

**43 AMERICANS CHOPPERED INTO
THE VALLEY. 7 WALKED OUT.**



... a war classic.
Move over, Norman Mailer.
Make way, James Jones.
—London Thames Review

A NOVEL OF THE AFGHAN WAR

PAUL AVALONE

AN IMPORTANT AND DISTINCTLY AMERICAN BOOK . . . A BIG
NOVEL IN THE TRADITION OF *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD* . . .

—Publisher's New Look

Superb. . . A treasure. . . A masterpiece of war fiction. A full-blooded
inspection right into the heart of the Afghan war through the eyes and
hearts of the line dogs fighting it.

—Charleston Tidewater Ledger

Unforgettable. . . A beautifully crafted novel, authentic and powerful, filled
with heroism, terror, politics, profound waste, and, ultimately, love in the
triumphant of good. . . Gripping. . . To become a war classic. Move over,
Norman Mailer. Make way, James Jones.

—London Thames Review

Were I a novelist rather than a journalist, I would envy the triumph here
and try to ignore the novel, and I would certainly not promote it nor the
author. Instead, I glory at the literary achievement and want to scream from
the mountaintop that perhaps the adage is true, that there is more truth in
fiction than in non-fiction.

—Jan Krackauer

They should read this in the Obama White House, on Capitol Hill, in the
Pentagon and at the Bush and Cheney ranches. But they will not want to
believe it. They will refuse to believe it.

—UK Sun-Guardian

IT WILL DRAW YOU IN AND EVENTUALLY SUCK THE VERY
BREATH OUT OF YOU. . . A TRIUMPH!

—J.K. Sibley, Boston Times

. . . oozes authenticity. The author makes it clear in his depiction of the
infantry GI that he has been to war with them . . . Yes, this is a fictional
story, but the men and women, from privates to colonels to the 4-star, are
so real that you will know them—those standing at attention in the ranks
around you.

—Screaming Eagle Weekly

A WAR STORY OF THIS GENERATION. Nothing short of
revolutionary in its telling. Nothing short of profound in its frightening
message of the injustices we are inflicting upon our soldiers caught in
battlefield political correctness.

—Iowa Writer's Wordworks Quarterly

. . . a novel that gives us a story of war in its most raw essence. It will lay claim as **THE ONE BOOK TO BE READ ABOUT THE AMERICAN WAR IN AFGHANISTAN.**

—Kevin Nevisoll, *Denver Times-Intelligencer*

A perfect meshing of style and substance, **BLISTERINGLY ORIGINAL.** Avallone's prose is choppy and abrupt and acrobatic, and you can't pull your eyes away. Like his anti-hero ex-Marine Kyle Wolfe, Avallone plays by his own rules. . . .

—Orange Coast Literary View

I left this book lying around for nearly a year unread because I had not heard of the author. Big mistake. Read it now!

—Sébastien Jéunger

For the 99.8% of Americans who know the Afghan War only from snippets reported in the lazy media, *Tattoo Zoo* will put you there personally, vividly, viscerally. For the .2% who were there, be prepared to relive it.

—The Green Beret Flash

AN IMPORTANT NOVEL OF A FUTILE WAR. . . Sit back and allow yourself to be swept into the expansive story told in brilliant simplicity in the language of the very generation we've called upon to do the fighting.

—Peter Yank, *Houston Alamo Current*

Hard. Cold. Exact. . . . Avallone's voice is original, disarmingly casual, rough and streetwise to the point of giving an appearance of pulp fiction. That is the brilliance here. It is anything but pulp. It is literary.

—Book Me!

**. . . MEGA-COOL . . . FEROCIOUS . . . SURPRISINGLY MOVING . . .
THREE DAYS THAT WILL DEFINE THE AFGHAN WAR . . .**

—Summer Elliott, *The Atlantic Standard*

In his debut novel Avallone does what Karl Marlantes did in *Matterhorn*, John Del Vecchio did in *The 13th Valley* and James Jones did in *The Thin Red Line*. . . Take note, *Tattoo Zoo* will be a classic.

—San Diego Palm Chronicle

TATTOO ZOO

A NOVEL OF THE AFGHAN WAR

PAUL AVALLONE



ST. MARTIAN'S PRESS

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A NOVEL OF THE AFGHAN WAR

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To the American and Nato soldiers who fought the Afghan War
regardless that their senior commanders, civilian and military,
were engaging them in warfare with mistaken assumptions
about the enemy and no intent to vanquish them.

