt a fresh wave of shame move through him at the sight of it — the last physical evidence of the man he'd once been, now exposed to a stranger's scrutiny.

"Deacon Wallace found this doing laundry," Noblit said, following Jerry's gaze to the beret. "Didn't mean any disrespect by it. Just recognized what it was, and thought you'd want to know it made it through the wash safe."

"Fifth Group," Jerry said quietly, the words feeling strange in his mouth after so many years of not speaking them aloud to anyone. "Vietnam, sixty-six to sixty-seven. Feels like it happened to a different man entirely, most days."

"I hear that from a lot of the veterans who come through my door, one way or another." Noblit's voice carried an easy, unforced understanding. "Two tours myself, with the First Cav. Came home in sixty-nine to a country that didn't much want to look at what it had asked of us, and spent the better part of a decade after that trying to drink my own way out of remembering it too clearly." He met Jerry's eyes steadily. "I'm not telling you that to compare wounds, Jerry. I'm telling you because I don't want you thinking I'm looking at you this morning and seeing just an addict on a cot. I'm looking at a soldier, same as I was, who's still fighting a war most of this country decided to stop paying attention to a long time ago."

Jerry felt something in his chest tighten at the words, an old, familiar ache mixed with an unfamiliar and unsettling relief — the specific, rare sensation of being fully seen by someone who was not flinching from what he saw. "Most folks just see the addiction," Jerry admitted. "Can't say I blame them. It's mostly all that's left of me these days."

"I don't believe that's true, and I don't think you fully believe it either, or you wouldn't have carried that beret through however many years of losing everything else." Noblit's voice remained gentle but carried an unmistakable conviction. "A man who'd truly given up on himself would have pawned that beret same as everything else, first hard winter he needed the money bad enough. You kept it. That tells me something about what's still alive in you, whatever the rest of you has been through."

"How does a man come back from something like this?" Jerry asked, the question carrying more genuine curiosity than he expected himself to feel. "You said you drank for the better part of a decade after your own tours. What actually changed it?"

Noblit settled back in his chair, his gaze drifting briefly toward the window as he gathered the memory. "Woke up in a jail cell in sixty-nine, drunk and disorderly, and found a chaplain waiting outside my cell the next morning, same as one had once found me in an Army hospital after a wound I'd earned myself getting careless on patrol. That chaplain didn't preach at me. Just sat with me a good while, asked about my war, actually listened to the answer instead of flinching from it the way most civilians did back then. Told me God hadn't given up the search for me just because I'd given up looking for Him." He met Jerry's eyes. "Took me another two years after that to actually get sober for good. Wasn't a single moment. Was a long, slow turning, same as I suspect yours is going to be. But it started with somebody willing to sit with me in the mess I'd made, rather than waiting for me to clean it up first before they'd offer their attention."

"Is that why you started this place?" Jerry asked.

"Partly. Mostly I started it because I got tired of watching men who'd fought for this country come home to find nobody willing to fight for them in return, once the fighting itself was done." Noblit's voice carried a quiet, settled conviction. "Somebody sat with me in my mess, Jerry. Felt like the least I owed the Lord was to go do the same for however many other men crossed my path needing it."

"You said it was a long, slow turning. Not a single moment." Jerry turned the phrase over, uncertain why it caught in him the way it did. "I keep looking for the single moment. Feels like that's what I need, some kind of lightning-bolt conversion that fixes the whole of it at once. Easier to hope for that than to trust a slow turning might actually hold, this many years in."

"I understand that hoping. Wished for the same lightning bolt myself, more times than I could count, in my own hardest years." Noblit's expression carried a gentle, hard-won honesty. "But near every genuine recovery I've watched unfold in this building has looked considerably more like a slow turning than a lightning bolt. A man shows up. Stays another day. Tells one honest truth, then another. Fails sometimes, and comes back anyway instead of disappearing for good after the failure. Bit by bit, the turning adds up to something that looks, from a distance, almost like a single dramatic moment,

even though it never actually felt that way living through it. I'd encourage you to let go of needing the lightning bolt, Jerry. The slow turning's plenty, if a man's willing to keep at it."

Jerry sat with that a long while, understanding it as both a comfort and a considerable demand — the plain, unglamorous truth that whatever recovery waited for him would likely require the same patient, day-by-day discipline that had once carried him through eighteen months of jungle combat, applied now to an entirely different and in some ways more demanding kind of survival.

* * *

The first attempt came on his second night, well past midnight, when the last real traces of the opioids finally began leaving his system in earnest and the withdrawal's familiar, punishing sickness returned with a vengeance — cramping, sweating, a desperate, all-consuming need that made the mission's warm beds and Noblit's kindness feel, in the grip of it, like meaningless obstacles between Jerry and the only relief his body still trusted. He made it as far as the dining hall, moving as quietly as his shaking limbs allowed, before a night attendant gently but firmly guided him back to his cot, murmuring reassurances Jerry was too sick to fully absorb, and Doc Willis, summoned from his own bed, sat with him through the worst of the following hours, administering what modest relief the clinic could safely offer and simply remaining present through the rest, a small mercy Jerry would only fully appreciate once the sickness had finally passed.

The second attempt came two days later, once the physical worst had eased into a lingering, gnawing restlessness, and this time it was Jerry's own clear-eyed will, rather than his body's desperate chemistry, driving him toward the gate — a familiar, cowardly instinct to simply disappear before anyone could witness whatever failure he assumed was still coming, before he could disappoint Noblit and Wallace and Cooper and Doc Willis the way he had disappointed nearly everyone else who had ever tried to help him. Jerry tried to leave twice over the following three days, the old, familiar pull of the street and whatever relief still waited for him there proving, at moments, stronger than the mission's warmth and regular meals, and both times it was Noblit himself who intercepted him near the front gate, not with force or lecture but with a simple, unhurried presence that Jerry found, to his own surprise, harder to walk away from than any argument could have been.

"You don't owe me an explanation for wanting to go," Noblit said the second time, standing beside Jerry at the gate in the gray early morning light, making no move to physically block his path. "I'm not going to chain you to a cot, Jerry. This isn't a prison, and I'm not your warden. But I'd ask you to consider staying one more day before you decide. Just one more. See how it sits with you by evening."

"Why do you care so much what I decide?" Jerry asked, genuinely bewildered by the persistence of a stranger's investment in him. "You don't know me. Don't know the whole of what I've done, what I've lost, how many times I've already failed at this exact thing."

"I know you were married once, and that you lost that marriage. I know you were a father, and that whatever's happened since has put a considerable distance between you and your children. I know you held a good job for years and lost that too, same as you lost your parents' address somewhere along the way, if the state of that beret's the only thing you've managed to hold onto." Noblit's voice carried no accusation, only a plain, gentle recitation of what little Jerry had shared over the preceding days. "I know all of that, Jerry, and none of it changes my answer. I've watched a great many men walk through that gate carrying an almost identical list of losses. Doesn't make any one of you less worth the fight, in my accounting. Might even make you more worth it, given how much you'd be getting back if this actually takes root."

"I know enough. I know you're a Green Beret who nearly died on my sidewalk and still had the strength left in him to carry a twenty-year-old beret through every single thing that took from him everything else." Noblit's eyes held a steady, unflinching warmth. "There's a parable Jesus told, about a father who saw his son coming home from a long way off, while the boy was still too far away to have

said a single word of apology yet, and ran to meet him anyway, compassion arriving before the confession even had a chance to. I think about that story a lot, running this place, Jerry. I think it's closer to the truth of how God actually receives a man like you than anything you've probably been telling yourself out there on the street. I'd like the chance to show you a little of that same compassion, if you'll let me. Just one more day."

Jerry stood at the gate a long moment, the morning traffic beginning to stir on the street beyond it, and felt something shift in him that he could not have fully named — not a decision exactly, not yet, but the first crack in a wall he had been building, brick by brick, for the better part of two decades. "One more day," he said finally, and turned back toward the mission's warm, lit doorway.

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Deacon Wallace found him a pencil and a few sheets of paper that same afternoon, at Jerry's own halting request, and Jerry sat for the better part of an hour at the dining hall's long table, staring at the blank page with a paralysis that felt, in its own way, as daunting as anything he'd faced in that jungle valley two decades earlier.

Dear Mama and Daddy, he finally wrote, and then sat a long while more before the next words would come. I don't know if this letter will even find you at the same address, it's been so many years since I last wrote, and I don't know what you'll think of me after all this silence. I'm at a place called New Hope Rescue Mission in Atlanta. I've been sick, and I've been lost, in about every way a man can be lost, but I'm trying, for the first time in longer than I can honestly account for, to find my way back. I think about you both every day, even in the years I didn't write. I think about Sarah, and Michael, and Emily, though I know I've got no right yet to ask after them, not after so much silence on my part. I just wanted you to know I'm still here, still your son, still trying. I love you both. I'm sorry it's taken me this long to say so.

He thought, staring at the finished letter, of every year he had let pass without writing, telling himself each time that he would reach out once he had something better to report, once he had climbed a little further out of whatever hole he currently occupied — a rationalization that had, in practice, simply ensured the silence stretched longer with each passing year, the gap growing more daunting to bridge the longer it went unaddressed. He understood now, reading his own halting words back to himself, that waiting for a better report had cost him nearly two decades he would never recover, and resolved, however uncertain the outcome, not to make that particular mistake again. Better an honest letter admitting the wreckage than another decade of silence waiting for a triumph that might never actually come.

He read the letter over twice, uncertain whether to send something so raw and unpolished, and it was Wallace, passing by the table, who offered the small piece of counsel that finally settled the matter.

"Best letters I've ever watched a man send from this table were the ones that didn't try to explain everything all at once," Wallace said, glancing at the single page without reading its contents. "Just tell them you're alive and you're trying. Rest can come later, in its own time, if the door's still open on the other end."

Jerry folded the letter carefully and addressed it to the only address he still remembered with any certainty — his parents' old farmhouse outside Newnan, praying, as he sealed the envelope, that Everett and Ruth still occupied it after all these years, and that whatever remained of their long patience had not, at last, finally run out.

* * *

Doc Willis cleared him for light work therapy the following week, and Wallace assigned him to the mission's small woodshop, a modest operation that built simple furniture for resale, funding a portion of the mission's operating costs while giving its residents, as Cooper had described it, something

concrete to rebuild their sense of worth upon. Jerry found himself, on his first morning at the workbench, surprised by how naturally the old, careful discipline of his foreman years returned to his hands — measuring twice, checking a joint's fit before committing to the glue, the same methodical thoroughness that had once impressed Curtis Boyd now applied to a simple pine chair frame rather than a stack of green lumber.

"You've done this kind of work before," Wallace observed, watching him check a mortise joint with an experienced eye, genuine appreciation evident in his voice.

"Ran a sawmill floor for six years, before everything else happened. Feels strange, having hands that still remember how to do something useful." Jerry turned the chair leg over, examining the joint from another angle. "Feels like finding an old friend I'd forgotten I still had."

"That's rather the whole point of the exercise," Wallace said, with the satisfied expression of a man watching a familiar and welcome pattern unfold. "Addiction convinces a man he's got nothing left to offer anybody, himself included. Takes some doing, most times, to prove that particular lie wrong. A good, honest piece of work a man can hold in his own two hands does more to unravel it than a hundred conversations sometimes." He picked up a finished chair from the shop's small display shelf, running a hand along its smooth back rail. "We sell these down at the Saturday market, use the proceeds to keep the lights on around here. Every man who's ever worked this shop has a piece of himself sitting in somebody's dining room now, whether they know it or not. Good thing for a man to remember, some mornings, when the rest of the day feels like more than he can carry."

Jerry worked the remainder of that morning with a focus he had not brought to any task in longer than he could clearly remember, and left the woodshop at noon with sawdust on his hands and a small, unfamiliar satisfaction settling into his chest — the first genuine pride he had felt in his own capability since long before the pills, before the needle, before any of it.

* * *

Wallace joined him for lunch that same day, settling across the dining hall table with a plate of Cooper's grits and an easy familiarity Jerry had not expected from a man who barely knew him. "Rodney tells me you served with the Fifth Group," Wallace said. "I was a corpsman myself, Navy, attached to a Marine unit up near Khe Sanh. Different branch, different corner of the same war, same as Rodney's always saying."

"Didn't figure you for a veteran," Jerry admitted. "You've got a stillness about you that doesn't much match what I remember of most men fresh off that particular tour."

"Took me the better part of fifteen years to find this particular stillness, if it's any comfort to you." Wallace's eyes carried an old, settled peace that nonetheless did not fully hide the cost of having earned it. "Buried more boys in that jungle than I've ever managed to properly grieve, even now. Spent a long stretch after I came home unable to sit still in a room for longer than ten minutes without needing to move, needing to check the exits, needing to do something with my hands so my mind wouldn't wander back to that aid station." He gestured around the dining hall with a small, contented motion. "This place did for me what I hope it's starting to do for you. Gave the stillness somewhere safe to finally take root."

"How long have you been here?" Jerry asked.

"Twelve years, this spring. Started same as you did, more or less — Rodney found me half-frozen behind a dumpster two blocks from here, brought me in, and I never much felt the need to leave once I'd found my footing." Wallace's smile carried real warmth. "Some men move on from this place once they're steady enough to build a life elsewhere. Some of us stay to help carry the next fellow through the same door. I expect you'll know, in time, which kind of man you're going to turn out to be. No wrong answer, either way, so long as the choosing's an honest one."

"Doesn't it wear on you?" Jerry asked. "Watching men come through here broken, year after year. Some of them making it, I'd guess, and some of them not."

"Wears on me plenty, if I'm honest." Wallace's expression carried a weathered, hard-earned steadiness. "But I've come to believe a man's called to bear witness to both kinds of story, the ones that end well and the ones that don't, rather than only sticking around for the easy victories. Somebody bore witness to my own mess, once, and didn't walk away when it got hard to watch. Felt like the least I could do was learn to offer that same steadiness to the next fellow, whichever way his own story ends up going."

"How many make it, would you say? Out of everybody who comes through that gate?" Jerry asked, uncertain he wanted to know his own odds but needing, all the same, to ask.

"More than folks on the outside would guess, fewer than I'd like." Wallace considered the question honestly rather than offering easy comfort. "I've stopped keeping too close a count, if I'm truthful with you. Found it did more harm than good, treating a man's recovery like a statistic I was tracking rather than a whole life I was walking alongside. What I will tell you is this — every single man who's ever made it through has, without exception, been a man who let this place and this fellowship carry some of the weight instead of trying to manage the whole of it alone. That much I've watched hold true, consistent as anything I've observed in twelve years here."

Jerry turned the observation over as he returned to his workbench, understanding it as its own quiet echo of everything Teague had once tried to teach him, decades earlier, in a Baptist church classroom he had eventually stopped attending — the same hard, simple truth arriving again, this time in a Georgia woodshop, from a corpsman who had buried more boys than he could properly grieve and found, on the other side of that grief, a life still worth building.

* * *

That evening, Noblit led a small chapel service in the mission's modest dining hall, a dozen or so residents gathered on folding chairs while he read from the fifteenth chapter of Luke, the same parable he'd mentioned at the gate that morning, and Jerry sat near the back, listening with a raw, unguarded attention he had not brought to Scripture in longer than he could remember.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him," Noblit read, his voice carrying clearly through the small room. "Not after the son had cleaned himself up. Not after he'd proven his intentions, or paid back what he'd wasted, or found his own way to a version of respectable the father could be comfortable receiving. While he was still a long way off — still ragged, still smelling of the pigs he'd been feeding, still carrying nothing but a rehearsed apology and a desperate hope his father might, at minimum, hire him on as a servant. The father saw him at that exact distance, in that exact condition, and ran to him anyway."

Jerry felt the words land with a force he had not braced for, a lifetime of shame and self-judgment briefly, unexpectedly interrupted by the plain, radical mercy the old story described. He thought of his own father, of Everett's unwavering offer of a room extended again and again despite every refusal, of Ruth's letter still folded in his bag, come home when you're ready, we'll be here, and understood, sitting in that dim dining hall among a dozen other broken men, that he had perhaps spent nearly two decades assuming a distance existed between himself and any possible grace that had, according to the very story Noblit was now reading, never actually been as vast as his own shame had insisted it was.

Noblit continued through the parable's remaining verses, the father calling for the best robe, the ring, the fattened calf, a celebration thrown not because the son had earned it but simply because he had been lost and was found, dead and was alive again. "Some of you sitting here tonight," Noblit said, closing his Bible and looking out over the small gathered room, "have spent years now believing you're too far gone for a welcome like that one. Believing the best you can hope for is to be received back as a servant, if you're received at all, on account of everything you've done and everything you've lost. I

want to tell you plainly tonight that's not the God I've come to know, in twenty years of watching Him work in men just like you sitting in these same folding chairs. He runs to meet you. He doesn't wait for you to arrive fully cleaned up first."

Cooper, sitting a few chairs down from Jerry, wiped at his eyes without any particular embarrassment, and an older resident near the front murmured a quiet "amen" that several others echoed, a small chorus of broken men finding, together, some shared permission to receive a mercy most of them had long assumed was reserved for people considerably less ruined than themselves. Jerry felt his own throat tighten, understanding, watching the room's collective response, that he was not the only man present carrying two decades of conviction that his own particular ruin had placed him beyond the parable's reach.

Noblit closed the service with a final observation that Jerry would carry with him long after that particular evening had passed. "Notice, too, that the father in this story doesn't wait passively for his son to return. Scripture tells us he saw him while he was still a long way off — meaning that father had been watching that road, day after day, hoping, refusing to give up the vigil, long before his son ever came stumbling back down it. I want you to understand something plain tonight, whoever among you still doubts it. There have been people watching your road too, this whole time you've been gone. Praying, hoping, refusing to give up the vigil, however far off you've wandered. You are not returning to an empty house. Somebody's been watching for you."

Jerry thought of Ruth's letter, and of Everett standing wordless at the foot of a hospital bed, and of a father he could not fully picture anymore after so many years apart, and wondered, for the first time with something closer to hope than dread, whether his own long road home might yet find someone still watching for him at its end.

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He found Noblit alone in the small office off the dining hall after the service concluded, the pastor sorting through paperwork with the same unhurried patience he brought to everything, and stood in the doorway a long moment before finally speaking.

"I want to stay," Jerry said. "Not just one more day. I mean properly stay, if you'll have me. Do whatever this place asks of a man trying to actually get well instead of just surviving another winter."

Noblit looked up, and something in his weathered face carried a quiet, unshowy joy that moved Jerry more than any more effusive reaction could have. "I'd be honored to have you, Jerry. I won't pretend the road from here is short, or that it doesn't ask hard things of a man. But I've watched this particular door open for broken men before, and I've watched what the Lord can do with a life once a man's finally willing to walk all the way through it instead of just standing at the gate deciding."

"I don't know if I've got the strength for it," Jerry admitted, the confession costing him something real. "I've failed at this so many times before, Noblit. Teague's group, my own father's example, promise after promise to Sarah and the children. I don't have a good track record to point to." He thought, saying it aloud, of Boyd's grief-filled goodbye at the mill, of the nine-day promise that had collapsed so quickly after the poured-out bottle, of every earlier attempt that had ended in some fresh and painful failure.

"None of us do, walking through that door for the first time. That's rather the point of it." Noblit rose and crossed the small office, and for a moment simply studied Jerry with an expression that carried the full weight of everything the preceding days had revealed — the beret, the war, the marriage and children lost to years of silence, the medals sold and the body nearly broken beyond repair. "I meant what I said at the gate this morning, Jerry. I've watched this door open for broken men before. I don't say that lightly, and I don't say it to promise you an easy road. I say it because I've got twenty years of evidence sitting behind me, in men like Henry Wallace and dozens of others who walked through this exact office on their own worst night and came out the other side of it changed. I believe you can be

one more name on that list. I wouldn't have carried you off that sidewalk if some part of me didn't already believe it." He extended his hand. "You won't be doing it on your own strength alone, Jerry, not if you let this place and this fellowship do what it's built to do. Deacon Wallace runs a Bible study Tuesday and Thursday evenings that's helped more men than I can count find their footing. We've got work therapy in the mornings, honest labor to rebuild a man's sense of his own worth. And we've got a God who ran to meet the prodigal while he was still a long way off, same as He ran to meet you on that sidewalk two nights back, whether you fully felt it in the moment or not."

"I mailed a letter to my parents today," Jerry said, the admission arriving almost involuntarily. "First one in six years. I don't even know if they're still at that address. Don't know if they'll want to hear from me after so long a silence, if it does reach them."

"How'd it feel, writing it?"

"Terrifying. Harder, in some ways, than anything I did in that valley." Jerry considered the question honestly. "Easier to run into gunfire, some days, than to sit at a table and put your own failures into words for the people who love you most to read. But it felt like something too. Like maybe the first honest thing I've done in longer than I can properly account for."

"That's usually how the truest steps feel, in my experience," Noblit said. "Terrifying and right, both at once. The Lord doesn't often ask us to do things that feel comfortable on the front end. Mostly He asks for the harder thing, and trusts the comfort to arrive on the other side of the obedience, not before it."

"Whatever they decide, you did something today most men in your circumstance never work up the nerve to do at all." Noblit's expression carried a quiet pride that Jerry received with a warmth he had not expected a stranger's approval to still carry, after everything. "That's the whole shape of this road, Jerry — small, terrifying acts of honesty, one after another, each one a little easier than the last for having survived the one before it. The letter today. Staying instead of walking out that gate. Telling me the truth about the beret, about your war, about what you're still carrying. None of it undoes twenty years in a single evening. But none of it is nothing, either."

Jerry shook the offered hand, and felt, for the first time in nearly twenty years, something that was not merely the absence of despair but the faint, fragile presence of something that might, with enough patience and enough grace, eventually grow into genuine hope — the first true step, he understood, of a much longer road still waiting ahead of him, but a real step nonetheless, taken at last through a door that had, it turned out, been standing open for him considerably longer than he had ever let himself believe.

* * *

He lay awake a long while that night in his cot, the mission quiet around him save for the ordinary sounds of a dozen other broken men sleeping, and found himself, for the first time in longer than he could remember, praying with something closer to genuine hope than desperation. Lord, I don't know what's waiting for me at the end of this road, or whether Mama and Daddy's address even still holds them, or whether Sarah and the children would ever want to hear from a man who left them the way I left them. But I'm asking You tonight, plain and honest, the way Noblit says You're willing to receive it — help me walk through this door all the way, and not just stand here deciding. I've stood at enough doors deciding, these past twenty years. I'm asking for the strength to actually walk through this one.

He touched the beret where it rested on the small table beside his cot, its faded green barely visible in the dim light, and thought of Sergeant Jerry Gatchell of the Fifth Special Forces Group, of Higgins and Delgado and Baxter and Y'Blul, of every man he had once sworn to protect and every promise he had since broken, and understood, drifting finally toward the first genuinely peaceful sleep he had known in longer than he could measure, that the war he had carried home from that valley two decades

earlier had, at long last, found him a shelter he had not expected still to exist — not the absence of the fight, but a fellowship willing, at long last, to help him fight it.

He thought, in the last clear moment before sleep finally claimed him, of Psalm 91, the psalm Y'Blul had first taught him beside a river a lifetime ago, the psalm that had carried him through combat and through his first difficult homecoming and through every hard season since — you will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day — and understood, lying in a mission cot two decades and a thousand miles removed from that original riverbank lesson, that the promise had finally, after everything, found him a shelter capable of actually holding it. Not the absence of the war he still carried. But a fellowship, at long last, strong enough to help him carry it — the terror of night, and the arrow that flies by day, no longer his to face entirely alone.

CHAPTER 17

WRESTLING WITH GRACE

God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God.

— James 4:6-7

Three weeks into his stay at New Hope Rescue Mission, Jerry Gatchell had built himself a careful, disciplined routine — up at six for the morning devotional, breakfast, four hours in the woodshop, an afternoon of chores and light exercise Doc Willis had prescribed to help rebuild his wasted frame, lights out by nine — and found himself, watching his own progress with a soldier's satisfaction in a well-executed operation, quietly proud of how thoroughly he had managed to organize his own recovery.

It was Deacon Henry Wallace who first named the trouble in that particular pride, catching Jerry after morning devotional one Tuesday with an observation delivered as gently as it landed hard.

"You've built yourself a fine routine, Jerry. Best I've seen a new man assemble in some while." Wallace fell into step beside him as they crossed the courtyard toward the woodshop. "But I notice you're running that routine the same way I expect you once ran a mill floor. All discipline, all your own steam. Man doesn't come through my Tuesday Bible study near as often as I'd hoped, for somebody clean three weeks and doing so well otherwise."

"I've been keeping up with my own devotions," Jerry said, hearing the defensiveness rise in his voice before he could fully check it. "Reading my New Testament most mornings. Don't know that I need the group study on top of everything else I'm already managing."

"That word right there," Wallace said, not unkindly, stopping in the courtyard's morning light. "Managing. Same word I've heard a hundred men use, walking this same road, right before the managing gives out from under them. This life we're rebuilding here isn't meant to be managed solo, Jerry, however capable you are at it. It's meant to be surrendered. Different operation altogether."

Jerry felt the observation land somewhere uncomfortably precise, an echo of a nearly identical conversation he'd once had with Sarah in a kitchen a lifetime ago — I need less managing and more actually letting somebody in — words he had heard then and only partially absorbed, apparently still not fully absorbed even now, two decades and an entire collapsed life later.

"Sarah used to tell me something close to that," Jerry admitted. "Never much understood it as anything more than a complaint about my schedule. Took losing everything to start hearing it as something deeper."

"Most of us need to lose considerably more than we'd like before that particular lesson finally lands," Wallace said, with a gentleness that softened the observation's weight. "Doesn't make you slow, Jerry. Makes you human. I promise you every man walking this courtyard has his own version of that same delayed hearing."

* * *

Supper that evening carried an easy, communal warmth Jerry had not fully allowed himself to notice in his first weeks, too absorbed in his own careful private discipline to register the fellowship happening around him at the long dining hall tables. He sat that particular night beside a younger resident named Marcus, a former Marine barely into his thirties who had arrived at the mission only days after Jerry himself, and found himself, for the first time, genuinely curious about another man's story rather than simply managing his own.

"How long you been in?" Marcus asked, working through a plate of Cooper's grits with the appetite of a man still rebuilding a wasted body.

"Seven weeks tomorrow," Jerry said. "You?"

"Six. Feels longer some days, shorter others." Marcus's eyes carried a raw, unguarded youth that Jerry recognized, with a pang, as uncomfortably similar to his own eyes twenty years earlier, fresh off a different war's battlefield with an identical hollowness settling in behind them. "Grenada, then some ugly business in Panama a few years back. Different war than yours, I hear, but the same general shape of trouble finding me once I got home."

"Different war, same shape," Jerry agreed. "That much I can promise you holds true across every generation of us, near as I've come to understand it." He studied the younger man a moment, struck by how closely Marcus's raw, unguarded exhaustion mirrored his own after coming home from Vietnam two decades earlier — the same watchful stillness, the same reflexive distrust of a peace his body hadn't yet learned to accept as genuinely safe. "You got family checking in on you? Anybody know where you landed?"

"Mother, back in Ohio. Calls the front desk most weeks." Marcus's expression flickered with something between gratitude and guilt. "Told her I was doing fine longer than I actually was, before I finally admitted I needed a place like this. Wish I hadn't waited so long to tell her the truth."

"I understand that particular regret better than most men you'll meet," Jerry said. "Took me the better part of twenty years to write my own folks an honest letter. Don't make my mistake, Marcus. The truth costs less the sooner you tell it, even when it doesn't feel that way going in." He found himself, without fully deciding to, offering the younger man a piece of the same counsel Wallace and Noblit had been offering him for weeks. "Best thing I've learned here so far, for whatever it's worth to you — quit trying to manage it alone. Took me twenty years and about everything I had to finally learn that lesson. Be glad you're learning it considerably younger than I did."

Marcus studied him a long moment, something like gratitude moving behind his young, tired eyes. "Appreciate you saying so, Sergeant. Wasn't sure anybody in here would understand where I'm coming from."

"Green Beret, myself. Vietnam." Jerry extended his hand across the table. "And I understand more than you'd probably guess, Marcus. More than I wish I did, some days. But I'm glad to walk alongside you here, whatever that's worth."

* * *

Jerry attended his first full Bible study that same Thursday evening, seven men gathered in a circle of folding chairs in the same dining hall where he'd first heard the parable of the prodigal son, and Wallace opened his worn Bible to the fourth chapter of James with the unhurried authority of a man who had taught this particular passage more times than he could count.

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble," Wallace read. "Submit yourselves, then, to God.' I want us to sit with that word submit a while tonight, because I've watched it trip up more soldiers and more strong men generally than almost any other word in this whole book. Submit sounds like defeat, to ears trained the way most of ours were trained. Sounds like weakness. But I want to suggest tonight that it's actually the opposite — that submission to God is the one act of genuine strength most of us have spent our whole lives too proud to attempt."

Jerry sat with the words a long moment, an old, familiar resistance stirring in him even as some other part recognized the truth Wallace was describing. "How do you tell the difference?" Jerry finally asked, surprising himself by speaking up. "Between submission and just giving up? Feels like a thin line some days."

"Fair question, and an honest one." Wallace considered it with real care. "Giving up says nothing matters, so why keep fighting. Submission says the fight matters too much to keep losing it my own way, so I'm handing the strategy over to somebody wiser than me. Giving up is despair, Jerry. Submission is the opposite of despair, dressed up in clothes that can look similar from a distance if you're not looking close."

Another man in the circle, an older resident named Franklin who had said little through most of the study, spoke up quietly. "Took me three trips through a place like this before that distinction finally landed for me. First two times, I thought I was submitting. Really I was just gritting my teeth harder, telling God I'd handle it if He'd just take the edge off the cravings some. Wasn't till my third time through that I understood submission means actually handing Him the wheel, not just asking Him to ride shotgun while I keep driving."

"What changed, that third time?" Jerry asked, genuinely curious.

"Ran out of my own strength completely. Nothing left to grit my teeth with." Franklin's voice carried the particular weight of hard-won wisdom. "Turns out that's often exactly where God's been waiting the whole while — not at the end of a man's strength as some kind of consolation prize, but as the actual starting line for what He wanted to do in him all along."

Wallace nodded slowly, gesturing toward Franklin with evident respect. "That's about as plain a testimony as you'll hear on this particular subject, gentlemen. Worth remembering, whichever leg of your own journey you're currently walking."

* * *

The old craving found him hard on a Sunday afternoon in his fifth week, triggered by nothing he could clearly identify — no specific memory, no particular stress, just a sudden, visceral pull that arrived with the force of a physical blow, his whole body remembering, with a clarity that frightened him, exactly what relief had once felt like and exactly how close the nearest source of it might be if he simply walked out the mission's front gate and caught a bus back toward his old neighborhood.

He sat with the craving alone in his cot for the better part of an hour, sweating, his hands shaking with an urgency that felt, in the moment, considerably more dangerous than the physical withdrawal he'd survived weeks earlier — a craving of the mind and spirit rather than the body, and in some ways harder to outlast for exactly that reason. His pulse hammered with a specificity he recognized, uncomfortably, from his worst combat memories, a full-body alarm insisting that relief was close and urgent and simple, if only he would stop fighting it and just walk the few blocks that separated him from whatever chemical peace still waited out there. He thought of every earlier failure, every promise broken to Sarah, every relapse after every partial victory, and felt the old, familiar conviction rising that

he was simply built wrong for lasting recovery, that this particular battle was one he had already proven, repeatedly, incapable of winning.

It was the memory of Wallace's words from Thursday's study — submission, not solo management — that finally moved him off the cot and down the hall to the small office where Noblit was finishing the evening's paperwork.

"I need to tell you something," Jerry said, standing in the doorway, his voice unsteady, his hands still trembling faintly with the aftermath of the fight he'd just barely won. "I've been sitting on a craving for the better part of an hour. Bad one. I almost walked out of here twenty minutes ago without telling a soul."

Noblit set down his pen immediately, giving Jerry his full attention. "Thank you for telling me instead. That's not a small thing, Jerry. That's the exact opposite of managing it alone." He rose and pulled a second chair close. "Sit with me a while. We'll pray through it together, and if it's still bad after that, I'll walk with you myself, out that gate and back again, for as many laps as it takes until it passes. You're not facing this one solo tonight."

Jerry sank into the offered chair, his hands still trembling, and felt something in him loosen slightly at the simple fact of not being alone in the room with the craving anymore — a small, immediate relief that arrived before Noblit had even said a single further word, evidence, however modest, that Wallace's teaching about submission carried some practical truth alongside its spiritual one.

"Tell me what it feels like," Noblit said. "Not to fix it necessarily. Just so it's not only living in your own head anymore."

"Feels like drowning," Jerry said, after a moment's search for the honest words. "Feels like my whole body's convinced there's a rope right there, just out of reach, and if I could just get to it, everything would stop hurting. Logically I know it's a lie. Doesn't make the pull feel any less real while it's happening."

"That's about as honest a description as I've heard," Noblit said. "And naming it that plainly, out loud, to another person — that's already changed something about its grip on you, whether you can feel the change yet or not."

* * *

They sat together for nearly two hours that evening, Noblit's steady presence and quiet prayers doing more to see Jerry through the craving's worst than any private resolve could have managed alone, and it was sometime past ten, the craving finally receding into something manageable, that Jerry found himself telling Noblit the fuller shape of his own pride — not just the addiction's pride, but the older, deeper version that had governed him since long before the pills, since the war itself.

"I was a Green Beret," Jerry said. "Trained to believe there wasn't a problem I couldn't solve with enough discipline, enough grit. Carried that same belief into my marriage, into fatherhood, into every hard season since. Kept telling myself if I could just white-knuckle it hard enough, I wouldn't need to ask anybody for help. Look where that got me."

"That kind of self-reliance kept you alive in a jungle, Jerry. I don't doubt that for a second." Noblit's voice carried real respect alongside the challenge. "But you're right that it became its own kind of idol, once the war ended and a different kind of battle started. Self-reliance as a soldier's virtue and self-reliance as a spiritual posture aren't the same animal, even though they can look identical from a distance. One kept your unit alive under fire. The other one nearly killed you, alone in a flophouse with Ray Dawson's poison in your veins."

Jerry absorbed the distinction slowly, understanding it as one of the truer things anyone had said to him about the whole shape of his collapse. "So how does a man let go of something that once saved his life?"

"Slowly, and with considerable grace for himself along the way." Noblit's smile carried a gentle warmth. "You don't have to fully let go tonight, Jerry. You already took the harder step, walking down this hall instead of out that gate. Let that be enough for one evening. The rest comes in its own time."

* * *

Wallace found a private moment with Jerry the following week, drawing him aside after the Tuesday devotional to share a piece of his own story he had not yet fully told, settling onto a bench in the small courtyard garden with the unhurried patience that characterized nearly everything he did.

"I want to tell you about a night in sixty-nine," Wallace said, "not long after I got back stateside, when I very nearly did to myself what your friend Otis was still doing to himself thirty years on. Sat up half the night with a bottle and a pistol on the table in front of me, trying to decide which one I actually needed worse." He said it plainly, without theatrics, a fact stated rather than a scene performed for effect. "What stopped me wasn't willpower, Jerry. I'd already proven, by that point, I didn't have enough of that left to matter. What stopped me was a memory of Jacob, wrestling all night with a stranger beside a river, refusing to let go until the stranger blessed him, even after the stranger had wrenched his hip clean out of its socket."

"I know that story," Jerry said. "Never much understood what it was supposed to teach a man, beyond stubbornness." He remembered a Sunday school flannelboard version of it from his own boyhood, long before Vietnam, long before any of it, Jacob and the stranger reduced to a simple tussle with a moral tacked on at the end that had never quite landed for him.

"Took me years to understand it myself. Here's what I've come to believe, sitting with it this long." Wallace's eyes carried a quiet, hard-won conviction. "Jacob wasn't wrestling to win. A man doesn't beat God in a wrestling match, however stubborn he is. Jacob was wrestling to stay in contact, refusing to let go of the struggle even once it became clear he couldn't win it on his own terms. That's what saved me that night with the pistol, if I'm honest. I wasn't strong enough to win my own fight. But I was stubborn enough to keep wrestling instead of walking away from it entirely, and somewhere in that wrestling, same as Jacob, I came out the other side limping but blessed, changed in a way I couldn't have managed through sheer willpower alone."

"Wrestling with grace," Jerry said slowly, turning the phrase over. "Never thought of it in exactly those terms."

"That's precisely what it is, near as I've experienced it. Not a fight you win by force. A fight you win by refusing to release your grip on the only thing capable of actually blessing you, even when everything in you wants to let go and walk off into easier, more familiar darkness."

"Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his life, after that night," Jerry said, remembering the detail from some long-ago Sunday school lesson. "Doesn't seem like much of a prize for staying in the fight."

"Depends how you weigh it." Wallace's expression carried the particular clarity of a man who had turned this exact question over many times himself. "The limp's not the punishment, Jerry. The limp's the proof. Proof he actually wrestled, actually touched something real, rather than just talking about the fight from a safe distance the way so many of us prefer to. I've got my own limp, metaphorically speaking, same as you're carrying yours — a marriage I never managed to rebuild, a body that still aches some mornings from years of hard living before I found my way here. I wouldn't trade the limp for having never wrestled at all. The limp means I showed up for the match."

Jerry sat with that a long while, the courtyard's afternoon light shifting slowly across the garden's small collection of tended plants, and felt something settle in him that had not fully settled since long before the war — a growing willingness to consider that his own considerable collection of losses might, someday, be viewed not merely as ruin but as evidence of having wrestled rather than simply surrendered to easier despair.

"Can I ask you something personal, Deacon Wallace?" Jerry said, after the silence had stretched a while longer. "You mentioned a marriage you never managed to rebuild. Does that particular limp still ache, this many years on?"

Wallace considered the question with evident care before answering. "Some days more than others. My ex-wife remarried a good man, some years back, and I've made my peace with that being the right outcome for her, whatever grief it still costs me privately. But I'll tell you plain, Jerry — the limp doesn't erase the peace I've found in every other corner of this life the Lord's rebuilt around me since. Both things are true at once. That's usually how it goes, near as I've observed it in myself and in every other man who's walked through here carrying his own particular losses."

"Does that scare you? Thinking mine might end up the same way, however hard I fight for it?"

"Some. But less than it used to." Wallace's smile carried a hard-won serenity. "I've learned to trust that the fight itself matters, regardless of exactly how every single outcome lands. You keep wrestling, Jerry. Let God worry about the shape of the blessing on the other side of it."

* * *

Doc Willis examined him again in his sixth week, and the assessment this time carried a different weight than the grim accounting of that first hospital-adjacent evening.

"Your liver function's improved more than I expected this early," Willis said, reviewing the bloodwork with evident satisfaction. "You've put on twelve pounds. Color's better. Whatever you're doing here, Jerry, your body's responding to it in ways I don't always get to see this clearly, this fast." He set down his clipboard. "I want to be careful not to overstate it. Twenty years takes longer than six weeks to fully undo. But I'll tell you plainly, I had my doubts about you that first week, watching how far gone you were. I don't have those same doubts anymore."

"What changed your mind?" Jerry asked, curious what a clinical eye had actually observed in him.

"Watched you attend every Bible study without missing one these past three weeks, for one thing. Watched you take on the woodshop keys and actually rise to the responsibility instead of buckling under it. Small things, mostly, but small things sustained over time are usually the best predictor I've got, better than any bloodwork." Willis's smile carried a genuine warmth. "The body follows where the spirit leads, more often than medical school ever quite prepared me to expect. You're proving that particular lesson out plainly, Jerry, whether or not it shows up cleanly on any chart I could draw for you."

Jerry received the news with a cautious gratitude, understanding it as tangible, measurable evidence of something he had mostly been experiencing as an internal, spiritual struggle — proof that the surrender Wallace kept describing was producing effects visible even to a clinical eye, a body slowly following where a spirit had finally begun to lead rather than resist. "Feels strange, hearing good news about my own body. Been a long time since anybody had reason to give me any."

"Get used to it, if you keep on this road," Willis said, with a small, genuine smile. "I intend to keep having reason to give you more of it."

* * *

Wallace handed him the woodshop's keys that same week, a small ceremony that carried more weight than its modest practical function might have suggested to an outside observer. "You'll be opening and closing the shop most mornings from here on, keeping the tool inventory, training the newer fellas coming through," Wallace said, placing the worn ring of keys in Jerry's palm. "Rodney and I talked it over. We think you're ready for the responsibility, and we think the responsibility might do you some good besides."

"I haven't been trusted with anything like this in longer than I can remember," Jerry admitted, turning the keys over, their weight unexpectedly significant in his hand. "Feels like more than just a set

of keys." He thought, holding them, of Boyd's grief-filled goodbye years earlier, of the trust he had once earned and then squandered on a mill floor a lifetime ago, and felt a fresh, cautious hope stirring that perhaps trust, once broken, was not always permanently beyond a man's reach to rebuild.

"It is more, if you let it be. A man rebuilding his sense of worth needs more than kind words telling him he matters. Needs somebody willing to hand him something real and trust him to carry it responsibly." Wallace's eyes carried a quiet confidence. "You handled a squad's worth of men's lives once, Jerry, in a jungle a long way from here. A woodshop's keys are a considerably smaller trust. But it's a start, and starts matter."

Jerry took to the new responsibility with a seriousness that surprised even himself, arriving each morning before the other men to unlock the shop and lay out the day's projects, training two newer residents in the careful, patient methods Wallace and Curtis Boyd had both, in their different ways, once taught him, and found, in the small daily discipline of it, a fresh and steady sense of his own continued usefulness.

* * *

The letter arrived on a Wednesday in his seventh week, and Wallace himself delivered it to the woodshop, recognizing the return address before Jerry had even fully registered what he was holding — his mother's careful, familiar handwriting, the same hand that had once penned come home when you're ready, we'll be here, now addressed to a rescue mission Jerry had not known existed until his own collapse had delivered him to its doorstep.

He carried it out to the courtyard garden to read alone, his hands trembling as he opened the envelope, and found not merely his mother's response but a second, separate letter folded inside it, in his father's own unmistakable hand — a rare occurrence, Jerry knew, since Everett had never been a man of many written words.

My son, Ruth had written, you cannot know what this letter meant to us, arriving after so long a silence we had genuinely begun to fear the worst. Your father and I read it together on the porch, and wept together, and prayed together, the same porch where you and Sarah once sat as young sweethearts a lifetime ago. We are still here, Jerry. We have never once stopped being here, whatever the silence made you fear. Come home to us when you're able. There is nothing you could tell us about these lost years that would close this door. There is nothing that could close it. We love you. We have never stopped.

Everett's letter, shorter and more halting, carried its own particular weight. Son, I don't have your mother's gift with words, but I wanted you to have something in my own hand, so you'd know this comes straight from me and not just relayed through her. I'm proud of you for writing. Prouder still, if what you're describing about this mission is true, that you're finally doing the harder work instead of running from it. I know something about that particular harder work myself, as you well know. Keep at it. We're not going anywhere. Your Daddy.

Jerry sat in the courtyard garden for a long while after reading both letters through twice, tears finally coming in a release he had not permitted himself in longer than he could measure, and understood, holding the physical evidence of nearly two decades of unwavering love in his own trembling hands, exactly how thoroughly his own shame had lied to him about the true shape of the welcome still waiting for him — a welcome that had, it turned out, been standing open considerably longer and considerably wider than he had ever let himself believe.

He sat with the two letters a long while before beginning his own reply, reading them over a third and fourth time, letting the full weight of their welcome settle into him fully before attempting to answer it. He thought of the pawnshop counter, of the medals he had traded for a fraction of what they'd once meant to him, and understood, holding his parents' unwavering love in his own hands, that

some things — a mother's welcome, a father's pride, however long deferred — had apparently never actually been for sale in the first place, whatever his own despair had once convinced him.

He wrote his reply that same evening, filling three full pages where his first letter had barely filled one, the words arriving now with a fluency the fear and shame had previously blocked. I want to tell you everything, he wrote, the whole twenty years, not because I think you need to carry the weight of it, but because I think I need to finally stop carrying it alone. I'm working with a wonderful man here named Deacon Wallace, studying Scripture, learning things about pride and surrender I wish I'd understood back when it might have spared all of us so much grief. I'm not fixed, Mama and Daddy. I don't know that a man ever gets fully fixed, this side of glory. But I'm fighting the right fight now, for the first time in longer than I can say, and I wanted you both to know that your prayers weren't wasted, even through all those years of silence. I love you. I'll write again soon.