TATTOO ZOO

A Brief History Before Day One

Tattoo.

Zoo.

Two simple words.

One, permanent-inked body markings.

And, caged animals.

Tattoo Zoo is an Army infantry platoon.

Not Airborne, not Ranger, not Special Forces. A regular leg infantry platoon like any other in the Army, no better no worse.

Thirty-six soldiers today, Day One.

Nothing special about these guys, not as a whole.

The platoon leader and the platoon sergeant have their Ranger Tab, and Staff Sergeant Ketchum too, along with their paratrooper wings and air assault wings, as do a couple of the others, like Staff Sergeant Utah, who, along with the platoon sergeant, is sapper-qualified—but the thirty-some rest are just average-Joe off-the-shelf GIs.

Infantry.

Riflemen.

Grunts.

The only distinction here is the name, which came in Iraq two years ago when a couple of colonels were escorting five visiting congressmen through the platoon's barracks—

the soldiers mostly just in running shorts in the oppressive heat, nearly every one of them with tattoos on arms, legs, torsos, and Platoon Sergeant Travis Redcloud completely inked-out covered in them

—with the congressman from Connecticut trying to act like a regular

everyday-one-of-the-guys himself by nonchalantly throwing out with a chortle, "What is this, a tattoo zoo?"

And the name stuck.

Who wouldn't want a cool nickname like that.

It aint a question.

Statement of fact: Who wouldn't.

Tattoo Zoo.

Ice cold.

Sharply clipped off the tongue, the hard Ts and Z, "*Tattoo Zoo*."

Fahrenheit twenty-five below.

And even more awesome when others shortened it to just The Zoo.

Then next thing, they're even leaving out the The.

Zoo.

As in, "*What we got tomorrow, where've we got Zoo goin out on patrol?*"

Fahrenheit -50.

Then someone somewhere calls them Zoosters, and that sticks. As in today's patrol, "*Zoosters gonna be taking the HTT up to Wajma, they can scope out the lay of the land at the same time.*"

And Sniper Sergeant Rodriquez —

back then in Iraq just a nothing nobody corporal who'd enlisted back in '03 as a way out of 11/29 in county lockup for small-time drugs and everyday escalating petty gangbanger thuggery in the Bakersfield barrios where he'd inked tats since he was a kid

—he drew up the *Tattoo Zoo* design, the skull and the roses and the single bullet hole right between the eyes for the first O in Zoo, and he inked the tatt first on himself right there in Iraq, on his own chest, using a mirror.

And others, if they deserved it, he inked them too.

On chests, shoulders, backs, thighs, and the wide arms of a couple of the guys who had weightlifters' ripped biceps.

And the tattoo became like the name, the coolest thing to have. In the company then battalion and the whole brigade. Guys wanted in the Zoo just for the tatt.

But the tatt's not for free, you don't get it just by being in the Zoo.

You've got to earn it.

Redcloud, Rodriquez, Ketchum and Utah and those few who've been in the Zoo since those nasty Iraq days, they judged who earned it back then and judge today who earns and gets it.

Preferably, if it's you, not posthumously.

As Pfc Holloway would say, "*Post—humorless—ly.*"

And not because he's a clever guy with a brilliant sense of comic irony, but because he just can't pronounce it properly.

Yeh, Holloway runs it all together, "*Post-humorlessly.*" And laughs *heh*

heh heh when someone like Doc Eberly looks at him and just shakes his head and corrects him even though he knows it's an utter waste of time, "*It's posthumously, idiot.*"

And Pfc Holloway, he's going to go one better and answer that with "*Easy enough for you to say, Doc, sergeant college bookworm dork doofus.*"

And laugh *heh heh heh* even louder and more insolent than before.

Day One, Late Morning

In Wajma Gorge

Three Zoo trucks—
two uparmored humvees and an Mrap between them
—are picking their way down the boulder-strewn stream in this narrow gorge that goes straight up in a steep V a couple thousand feet.

Just rock and shale. Pines and cedars and gnarly scrub oaks and thorned bushes growing out of fissures and cracks.

The gorge in shadow. From the bottom here in the stream you can see just a swath of blue sky way up top there on the ridgelines behind which the sun would be where on the maps it's etched as a border and labeled on the other side as Pakistan.

Down here in the stream it's Afghanistan.