He asked, in a careful postscript, whether they had any word of Sarah or the children, understanding even as he wrote the question that he was not yet ready to receive whatever answer might come, and sealed the letter with a hope considerably steadier than the desperate, uncertain hope that had accompanied his first. He walked the letter to the mailbox himself that evening rather than leaving it for Wallace to post, wanting, in some small private way, to be the one who carried this particular piece of his slow reconciliation the whole distance to its sending.

* * *

Cooper's relapse came without warning on a Friday night near the end of Jerry's seventh week, the older man simply absent from the dining hall at supper, his cot found empty and stripped by morning, and the news moved through the mission's small community with a somber weight that Jerry felt more acutely than he expected, given how briefly he had known the man.

"Happens," Wallace said simply, finding Jerry sitting alone in the courtyard that evening, clearly troubled by the news. "Doesn't happen because this place failed him, or because he didn't want it badly enough. Addiction's a cunning, patient enemy, Jerry. Sometimes it wins a round even against a man doing everything right. Doesn't mean the war's over for him. Doesn't mean it's over for you either, watching it happen to somebody you'd started to call a friend."

"He wrote his daughter a letter last month," Jerry said quietly. "Hadh't heard back yet, far as I knew. Feels like I watched exactly the kind of ending I've been afraid of for myself."

"Might be. Might also not be the ending at all — might just be a hard chapter in a longer story we haven't seen the close of yet." Wallace's voice carried a steady, hard-won hope that did not minimize the loss. "I've watched men leave this place and come back changed, months or years later, having finally hit whatever bottom they needed to hit before this door could do its full work in them. I've also watched men leave and never come back. I can't promise you which one Cooper's going to turn out to be. What I can tell you is his story isn't disqualifying evidence against your own. Every man's wrestling match runs its own course, on its own timeline."

Jerry sat with that a long while, understanding Cooper's absence as a fresh and sobering reminder of exactly how real the stakes still were, even seven weeks into his own fragile progress — a reminder he received, this time, not as cause for despair but as renewed resolve to keep wrestling rather than release his own grip on whatever blessing still waited on the other side of the struggle.

Marcus found him in the woodshop the following morning, visibly shaken by the news, which had spread through the mission's small community with the particular speed such losses always seemed to travel. "Doesn't seem fair," Marcus said, watching Jerry work a plane along a length of pine with more force than the task strictly required. "Man does everything right for months, and one bad Friday undoes all of it."

"Doesn't undo all of it," Jerry said, setting the plane down and meeting the younger man's eyes with a conviction he had only recently begun to genuinely possess himself. "Every day Cooper stayed

clean, he was still a man worth knowing, still doing honest work in this shop, still teaching me things about patience I hadn't managed to learn on my own. That doesn't get erased just because Friday went the way it went. Wallace told me something similar about my own worst chapters, and I'm starting to believe he's right about it."

"You think he'll come back?"

"I don't know, Marcus. Wish I did." Jerry picked the plane back up, working the wood with a steadier rhythm this time. "What I know is the door stays open either way. Rodney's told me that plain, more than once. Man's welcome back whenever he's ready, however many times it takes him getting ready. That's about the only certainty I've got to offer you on it."

* * *

Cooper's absence sat with Jerry through that whole weekend, unsettling something in him he had not fully expected it to unsettle, and on Sunday night, long after the mission's other residents had settled into sleep, he found himself unable to lie still in his own cot, some old, familiar restlessness pulling him instead out to the courtyard garden beneath a clear autumn sky.

He knelt there for the first time in longer than he could remember, the cold ground pressing through his trousers, and began praying with an intensity he had not permitted himself even in his most desperate mission-cot prayers of the preceding weeks — not the careful, managed prayers of a man still holding something back, but a raw, unguarded wrestling that poured out of him in fragments, confession tangled with grief tangled with a fierce, desperate hope he barely recognized as his own.

Lord, I don't want to be Cooper. I don't want to be Otis, thirty years down this same road, still fighting the same fight alone. I've spent my whole life gripping tight to my own strength, my own discipline, my own capacity to white-knuckle my way through anything — and look what it's cost me. Sarah. Michael. Emily. Boyd. My own health, my own medals, nearly my own life. I don't want to grip that tight anymore, Lord, but I don't know how to let go without it feeling like giving up entirely. Teach me the difference. Teach me what Wallace keeps telling me, submission instead of surrender to despair. I'm not leaving this garden until I understand it, or until You bless me the way You blessed Jacob, limp and all.

He knelt there a long while, the night deepening around him, wrestling with a silence that offered no dramatic voice from heaven, no sudden clarity descending like lightning — only the patient, steady work of a man finally emptying himself of every last defense he had spent two decades constructing, and it was sometime near dawn, his knees aching and his face wet with tears he had stopped trying to control, that Jerry felt something shift in him that he understood, even in the moment, as different from every earlier resolution he had made and broken.

It was not a voice. It was not a vision. It was simply a settling, deep and quiet, the sense of having finally set down a weight his own hands had never actually been strong enough to carry, replaced by something considerably steadier than his own strength had ever managed to be. He rose from the cold ground as the first gray light began touching the courtyard's eastern wall, understanding that he was walking away from that garden changed, limping in some sense he could not fully articulate, but blessed all the same — the wrestling match Wallace had described finally, truly joined, and finally, truly won, not by Jerry's own gripping strength but by his willingness, at last, to stop relying on it.

* * *

Wallace found him at the courtyard gate that same dawn, having risen early himself for his own quiet devotions, and stopped short at the sight of Jerry's face — reddened, exhausted, but carrying an unmistakable stillness Wallace recognized immediately for exactly what it was.

"You've been out here all night," Wallace observed, not quite a question.

"Most of it." Jerry's voice came out hoarse, scraped raw from hours of unguarded prayer. "Cooper's leaving shook something loose in me I didn't know was still stuck. Ended up out here on my knees till near dawn, wrestling with about everything I've been carrying since that valley in sixty-six."

Wallace studied him a long moment, something like recognition and quiet joy moving behind his weathered eyes. "I know that look, Jerry. Wore it myself, more years back than I care to count, after my own longest night with it." He set a hand on Jerry's shoulder. "Whatever happened out here, I'd wager it's the difference between a man who's heard about grace and a man who's actually wrestled his way into receiving it firsthand. Different animal, once you've lived it rather than just studied it secondhand."

"Feels different," Jerry admitted. "Can't fully explain how. Just feels like I set something down out here that I've been white-knuckling since before I even understood I was gripping it."

"That's the whole of it, near as I can tell you," Wallace said, his smile carrying real warmth. "Come on. Let's get you some coffee before the morning devotional. I expect you've got quite a bit worth sharing with the rest of us before too much longer, whether you'd planned on it or not."

* * *

Marcus came to him three days later, in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon, his young face carrying the exact haunted, urgent look Jerry recognized immediately from his own mirror weeks earlier. "I don't know who else to tell," Marcus said, his voice tight with a fear he was visibly fighting to control. "Craving's bad, Sergeant. Real bad. I keep thinking about a fella I used to run with, how easy it'd be to just walk to the pay phone and call him."

Jerry set down the chair leg he'd been sanding and gave Marcus his full attention, understanding, in the moment, that he was being handed precisely the opportunity Noblit had once extended to him — the chance to be the steady presence rather than merely the man in crisis. "You did exactly right, coming to find somebody instead of walking to that pay phone alone. Sit down with me a minute. We'll get through this one together."

They sat in the woodshop's back corner for the better part of an hour, Jerry offering Marcus the same steady, unhurried presence Noblit had once offered him, praying with him in fragments, simply staying present through the worst of the craving's grip without trying to rush its passing. "Tell me what it feels like," Jerry said, echoing Noblit's own words back almost without realizing he was doing it. "Not to fix it. Just so it's not only living in your head."

"Feels like drowning," Marcus admitted, and Jerry felt a jolt of recognition at hearing his own exact description echoed back to him from a completely different man's mouth, evidence of how universal this particular fight truly was among men who had once been trained to believe no fight existed they couldn't win through sheer discipline alone.

"I know that feeling better than I wish I did," Jerry said. "It passes, Marcus. Doesn't feel like it will, sitting inside it. But it does. I've got the scars and the twenty lost years to prove it, if you need the evidence."

By the time the craving finally eased, the woodshop's afternoon light had shifted long and golden across the sawdust-covered floor, and Marcus looked at Jerry with an expression of raw, unguarded gratitude. "Thank you, Sergeant. Don't know that I'd have made it through that one alone."

"You didn't have to make it through alone. That's the whole lesson, same one Wallace and Noblit have been teaching me since I got here." Jerry gripped the younger man's shoulder briefly. "Come find me again, day or night, whenever it hits you this hard. That's what this place is for. That's what I'm for, far as I'm concerned, now that I've got some strength back in me worth offering somebody else."

Walking back to his cot that evening, Jerry understood, with a clarity that moved him more than he expected, that he had just experienced something he had not felt in longer than he could measure — the specific, steadying satisfaction of being genuinely useful to another human being's survival, not through discipline or gritted teeth but through the very submission and shared weakness he had spent

his whole life avoiding. Wallace's teaching had finally borne visible fruit, not merely in Jerry's own recovering body but in another broken soldier's worst afternoon, safely carried through to its other side.

* * *

He shared his testimony for the first time at the following Thursday's Bible study, Wallace inviting him, gently, to say whatever he felt ready to say, and Jerry found himself, for the first time in nearly two decades, speaking the whole shape of his story aloud to a room full of men who received it not with judgment but with the particular, recognizing nod of fellow soldiers hearing their own battle described in another man's words.

"I was a Green Beret," Jerry began, his voice steadying as he continued. "Earned a Distinguished Service Cross for dragging a wounded friend out of an ambush. Came home to a country that didn't much know what to do with what it had asked of me, and spent the next twenty years proving, one relapse at a time, that I didn't know what to do with it either. Lost my wife. Lost my children. Lost a job I was good at, a house I was proud of, my own medals, sold across a pawnshop counter to a man who understood better than I did what I was actually giving up. Ended up on a sidewalk outside this building, sick and alone, with nothing left to my name but a duffel bag and my old beret."

He paused, gathering himself, aware of every man in the circle listening with the full weight of their own attention. "I spent this whole time thinking the answer was just trying harder, gripping tighter, managing it all myself the way I'd once managed a squad under fire. Took Pastor Noblit finding me half-dead on his sidewalk, and Deacon Wallace teaching me about a man named Jacob who wrestled all night rather than let go, to finally understand that the real fight wasn't about gripping tighter. It was about surrendering — submitting, like it says in James — to a God who'd apparently been chasing me down this whole time, even through every year I spent running from Him."

The room was quiet a long moment after he finished, and then Wallace spoke, his voice carrying a quiet, unshowy pride. "That's the wrestling, gentlemen. That's exactly what it looks like, a man finally letting go of his own grip long enough to discover Whose grip had been holding him steady the whole while." He looked around the circle. "None of you are done wrestling yet, myself included, near thirty years into my own match. But I'll tell you this much, watching Jerry tonight — a man limping out of that river changed is still a man walking forward, blessed, into whatever comes next. That's the whole of the promise. Not victory without cost. Victory that includes the limp, and is worth every bit of it anyway."

Jerry sat back down amid the circle's quiet murmurs of recognition and encouragement, his mother's and father's letters folded in his shirt pocket alongside the beret he still carried everywhere, and understood, for the first time since that bitter October night on the sidewalk outside this very building, that he was no longer merely surviving his own war — he was, at long last, actually winning ground in it, one surrendered battle at a time.

Marcus was the first to speak once the room's quiet settled, his young voice carrying an emotion he did not attempt to hide. "That's near exactly what I've been feeling since Grenada, Sergeant, only I never had the words for it till just now, hearing you say it. Man built to solve problems with grit, suddenly needing something grit can't fix." He shook his head slowly. "Didn't figure anybody else would understand that particular kind of stuck. Glad to be wrong about that."

"None of us are half as alone in it as the pride convinces us we are," Wallace said, looking around the circle with evident affection for every man gathered there. "That's rather the whole reason this room exists, gentlemen — to prove that particular lie wrong, one honest testimony at a time." He closed his Bible gently. "Let's pray together before we close tonight. For Jerry, for Cooper wherever he's landed tonight, for Marcus and every man still early in his own wrestling match, and for whatever tomorrow asks of each one of us in this room."

The circle bowed its heads together, a dozen broken, healing men joined in a single shared prayer, and Jerry felt, praying alongside them, a fellowship considerably deeper than anything Teague's Wednesday group had managed to offer him two decades earlier — not because Teague's circle had failed him, but because Jerry himself had finally arrived ready, at long last, to receive what a circle like this one had always been capable of giving.

Walking back to his cot after the study concluded, Jerry found himself thinking of Teague, wondering whether the old Korea veteran was still alive somewhere, still running his own Wednesday circle in that small Baptist church classroom back in Coweta County, and resolved, in a small private decision that felt entirely of a piece with everything else this evening had stirred loose in him, to write and thank him too, once he'd found the words — one more overdue debt of gratitude, among the many he was only now beginning to fully recognize and repay.

He lay awake a while that night turning the whole arc of the evening over in his mind — Marcus's raw gratitude in the woodshop, Wallace's dawn recognition at the courtyard gate, the circle's quiet murmured amens as he'd finished his testimony — and understood, drifting finally toward sleep, that he had crossed some genuine threshold these past weeks, however much distance still remained ahead of him. He was not fixed. Wallace had warned him plainly that no man was, this side of glory. But he was, for the first time in two decades, no longer merely surviving. He was fighting, submitted rather than solitary, wrestling rather than managing, and winning ground, however slowly, in a war he had once believed entirely unwinnable.

He touched the beret on the small table beside his cot one last time before sleep finally claimed him, its faded green a quiet, constant witness to everything he had lost and everything, against every earlier expectation, he was slowly beginning to rebuild, and thought of Jacob rising at daybreak from that riverbank, limping toward a new name and a new life he could not have earned through strength alone — a fitting image, he thought, for a man who had finally stopped gripping and started, at long last, to be held.

CHAPTER 18

DIGGING UP VIETNAM

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

— 2 Corinthians 5:17

The front desk attendant found Jerry in the woodshop on a Thursday afternoon in his tenth week, wearing an expression of mild bewilderment that struck Jerry as odd even before the man had spoken a word. "Got a visitor asking for you, Gatchell. Big fella. Says he served with you."

Jerry set down the chair leg he'd been sanding, a small, cautious hope rising in him that he did not fully trust, and walked out to the mission's front lobby to find a heavyset, silver-haired man standing near the entrance, studying the small waiting area with the careful, assessing stillness of a man checking his surroundings out of old habit rather than genuine suspicion. The man turned at the sound of Jerry's footsteps, and for a long moment neither of them said anything at all, simply staring at each other across two decades of separation and every mile that separation had traveled.

"Bulldog." Jerry's voice came out rough, barely above a whisper. "Tom Mercer. Is that really you?"

"In the considerably heavier flesh." Mercer's grin split his weathered face, the same grin Jerry remembered from a jungle clearing a lifetime earlier, and he crossed the lobby in three long strides and pulled Jerry into an embrace that nearly lifted him off his feet. "Lord Almighty, Jerry. Boone finally tracked down your address through some VA correspondence chain and passed it along to me. Been trying to work up the nerve to actually show up for near a month now."

Jerry held onto his old friend a long moment, feeling the specific, overwhelming shock of encountering a piece of his own history he had genuinely believed might be permanently lost to him. "Twenty years, Bulldog. I never thought I'd see your face again this side of heaven, if I'm honest with you. Figured I'd burned through every bridge I ever built, including the ones that mattered most."

"Bridges built in a place like that valley don't burn quite as easy as you might think," Mercer said, pulling back to study Jerry's face with an expression that mixed relief and lingering concern in equal measure. "You look rough, brother. Rougher than I expected, even knowing some of what Boone hinted at in his letters."

"You should've seen me three months ago," Jerry said, managing a small, rueful smile. "This is the considerably improved version, believe it or not."

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They sat together in the courtyard garden for the better part of two hours that afternoon, Jerry's woodshop duties entirely forgotten, and Mercer filled in the shape of his own twenty years with a candor that surprised Jerry, given how little of it matched the easy, unshakeable confidence Jerry remembered from their time together in the valley.

"Wasn't all smooth sailing on my end either, if I'm honest with you," Mercer admitted, turning his coffee cup slowly in his big hands. "Spent the better part of a decade drinking harder than I ought to have, myself. Lost a marriage to it, same as you lost yours. Took me longer than I'm proud of to finally get my own house in order. Been sober six years now, attending my own version of what you're doing here, down in Alabama."

"I had no idea," Jerry said, genuinely stunned. "Your telegram, at my wedding — you sounded so steady. Promised me a fishing trip, once you were stateside."

"Meant every word of it, at the time. Didn't fully understand yet how long it'd actually take me to make good on it." Mercer's smile carried a rueful, hard-won honesty. "Guess that makes us both liars about our own steadiness, back in those early years. Difference is you finally found this place to help you sort it out. Took me a VFW post and a considerably more stubborn wife than either of us deserved before I found mine."

"What was your bottom?" Jerry asked, understanding the question carried a particular weight between two men who had both walked some version of this same road. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Woke up in a ditch outside Birmingham, car wrapped around a fence post I don't even remember hitting, blood alcohol high enough the officer who found me said I should've been dead twice over." Mercer's voice carried no self-pity, only the plain accounting of a man long past needing to dress up his own worst chapter. "Spent eight months in a program not unlike this one. Second wife stood by me through the whole of it, which is more grace than I had any right to expect, given how I'd already burned through the first marriage by then." He shook his head slowly. "Funny thing, thinking back on it now. I used to believe I was the steady one in our old squad, Jerry. Turns out we were all just carrying our own version of the same weight, some of us further along in dropping it than others."

"Wish we'd found each other sooner," Jerry said. "Might have saved us both some of the harder years, walking it together instead of each of us thinking we were the only one still fighting."

"Might have. Or might have just taken us both exactly this long regardless, and we're only finding each other now because now's when we were both finally ready to receive it." Mercer's eyes carried a

weathered wisdom. "I've stopped trying to second-guess the timing of grace, if I'm honest. Just grateful it arrived at all."

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It was near the end of that first afternoon, the light beginning to slant gold and long across the courtyard garden, that Mercer's expression shifted into something more careful, more deliberate, and Jerry understood, watching the change settle over his old friend's face, that whatever had actually brought Mercer to this particular door went considerably deeper than a simple, overdue reunion.

"There's something I've been carrying a long while, Jerry," Mercer said. "About Baxter. About that day at the river." He set his coffee cup down, his hands not quite steady. "I've started this conversation in my head a hundred times over the years, and never once worked up the nerve to actually have it. But watching you now, seeing what this place has done for you, I think you're finally ready to hear it. And I think I've carried it alone long enough."

Jerry felt something in his chest go very still, an old, familiar dread surfacing alongside a stranger, more hopeful curiosity. "Tell me."

"You've spent twenty years believing you got to him too late. Believing if you'd moved faster, reacted quicker, he might've made it." Mercer's voice carried a weight Jerry had never heard from him before, not even in the valley's worst moments. "I was closer to Baxter than you were, in those final seconds before you reached him. I saw the wound clear, before you ever got there. Jerry, that round hit him center mass. He was gone before he hit the ground, or near enough to it that no speed on God's earth would have changed the outcome. I never told you that plain, because you were already carrying command that day, and I didn't think you needed one more weight added to it in the moment. But I've watched you carry it as guilt for twenty years now, in every letter, every visit, and I think it's long past time you set that particular weight down for good."

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Jerry sat with the revelation a long while, the courtyard garden's evening shadows lengthening around them, feeling something in him crack open that he had not expected still capable of cracking — a grief and a relief arriving together, tangled so completely he could not immediately separate one from the other.

"I've carried that for twenty years," Jerry said finally, his voice thick. "Rewrote that moment in my head more times than I could count. Always wondering if there was some version where I moved a half-second faster, reached him a half-second sooner."

"There wasn't, Jerry. I need you to hear that plain, from somebody who was actually close enough to see it firsthand. Nothing you did or didn't do changed that outcome. Nothing could have." Mercer's eyes were wet now too, twenty years of his own silent guilt finally finding release alongside Jerry's. "I should have told you at the funeral. Should have told you in a letter, years ago. I let my own fear of reopening the wound keep me quiet longer than I had any right to stay quiet. I'm sorry for that, Jerry. Sorrier than I know how to properly say."

"You're telling me now," Jerry said, reaching for his old friend's hand with a gratitude too large for easy words. "That's what matters. I don't think either of us fully understood, back then, how long a single unspoken truth could go on doing damage, left to fester in silence all these years."

"There's more, if you can bear it tonight," Mercer said, his voice still unsteady. "Baxter talked about his mother, near the end, before you got to him. Wasn't scared, Jerry. I want you to know that plain. Whatever I told him in that last half minute, whatever comfort a dying man can actually take in, he went out believing his mother would be alright, believing his unit would carry on without him. Wasn't the horror you've probably imagined it as, all these years turning it over in your own mind. It was as gentle an end as that valley ever offered anybody, and you gave him the dignity of a commander

who came running the second he heard, even though there was nothing left by then for you to actually change."

Jerry pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, twenty years of imagined horror finally meeting the plainer, gentler truth Mercer had carried all this time. "I told his mother he wasn't scared. Told her that in her own kitchen, three weeks after I got home. Didn't know if I was telling her the truth or just the mercy she needed to hear."

"Sounds like you told her both, without even knowing it," Mercer said quietly. "Sometimes those turn out to be the same thing."

They sat together as the courtyard finally darkened fully around them, two old soldiers finally setting down a shared weight neither had ever fully named to the other, and Jerry thought of Wallace's teaching on submission, on the wrestling that led not to victory through gripping tighter but through finally releasing what had never been his to carry in the first place — a lesson, it turned out, that applied as precisely to twenty-year-old guilt as it did to any craving.

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He brought the whole of it to Wallace two days later, still turning Mercer's revelation over, uncertain how to fully integrate a truth that had reshaped so significant a portion of his own self-understanding almost overnight.

"Feels strange," Jerry admitted, sitting across from Wallace in the small office. "Like I don't quite know who I am without that particular guilt. Carried it so long it started to feel like part of my own skeleton."

Wallace nodded slowly, considering the observation with evident care. "That's not an unusual feeling, Jerry, and it's worth taking seriously rather than dismissing. A man can build an entire identity around his own guilt, even guilt that was never rightfully his, simply because it's familiar and the alternative feels unfamiliar and disorienting." He opened his Bible to a passage he'd clearly had in mind before Jerry had even finished speaking. "Paul writes to the Corinthians, therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here. I want you to sit with that verse specifically this week, Jerry. Not as an abstract theological claim, but as a description of exactly what you're navigating right now. The old guilt, even the false guilt you've been carrying twenty years, has gone. What replaces it isn't a void. It's a new creation, a new identity, one you're only just beginning to discover the shape of."

"Feels like learning to walk on a leg that's been in a cast for two decades," Jerry said.

"That's about as apt a description as I've heard," Wallace said, with a small, warm smile. "Give it time. New legs need practice too, same as new creations do."

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Marcus met Mercer over supper that same week, and the two men fell into an easy rapport that pleased Jerry more than he expected, watching his old war brother and his new one find common ground across a twenty-year gap in their respective service.

"Sergeant Gatchell talks about you sometimes," Marcus told Mercer, working through a plate of the kitchen's stew with evident interest. "Says you're the reason he made it out of some ambush or another. Never gives me the full story, though."

"Man's always been modest about his own part in it," Mercer said, glancing at Jerry with an affectionate smile. "Truth is we saved each other plenty of times over those months, Marcus. That's mostly how it works, in a unit worth its salt. Nobody makes it out on their own steam alone, whatever the medals might suggest to folks who weren't there."

"That sounds familiar," Marcus said, with a small, knowing look toward Jerry. "Sergeant's been telling me something real similar about this place, these past weeks."

"Man's finally starting to believe his own advice, from what I can see," Mercer said, and the three of them shared a moment of easy, warm laughter that Jerry received with a gratitude he did not fully have words for — evidence, small but real, of an entire new family assembling itself around him from the unlikeliest of pieces, old war brothers and young ones alike.

* * *

Mercer stayed on at the mission through the following week, taking a room in the guest quarters Noblit kept for exactly this kind of extended reunion, and the two men spent their evenings together in a companionable ease that Jerry had not experienced with anyone since Boyd's mentorship, decades earlier — old soldiers relearning how to simply be present with each other, unburdened now of the single heaviest secret that had stood between them.

"You ever hear from any of the others?" Jerry asked one evening, the two of them sitting on the mission's front steps in the cooling evening air. "Y'Blul, or any of the strike force fellas?"

"Lost track of Y'Blul after the fall, same as most everybody did. Heard secondhand, years back, that he made it out through Thailand, but I've never managed to confirm it properly." Mercer's expression carried the particular sorrow of a man who had lost more than comrades, that April in seventy-five — an entire country's worth of allies, scattered or worse. "I think about him often, Jerry. Wonder if that psalm he taught you ever made it all the way through whatever he had to survive to get out."

"I think about him too," Jerry admitted. "Wonder the same thing, most Sundays when I say that psalm myself."

They sat in a companionable silence a while longer, and it was during that silence, Mercer glancing casually toward the street outside the mission's gate, that his expression suddenly sharpened into something considerably more alert. "Jerry. That fella across the street. He been watching this place before, that you know of?"

* * *

Jerry followed Mercer's gaze to a lean, watchful figure standing beneath a streetlight on the opposite corner, and felt a cold recognition move through him even before the man's face resolved clearly in the dim light — Ray Dawson, considerably more gaunt and hollow-eyed than Jerry remembered from their last encounter in an Atlanta flophouse, but unmistakably, chillingly the same man.

"I know him," Jerry said quietly, his pulse suddenly hammering. "From before. He's the one who first got me onto the needle."

Dawson did not approach, simply stood watching a long moment longer, his gaze fixed unmistakably on Jerry across the darkening street, before turning and disappearing into the evening without a word, and Jerry sat frozen on the mission steps a long while afterward, understanding, with a dread that settled deep into his stomach, that his past had just found the exact door he had been hoping it would never manage to locate.

"You want to tell me what that was about?" Mercer asked, his voice carrying the same protective steadiness Jerry remembered from a dozen tense moments in the valley two decades earlier.

* * *

The full shape of it came out over the following days, in careful pieces Jerry shared first with Noblit and then, at Noblit's gentle urging, with a detective named Ellison who had approached the mission some weeks earlier, working a federal task force investigating a heroin trafficking network that had operated across several Southern cities for the better part of a decade — a network Jerry recognized, with a sick jolt of recognition, as the very supply chain Ray Dawson had once used to

introduce him and dozens of other broken men to the addiction that had cost Jerry nearly everything he possessed.

"We've built a case against several of the network's mid-level operators," Ellison explained, sitting across from Jerry in Noblit's small office, "but we need firsthand testimony from men who can speak to how the operation actually recruited and supplied its customers. Your history with Dawson specifically, the timeline of your own addiction, the location of that flophouse above the feed store — all of it could matter considerably to building a case that actually holds up in court."

"What happens if I testify?" Jerry asked, understanding even as he asked it that the question carried weight beyond its simple factual answer.

"Some risk, I won't lie to you about that. Dawson's associates aren't gentle men, and testimony like yours could expose you to exactly the kind of intimidation you may have just witnessed outside this building." Ellison's voice carried a plain, professional honesty. "But I'll also tell you this — testimony like yours could help take an operation off the street that's currently supplying dozens of other men exactly the kind of poison it supplied you. Might spare some other family the twenty years you and yours just lived through."

"How many other men have you gotten to testify?" Jerry asked, curious whether his own hesitation put him in rare company or common.

"Fewer than we'd like. Understandably so." Ellison's expression carried genuine sympathy alongside his professional determination. "Most men who've survived what you survived want nothing more than to put the whole chapter behind them permanently. Can't fault a single one of them for that instinct. Takes a particular kind of courage to instead walk back toward it deliberately, in service of men you'll likely never even meet." He met Jerry's eyes directly. "I'm not going to pressure you, Jerry. This has to be your own choice, made with clear eyes about what it might cost. But I wanted you to understand exactly what's at stake on both sides of the decision before you make it."

Jerry sat with the weight of it a long while after Ellison had gone, understanding that Noblit and Wallace were both watching him with the same patient, unhurried presence they brought to every hard decision at the mission, offering no pressure of their own, only steady company while he found his own way toward an answer.

* * *

Jerry brought the decision to Noblit and Wallace that same evening, turning the considerable risk over with a gravity that felt, in its own way, as demanding as anything he'd faced in the valley two decades earlier.

"I keep thinking about Marcus," Jerry admitted, sitting with the two men in the small office long after the mission's other residents had settled for the night. "About every other young man who's going to walk through that gate someday, carrying the exact same wound Dawson's network specializes in exploiting. If I've got the chance to help shut that operation down, and I don't take it out of fear for my own safety, what does that say about everything I've supposedly learned here these past weeks?"

"It says you're human, and fear's a reasonable response to a genuine threat," Noblit said gently. "Nobody in this room is going to think less of you if you decide the risk is more than you can safely carry right now, Jerry. That's a legitimate consideration, not a failure of faith."

"But it's not the only consideration," Wallace added, his voice carrying its own careful weight. "The old Jerry, the man who walked into this mission on a stretcher ten weeks ago, might have made this decision out of guilt, or out of some misguided need to punish himself for his own addiction by taking on unnecessary risk. That man's gone, Jerry, same as Paul describes. The new creation makes this decision from an entirely different place, if he makes it at all — not from guilt, but from love. Love for Marcus. Love for whatever young soldier walks through that gate five years from now, carrying a war none of us have even fought yet."

* * *

Jerry sat with both counsels a long while, understanding that neither man was pushing him toward a particular answer, only helping him locate the honest ground beneath his own competing fears and convictions, and it was near midnight, alone in his cot afterward, that he finally settled the question in a prayer considerably steadier than the desperate, fragmented prayers of his earliest weeks at the mission.

Lord, I don't know if I'm brave enough for this. I know what Dawson's capable of. I've seen what that world does to men who cross it. But I keep thinking about every man still out there right now, caught the way I was caught, and I don't think I can call myself a new creation and then let fear talk me into staying silent about the very poison that nearly killed me. Give me the courage Mercer showed, finally telling me the truth about Baxter after twenty years of carrying it alone. Give me the courage to do the hard, right thing now, instead of the safe thing.

He called Detective Ellison the following morning and agreed to testify.

* * *

Dawson's next approach came three days later, considerably more direct than the silent, watching figure across the street, and considerably more frightening for its directness. Jerry was walking back from the corner grocery, a small errand Wallace had sent him on, when a car pulled alongside him and Dawson's voice called out from the passenger window, low and unmistakably threatening.

"Heard you've been talking to some folks about old business, Gatchell." Dawson's eyes carried none of the flophouse camaraderie Jerry remembered from their earliest encounters, only a flat, calculating menace. "I'd think real careful about that, if I were you. Man's got a mother, a father, even some children out there somewhere, near as I recall you mentioning once. Be a shame if old business started reaching out and touching people who never asked to be part of it."

The threat landed with a specific, cold horror that Jerry had not experienced even in combat — the particular terror of a danger aimed not at himself but at the people he loved most, people who had already suffered so much on account of his own twenty lost years. "Don't you touch my family," Jerry said, his voice steadier than he expected, some old command instinct rising to meet the moment even through his fear.

"Wasn't planning to, long as you make the smart choice here." Dawson's smile carried no warmth at all. "Think it over, Gatchell. You've got some time yet before that trial date."

"You know what I keep thinking about, Dawson?" Jerry said, surprising himself with the steadiness of his own voice, some new and unfamiliar courage rising up from a place he did not fully recognize as his own strength. "I keep thinking about how many other men just like me you've walked into that same flophouse over the years. How many other families you've quietly threatened, keeping them scared and silent while you kept right on operating. I spent twenty years being exactly the kind of scared and silent you're counting on right now. I'm not that man anymore."

Something flickered behind Dawson's flat eyes, a brief, genuine surprise at the resistance in Jerry's voice. "Careful, Gatchell. Brave talk's cheap. We'll see how brave you're still feeling once the trial date actually arrives."

The car pulled away before Jerry could respond further, and he stood alone on the sidewalk a long moment afterward, his hands finally beginning to shake now that the immediate confrontation had passed, understanding that he had just done something the old Jerry, the frightened and isolated man he'd been for two decades, would never have found the nerve to attempt.

* * *

He reported the threat to Ellison and Noblit within the hour, shaking but resolved, and the response that followed carried a swiftness and a solidarity that Jerry received with a gratitude he had not fully

anticipated needing — Ellison arranging for a patrol car to increase its presence near the mission, Noblit and Wallace both insisting Jerry not walk anywhere alone until the trial date had passed, and Mercer, upon hearing the full account, simply setting his jaw with the particular grim determination Jerry remembered from a dozen tense moments in the valley and announcing, without room for argument, that he was staying at the mission until this whole business was settled.

Ellison arrived within the hour to take Jerry's formal statement, his expression carrying a controlled anger that suggested this was not the first such threat he'd encountered in building the case. "This actually strengthens things, from a legal standpoint, much as I hate saying it that plainly," Ellison said, reviewing his notes. "Witness intimidation carries its own weight with a jury, once we can establish it happened. Dawson may have just made our case stronger by trying to make you afraid enough to weaken it."

"Doesn't make me feel any less afraid in the meantime," Jerry admitted.

"No, I don't imagine it does," Ellison said, with genuine sympathy. "But you're not facing that fear with nothing behind you, Jerry. You've got a detective, a federal prosecutor's office, and by the sound of it, a considerable circle of people at this mission who aren't about to let anything happen to you. That's a different position than the one Dawson's counting on you occupying."

"Wasn't planning on leaving my brother to face this kind of threat alone," Mercer said, when Jerry protested that he'd already imposed on enough of Mercer's time. "Didn't leave you alone in that valley. Don't intend to start now, twenty years on, over something considerably less dangerous than an ambush, whatever Dawson wants you to believe about the odds."

Jerry felt something in his chest ease at the declaration, a fresh and steadying reminder of exactly how far he had traveled from the isolated, self-reliant man who had once tried to survive every hardship entirely on his own strength — a man who would have, in his old life, told Mercer to go home, told Noblit and Wallace he could handle Dawson's threat privately, told himself that asking for this much protection amounted to an unacceptable weakness. The new creation, he was beginning to understand, did not merely tolerate this kind of community. It actively required it, and was, against every old instinct, considerably stronger for the requiring.

* * *

He wrote to Everett and Ruth that same week, choosing honesty over the old instinct to shield them from difficult news, describing both Mercer's revelation about Baxter and the considerably more frightening matter of Dawson's threat, and his father's response arrived within days, carrying a fierce, protective love that moved Jerry more than he expected.

I'm driving up there myself if you need me to, Everett had written, his usual economy of words abandoned entirely in the face of his son's danger. Don't you dare try to carry this one alone, Jerry, the way you've tried to carry so much else alone these past twenty years. You've got a whole family behind you now, however long the silence stretched before you finally let us back in. Use us. That's what family's for.

Jerry read the letter with tears he no longer felt any need to hide, even from himself, and understood, holding his father's fierce and unhesitating support in his own hands, that the new creation Wallace kept describing was not merely a private, internal transformation but something considerably larger — a whole restored network of people, family and mission and old war brothers alike, all of them now standing between Jerry and whatever darkness still tried to reach him from his old, discarded life.

He wrote back that same evening, gently declining Everett's offer to drive up immediately, reassured by Ellison's protective measures and Mercer's steady presence, but asking instead for something he understood, even as he wrote it, marked its own small but significant milestone in his recovery. Pray for me, Daddy, he wrote. Not just for safety, though I'll gladly take that too. Pray that I

do this the right way — not out of fear, and not out of some need to prove myself brave, but simply because it's the right thing for a man in my position to do. I think that's the difference between the man I used to be and whatever I'm becoming now. The old Jerry would have needed to prove something. This one just wants to do right by the men who'll walk through this mission's gate after I'm gone from it.

Everett's reply arrived by return post, shorter than usual but carrying its own quiet weight. Already praying, son. Have been since your first letter. Proud of the man asking that particular question, more than I know how to say plain. Your Daddy.

* * *

The trial date approached with a tension that settled over the mission's small community like weather, and Jerry found himself, in the final days before his scheduled testimony, returning often to Wallace's verse from Corinthians, turning it over with a steadiness that surprised him given the genuine danger still surrounding him.

"I keep thinking about what it actually means, being a new creation," Jerry told Wallace, the two of them sitting in the courtyard garden on the evening before Jerry's scheduled court date. "Dawson's counting on the old Jerry still being in here somewhere — the frightened, isolated man who'd rather protect himself than risk anything for somebody else's sake. But that man really is gone, isn't he? Not perfectly. Not without fear. But gone, in the way that actually matters." He thought of the man who had once poured out a single bottle and believed the battle won, only to relapse nine days later, and understood the difference now between that fragile, self-willed resolve and whatever steadier foundation he was standing on tonight.

"That's precisely it, Jerry." Wallace's voice carried a quiet, settled pride. "The new creation doesn't mean the absence of fear. Even Christ Himself sweated blood in that garden, facing what was coming. The new creation means facing the fear from an entirely different foundation than the old self could ever manage — not alone, not by gripping tighter, but surrendered, submitted, surrounded by exactly the kind of community you've spent twenty years without. You're not walking into that courtroom tomorrow as the same man who walked into this mission ten weeks ago. Whatever Dawson's expecting to find, I don't believe it's what he's actually going to get."

Jerry sat with that a long while, the courtyard's evening settling gold and quiet around him, Mercer's steady presence nearby, his parents' letter folded against his chest, the beret still carried faithfully in his jacket pocket, and understood, facing down the last dangerous echo of his old, discarded life, that he was ready — not because the old fear had vanished entirely, but because the old, isolated man who had once faced every battle alone had, at long last, truly and finally gone.

* * *

Wallace walked him through his own testimony that same night, not the legal specifics Ellison had already covered thoroughly, but the deeper fear Jerry had not yet fully named aloud even to himself. "What's the part you're actually most afraid of, Jerry? Not Dawson's threat. Something underneath that."

Jerry considered the question honestly, turning it over until the truer fear finally surfaced. "Afraid of standing up in that courtroom and having it all sound like an excuse. Like I'm just a weak man blaming somebody else for choices I made myself. Twenty years of losses, and some part of me still isn't sure how much of it was really Dawson's doing and how much was just my own failure."

"That's an honest fear, and I won't pretend it doesn't have a grain of truth worth sitting with," Wallace said. "You did make choices, Jerry. Nobody's asking you to pretend otherwise tomorrow. But there's a considerable difference between a man acknowledging his own choices and a man taking on responsibility that rightly belongs to somebody else entirely. Dawson built a business on exploiting

men exactly like you were, in exactly the condition you were in. Both things are true at once — your choices, and his exploitation of your wounds. Tell the truth about both tomorrow, plainly, same as you told the truth about Baxter with Mercer. That's all any of us can ask of you."

Jerry nodded slowly, the fear not fully dissolved but considerably more manageable for having been named aloud and examined honestly rather than left to fester in the dark. "Thank you, Henry. For all of it. Not just tonight."

"Wasn't my doing, mostly," Wallace said, with a small, warm smile. "I just opened the door a crack. You're the one who's done the walking through it, these past ten weeks. Don't forget that part tomorrow, whatever nerves try to convince you otherwise."

* * *

The federal courthouse in downtown Atlanta carried a hushed, formal gravity that reminded Jerry, walking through its metal detectors with Mercer and Noblit flanking him on either side, of a considerably different kind of gravity he had once known in briefing rooms before a combat operation — the same tightening focus, the same awareness that the coming hours would matter in ways too large to fully calculate in advance.

He took the stand a little past ten that morning, Dawson seated at the defense table with two other men Jerry recognized dimly from the network's lower rungs, and felt his pulse hammering as the prosecutor began her questions, walking him carefully through the timeline of his own addiction — the painkillers, Doc Fetch's declined prescription, the Rusty Anchor, and finally Dawson himself, sliding into a booth with an easy, predatory confidence twenty years earlier and offering Jerry a relief that had very nearly cost him everything.

"Mr. Gatchell, can you describe for the court what happened the first time you used heroin supplied through Mr. Dawson's network?" the prosecutor asked.

Jerry answered plainly, without embellishment, describing the back room above the defunct feed store, the totality of the relief it had offered, and the two decades of devastation that had followed — the marriage lost, the children estranged, the job forfeited, the medals sold across a pawnshop counter, the near-fatal overdose in a flophouse not unlike the first — and felt, delivering the testimony, a strange and unexpected steadiness settle over him, the same steadiness Wallace had promised would arrive once he stopped facing the fear entirely alone.

* * *

The defense attorney's cross-examination pressed hard on Jerry's own culpability, on his years of addiction, on whether a man with so extensive a history of drug use could be considered a reliable witness at all, and Jerry met each question with an honesty that seemed, by the visible frustration crossing the attorney's face, to be considerably more disarming than outright defensiveness would have been.

"Mr. Gatchell, isn't it true you sold your own war medals to fund your addiction?" the attorney asked, clearly hoping the admission would undercut Jerry's credibility in the jury's eyes.

"It is," Jerry answered plainly, without flinching. "Distinguished Service Cross, Purple Heart, and several campaign ribbons besides, across a pawnshop counter in Atlanta, for considerably less than they were worth to anybody who understood what they represented. I'm not proud of that moment. I carry it same as I carry every other loss those years cost me." He met the attorney's eyes steadily. "But I'd ask the court to consider what kind of desperation drives a decorated combat veteran to sell the very medals that once defined his sense of honor. That desperation didn't arrive in me naturally. It arrived through a needle your client's organization was only too glad to keep supplying, for however long my money held out."

"So you admit, Mr. Gatchell, that you were a willing customer of my client's operation for a considerable period," the attorney pressed. "That nobody forced you to return, visit after visit."

"Nobody held a gun to my head, if that's what you're asking," Jerry said steadily. "I was a broken man looking for relief from a war that never fully let me go, and your client's operation was built, quite deliberately, to exploit exactly that kind of brokenness. I'm not here to claim I bear no responsibility for my own choices. I made plenty of bad ones, over plenty of years. I'm here because I finally understand the difference between a man who fell into a trap and the men who built the trap and kept it baited, year after year, for whatever profit they could extract from broken men like me."

The courtroom held a brief, charged silence following the answer, and Jerry caught, from the corner of his eye, Mercer's small, proud nod from the gallery — the same steady presence that had once carried him out of a burning ambush now simply watching, unable to intervene directly but present all the same, exactly as he had promised.

The prosecutor rose for a brief redirect, her voice gentle but deliberate. "Mr. Gatchell, in your own words, why did you choose to testify today, knowing the risks involved?"

Jerry considered the question a long moment, aware of Dawson's flat, unreadable stare from the defense table, aware of Mercer and Noblit watching from the gallery, aware, most of all, of every man still out there somewhere, caught the way he had once been caught. "Because I spent twenty years believing I had nothing left worth offering anybody," he said finally. "This mission, and the men in it, taught me otherwise. If my testimony today keeps even one more man from losing what I lost, then everything it's cost me to sit in this chair is worth it several times over. I'm not the same man Mr. Dawson once found easy to exploit. I'd like to think that matters for something, here in this room, today."

The judge allowed the answer to stand without objection, and Jerry stepped down from the witness stand a few minutes later with his legs unsteady but his conscience settled, understanding that whatever the trial's ultimate outcome, he had already accomplished the harder part simply by walking through the courthouse doors that morning.

* * *

The trial concluded three days later with convictions on the network's principal operators, Dawson among them, and Jerry received the news from Detective Ellison with a relief considerably quieter than he had expected — not triumph, exactly, but a settled, grateful peace that the operation's particular poison would not be reaching any more broken men through that same particular channel.