"*Affuckingstan*" Pfc Holloway calls it, 'cause he heard it from someone once and loves saying it that way, always with his little *heh-heh* snicker, like he himself has just made it up.

It's "*The Stan*" to guys like Staff Sergeant Ketchum, who's been here before and is now a squad leader and next in line to take over if Platoon Sergeant Redcloud buys it. As Ketchum put up on Facebook before the Zoo deployed here four months ago, "*Stan #2 for me and the Zoo. See ya!*"

The first, Stan #1, being four years ago.

Pre Iraq for the Zoo.

Pre the cool nickname.

Pre the tatt.

And it's these four years later and Redcloud and Ketchum who were here before in the Zoo and the other guys who were here but in other units don't look at it as fighting a war to win it anymore. While the younger soldiers, like Pfc Holloway, who were hardly even teens back when this thing started after 9-11, even they all know now someone who's died here

and guys who've lost a leg or fingers or nuts here, this time, this year, while they barely if ever see the enemy who blow off those legs and fingers and nuts with IEDs and distant ambushes and who they rarely if ever find the bodies of to count after the brief firefight, if there even is one.

For them, the younger guys, in the infantry in particular because they want to be warriors like Audie Murphy and John Wayne and Schwarzenegger and Eastwood, their attitude is exactly like Sergeant Rodriguez says often: *"It's a shitty war, 'mano, but it's the only one we got."*

Affuckingstan.

These days, now that Iraq's wound down to zilch, if you want to be an American warrior, a fighting man in combat, you can kiss off that place, there's no fighting there in Iraq anymore.

This here is where it's rockin'.

Affuckingstan. *The only one we got.*

Where these three Zoo gun-trucks are right now.

In the stream.

Down at the bottom of Wajma Gorge.

Two humvees and an Mrap between them.

Picking their way around the boulders, water up over their wheels, splashing up on the big Mrap's V-shaped hull designed to deflect the upward blast of the enemy's ever-bigger IEDs.

Mrap, or officially MRAP, for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected; pronounced for short simply *"M-rap"*.

Or, even shorter, like the humvee, just *"truck"*.

But three times the size and heft of a humvee. Massive in contrast.

And cooler looking, sharp-edged boxy, futuristic, robotic.

The *mine* part of Mine Resistant, that's IEDs.

Formally, Improvised Explosive Devices.

Roadside bombs for short.

Just kaboom for really short.

That *"kaboom"* is only really when you can laugh about it later that day because it didn't get you, any of you, no one in the platoon, not that day. It's *"kaboom"* with a laugh because that's the way you try and ignore your fear, the way you try and pretend that you don't care, because you know every time you get into one of these trucks, no matter how good a soldier you are, no matter how proficient, how smart, how lucky, suddenly out of nowhere before you even know what's happening —

and it's probably the last thing you will ever hear, that one instant, and not even know it, not even hear it, really, except maybe later as a video-loop played back in your mind once you're in heaven, or hell

—that kaboom can come of a sudden and you can do nothing about it.

So, if you're a turret gunner or up front as driver or vehicle commander where you've got a good view of the roadway ahead, you try and see a telltale

sign of irregular dirt, rocks overturned, or even a glint off an inch or two of bare copper wire left exposed. If you're a squad leader or platoon sergeant you demand that your drivers stay out of the well-worn ruts of decades of travel that make riding easy and instead take the roughest part of the road, where no one drives, because, simple common sense efficient practicality of the insurgent bomb-planter, the kaboom's going to be buried where everyone drives or is most likely to drive.

Either way, any truck any day can meet a kaboom. And the four or five soldiers in that truck, if the kaboom's big enough, have just earned their loved ones back home that big windfall SGLI payout of \$400,000.

Serviceman's Group Life Insurance. Your family's winning lottery ticket, and it's only costing you less than twenty bucks a month, and then Big Army throws in a sweet bonus of a hundred grand on top just 'cause it's a swell organization. Totaled up, a cool half million, and all that's required of the guys in the unlucky truck is they've gotta not ever wake up or breathe a lick after the kaboom.

Which, with ever more skilled enemy bombmakers' bigger and better kaboom products, is all that ever much more likely.

And every guy in the trucks every day knows it and knows he can't shoot his gun back at the kaboom or charge through it or call in artillery or air on it, and that gives him a feeling of helplessness on top of the vulnerability because he cannot be a soldier and fight back, and he just secretly hopes that if there's going to be a kaboom that doesn't bring laughter afterwards it sure as shit had better be on the truck in front or the truck behind.