"Wanted you to hear it from me directly," Ellison said, shaking Jerry's hand outside the mission's front gate. "Your testimony mattered, Jerry. Made a real difference in how the jury weighed the whole case. I know it cost you something, walking into that courtroom. Wanted you to know it was worth the cost."

Jerry accepted the news standing beside Mercer and Wallace, his parents' letters still folded in his jacket pocket alongside the beret, and understood, watching Ellison's car pull away from the mission's gate, that he had just completed something considerably larger than a single legal proceeding — a full and public reckoning with the very darkness that had once nearly consumed him, faced this time not alone but surrounded, at every turn, by exactly the kind of community his old, isolated self had spent twenty years too proud to accept.

* * *

Doc Willis found him in the woodshop that same afternoon, ostensibly to check the healing scar along Jerry's forearm from an old infection scare earlier in his stay, though Jerry suspected the visit carried a second, unspoken purpose the moment the older man settled onto the stool beside the workbench with no particular hurry to leave.

"Heard about the verdict," Doc Willis said, turning Jerry's arm gently to inspect the scar. "Heard about the whole business, actually, near enough. Man doesn't stay quiet about a thing like that around here, whatever your own instincts might prefer."

"Wasn't trying to keep it quiet, exactly," Jerry said. "Just wasn't sure how to talk about it without it sounding like I was fishing for praise I didn't rightly earn."

"Didn't take you for that kind of man, Gatchell, praise-fishing." Doc Willis released his arm, satisfied with the healing, and sat back with the unhurried patience of a man who had spent forty years learning to let silence do half his talking for him. "Pulse looks steady. Color's good. Better than I've seen you look in all your ten weeks here, if I'm honest, and that's saying something considering you just walked out of a federal courthouse with a man like Dawson glaring daggers at you the whole while."

"Feels steadier than it has in a long while," Jerry admitted. "Strange thing to say, given the week I've had."

"Not strange at all, in my experience." Doc Willis packed his small bag with the same unhurried care he brought to everything. "Fear and steadiness aren't opposites, whatever a man might assume before he's tested the proposition himself. Sometimes the steadiest a man ever stands is precisely the moment he finally stops running from the thing he's most afraid of." He paused at the woodshop door, glancing back. "Wallace tells me you've got Marcus asking after you every hour today, wanting to know how it went. Might ease the boy's mind some, you going and finding him before supper."

Jerry found Marcus exactly where he expected, sanding a chair leg with considerably more attention than the task strictly required, a nervous energy in his hands that eased visibly the moment he spotted Jerry crossing the courtyard.

"Heard it went alright," Marcus said, setting down his sandpaper. "Wallace wouldn't tell me much. Said it was yours to share, not his."

"Went about as well as it could have," Jerry said, settling onto the bench beside him. "Scared near to death the whole while, if I'm honest with you. But it's done now. Dawson's not walking free to trouble anybody else, not for a considerable while."

Marcus nodded slowly, turning the chair leg over in his hands. "Guess that's the part I keep circling back to, Sergeant. Wondering if I'll ever have that kind of nerve myself, when my own hard day finally comes."

"You've got more of it than you credit yourself for already," Jerry said. "Same nerve that gets a man through one more day sober gets him through a courtroom, eventually, if it ever comes to that. It's the same muscle, Marcus. Just exercised different."

* * *

Mercer stayed through the weekend following the verdict, and the two men spent one final evening together on the mission's front steps, the particular ease of old, restored friendship settling comfortably between them now that the trial's tension had finally lifted.

"You heading back to Alabama tomorrow?" Jerry asked.

"Reckon so. Missing my wife something fierce, and I expect the fishing trip I promised you back at your wedding is about twenty years overdue at this point." Mercer's grin carried its old, familiar warmth. "Once you're through this program proper, Jerry, I want you out at my place for a week. Lake's stocked with more bass than a man rightly deserves. We'll make good on that old telegram at long last."

"I'd like that more than I know how to say," Jerry said, feeling the promise land with a hope he no longer needed to guard against. "Feels strange, having something simple to look forward to. A fishing trip, of all things, after everything the past few weeks have held."

"Simple things matter more than we tend to credit them, once the harder chapters finally ease up some," Mercer said. "You've earned a little simple, Jerry. Don't let yourself feel guilty about receiving it, whenever it finally arrives."

They sat together a while longer in the cooling evening air, two old soldiers who had finally, after twenty years of separate silent wars, found their way back to something resembling the easy brotherhood they'd once shared in a jungle clearing a lifetime ago, and Jerry understood, watching the stars emerge slowly over the mission's courtyard, that Mercer's long-buried truth about Baxter had done more than simply lift an old guilt. It had proven, in the plainest possible terms, that the past did not have to remain buried to be survived — that digging it up, honestly and together, could heal considerably more than it ever threatened to reopen.

CHAPTER 19

THE ROAD BACK TO FAMILY

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

— *Ephesians 4:32*

Everett's answer to the postscript question came nearly three weeks later, arriving on a Tuesday morning while Jerry was still elbow-deep in sawdust in the woodshop, and Wallace himself carried the envelope out to him rather than leaving it in the mail cubby, understanding, without needing to be told, that this particular letter deserved to be delivered in person rather than discovered cold among the ordinary correspondence.

"Thought you'd want this one now, not at supper," Wallace said simply, holding it out.

Jerry recognized his father's handwriting immediately and felt his hands go unsteady before he'd even broken the seal, twenty years of accumulated fear and hope crowding into the same narrow space in his chest. He sat down heavily on the woodshop's back step, the letter trembling slightly in his grip, and made himself read it slowly, the way Wallace had taught him to receive hard news — a little at a time, with room to breathe between each piece of it.

Son, Everett had written, you asked after Sarah and the children, and I've put off answering longer than I should have, mostly out of not knowing how to say some of it plain without it landing on you all at once. I'll try to lay it out simple and let you carry it at whatever pace you need.

Sarah never remarried. She's been teaching third grade at the elementary school in Newnan going on twelve years now, still lives close by, still comes to see your mother now and again, though the two of them don't speak of you often, out of a kind of tenderness toward each other more than any bitterness. Michael is twenty years old, working over at the county extension office, and from what your mother hears he's a steady, hardworking young man, quiet the way you were quiet at that age. Emily's nineteen, finishing up her first year of nursing school in Atlanta, of all places, which your mother says isn't but forty minutes from that mission of yours, though I don't know if either of you has ever thought to wonder how close that particular distance actually is.

None of them know I'm writing you this letter, Jerry. I want to be honest with you about that before you get your hopes built up too high. I don't know what any of the three of them would say if you tried to reach them. Sarah's forgiven a great many things in her life, your mother tells me, but forgiveness and readiness aren't always the same creature, and I won't pretend to know which one she's carrying toward you these days, or whether she's carrying either at all. Michael and Emily, I know even less about, since they were young enough when you left that whatever they remember of you is mostly secondhand, filtered through years of a silence you're the only one who can properly explain to them.

I'm not telling you this to talk you into anything, son, and I'm not telling you to talk you out of it either. You asked, and I think a man deserves the truth once he's finally strong enough to receive it, however that truth eventually lands. Whatever you decide to do with it, your mother and I are behind you either way. Your Daddy.

Jerry sat with the letter a long while after finishing it, the woodshop's ordinary afternoon sounds continuing around him — a table saw somewhere inside, Marcus's low laugh, a truck idling out at the loading gate — while he turned the news over piece by piece, the way Wallace had taught him. Sarah, unmarried, twelve years teaching third grade less than an hour from where he now sat. Michael, twenty and steady and quiet, working some ordinary job Jerry had never once imagined for him in all his years of picturing his son from a distance. Emily, a stranger entirely, a nineteen-year-old young woman training to become a nurse, who had been not quite two years old the last time Jerry had held her, and who likely carried no memory of him at all beyond whatever secondhand account Sarah had eventually offered her.

* * *

He brought the letter to Wallace that same evening, the two of them sitting in the small office long after most of the mission had settled for the night, and Jerry read it aloud a second time, his voice steadier now than it had been on the woodshop steps.

"What do you want to do with it?" Wallace asked, once Jerry had finished.

"I want to see them," Jerry said, and heard, in his own voice, a certainty that surprised him with its plainness. "I've wanted to see them every single day for twenty years, Henry. I just never let myself believe it was a door that might actually still be standing."

"It may be standing and still be locked, Jerry. I want you to hold that possibility alongside the hope, not instead of it." Wallace's voice carried its usual careful weight. "Your father's right to caution you. Sarah teaching third grade twelve years and never remarrying tells you she built a whole life without you in it, a good and steady one by the sound of it. That's not necessarily an invitation. It might just as easily be a wall she's built with considerable care, brick by brick, precisely because she needed one."

"I know that," Jerry said. "I'm not expecting her to fall into my arms, Henry. I gave up any right to that kind of welcome a long time ago." He turned the letter over in his hands. "But Paul tells the Ephesians to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave them. I've spent ten weeks in this place learning to receive that kind of forgiveness for myself, from Him, from my own parents, even some measure of it from Mercer over that business with Baxter. I think I owe it to Sarah, and to Michael and Emily, to at least give them the chance to decide for themselves whether they've got any of that kind of forgiveness left in them for me. Even if the answer's no. Especially if the answer's no, honestly, because then at least they'll have heard the apology out loud instead of having to go on wondering if I ever meant to offer one."

Wallace considered this a long moment, something like quiet pride moving behind his eyes. "That's a different reason for reaching out than the one that would've driven the old Jerry, I think. The old Jerry might have reached out needing them to forgive him, needing the relief of it for his own sake. What I'm hearing tonight sounds more like a man reaching out because it's the right thing to offer, regardless of what he receives back. That's a considerable distinction, Jerry, and not one you'd have been capable of ten weeks ago."

"Doesn't mean I'm not scared," Jerry admitted.

"Wouldn't trust you nearly as much if you weren't," Wallace said, with a small smile. "Courage isn't the absence of fear, same as we've said before. It's doing the right thing anyway."

"What if I reach out and the answer's silence?" Jerry asked, giving voice to the fear that had been circling beneath the surface of the whole conversation. "What if I write to Sarah and never hear

anything back at all? I don't know that I could bear that particular silence a second time, Henry. I spent twenty years drowning in one silence already."

"Then you'll grieve it, same as you'd grieve any real loss, and you'll bring that grief here, to this office, or to the Lord in that courtyard, instead of to a needle or a bottle," Wallace said, his voice gentle but unflinching. "I won't promise you a happy ending, Jerry, because I don't know that one's coming, and I'd be doing you a disservice pretending otherwise. What I can promise you is that you won't have to carry whatever answer comes back alone, the way you carried everything alone for twenty years. That's the whole difference this mission's tried to teach you. Not that the outcomes get guaranteed. Just that you stop facing them by yourself in the dark."

Jerry nodded slowly, turning that over. "I think I needed to hear you say it might not work. Everybody's been so encouraging about it, these past few days, that I'd started building something a little too shiny in my own head. Guilty of exactly what you warned me about with Sarah's first letter, probably, getting my hopes stacked higher than the situation's actually earned yet."

"Hope and shiny expectation aren't always the same thing, Jerry, though they can wear each other's clothes if a man's not careful," Wallace said. "Hope says I'm going to reach out because it's right, and I'll trust God with whatever comes of it. Shiny expectation says I'm going to reach out because I've already decided how the story ends, and I'll be devastated if reality doesn't cooperate. Aim for the first kind. It'll serve you considerably better, whichever way Sarah's answer actually lands."

* * *

He wrote to Sarah first, understanding instinctively, without needing Wallace's counsel to confirm it, that whatever door existed toward his children ran necessarily through her, both as a matter of practical courtesy and as a matter of simple respect for everything she had carried alone across the intervening years.

He labored over the letter three full evenings before he judged it ready to send, tearing up two earlier drafts that had, on rereading, sounded too much like pleading, too much like a man angling for something rather than a man simply telling the truth and letting the truth stand on its own.

Dear Sarah, he finally wrote, I don't know if this letter finds you glad to hear from me or dreading it, and I want to say plainly that either reaction would be entirely fair, given everything I put you and the children through. I'm not writing to ask anything of you. I'm writing because I've spent the last ten weeks at a place called New Hope Rescue Mission in Atlanta, getting sober, really sober, for the first time since before I lost you, and somewhere in the middle of that work I understood that I owed you an apology far overdue, whether or not you're in any place to receive it.

I'm sorry, Sarah. Not the kind of sorry I used to offer you, the kind that came wrapped around a promise I already suspected I couldn't keep. Just sorry, plain and unconditional, for the fear I put in Michael's eyes on your parents' porch, for the house I let go to the bank, for every visit I showed up to in worse shape than the one before, for choosing a needle over the two of you more times than I can bear to count now that I'm finally clear-eyed enough to count them. You deserved a husband who showed up whole. I gave you a man who kept promising to and never quite managed it, until I'd managed instead to lose you both.

I don't expect forgiveness, Sarah, and I want to be honest that I'm not writing to request a visit, not yet, not unless you'd want one. I mostly just needed you to know that I'm alive, that I'm finally doing the work I should have done twenty years ago, and that whatever you decide to do with this letter — answer it, or set it aside, or burn it — I'll understand and I won't write again uninvited. You gave me more chances than I deserved, back when giving them still cost you something real. I'm not asking for another one. I'm just telling you the truth of where I've landed, because I think, after everything, you're owed at least that much plain honesty from me. Jerry.

* * *

Her reply arrived nine days later, and Jerry carried the envelope to the courtyard garden before opening it, needing, he found, the particular steadiness that space had come to represent for him across these ten weeks — the same bench where he had wrestled Wallace's teaching on submission, the same worn grass where he had prayed the honest, unresolved prayers of his earliest recovery.

Jerry, Sarah had written, in the same careful, familiar handwriting he remembered from a hundred old letters, your letter caught me by surprise, though I suppose I should say your father's called twice over the years to let me know you were still living, so it wasn't a complete shock the way it might have been otherwise.

I won't pretend the last twenty years haven't been hard, or that I haven't spent a good many of them angry at you in ways I'm not entirely proud of. But I want you to know something else too, Jerry, something I've come to slowly and with considerable help from my own church family over the years. I forgave you a long time ago. Not because what you did wasn't real, and not because forgiving you undid any of the damage. I forgave you because I finally understood that carrying the anger wasn't hurting you nearly as much as it was hurting me, and because I've got two children who needed a mother who wasn't drowning in bitterness on top of everything else they'd already lost.

Forgiving you and trusting you again aren't the same thing, though, and I think you already understand that distinction better than you used to, from the sound of your letter. I'm glad you're sober, Jerry. Genuinely glad, for your own sake as much as anyone's. I'd be willing to see you, if you're serious about this being real and lasting and not another version of the nine days. I'd want it to be somewhere neutral at first. And I need to tell you plainly that Michael carries more anger than I do, considerably more, and Emily barely remembers you at all, which carries its own particular kind of complication. I can't make either of those things easier on you. I can only tell you the truth of where each of us stands, and let you decide what you're prepared to walk into. Sarah.

* * *

He brought the letter to Noblit and Wallace together the following morning, and the two men listened without interrupting as Jerry read it aloud, his voice catching once, near the middle, on the line about forgiveness and trust being different creatures.

"She's right, you understand," Noblit said, once Jerry had finished. "About the distinction. A great many men in recovery mistake the first for a guarantee of the second, and set themselves up for a fresh wound when trust doesn't arrive on the same timeline as forgiveness. Forgiveness is something she's already done, in her own heart, before God, largely for her own sake as she says. Trust is something you're going to have to earn back with her and with your children, the same slow, patient way you've been earning it back here at the mission these past ten weeks. One honest day at a time."

"I understand that," Jerry said. "I think I understand it better now than I would have three months ago. I'm not expecting Michael to run into my arms, Rodney. I remember his face on that porch too well for that. But I want the chance to at least stand in front of him and let him see whatever he needs to see, however long it takes him to see it."

"Then let's talk about how you actually walk into that first meeting," Wallace said, "because there's a considerable difference between walking in ready to hear whatever they need to say to you, and walking in still secretly hoping to manage their reactions the way the old Jerry might have tried to manage a difficult conversation. You're not there to defend yourself, Jerry. You're not there to explain away twenty years in a way that makes it easier for you to carry. You're there to listen, mostly, and to let whatever anger or grief or caution they're carrying land on you without flinching away from it or trying to talk them out of it prematurely."

"That sounds like the hardest kind of listening there is," Jerry admitted.

"It is," Wallace agreed. "But it's also, from what I've watched these past ten weeks, exactly the kind of listening you've become considerably more capable of than the man who first collapsed on our front step."

* * *

He told Marcus about the coming meeting over supper that same week, the two of them sitting apart from the rest of the mission's dining hall the way they'd taken to doing most evenings since Mercer's departure, and Marcus listened with the particular attentiveness of a younger man watching an older one navigate territory he himself still feared approaching in his own life.

"You scared?" Marcus asked, once Jerry had finished laying out the plan — Sarah first, then whatever Michael and Emily were willing to offer.

"More scared than I was walking into that courtroom against Dawson, if I'm honest," Jerry admitted. "Dawson I understood. Knew exactly what kind of danger I was facing. This is a different animal entirely. I don't know what I'm walking into, Marcus. Don't know if I'm walking toward a door opening or a door staying shut for good."

"My old man's still out there somewhere," Marcus said, turning his fork over without eating. "Haven't spoken to him in six years. Keep telling myself I'll write, once I've got more sober days behind me, more to show for myself before I go asking him to look at what I've become. Watching you do this now, though, makes me wonder if I've just been finding excuses to keep putting it off."

"Might be some truth in that," Jerry said gently. "I put mine off twenty years, Marcus, telling myself some version of the same story — that I'd write once I was more finished, more presentable, more worth forgiving. Wallace helped me see that waiting for finished is really just another way of staying hidden. Nobody ever feels finished enough. You write when you're honest enough to tell the truth about where you actually stand, not when you've got some polished version of yourself ready to present instead."

Marcus sat with that a long moment, and though he said nothing further about his own father that evening, Jerry noticed him afterward, twice over the following week, sitting alone at the mission's small writing desk with a blank sheet of paper in front of him, turning a pen over in his hands the way Jerry himself had once turned Boone's old letters over in his — a small, private wrestling Jerry recognized and chose not to press, understanding that some doors a man had to approach entirely on his own timetable.

A letter from Boone arrived that same week as well, forwarded from the mission's general address after Jerry had written to update his old army correspondent on the whole unfolding situation, and Boone's reply carried its usual plain, steady encouragement. Sounds like the Lord's been busy down there in Georgia, Jerry, Boone had written. I always figured, all those years I kept writing you even when you went quiet, that a man doesn't stop being worth writing to just because he's stopped answering. Glad to see I wasn't wrong to keep at it. Give my best to that boy of yours, whenever you see him. Any son of yours has got to be worth knowing.

* * *

He met Sarah first, alone, at a small diner off the county highway roughly equidistant between the mission and Newnan, a neutral, unremarkable place Sarah herself had suggested, and Jerry arrived a full twenty minutes early, sitting in a corner booth with his hands wrapped around a coffee cup he did not drink from, watching the door with a nervous, hopeful dread he had not experienced since the county line road all those years earlier.

She looked older than the woman in his memory, silver threading through her dark hair now, small lines at the corners of her eyes that spoke of years he had not been present to witness, and Jerry stood as she approached the booth, uncertain whether a handshake or an embrace or simply standing

awkwardly in place was the correct posture for a moment neither of them had ever had occasion to rehearse.

"You look well, Jerry," Sarah said finally, settling into the booth across from him, her voice carrying a careful, measured warmth. "Sober suits you. I remember what the other version looked like, near the end. This is a considerable improvement."

"Feels strange, hearing that from you," Jerry admitted, sitting back down. "I spent so many years imagining this conversation, and somehow never once imagined it starting with a compliment."

"I'm not here to punish you, Jerry," Sarah said. "I did enough of that in my own heart for longer than was good for me. I'm here because your letter sounded like the man I actually married, underneath everything else, and I wanted to see for myself whether that man was really still in there, or whether it was just good words on paper."

They talked for the better part of two hours, working slowly and carefully through the intervening years — Sarah's account of raising Michael and Emily alone, the years of substitute teaching before the permanent position at the elementary school, the small, hard-won stability she had built for herself and the children out of the wreckage Jerry had left behind, her own long and gradual journey toward forgiving him, undertaken mostly in the quiet of her own church pew rather than in any dramatic single moment. Jerry, in turn, told her the fuller truth of the lost years he had only sketched in his letter — the flophouse above the feed store, the near-fatal overdose, the decade and more spent on the street, and finally the collapse outside New Hope's gate that had, at last, delivered him to Noblit and Wallace and the slow, patient work of these past ten weeks.

"Tell me about them," Jerry said, when the harder ground had been covered and something gentler seemed, for the moment, safe to walk toward. "Michael and Emily. I've got twenty years of missing to catch up on, and I'd rather hear it from you first than stumble into it blind."

Sarah's face softened, the particular warmth of a mother describing her children moving visibly across her features. "Michael's steady, like I said. Careful with people, careful with money, careful with his own heart most of all, which I suspect he came by honestly, watching what happened to this family when somebody wasn't careful enough. He's got Everett's hands, did you know that? Big, capable hands, always fixing something. He rebuilt the transmission on my car last spring rather than let me pay a mechanic, wouldn't hear a word of argument about it."

"And Emily?"

"Emily's got more of my mother in her than either of us, I think — that same restless kindness, always looking for somebody to take care of. She used to bring home every stray animal in the county when she was small, and I suspect the nursing program is just a grown-up version of the same instinct." Sarah's smile carried a private tenderness. "She asks about you sometimes, Jerry. Not often, but sometimes. Wants to know what you were like before, whether you were funny, whether you sang in church, little details like that. I've tried to give her the honest, whole picture, the good years alongside the hard ones, rather than either version alone. Seemed like the fairer thing to do, letting her form her own opinion eventually instead of inheriting mine wholesale."

"Thank you for that," Jerry said, something in his chest tightening with gratitude. "I wouldn't have blamed you for giving her only the hard version. Would have been the easier account to tell, probably, and not even an unfair one."

"Might have been easier in the short run," Sarah agreed. "But I didn't want to raise children who only knew half their own father, even the half of him that wasn't currently present. Seemed like robbing them of something that was rightfully theirs to eventually decide about for themselves."

"I read the Ephesians verse this morning, before I drove over," Jerry told her, near the end of their conversation, the diner's lunch crowd thinning around them. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. I used to think forgiveness was something a man earned by finally doing enough good to outweigh the bad. Wallace has been teaching

me these past weeks that it doesn't work that way at all. That it's a gift, given because it was given to us first, not because the receiver's proven himself worthy of it yet."

"That sounds like something I'd have appreciated hearing from you twenty years ago," Sarah said, with a small, rueful smile that carried no real bitterness in it. "But I suppose you weren't ready to hear it yourself back then, let alone offer it to anybody else."

"No," Jerry agreed. "I wasn't. I'm not sure I'm fully ready now, if I'm honest. But I'm closer than I've ever been, and I understand that closer is what I've actually got to offer you and the children right now, not some finished, perfected version of myself I haven't yet become."

Sarah studied him a long moment across the table, something working behind her eyes that Jerry could not fully read. "I'll talk to Michael and Emily," she said finally. "I can't promise either of them will want to see you, Jerry, and I won't push them toward a decision that isn't genuinely their own to make. But I'll tell them you asked, and I'll tell them honestly what I saw sitting across from you today. That's the most I can offer you right now, and I think, given everything, it's actually a considerable amount more than either of us would have predicted possible a year ago."

* * *

Michael's response, when it came a week later through Sarah, was cautious and conditional, carrying none of the warmth Sarah herself had eventually extended, and Jerry understood, reading Sarah's careful account of her son's reaction, that this particular door was going to require considerably more patience than the one that had opened, however guardedly, with Sarah herself.

"He said he'd meet you," Sarah told Jerry over the phone, her voice careful. "But he wants it to be just the two of you, no supervision, and he wants to say his piece without you interrupting him or explaining yourself, at least not at first. I told him that seemed fair, given everything. I hope you understand what you might be walking into, Jerry. He's carried a great deal of anger about you over the years, more than he's ever let me see the full shape of, I think."

"I understand," Jerry said, though his stomach had gone tight and cold at the description. "I'll take whatever he needs to give me, Sarah. That's the deal I signed up for, writing that first letter."

He drove to the county extension office parking lot on a Saturday afternoon, arriving early as he had for the meeting with Sarah, and watched a tall, lean young man emerge from the building at the appointed hour — Michael, twenty years old now, carrying himself with a wary stillness Jerry recognized immediately as an inheritance from his own younger self, the same guarded posture Jerry had once worn walking through an airport crowd four years after Vietnam.

"You look like your grandfather," Jerry said, unable to help the observation as Michael approached, "more than you look like me, if I'm honest. Everett, I mean. Something in the jaw."

"I wouldn't know," Michael said flatly, not extending a hand, not offering any of the softening courtesies Sarah had eventually extended. "I don't have a lot of memories of comparing faces with you, since you weren't really around long enough for me to notice the resemblance."

The words landed with their intended weight, and Jerry made himself absorb them without flinching, remembering Wallace's counsel from two nights earlier. "That's fair," Jerry said quietly. "I wasn't. I'd like to hear whatever you need to tell me about that, Michael, if you're willing to say it."

They walked to a bench at the edge of the parking lot, and Michael sat with his arms crossed, his jaw set in an expression that reminded Jerry, painfully, of his own posture during the worst of his silent years. "I remember the porch," Michael said, without preamble. "The night you asked if you were going to miss my next birthday too, and I told you it was okay when you said you wouldn't. I was three. I believed you. I kept believing you for years after that, every single time you said you were going to do better, right up until the day Mama drove us to Grandma and Grandpa Whitcomb's and I understood, finally, that believing you had just been a habit I hadn't yet learned to break."

"I remember that night too," Jerry said, his voice unsteady. "I've thought about it more times than I could count, these past twenty years. I broke that promise, Michael, and a hundred more like it, and I don't have a single excuse that would make any of it sound like less than what it actually was."

"I used to think it was something wrong with me," Michael continued, his composure cracking slightly for the first time. "Some kid logic, I guess. Figured if you'd really loved us, you'd have found a way to stay sober. Took me a long time to understand that wasn't how any of it actually worked, that it wasn't about whether you loved us enough. But knowing that with my head doesn't undo twenty years of feeling it in my gut every single time somebody's father showed up at a school thing and mine didn't."

Jerry sat with that a long moment, resisting the old instinct to explain, to soften, to offer some account of the addiction's own cunning logic that might ease his son's judgment even slightly. "I'm not going to tell you it wasn't about whether I loved you," he said finally. "I did love you, Michael, more than I had words for even at my worst. But you're right that the love didn't save you from the cost of my choices, and I think you deserve to hear me say plainly that the love was never enough on its own. I let something get bigger than my love for you and your sister and your mother, and that's a truth I have to carry, not one I get to explain away."

Something in Michael's rigid posture eased, fractionally, at the admission. "That's the first time I've heard you say something that didn't sound like you were trying to talk your way out of it," he said.

They sat in silence a while, the parking lot's ordinary Saturday traffic continuing around them, and Michael was the one who eventually broke it, his voice quieter now, some of its earlier edge worn down. "I used to make up stories about you, when I was a kid. Told the other boys at school you were overseas somewhere, working some important job you couldn't talk about. Easier than telling them the truth, I guess. I got good at the lying, after a while. Almost believed some of it myself."

"I'm sorry you had to carry that," Jerry said. "Sorry you had to build a whole story just to have something decent to tell people, instead of getting to just have me there to point to."

"There's a part of me that's still angry about the lying, honestly. Not just angry at you for leaving. Angry at myself for how easy the pretending got, after a while. Like some part of me had already given up on the true story ever being one worth telling." Michael studied his own hands a moment. "Mama never once badmouthed you to us, you know. Even at the worst of it. Used to make me madder than anything, as a kid, her defending you when I wanted somebody to just say out loud how much you'd wrecked. Took me a long time to understand she wasn't defending what you did. She was just refusing to let our whole picture of you get reduced down to only the worst parts."

"Your mother's a better person than I ever deserved to be married to," Jerry said. "I understood that clearly enough twenty years ago. Understand it a great deal more now."

"I don't know what I want from this, Jerry. I don't even know if I want to call you Dad yet, if I'm honest. But I didn't walk away just now, and I guess that's something, given where I started this conversation."

"That's more than I expected, and considerably more than I had any right to," Jerry said. "I'm not asking you to call me anything, Michael. I'm not asking you for anything at all, except maybe the chance to keep showing up, slow as you need it to be, and let you decide for yourself, over time, whether there's anything in me worth trusting again."

* * *

Emily's meeting, when it finally came three weeks later, carried a different weight entirely, and Jerry understood, driving into Atlanta to the small campus coffee shop she had suggested, that he was walking toward a young woman who held almost no direct memory of him at all — a stranger meeting a stranger, however biologically bound the two of them remained.

She was smaller than Michael, dark-haired like Sarah, with an open, curious expression that carried none of her brother's guarded wariness, though a careful reserve moved beneath the openness that told Jerry she had not arrived entirely without her own defenses.

"I don't actually remember you," Emily said, with a disarming directness once they'd settled at a small corner table, her coffee cup untouched between her hands. "I know that probably sounds harsh, but I think it's better I say it plain rather than let you wonder. I was barely two when Mama took us to Grandma and Grandpa's. Whatever I know about you is secondhand — things Michael's told me, things Mama's said over the years, mostly careful and mostly kind, honestly, more generous than I think some mothers would have managed."

"It doesn't sound harsh," Jerry said. "It sounds honest, and I think honest is exactly what I'm here for. I don't expect you to remember me, Emily. I mostly just wanted the chance to actually meet you as the person you've become, instead of only carrying around some frozen memory of a baby I held twenty years ago."

"Michael's still pretty angry," Emily said, studying him carefully. "I want you to know that, since he probably won't say it to you directly, at least not yet. I think I got off easier than he did, honestly, not remembering enough to be angry about specific things the way he is. Mine's more like a general sadness about a gap where a father should have been, rather than anger at a person I actually remember failing me."

"Which one's harder to sit across from, do you think?" Jerry asked. "His anger, or your sadness?"

Emily considered the question with a thoughtfulness that reminded Jerry, unexpectedly and movingly, of Sarah at that same age. "I don't know that either one's harder, exactly. Just different. His is pointed at somebody specific. Mine's more like grieving something I never actually had, which people tell me is its own strange kind of grief, mourning an absence instead of a loss." She studied him a moment longer. "I'm studying to be a nurse, did Grandpa Everett tell you that? I think part of why I chose it is watching Mama take care of everybody around her all those years, mostly by herself. Wanted to do something that felt like that same kind of caring, I guess, even before I fully understood why."

"That's a fine thing to want to do with a life," Jerry said, something in his chest aching with a pride he had no real claim to but felt anyway, plain and undeniable. "I wish I could tell you I had some part in shaping that in you, Emily, but I think the honest truth is your mother gets the whole of that credit, and I'm only just now, twenty years late, getting the chance to admire it from a distance."

"Can I ask you something that might be a little forward?" Emily said, after a pause, turning her cup slowly on its saucer. "Why now? I don't mean that unkindly. I just mean — twenty years is a long time. What made this particular month the one where you finally wrote?"

Jerry considered the question with the same care he had come to bring to most hard things, these past ten weeks. "Honest answer is I don't think I was capable of it before now. Not wouldn't. Couldn't. There's a considerable difference, even if it doesn't change the cost of the years you all paid for my not being capable. I spent most of those years too broken to even imagine a version of myself worth introducing to you, let alone brave enough to risk hearing you say no." He met her eyes. "A man at the mission taught me that waiting to be finished before reaching out is really just another way of staying hidden. I finally got honest enough, and steady enough, to stop hiding. That's the whole of the honest answer, as much as I understand it myself."

"That's a fairer answer than I expected," Emily said. "I think I was braced for some kind of excuse. That wasn't an excuse. That was just true."

"Maybe you can have some small part in what comes next, though," Emily said, with a careful, tentative warmth that struck Jerry as the first genuine invitation either of his children had offered him. "I'm not saying it's going to be easy, or fast. Michael's going to need a lot longer than I will, probably, given everything. But I don't see any reason we can't at least try, slowly, and see what it turns into. I

don't think holding onto a grudge I can't even fully justify, not remembering the specifics, would do either of us much good."

* * *

He wrote to Sarah that same week, describing both meetings in careful, honest detail, and her reply carried a warmth considerably fuller than her first, cautious letter, along with an invitation that Jerry received with a gratitude too large for easy words — a family supper, the following month, at Sarah's own house, the four of them together at a single table for the first time in nearly two decades.

"Michael agreed to come," Sarah wrote, "though I want you prepared for the fact that he's agreeing more out of a sense that it's the fair thing to do than out of any eagerness. Emily's actually looking forward to it, from what I can tell, which surprises me some, given how little she remembers of you to be looking forward to. I think she's more curious than anything, and maybe a little hopeful in a way she hasn't quite let herself name aloud yet.

I want to say something else too, Jerry, and I want you to receive it in the spirit I mean it. I'm proud of the man you're becoming. That doesn't erase what the other man cost us, and I'm not offering it as some signal that we're headed back toward anything more than a careful, rebuilt friendship for the children's sake, at least not yet, and maybe not ever, and I need you to hear that plainly so neither of us builds false hope on top of real gratitude. But watching you walk into these last few weeks the way you have, patient and honest and willing to receive whatever anger or distance the children needed to offer you, tells me something real changed in you at that mission. I wanted you to know I've noticed it, whatever else does or doesn't come of it."

Jerry brought the letter to Wallace that evening, reading the closing paragraph aloud with a voice that caught more than once. "She's not promising anything," he said. "I understand that, Henry. I don't want you to think I'm building some fantasy on top of a single kind sentence in a letter."

"I don't think you are," Wallace said. "I think you're doing exactly what she asked of you — receiving real gratitude for what it actually is, without inflating it into more than it's offering. That's a considerable maturity, Jerry, holding gratitude and uncertainty in the same open hand without needing to force one into becoming the other before its time."

* * *

The supper arrived on a Sunday evening in early autumn, and Jerry drove to Sarah's small house on the outskirts of Newnan with a nervousness that rivaled, in its own quiet way, the fear he had carried into that federal courthouse weeks earlier, understanding that whatever verdict awaited him at this particular table carried a weight no legal proceeding could match.

Sarah met him at the door, and behind her, in the warmly lit kitchen, Jerry could see Michael setting the table with a careful, deliberate focus that suggested the task was serving him as much as it served the meal, and Emily arranging a vase of late-season flowers with an easy hum that carried through the house's open windows.

He had spent the drive over turning a single verse in his mind, Peter's words to the scattered believers about above all, loving each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins, and found himself hoping, pulling into Sarah's driveway, that whatever love still existed between these four people might prove capable of exactly that kind of covering — not erasing the twenty lost years, but making room, somehow, for a future large enough to hold both the wound and whatever healing might yet grow up around it.

"Thank you for having me," Jerry said, standing on the small porch a moment longer than necessary, memorizing the scene before he crossed its threshold — the ordinary, hard-won domesticity of a life Sarah had built entirely without him, a life he was only now, twenty years late, being permitted to glimpse from the inside rather than from some distant, aching remove.

"Come on in, Jerry," Sarah said, stepping back to let him pass. "Supper's not going to eat itself, and Michael's been threatening to eat all the cornbread before we even sit down."

The meal that followed was not, by any measure, a seamless or effortless reconciliation — Michael remained largely quiet through the first half hour, answering Jerry's careful questions with short, guarded replies, and there were long stretches of silence around the table that no one quite knew how to fill, twenty years of absence not dissolving simply because four people had finally agreed to share a meal together. But somewhere near the meal's end, as Emily recounted a particularly disastrous first attempt at drawing blood during her nursing rotation, and Michael, despite himself, offered a small, genuine laugh at his sister's telling, Jerry felt something shift in the room's whole atmosphere — not resolution, not yet, but the first real warmth he had witnessed pass between the four of them in longer than he could measure.

"Grandpa Everett tells me you used to take me fishing," Michael said, unprompted, near the meal's close, his guard lowering by a fraction Jerry recognized as significant precisely because it had cost his son something to offer it. "Before. I don't remember it, but he says we caught a bream together, out at the old Hutchins pond."

"We did," Jerry said carefully, not wanting to press too hard against the fragile opening. "You were about seven. Best morning I had in longer than I could measure, at the time."

"Maybe we could go sometime," Michael said, not quite meeting Jerry's eyes, the offer costing him something visible even as he made it. "Not saying it fixes anything. Just saying I wouldn't mind trying it again, seeing if it's really as good as Grandpa makes it sound."

Jerry felt something in his chest give way entirely, a grief and a gratitude arriving together so completely tangled he could not separate one thread from the other. "I'd like that more than I know how to say, Michael," he managed. "Whenever you're ready. No rush on my end at all."

Sarah, watching the exchange from the head of the table, caught Jerry's eye for just a moment, and something passed between them that needed no words to carry its full weight — twenty years of grief and disappointment folded, however briefly, into something closer to shared relief, two parents who had each, in their own separate and imperfect ways, spent this whole evening hoping for exactly this small, ordinary miracle at their table.

* * *

He drove back to the mission that night well past dark, the autumn air carrying the first real chill of the coming season through his rolled-down window, and found himself praying aloud in the quiet cab of his truck, the same honest, unpolished prayers he had learned to offer across these ten weeks of recovery.

Lord, I don't deserve a single moment of tonight. I know that plainly, and I'm not asking You to pretend otherwise. But I'm asking You to help me steward it well, whatever it turns into — Michael's fishing trip, Emily's curiosity, Sarah's careful, rebuilt trust. Help me be patient with however slowly this has to rebuild. Help me remember that forgiveness offered isn't the same as trust restored, and that both of them are gifts I haven't earned, only received. Thank You for a table I never thought I'd sit at again. Thank You for a son willing to offer a fishing trip and a daughter willing to offer her curiosity and a woman who buried her anger at me long before I ever gave her a reason to set it down. Whatever comes next, Lord, help me walk it the way Wallace has been teaching me — one honest day at a time, gripping nothing too tightly, trusting You with the rest.

He arrived back at the mission near eleven, the building quiet and dark save for a single light burning in Noblit's office window, and found the older man still awake, reviewing paperwork at his desk with the particular late-night stillness of a man who kept unusual hours out of long habit.

"How'd it go?" Noblit asked, looking up as Jerry appeared in the doorway.

"Better than I had any right to expect," Jerry said, sinking into the chair across from Noblit's desk, exhaustion and joy tangled together in equal measure. "Michael asked me fishing, Rodney. First thing he's asked of me in twenty years, and it was that."

Noblit's face broke into a warm, unguarded smile. "The Lord's economy," he said, "restoring in ordinary fishing trips what twenty years of silence very nearly destroyed for good. I've watched that particular grace work itself out in a hundred different families over the years at this mission, Jerry, and I confess it never once stops moving me, watching it happen fresh each time."

"Wallace kept telling me forgiveness wasn't something I'd earn, just something I'd receive," Jerry said. "I believed it about God forgiving me. Took me considerably longer to believe it might work the same way with Michael and Emily and Sarah. But sitting at that table tonight, I understood it plain for the first time — none of them owed me that meal. None of them owed me a single kind word. And they gave it anyway, same as grace always does, freely and past what I'd earned."

"That's the whole of Ephesians four, right there," Noblit said. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Notice Paul doesn't say forgive once the other person's earned it. He says forgive the way you were forgiven — which is to say, considerably before you'd earned a bit of it yourself." He closed his ledger, considering Jerry with a quiet, settled satisfaction. "You've walked a long road to get to a fishing trip, Jerry Gatchell. I hope you'll let yourself simply enjoy it, without immediately worrying over every mile still left ahead."

"I keep thinking about the prodigal, Rodney," Jerry said, after a moment. "Wallace preached it to me my very first week here, the father running down the road before the son had even finished his confession. I always used to picture myself as the son in that story, the one who finally comes home. Sitting at Sarah's table tonight, I started wondering if maybe I'd had it backward some. Maybe I've also got some of the father in me now, the one who has to decide, over and over, whether to run out and meet Michael and Emily wherever they actually are, instead of waiting on my porch for them to arrive fully formed and ready."

"Man can hold both roles in a single lifetime, I've found," Noblit said. "Sometimes even in a single evening. You were the son who came home to this mission ten weeks ago, half dead and unable to offer anything but your own need. Tonight you were something closer to the father, extending patience to children who owed you nothing, meeting them exactly where their own hurt and hesitation actually stood instead of demanding they arrive somewhere further along than they were ready for. That's no small transformation, Jerry, learning to hold both postures as they're needed instead of getting permanently stuck in only one of them."

Jerry sat with that a long moment, the mission settling into its late-night quiet around him, and thought of Michael's guarded offer, and Emily's easy curiosity, and Sarah's careful, honest letter, and understood, walking back to his cot a while later, that he had crossed some threshold tonight he had once believed permanently closed to him — not a finished reconciliation, not yet, but a road, clearly marked now, leading unmistakably homeward, one fishing trip and one Sunday supper at a time.

CHAPTER 20

THE SOLDIER'S NEW COMMANDER

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

— 2 Timothy 4:7

Noblit called Jerry into his office on the last Friday of his sixth month at New Hope, the formal completion of the residential program he had entered as a broken, half-dead stranger on a winter night, and Jerry sat across the familiar desk with a steadiness that would have been unrecognizable to the man who had first collapsed on the mission's front step.

"You've finished the program, Jerry," Noblit said, sliding a simple certificate across the desk, the mission's modest seal stamped at its bottom corner. "Six months clean, a restored relationship with your family well underway, steady work, steady faith. By every measure we use around here, you've completed what you came for."

Jerry looked at the certificate a long moment, turning it over in his hands the way he had once turned over Boone's old letters, Everett's fierce reply, Sarah's careful forgiveness. "Feels strange, holding a piece of paper that says finished," he said finally. "Doesn't feel finished, exactly. Feels more like I've learned how to walk properly for the first time, and now somebody's handing me a diploma for it."

"That's about the size of it," Noblit agreed, with a small smile. "Recovery's not a destination a man arrives at once and for all, Jerry. It's a road he learns to keep walking, one honest day at a time, same as Wallace has been teaching you since your very first week. This certificate doesn't mean the walking's done. It means you've learned the gait well enough to keep walking it on your own, with the Lord's help, rather than needing this particular set of walls around you every hour of every day."

"What happens now?" Jerry asked. "I've got Boyd's old offer still standing, near enough, if the mill would have me back. I've got Sarah and the children, slow as that road still is. I've got a whole life waiting out there I never expected to get back."

Noblit considered the question a moment before answering, folding his hands on the desk in the particular manner Jerry had come to recognize as the pastor's thinking posture. "I'd like to offer you something else first, if you're willing to hear it out before you decide anything final. We've got more men coming through that front gate every single month than Wallace and I can properly shepherd on our own, Jerry, and a fair number of them are veterans, same as you — men carrying wounds this country still doesn't fully know how to name, let alone heal. I've watched you these past six months, watched you with Marcus, watched you with the newer men who've come through since. You've got a gift for meeting broken soldiers exactly where they stand, without flinching from what you find there. I'd like to offer you a staff position, Jerry. Not charity. Real, paid work, leading a program specifically built for veterans, same as the one that saved your own life."

* * *

Jerry sat with the offer a long moment, the office's afternoon light slanting gold across Noblit's desk, and found himself thinking of Paul's words to Timothy that Everett had quoted in an early letter, fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith — words Jerry had once assumed described some distant, finished saint, a man who had already crossed his own finish line and could rest easy in the accounting. He understood now, sitting in this office, that the verse described something considerably more active than rest. A soldier still fighting. A runner still running. A man who kept the faith not once, in some single dramatic moment, but continuously, day after ordinary day, choosing it fresh each morning.

"What would it actually look like?" Jerry asked, needing the practical shape of the offer before he could properly weigh it. "I've never run a program before, Rodney. Never led anything bigger than a woodshop crew, and even that only these past few months."