No kaboom of a roadside bomb coming here today, not to worry, you're in a stream.

No road.

No roadside.

Just water and boulders.

And the Americans have never come this far up anyway. They never come up here. No use wasting an IED on where the infidels don't go.

Nothing here. Just a running stream of water swirling around boulders.

And mountainsides so close you can almost reach out and scrape your gloved hands on the rocks as you bounce and jerk down the gorge.

Maybe a mile to go back to the village Wajma.

That's where these Zoosters in these three trucks will rejoin the rest of the platoon, after this recon they took up the gorge until it narrowed down to just a waterfall, impassable any farther, end of the line.

Back to Wajma they're headed, then from there later the whole Zoo will return the dozen miles switchbacking down the widening gorge to home.

Their COP.
As in Combat Outpost.
Just Cop for short.

A tiny piece of twenty-first century civilization surrounded by walls of Hesco barriers topped with razor wire, set down smack dab in the middle of nowhere.

Miles and many hours still from here.

Yeh shit yeh, get back to the Cop.

Wooden barrack B-huts with heat in the winter and AC the rest of the time.

Conex sit-down vinyl-curtained partitioned shitters.

Hot showers and hot chow.

And the internet. Email and MySpace and Facebook.

Porn, when you can get it past the Army firewalls.

Home.

Sometime this afternoon. If all goes according to plan.

If they don't throw an axle.

Or blow an engine.

Have a rollover.

Get ambushed.

Nothing but streambed and mountainsides between the village Wajma and the Cop.

According to plan.

The GIs in these three trucks've got to make it whole back to the village Wajma and the rest of the Zoo first before they can start thinking about home.

Which is why they're a good distance apart, these three trucks.

Thirty, forty meters between them.

Oldest lesson in combat, Rule #1:

Don't bunch up; one round gets you all.

Not really the case, one round, with these armored vehicles, especially the big Mrap, but then there's Combat Rule #2 to consider:

Separation makes for dispersed targets in an ambush. The more dispersed the better.

Unless the enemy insurgents are spread out themselves, dispersed hidden up high in the rocks, five or six or ten, each with a separate target, each with an RPG and four or five rounds.

Rocket-Propelled Grenade.

The Commie Bloc version of the old bazooka, ten bucks maybe wholesale on the international market. Shoulder tube, pistol grip, long snout-looking grenade sticking out the front. Trigger pulled, *paashooooop!*, the rocket's shot, fins flipping out, and flying just slow enough that if you've got focused vision you can watch its blur coming your way and you groan

an *Oh shit*, pleading that it's not stopping to say hi but going right on by, thank you very much, better luck next time.

RPG.

Designed to go through things—exploding on contact, actually, and all its flaming power and its big and little bitty steel parts going through those things.

Like doors and windows.

And buildings and vehicles. Like armored trucks.

And the people in them.

An RPG will make hamburger out of flesh, bone and organs.

A half-dozen insurgents somewhere hidden up there with RPGs, they'll each aim his launcher at the open gun turrets. That's the most vulnerable spot from above, and the guns in those turrets are these trucks' only real firepower.

Insurgent Ambush Rule #1: *Take out the turret gunner.*

Might even get some of the guys down inside too on a good angle.

Which is why the three Zoo turret gunners here are alert.

Heads constantly in motion scanning.

Faceless and nameless behind the thick steel and glass of the turrets, and near impossible to tell one from another in their Kevlar helmets and bulky body armor, their ballistic-protection eyepro wraparound Wiley-Xs or Oakleys and their dust masks and scarves. Hands in \$40 online-purchased gloves. Not a square inch of skin showing, except maybe a glimpse of the neck or chin.

Just the tops of their helmets peeking up out of the open turrets.

Not that any of that armor'll do any good against a direct hit RPG in the turret.

Which is why, again, these three Zoosters are alert on their guns.

RPGs, just call em rockets for short.

The first incoming rocket's most likely going to miss, but it sure increases your chances there isn't a second or third rocket if you've seen where the first came from so you can *slam bam thank you ma'am* pulverize that spot to really really *really* mess up the insurgent's aim.

R.I.P not RPG.

Specialist Lee Tran is the turret gunner in the lead truck, a humvee. On his big .50-cal machinegun.

You put yourself in his place in that turret and imagine this very moment he's thinking there're Taliban up there hidden aiming their RPGs, he's not seeing a rocket coming his way, not the first one, it's not for him, it's taking out the gunner behind him, or the one behind him.