"You wouldn't be building it entirely alone. Wallace has already agreed to lead the Scripture study portion, same as he's done for you and every other man who's come through here. Doc Willis has offered to extend his medical oversight to the group, at least until we can secure proper funding for a dedicated staff physician. What we'd need from you is the piece neither of them can offer — a man

who's actually walked the particular road these veterans are walking, who can sit with a soldier's specific nightmares without needing them explained first, who understands the shape of a battlefield most civilians, however well-meaning, simply can't picture clearly enough to counsel a man through it properly." Noblit leaned back in his chair. "I watched you with Danny Ruiz's predecessor, that young corporal who came through in the spring, more scared of his own flashbacks than of anything currently chasing him. You didn't flinch once, Jerry, not even when he described things that would have sent most of our other counselors straight out of the room. That's not a skill I can teach a man. That's a calling, near as I can tell, forged in exactly the kind of fire you survived."

"I'd need to talk to Sarah first," Jerry said finally. "And to Michael and Emily. This life's already asked a great deal of them, these past six months. I don't want to make a decision this size without bringing them into it."

"That's exactly the right instinct," Noblit said. "The old Jerry might have decided alone, in the dark, the way he decided most things for twenty years. I'd be considerably more worried about this offer if you'd said yes on the spot, without needing to ask anybody else at all."

Jerry rose to leave, then paused at the office door, turning back. "Can I ask you something, Rodney? You've been doing this work a long time. Watched a great many men come through that gate, some who made it and, I'd guess, some who didn't. Does it ever stop costing you something, watching the ones who don't?"

Noblit's expression grew thoughtful, the particular stillness of a man who had sat with that exact question many times before. "No," he said simply. "It doesn't stop costing. I've buried men I loved dearly who never did find their way all the way through, Jerry, and I expect to bury more before the Lord calls me home myself. But I've come to believe the cost is part of the calling, not a sign that the calling's somehow gone wrong. Shepherds grieve sheep, same as fathers grieve prodigals who never do come home. The grieving doesn't mean you stop running out to the ones who might. It just means you run out with your eyes open, understanding plainly what the running might cost you."

"I think I can carry that," Jerry said, after a moment. "I've carried heavier than that already, these past years."

"I believe you can too," Noblit said. "Wouldn't be offering you the position otherwise."

* * *

He drove to Sarah's that same evening, and found the whole family gathered for what had become, over recent months, a fairly regular Sunday supper — Michael setting the table with an ease that had grown steadily less guarded since that first difficult reunion, Emily home from her nursing rotation for the weekend, Sarah moving between stove and table with the particular contentment of a woman watching her family, however unconventionally assembled, slowly knit itself back together.

"Noblit's asked me to stay on at the mission," Jerry told them over supper, laying out the offer plainly. "Running a program specifically for veterans. It'd mean staying in Atlanta rather than coming back to Newnan the way I think some part of all of us has been hoping for. I wanted your thoughts before I gave him an answer."

Michael was the first to speak, setting down his fork with a thoughtfulness that Jerry had come to recognize as his son's particular way of taking a question seriously. "You asked me a while back whether I thought there was anything in you worth trusting again," Michael said. "I think this is part of my answer. A man who spends the rest of his life trying to keep other families from losing what ours lost — that's not nothing, Jerry. That's actually a considerable amount of something."

"I think you should do it," Emily added, with the same open directness Jerry had come to expect from her. "I've seen what that place did for you. I think about all the other Michaels and Emilys out there somewhere, waiting on their own fathers to come home from whatever war they're still fighting inside themselves. Seems like exactly the kind of work you're supposed to be doing now."

Sarah was quieter, studying Jerry with an expression that carried both pride and a private grief Jerry recognized and did not try to talk her out of. "I won't pretend some part of me doesn't wish you were coming back to Newnan for good," she said finally. "But I think I'd rather have a father to my children who's forty minutes away doing exactly the work he was built for, than one who's five minutes away doing something that slowly hollows him back out. Take the position, Jerry. We'll figure out the distance. We've figured out considerably harder things than forty minutes these past months."

* * *

He accepted Noblit's offer the following Monday, and spent the next several weeks building what would eventually become known, informally at first and then with growing permanence, as the Valley Company — a name Jerry had chosen deliberately, a callback to the jungle valley where he had once served under an earthly commander and learned, at terrible cost, what it meant to carry a wounded brother out under fire. The new company's members carried different wounds now, addiction and homelessness and the particular invisible scarring of combat, but Jerry understood, standing before his first small gathering of a dozen veterans in the mission's largest meeting room, that the essential work remained unchanged from that valley two decades earlier — leaving no man behind, whatever the cost of the carrying.

"I'm not your commanding officer," Jerry told that first gathering, some of the men still wearing the wary, guarded posture Jerry himself had once worn on this same mission's front step. "I want to be plain about that from the start. I've got a new Commander myself, and I answer to Him same as you'll be invited to, if you're willing. But I have walked the particular road most of you are standing on right now, and I'm not going anywhere until every man in this room has either found his own way home or decided, of his own free will, that he's not ready yet. Either way, you won't be walking it alone anymore. That much I can promise you plainly."

Wallace led the group's Scripture study most Thursday evenings, continuing the same patient, careful teaching that had first reached Jerry across his own difficult months, while Doc Willis extended his medical oversight to the growing roster, and Marcus, six months further into his own sobriety now and steady enough to begin serving rather than simply receiving, took on the role of welcoming new arrivals at the front gate — the exact role Noblit had once filled for Jerry himself, a small, deliberate passing forward of the same grace that had once met Marcus in his own darkest hour.

The men who found their way to the Valley Company in those early months carried a range of wounds Jerry came to know intimately over that first year — a former artillery sergeant named Coleman who had not slept a full night without nightmares since a mortar strike outside Da Nang; a young corporal, barely older than Michael, whose hands would not stop shaking whenever a car backfired anywhere within a city block; a quiet, watchful man named Ortiz who had spent a decade in and out of county jails before a court-appointed counselor finally mentioned New Hope's name to him. Jerry met each of them the same way Noblit had once met him, without flinching from whatever they described, without rushing them toward a healing they were not yet ready to receive, offering instead the same patient, unhurried presence that had first reached him across his own darkest months.

"You don't have to have the words for it yet," Jerry told Coleman, the two of them sitting in the courtyard garden during the sergeant's first difficult week, the older man unable to speak of Da Nang without his hands beginning to tremble. "I spent twenty years without the words for mine. Found them slow, one Thursday evening at a time, sitting in a group not unlike the one we're building here. You don't owe anybody a tidy account of what happened to you, Coleman. You just owe yourself the honesty of not facing it alone anymore."

"How'd you finally find the words?" Coleman asked.

"Wallace taught me a fella doesn't wrestle his way to victory by gripping tighter," Jerry said. "Teaches submission instead — laying the whole ugly weight of it down in front of the only

Commander strong enough to actually carry it. Took me most of a lifetime to believe that was even possible. I'm not asking you to believe it tonight, Coleman. Just asking you to keep showing up Thursdays, and let the believing catch up to you in its own good time."

* * *

Mercer's promised fishing trip finally arrived that same autumn, nearly a full year after the telegram at Jerry's wedding had first made the promise, and Jerry drove down to Alabama for a full week, the lake exactly as stocked with bass as Mercer had claimed, the two old soldiers spending long, unhurried days on the water discussing everything and nothing, the particular ease of restored brotherhood settling over them both like the autumn light itself.

"You ever think we'd end up here?" Mercer asked one evening, the two of them sitting on his dock as the sun set red and low over the water. "Two broken old soldiers, both of us somehow still standing, both of us somehow still useful to something bigger than our own wreckage?"

"Never in a hundred years," Jerry admitted. "Spent most of the years in between certain I'd end up a cautionary tale somebody mentioned in passing, not a man anybody'd actually want fishing beside." He cast his line out into the reddening water. "Wallace has a way of putting it. Says the Lord doesn't waste a single one of our wasted years, if we finally hand them over honest. Says He's in the business of redeeming exactly the wreckage we thought was beyond using."

"How's the wife?" Jerry asked, after a comfortable silence had settled between them. "And that stubborn discipline you told me about, the one that finally got you sober down there in Alabama?"

"Still stubborn, still married to it near thirty years now, God bless her patience with me," Mercer said, with a warm laugh. "She asks after you regular, since I got back from that trial business. Wants to meet the famous Sergeant Gatchell someday, put a face to all the stories I've told her over the years." He cast his line back out, watching the ripples spread across the darkening water. "You know, I think about Baxter some evenings, out here on this dock. Wonder what he'd make of the both of us, still standing, still fishing, still finding some use for the years he never got to have himself."

"I think about that too," Jerry admitted. "Wallace has a way of putting it that's stuck with me. Says a man doesn't honor the fallen by wasting the years he was given instead of them. Says he honors them by spending those years like they actually matter, the way the fallen never got the chance to." He watched his own line a long moment. "I try to carry Baxter that way now, Bulldog. Not as a wound anymore, thanks to you finally telling me the truth of it. As a kind of debt I mean to keep paying forward, every broken soldier I manage to walk home."

"I've got a VFW post back in Birmingham that could use a man who talks like that," Mercer said. "Bunch of us old-timers, meeting Tuesday nights, still carrying more of that valley than we let on to our own wives most days. Might do them some good, hearing from a man who's found his way all the way through to the other side of it, and not just partway."

"Man like you talking to a room full of old veterans," Mercer went on, reeling in his line to check the bait, "that's a considerably different proposition than some young chaplain fresh out of seminary trying to tell us what we ought to be feeling about a war he never fought. Fellas at my post have sat through plenty of the second kind. Politely nodded along and gone right back to drinking the same amount Tuesday nights as they did before the sermon started. Man's got to have actually walked through the valley himself before most of us will trust a single word he says about the walking out the other side."

"I understand that better than I'd like to," Jerry said. "Spent twenty years distrusting exactly that kind of secondhand comfort myself. Some fella who'd never held a rifle, telling me what my own nightmares ought to mean." He watched his own line a moment, the water calm and unbroken in the fading light. "I think that's part of why the Lord let me walk the road I walked, Bulldog, hard as it is to say plainly even now. Wasted years, near enough, if I'm measuring by what they cost me. But not

wasted, if I'm measuring by what they've made me able to offer men like Coleman and Danny and whoever else walks through that gate next. Everett always used to caution he wasn't only handing me finished lessons but the messy road that got him there. I think that's exactly what this new work's asking of me too. Not polish. Just the honest, unfinished road, offered plain to whoever needs to hear it walked."

"I'd be honored," Jerry said, and meant it fully, understanding, even as he said it, that the Valley Company he was building in Atlanta was never going to be the whole of the work the Lord had waiting for him — that a soldier who had once fought in a single valley in Vietnam might yet find himself commissioned, in this new chapter, to carry the same fight into a hundred different rooms, wherever broken men gathered still hoping, however faintly, for a way home.

* * *

Michael's own fishing trip came a month later, the two of them driving out to the old Hutchins pond on a cool Saturday morning in November, and this time there was no careful negotiation of the invitation, no visible cost to Michael in the offering — simply a father and a son, poles in hand, settling onto the same bank where Jerry had once taught a three-year-old to bait a hook.

"Been thinking about something," Michael said, midway through the quiet morning, his bobber sitting still on the pond's glassy surface. "Wanted to ask you before I said anything to Mama, since I figured you ought to hear it first."

"Go on," Jerry said, feeling something in his chest tighten with an old, familiar nervousness he had learned, these past months, not to let show too plainly.

"There's a girl. Rebecca. Works over at the extension office with me, been seeing her the better part of a year now." Michael kept his eyes on the water, though Jerry could see the careful effort behind the casualness of his son's posture. "I think I'm going to ask her to marry me, come spring. Wanted you to know first. Wanted to ask if you'd stand up with me, if it comes to that. Best man, I mean."

Jerry felt his throat close entirely for a long moment, twenty years of imagined milestones he had never expected to witness crowding suddenly, overwhelmingly, into this single ordinary morning. "Michael, I don't have words for what that means to me," he managed finally. "I missed so much of your growing up. I never once let myself hope I'd be asked something like this."

"I thought about it a long while before deciding," Michael admitted. "Wasn't an easy decision, if I'm honest. But watching you this past year — watching you actually show up, actually do the harder work instead of just talking about doing it — I decided I wanted you standing beside me when I make my own promises. Figured a man who's finally learned how to keep his word is exactly the kind of man I want in my corner, making sure I keep mine."

They fished in a companionable silence a while longer, and it was near noon, packing up their gear for the drive home, that Michael spoke again, more quietly this time. "I caught my first fish off this bank, Grandpa Everett tells me. With you. I don't remember it, same as I don't remember a lot from back then. But I like knowing it happened here, all the same. Like there's some kind of thread running clear through from that morning to this one, even through everything in between."

"There is," Jerry said, his voice thick. "I believe that with my whole heart, Michael. The Lord doesn't let a single thread go, even the ones we ourselves nearly cut clean through. He just waits, patient as anything, for us to pick our end back up."

They loaded the truck in a comfortable quiet, the pond's surface already stilling behind them into the flat, mirrored calm of early afternoon, and Michael paused before climbing into the passenger seat, studying his father a long moment with an openness that would have been unthinkable between them a year earlier.

"I used to lie awake some nights, as a kid, trying to imagine what you'd say if you ever did come back," Michael admitted. "Used to picture a hundred different versions of the conversation, most of

them ending with me telling you off pretty thoroughly, if I'm honest. Never once imagined it'd end up being this. Just an ordinary Saturday, fishing, same as if none of it had ever happened at all."

Jerry felt the weight of his son's honesty settle over him, gentle but real, and found himself grateful, not for the first time these past years, that Michael had never learned to soften hard truths simply to spare a listener's feelings — a plainness Jerry recognized, with a private ache of pride, as an inheritance from Sarah rather than from himself. "I don't think none of it happened, though," Jerry said carefully. "I think it happened, all of it, every hard year of it, and this ordinary Saturday is what the Lord managed to build on the other side of it anyway. I'd rather have this, Michael — the real thing, scars and all — than some easier version where the wreckage never occurred in the first place. I don't know that I'd have become the kind of man capable of sitting here with you today, without having first walked through every bit of what got me here."

Michael considered that, nodding slowly. "Wallace been teaching you that too?"

"Wallace, mostly, and about twenty years of considerably harder tuition besides," Jerry said, with a rueful smile, and the two of them climbed into the truck together and drove back toward Newnan in a silence that had, by then, become entirely comfortable between them.

* * *

The years that followed carried their own steady, unspectacular rhythm — the ordinary, hard-won texture of a redeemed life rather than the dramatic crisis and rescue that had marked Jerry's earlier decades. Michael married Rebecca the following spring in the same small country church where Jerry and Sarah had once stood before Pastor Whitfield a lifetime earlier, and Jerry rose at the reception to offer the best man's toast with a steadiness that surprised even himself, given how many years he had once assumed he'd forfeited any right to stand in this particular role at all.

"I don't have the kind of speech a father's supposed to have ready for a moment like this," Jerry told the gathered guests, Michael and Rebecca seated close together at the head table, Sarah watching from nearby with tears she made no effort to hide. "I missed a great many years I should have been collecting stories for exactly this occasion. What I've got instead is considerably simpler. I watched my son forgive a man who'd given him every reason not to, slowly, honestly, without ever once pretending the hurt hadn't happened. If he can extend that kind of grace to his own father, Rebecca, I expect you're marrying about as steady and forgiving a man as this world's got left to offer. Michael, I'm prouder of you today than I know how to say plainly. Whatever kind of husband and father you become, I believe you've already proven you know exactly what those words are supposed to cost, and exactly what they're supposed to give."

Everett wept openly through the whole ceremony in a way that surprised no one who knew how much that particular morning had cost the old man to believe possible, and Emily finished her nursing degree that same year, taking a position at a veterans' hospital in Atlanta close enough to the mission that she began volunteering some Saturdays at the Valley Company's small medical clinic alongside Doc Willis, extending her mother's instinct for care into a life entirely her own.

"Never thought I'd end up treating soldiers for a living," Emily told Jerry one Saturday afternoon at the clinic, checking a young veteran's blood pressure with the same easy competence Jerry had come to admire in her these past years. "But I keep thinking about what you told me that first day at the coffee shop, about not being able to shape my choosing this work, and I've decided I don't fully believe that anymore. I think some part of me chose it because of you, Jerry, even the years I didn't know you at all. Wanting to fix the kind of hurt that took my own father away for two decades. Guess I finally get to do some of that fixing right alongside you instead of only wishing somebody had, back when it mattered most."

The Valley Company itself grew steadily over those years, from a dozen wary men in a borrowed meeting room to a program serving several hundred veterans across the wider Atlanta area, funded

eventually by a combination of church support, veteran organizations, and a modest state grant that Ellison himself had helped Jerry navigate, the detective having become, in the years since the trial, something closer to a genuine friend than a professional contact. Marcus, sober now going on four years, took over the front-gate welcoming duties permanently, eventually earning a small staff salary of his own, and wrote, at last, to the father he had once feared approaching — a reconciliation slower and more halting than Jerry's own, but real, the two of them exchanging letters now most months, a small, hopeful thread Marcus tended with the same careful patience Jerry had once learned from Wallace.

Sarah and Jerry never remarried, a fact Jerry had made a kind of uneasy peace with across those years, understanding that some doors, once closed, opened again only partway, and that the partial opening — a restored friendship, a shared devotion to their children and, in time, their grandchildren, a mutual and unhurried respect neither of them rushed to define as anything more — was itself a considerable grace, not a lesser consolation prize.

"I used to think we owed each other a second try," Sarah told him once, the two of them sitting together on a porch swing after Michael and Rebecca's christening reception had wound down, the toddler finally asleep in Rebecca's arms across the yard. "Some tidy, storybook ending where the family gets fully restored, right down to the wedding rings. I don't think that anymore, Jerry, and I want you to hear that it's not a grief for me, saying it plain like this. What we've actually got feels more honest than that storybook version ever could have. Two people who hurt each other about as badly as two people can, choosing anyway, year after year, to keep showing up for what still matters between us. I think I'm prouder of this than I would have been of some neat remarriage that papered over everything underneath it."

"I think I agree with you," Jerry said, watching Michael across the yard, patiently answering some question of his young daughter's with the same careful attentiveness Jerry himself had only learned to offer his own children very late. "Took me a long while to stop measuring this as some lesser outcome, Sarah. Wallace used to tell me grace doesn't always look like the ending a man pictures for himself. Sometimes it looks like exactly this instead — imperfect, unfinished, but real. I'll take real over storybook every single time, at this point in my life."

They sat together at Michael's wedding, at the christening of Michael and Rebecca's first child two years later, and again three years after that at the birth of a second grandchild, a boy Michael and Rebecca named Everett after his great-grandfather, at every ordinary family gathering the intervening years produced, two people who had once lost everything together and had found, slowly and without any single dramatic reconciliation, a way to be present for what remained.

* * *

Everett passed quietly in his sleep some six years into Jerry's work at the Valley Company, and Jerry delivered the eulogy himself, standing before the same small country church where Pastor Whitfield had once married him and Sarah a lifetime earlier, and found himself speaking, without quite planning to, of 2 Timothy's soldier language — his father's own long, quiet fight against the same bottle that had nearly claimed Jerry himself, a fight fought and won decades before Jerry had found the courage to walk his own version of that same road.

"My father fought a good fight most of you never fully saw," Jerry told the gathered mourners, Ruth's hand held tightly in his own, Sarah and the children seated in the pew just behind them. "Finished a considerably harder race than most men are ever asked to run, and kept a faith that outlasted every single one of my own worst years, even when I gave him every reason to set it down. I stand here today only because he refused to stop believing a prodigal might still find his way home, however long the road stretched out in front of both of us."

Ruth's own decline began not long after Everett's passing, a slow fading of memory and strength that Jerry recognized, watching it unfold across those difficult months, as its own kind of long

goodbye, and he made the drive to Newnan every single Sunday afternoon he could manage, sitting with his mother on the same porch where she and Everett had once waited out so many of his own worst years, reading her the Ninety-First Psalm on the evenings her memory grew too uncertain to hold a full conversation but never once forgot the shape of that particular Scripture, her lips moving faintly along with his own recitation even in her final confused weeks.

"You were always my favorite of the two hard blessings the Lord gave me," Ruth told him, on one of her clearer afternoons near the very end, her hand thin and papery in his own. "Your father and I used to say that to each other, quiet, when nobody else was listening. You cost us more worry than any child rightly should, Jerry, but you gave it back tenfold, every bit of it, in these last years. I want you to know I saw it. Every bit of the man you finally became. I want you to know I'm not leaving this world one particle sorry for any of the years I spent believing you'd get there."

Ruth followed her husband some three years later, and Jerry buried his mother beside his father on a gray February afternoon, understanding, walking away from that graveside with Sarah's steady hand in his, that he had now outlived both the parents who had first taught him the psalm that followed him through a jungle valley and every dark year afterward — a debt of faith he understood he could only repay forward, in the lives of the broken soldiers still arriving, week after week, at the Valley Company's front gate.

The Valley Company marked its fifth anniversary that same spring with a small gathering in the mission's courtyard, dozens of current and former members returning to share testimony over a modest potluck supper, and Marcus, sober now going on nine years himself and running the program's day-to-day operations with a steadiness that continually humbled Jerry to witness, stood to speak near the evening's close, a folded letter visible in his shirt pocket.

"Sergeant Gatchell's the one who told me, years back, that waiting to be finished before reaching out to my own father was just another way of staying hidden," Marcus told the gathered crowd, his voice carrying an ease it had not possessed in his own earliest years at the mission. "Took me considerably longer than it took him to actually believe that. But I wrote my daddy a letter, finally, about four years back now, and this—" he touched the folded paper in his pocket "—this is the one he sent back last month, inviting me up to Ohio for his seventieth birthday. First time I'll have seen him face to face in going on fifteen years." He looked out at the gathered veterans, many of them men Jerry had personally walked through their own darkest weeks. "I stand up here most Tuesdays telling other men there's a road back from wherever they've wandered off to. I want you all to know I'm not just preaching it. I'm walking it myself, same as every one of you, one honest day at a time."

Jerry watched Marcus sit back down to a round of quiet, warm applause, and felt something in his chest swell with a pride considerably larger than anything he had experienced at his own achievements — the particular, multiplying joy of watching a man he had once carried through his darkest week now carrying others through their own, the grace extended to Jerry eight years earlier rippling outward now through a whole company of soldiers he had never expected to shepherd. He thought of Wallace's old teaching about a man holding both roles across a single lifetime, the son who comes home and the father who runs out to meet the next one, and understood, watching Marcus fold that letter carefully back into his shirt pocket, that the whole Valley Company had become exactly that — a chain of prodigals and waiting fathers both, each man passing forward whatever grace had first found him.

* * *

Boone made the trip down from where he'd settled in Tennessee for Ruth's funeral, the two old army friends standing together at the graveside in a companionable silence neither felt any particular need to fill with words, and it was Boone, walking back to the cars afterward, who finally spoke what Jerry himself had been turning over privately for weeks.

"Your mama and daddy got to see the whole of it, Jerry," Boone said. "Not just the wreckage. The whole restoration, start to finish, right up to grandbabies bearing your daddy's own name. Not every prodigal's parents live long enough to see that much of the harvest. Yours did. I think that's its own particular mercy, worth sitting with a while, even in the middle of grieving them."

"I think about that every day," Jerry admitted. "Wish I'd given them more years of the restored version and fewer of the wreckage. But I've stopped letting that wish curdle into the old shame these past years, Boone. Wallace taught me that particular lesson slow, same as he's taught me most things. The Lord doesn't need me spending what's left of my own years mourning the years I can't get back. He needs me spending them on the Dannys and the Colemans still out there, same as your letters kept spending themselves on me, all those years I never once wrote back."

* * *

It was on an ordinary Tuesday evening, some eight years into his work at the mission, that Jerry found himself standing at that same front gate near dusk, locking up the meeting hall after a Bible study. Wallace's own declining health had begun requiring Jerry to lead more often, when he saw a figure collapse on the sidewalk beyond the gate — a young man, gaunt and shaking, a faded field jacket hanging loose on a frame that had clearly not eaten a proper meal in longer than was safe.

Jerry felt the whole of his own arrival, eight years earlier, rise up in him at once — the same sidewalk, near enough, the same collapse, the same gaunt desperation he himself had once worn as his only remaining garment — and ran, without a single moment's hesitation, through the gate and down the block, reaching the young man just as he tried, weakly, to push himself back up onto his knees.

"I've got you, son," Jerry said, kneeling beside him, one arm coming around the young man's shoulders with the same steady, unhurried strength Noblit had once offered Jerry himself on this identical stretch of sidewalk. "You're not alone out here anymore. Whatever brought you to this gate tonight, you've found the right door. I promise you that plainly."

The young man looked up at him with a hollow, disbelieving exhaustion Jerry recognized in his own bones. "Don't know why I came here," he managed. "Just heard some fella at a shelter downtown say there was a place that took in soldiers. Didn't figure it'd still be open, this late."

"It's open," Jerry said, helping him slowly to his feet, bearing most of the young man's weight without complaint. "Been open eight years now, on account of a night not so different from this one, when a man not so different from you collapsed on this exact sidewalk and found somebody willing to run out and meet him instead of waiting for him to find his own way in." He guided the young man through the gate, toward the mission's warmly lit entrance. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Danny," the young man said. "Danny Ruiz. Third Battalion, out of Fort Benning. Got back from Panama eighteen months ago. Been going downhill pretty steady ever since."

"Well, Danny Ruiz," Jerry said, "my name's Jerry Gatchell. Green Beret, myself, a long time back, in a jungle valley you've probably never heard of, fighting a war most folks would rather forget entirely. I understand more of what you're carrying tonight than you might expect a stranger to understand. And I want you to hear something plain, before we get you inside to a hot meal and a warm bed. You've got a new Commander waiting for you here, if you're willing to enlist under Him. He's the only one I've ever served under who's never once, not for a single day, abandoned a soldier still willing to fight."

* * *

Doc Willis arrived within minutes of Jerry's call, moving through his familiar examination with the same unhurried thoroughness he had once brought to Jerry's own arrival, and pronounced Danny malnourished and exhausted but fundamentally sound, in need of rest and food considerably more than immediate hospitalization. Wallace appeared not long after, drawn by the commotion despite the late

hour, and stood quietly in the doorway a moment, watching Jerry settle a blanket over the young soldier's shoulders with a tenderness that had once, eight years earlier, been extended to Jerry himself in this same building.

"Feels like watching the whole thing come round again," Wallace said quietly, once Danny had been settled into a cot and Doc Willis had gone to fetch a proper meal from the kitchen. "Different soldier, different war, same mercy meeting him at the same gate."

"I keep thinking about that, Henry," Jerry admitted, the two of them stepping out into the hallway to let Danny rest. "About how many gates like this one there'd have to be, to catch every single man still out there tonight, still convinced his own worst chapter's got to be his last one. Feels like an ocean some evenings, the scale of it. More broken soldiers than any one mission, any one Valley Company, could ever hope to reach."

"That's not your work to reach the ocean, Jerry," Wallace said gently. "Never was, and it never will be. Your work's this one gate, this one soldier, this one Tuesday night. The Lord's got other gates standing open in other cities, other men He's raising up same as He raised you, to tend them. You're not meant to carry the whole ocean. Just this one particular shore, faithfully, for as long as He's got you stationed here." He rested a hand briefly on Jerry's shoulder. "Eight years, Jerry. I still remember carrying you in through that same door myself, half convinced you wouldn't make it through the night. Watching you carry Danny in tonight — that's about as plain a picture of Ephesians four as I've witnessed in all my years at this mission. The old has gone. The new really has come. I don't say that lightly, and I don't say it about every man who walks through that door. I say it about you because I've watched it be true, gradual and hard-won and entirely real, across every single one of these eight years."

Jerry sat with Danny long into that night, the young man finally sleeping soundly in one of the mission's cots after a hot meal and Doc Willis's careful examination, and walked out afterward to the courtyard garden that had witnessed so much of his own slow transformation across these eight years, settling onto the familiar bench beneath a sky thick with early spring stars.

Lord, he prayed, the same honest, unpolished prayer he had learned to offer across all these years, I don't know how many more Dannys are still out there tonight, still fighting some version of the same war I fought, still convinced their own worst chapter has to be their last one. I know I can't save every single one of them. I know that's Your work, not mine, however much of the carrying You've asked me to help shoulder along the way. But I'm asking You tonight, same as I asked that first desperate night on this same bench eight years ago, to keep using whatever's left of this broken old soldier, for exactly as long as You've got use for him. I've fought the good fight, Lord, or at least I've started fighting it, more honestly than I ever managed before I found my way to this gate. I don't know that the race is ever fully finished this side of glory. But I mean to keep running it, every single day You grant me, and I mean to keep pointing every soldier You send through that gate toward the only Commander who's never once let a single one of us fight alone.

Danny's own recovery, in the weeks and months that followed that first collapsed night, traced a path Jerry recognized in nearly every particular — the early, grudging suspicion of the mission's routines, the sudden collapse into grief during a Thursday Scripture study when Wallace read aloud the same Ninety-First Psalm that had once carried Jerry through his own first Vietnam nights, the halting first attempt at a letter home to a mother who had not heard from him in over a year. Jerry sat with him through each stage without hurrying it, remembering his own impatience with his own healing in those first difficult weeks, understanding now, watching from the other side of the process, exactly how much of that early suspicion and grief was simply the necessary labor of a soul learning, slowly, that it was finally safe to stop bracing for the next blow.

"You keep telling me it gets easier," Danny said one evening, some six weeks into his stay, sitting with Jerry in the same courtyard garden where Jerry himself had once wrestled Wallace's teaching on

submission. "Doesn't feel like it's getting easier yet, Sergeant Gatchell. Feels like it's just getting different kinds of hard."

"That's about the most honest description of this road I've heard from a new man in a long while," Jerry said, with a small, appreciative smile. "I told myself the same lie for a good while, that easier was coming if I could just hold out a little longer. Wallace finally corrected me on it, and I'll pass the correction along to you now, since it's served me well ever since. It's not that it gets easier, Danny. It's that you get stronger, and steadier, and considerably less alone in carrying it. The weight doesn't necessarily shrink. But a man surrounded by the right company can carry a very great deal more than he ever could standing by himself in the dark."

Danny sat with that a long moment, the courtyard's evening settling gold and quiet around them, and Jerry recognized, watching him, the exact posture he had once worn himself on this same bench — not yet believing, not yet fully able to receive the promise, but no longer actively fighting it either, a soldier standing at the very edge of surrender without quite having found the nerve to cross it. "You really think it works, all this?" Danny asked, finally. "Not just for men like you, who had a whole family waiting on the other side. For fellas like me, who burned every bridge I ever had before I even got here."

"I think it works because it was never really about the bridges we burned," Jerry said. "Wallace taught me that early on, and I didn't believe it for a good while either. Grace doesn't wait on us having something left worth saving, Danny. It runs out to meet a man exactly as burned-down as he actually is. That's the whole of the parable Noblit preached my first week here — the father doesn't wait for the son to arrive presentable. Runs out while he's still a long way off, still covered in whatever mess got him there." He met Danny's eyes steadily, and Danny, for the first time since his collapse at the gate, allowed himself something close to a small, tentative nod.

"Is that from the Bible, or from you?" Danny asked.

"Bit of both, I suppose," Jerry said. "Paul told the Galatians to carry each other's burdens, and in that way fulfill the law of Christ. I've come to believe that's about as plain and practical a piece of wisdom as this whole book's got to offer a man in your position. Not carry your own burden better. Carry each other's. That's the whole of what this Valley Company's actually built to do, Danny, whenever you're ready to let it."

* * *

He thought, sitting there beneath the stars, of every hand that had reached him across these eight years and the twenty before them — Everett's fierce, unhesitating letter after Dawson's threat; Ruth's psalm, murmured faithfully even through the fog of her final months; Boone's decades of unanswered faithfulness, writing on and on into a silence he had no guarantee would ever answer back; Boyd's grief-filled goodbye at the mill, which had planted some first small seed of shame Jerry hadn't been ready yet to till into anything useful; Mercer's twenty-year-buried truth about Baxter, finally spoken aloud in a courtyard not unlike this one; Wallace's patient, relentless teaching on submission over gripping tight; Noblit, who had run out that first cold night to meet a collapsed and dying stranger the same way the father in Luke's parable had run to meet his own returning son; Sarah's hard, honest forgiveness, offered long before Jerry had done a single thing to earn it; Michael's guarded, costly offer of a fishing trip; Emily's open, curious grace toward a father she barely remembered. A whole company of witnesses, he understood, each of them a small and different picture of the very verse Wallace had first taught him in this same courtyard — the new creation, arriving not all at once in some single dramatic moment, but assembled patiently, person by person, mercy by mercy, across the whole slow architecture of a redeemed life.

He sat a long while longer beneath the stars, the tattered green beret he still carried, even now, folded in his jacket pocket — no longer a relic of grief and loss, he understood, but a plain reminder of

exactly what a soldier owed the men who marched beside him, in whatever valley the Lord saw fit to station him next. Somewhere down the hall behind him, Danny Ruiz slept a steadier, safer sleep than he had likely known in longer than he could remember, one more soldier further along now in finding the shelter of a Commander who had run out to meet him while he was still a long way off, and further gates would open in the years still waiting, further soldiers still to come, each of them carried the same patient distance Jerry himself had once been carried. And Jerry Gatchell, Green Beret, husband once and father always, addict redeemed and soldier still serving, rose from that bench at last and walked back inside to keep the watch, understanding, with a peace that had taken him the whole of a hard and costly lifetime to receive, that the fight was good, the race was worth the running, and the faith, against every single year that had once conspired to steal it from him, had somehow, by a grace larger than his own worst chapter, been kept.

EPILOGUE

HERE A SOLDIER CAME HOME

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.

— 2 Timothy 4:7-8

Jerry Gatchell died on a Tuesday morning in early spring, twenty-six years to the week after he had first collapsed on the front step of New Hope Rescue Mission, and he died the way Wallace had once told him a soldier of Christ ought to hope to go — not in battle, not in crisis, but quietly, at peace, surrounded by exactly the family his own worst years had once convinced him he'd forfeited for good.

He had kept the watch at the Valley Company for nineteen of those twenty-six years, stepping back from the day-to-day leadership only after his heart first gave him trouble in his early seventies, though he had never fully stepped away — visiting the mission most Tuesdays right up until his final month, still the first man at the gate whenever a new soldier arrived too gaunt and shaking to walk in on his own strength. Marcus had taken over the program's leadership a decade earlier, sober by then more than twenty years himself, and had built on Jerry's foundation a network that now reached four cities across the Southeast, hundreds of veterans finding their way each year through doors Jerry had first propped open with nothing but his own hard-won testimony and a tattered green beret.

He died at Emily's house, in the small downstairs room the family had prepared for him once his strength had finally begun its last, gentle decline, Sarah at his right hand and Michael at his left, Emily herself keeping the kind of careful medical watch her whole career had trained her for, and it was Sarah, in the final hour, who read him the Ninety-First Psalm one last time, the same psalm a Montagnard translator named Y'Blul had first taught a young, terrified sergeant in a jungle valley over half a century earlier.

"He will cover you with his feathers," Sarah read, her voice steady though her eyes were not, "and under his wings you will find refuge."

"Feels like I've been finding it my whole life," Jerry murmured, his own voice barely above a whisper by then, "even the years I didn't know enough to look for it."

* * *

The funeral filled the small country church near Newnan past its ordinary capacity, folding chairs set up in the side aisles and along the back wall, and Pastor Rodney Noblit, himself well into his eighties by then but still sharp enough to insist on delivering the eulogy personally, stood before the gathered mourners and looked out over a congregation that told, more plainly than any words could have, the whole shape of the life being honored that day.

There was Sarah, seated in the front pew beside Michael and Rebecca and their two grown children, and beside her Emily, in her nurse's composure even now, holding her mother's hand. There was Boone, come down from Tennessee one final time, leaning on a cane but upright and present. There was Tom "Bulldog" Mercer, eighty years old himself, his wife beside him, both of them having driven up from Alabama the moment word reached them. There was Doc Willis, retired now but still spry, and Detective Ellison, long since retired from the force himself, and a scattering of gray-haired men from Teague's old rap-group circle who had stayed friends with Jerry across five decades. And filling most of the remaining pews, men of every age from twenty-five to seventy-five, veterans of wars from Vietnam through the Gulf and beyond, every one of them a soldier who had at some point walked through the gate of New Hope or one of its sister missions and found, waiting for him there, a man willing to run out and meet him exactly where he stood.

"I have been a pastor a great many years," Noblit began, his own voice carrying the particular gravity of a man who had buried more members of his flock than he could easily count, "and I want to tell you plainly that I do not often stand before a congregation this large to honor a man who spent the middle third of his life as a homeless addict, sleeping in doorways not four miles from where we're gathered this morning. I say that not to shame his memory, but because Jerry Gatchell would have wanted it said plainly. He never once, in all the years I knew him, asked anybody to pretend the wreckage hadn't happened. He only ever asked us to see what the Lord had built on the other side of it."

He read, then, the full passage from Second Timothy that had once served as Jerry's own chapter epigraph, the verse Jerry had asked to have read again at this very service. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," Noblit read, his voice steady. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." He looked up from the page. "Jerry told me once, sitting in my office not two years after his own arrival at our gate, that he didn't know if the race was ever fully finished this side of glory. I believe he was right about that, for every one of us still running it. But I believe, standing here today, that Jerry Gatchell crossed his own particular finish line this week, and crossed it running toward the very Commander he spent the second half of his life pointing other broken soldiers toward."

* * *

Michael rose to speak next, and stood a long moment at the front of the church before he found his voice, Rebecca's hand resting steady on his shoulder from the front pew.

"I spent the first twenty years of my life believing my father was a man who couldn't be trusted to keep a promise," Michael said finally. "I spent the last twenty-six believing exactly the opposite, and watching him prove it fresh, every single day, to me and to hundreds of other sons who weren't even his own by blood." He paused, steadying himself. "My father used to tell me the Lord doesn't waste a single wasted year, if a man finally hands them over honest. I didn't fully believe that for a long while either. But I buried my father this week having watched him spend every one of his reclaimed years exactly the way that verse promised — not wasted, not one of them, right up to the very last."

He looked out at the gathered veterans filling the church's back rows, men Jerry had personally walked through their own darkest weeks across two and a half decades. "I know a lot of you called him Sergeant. Some of you called him Chaplain, near the end, once the state finally recognized the ministry work he'd already been doing for twenty years without any title at all. I got to call him Dad, which took

me a good while longer to feel entitled to than it probably should have. But I think all of us in this room, whatever we called him, knew him for the same thing underneath it. A man who ran out to meet you while you were still a long way off, same as it says in that old parable he loved so well. I don't know a finer thing to have carved on a stone, when all's said and done."

* * *

They buried him beside Everett and Ruth, in the small church cemetery where three generations of Gatchells now rested beneath the same wide Georgia sky, and Marcus, standing at the graveside afterward with the tattered green beret in his own hands — Jerry's final instruction, delivered weeks earlier, had been plain and characteristically humble: not buried with him, but passed forward, the way everything worthwhile in his life had eventually been passed forward — spoke the closing words before the small crowd began, slowly, to disperse.

"Sergeant Gatchell told me once that a soldier doesn't honor the fallen by wasting the years he was given instead of them," Marcus said, holding the beret with a care that matched its considerable weight. "I mean to carry that instruction forward, same as he carried Baxter's. This beret's going up on the wall of the Valley Company's front office, where every soldier who walks through that gate can see it, and be told the story behind it, for as long as that mission stands." He looked around at the gathered veterans, at Sarah and Michael and Emily, at Mercer and Boone and Doc Willis, at every life this one redeemed man had touched across the whole long arc of his second chance. "I don't believe Jerry Gatchell would want us standing here in grief today, not for long anyway. I believe he'd want us standing here in gratitude, and then he'd want every single one of us walking back out that gate and finding the next soldier still lying somewhere out there in the dark, still waiting on somebody willing to run."

* * *

New Hope Rescue Mission's Valley Company program marked its thirtieth anniversary four years later, having by then grown into a network spanning nine cities and having walked more than six thousand veterans through some portion of the same recovery Jerry Gatchell had once walked alone in a rented room above a laundromat, certain his own story had already reached its final, wasted chapter. A modest bronze plaque hangs today beside the mission's front gate, fixed to the very stretch of sidewalk where a broken Green Beret once collapsed on a winter night and found, waiting for him there, a man willing to run.

It reads simply: Here a soldier came home. Psalm 137:4. Luke 15:20. 2 Timothy 4:7.

The gate remains open still, every hour of every day, for whichever soldier the Lord sends next.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read **From the Jungle to Jesus**.

Although Jerry Gatchell is a fictional character, his story reflects the very real experiences of countless men and women who have served our nation with courage and sacrifice. Many returned home carrying wounds that could not be seen—wounds of grief, trauma, loneliness, guilt, and despair. Some found themselves battling addiction. Others lost their families, their homes, or even their hope.

Too often, these heroes have been forgotten.

My prayer is that this novel will remind us that every veteran has a story, every homeless person has a name, and every life has value because every person is created in the image of God.

More importantly, I hope this book points you to the One who changes lives forever.

The central message of this novel is not simply that people can turn their lives around. It is that **Jesus Christ transforms lives**. Human determination has its limits, but God's grace has none. The Gospel is not about becoming a better person; it is about becoming a new creation through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us:

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." — **2 Corinthians 5:17**

Jerry survived the jungles of Vietnam, but the greatest miracle in his life was not surviving a war—it was discovering the peace that only Christ can give. His greatest victory was not won with a rifle but with a surrendered heart at the foot of the cross.

If you are a veteran, thank you for your service. Your sacrifices matter, and your life matters.

If you are struggling with addiction, please know that your story is not over. There is hope.

If you are burdened by guilt, haunted by your past, or convinced that you have gone too far for God to forgive you, remember this: no one is beyond the reach of His grace. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, heal the brokenhearted, and give eternal life to all who trust in Him.

My hope is that **From the Jungle to Jesus** will encourage believers to extend Christ's love to those who have been overlooked, inspire churches to reach veterans and the homeless with compassion, and remind every reader that redemption is possible because of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for allowing me to share this story with you. May it strengthen your faith, deepen your appreciation for God's amazing grace, and encourage you to share the hope of the Gospel with a world that desperately needs it.

May God richly bless you.

In Christ,

Dr. Paul Crawford

A Closing Prayer

“Father, I thank You for every reader who has walked through these pages. For the one who does not yet know You, I pray they would hear Your voice and receive Your Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. For the one who already believes, I pray You would set their heart ablaze with urgency—to speak, to share, to love, and to never be silent. May we all live as faithful watchmen, sounding the trumpet until the day You call us home. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.”

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a)

Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong.

The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever. Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.



HE SURVIVED THE JUNGLES OF VIETNAM. BUT ONLY JESUS COULD RESCUE HIS SOUL.

★

Staff Sergeant Jerry Gatchell was a Green Beret—a warrior trained for the most dangerous missions, a leader who would never leave a man behind. In the jungles of Vietnam, he fought with courage, loyalty, and honor.

**He survived the war...
but the war never left him.**

Haunted by nightmares and the faces of fallen brothers, Jerry returned home to a country that no longer understood him. Lost in pain, guilt, and isolation, he turned to alcohol and drugs to silence the memories. Slowly, everything he once loved slipped away—his marriage, his children, his freedom, and his dignity.

For nearly twenty years, Jerry lived on the streets, forgotten by the world and consumed by addiction. He became another invisible face in the crowd—a veteran homeless, hopeless, and broken.

But on one cold winter night, everything changed. When Jerry walked into New Hope Rescue Mission, he met Pastor Rodney Noblit—a man who saw beyond the uniform, beyond the addiction, and beyond the brokenness. He saw a soul worth saving.

**This is more than a story of war.
This is a story of grace.**

From the Jungle to Jesus will encourage every veteran, every struggler, and every believer that no life is too broken, no past too dark, and no person beyond the reach of

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE.

*"He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds."*

— Psalm 147:3

★

**A BROKEN SOLDIER. A SOVEREIGN SAVIOR.
A NEW LIFE.**



**NEW HOPE
RESCUE MISSION**
JESUS CHANGES EVERYTHING



FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO THE CROSS.

A powerful story of:

- ★ Courage in combat
- ★ Invisible wounds
- ★ Addiction and despair
- ★ Homelessness and broken relationships
- ★ Forgiveness and restoration
- ★ The life-changing power of Jesus Christ