You start seeing that first rocket taking you out, you ask to get down off the gun, down inside, a driver or a dismount, and then there inside when you start seeing that rocket coming straight right through the

window at you, you ask to stay back, sarge, man, please dude, you'll do anything, you'll even be the cook's helper, washing all those pots and pans breakfast and dinner. That don't work, they don't need another cook's helper, you'll shoot a 30-round mag off in the conex latrine at like 3a.m. to get sent asap, first chopper out, to the real rear, the big safe forward operating base, the FOB, or Fob, for a psych eval where, the better you can snow-job the Army shrink the better chance you'll land a job doing jack-shit in supply or the motor pool at brigade and wetting your dick every night in one of the chunky pfc and spec-4 soldierettes, white, black and brown, who get all hot-n-goey just hearing your war stories from back where the RPGs and 7.62s fly and roadside bombs are always out there waiting just around the next bend to blow you to heroic smithereens.

You wish.

Not the kabloom blown to smithereens part. Blown by those wet pussies.

As in BJ blown.

Lewinsky blown.

You wish.

Those soldierettes, they're sluts, every last one of them, and more so, they're "*Worthless sluts!*", you bet your frickin ass they are, every skanky last one of them, because they aint giving it up for you, dude, you kiddin? For you? Ha ha, what a scream. In your dreams. Wet dreams.

Fact is, odds are 10 to 1 they aint giving it up for anyone here in the Stan 'cause odds are they've got a husband and kids back home, and everyone knows that wives and mothers are far less hungry to give it up to just anybody, especially a zit-sprouting shitbird infantry goober.

If they're going to give it up, they're doing it on the side on the sly with someone a couple of ranks higher, guy or gal, as boyfriend or girlfriend, or with a married first sergeant or lite colonel as adulterer and mistress in double secret forbidden fornication.

Besides, there's maybe one soldierette in a hundred who gets hot-n-anything hearing war stories, any more than there's one in a hundred who back home thinks date night at the movies means *300* or *Clash of the Titans*.

Rambo's for guys, *Twilight's* for girls.

Die Hard's for guys. *Bride Wars* is for chicks.

And guys who dream themselves as heroes with blazing guns don't settle their asses down safe and comfy on a big Fob, not on your life.

Dude, if you've signed up for the infantry in this all-volunteer army, you're one of them, a Rambo dream-a-be, and unless you're a real head case, certified, wacko, nutso, Looney Tunes on Mars, you wind up back in the gun turret cuz you've begged to go back because you aint gettin no pussy or BJs even on the Fob and supply and the motor pool are boring do-nuthin snoozes cuz there's no fear and thus no adrenaline rush in either place, and when it comes right down to it all your buds are out there where the war

stories might really happen, and that first round, rocket or 7.62 AK bullet, c'mon dude, you can't let it play mind games on you, you know cock-sucking good-n-plenty it's got the other guy's name on it, that cocksucker, your buddy in the other truck, it's always going to get him first.

You're infantry, a warrior, and you may think you want off the gun and out of patrolling period, a cook or in the motor pool, but it's a day-dream, no more than wishful thinking in moments of stark unshaken anticipatory fear, and unless you really are shell-shocked wacko, you're never going to fire off that magazine in the shitter, because you belong out here not in the rear.

Because you're grunt infantry.

A warrior.

For real.

Down-n-dirty.

A flesh-and-blood warrior, like Audie Murphy and Sergeant York, not play-acting like Stallone and Schwarzenegger and Willis and *Top Gun* Cruise. Sure, cocky on the outside like them all, but on the inside tentative and sometimes scared shitless because it's human nature to be tentative and cautious and afraid when you can be killed out of nowhere from one moment to the next.

And you're in the turret now and tomorrow and the next day in spite of that fear, for real in person not in a movie, because a warrior pushes against the fear, won't let it overcome him, conquer him, enslave him, coward him.

That fear makes him realize his smallness, his insignificance, his vulnerability, and it humbles him underneath that cocky strutting, but he does not allow himself to obsess about it and allow it to bludgeon his own shame and send him crawling to the safe rear.

In spite of that fear, ever-present if only a nagging in the back of the brain, the flesh-and-blood warrior is here.

In Affuckingstan.

Right here in Wajma Gorge.

In the Zoo.

One of thirty-six of the Tattoo Zoo.

And if you haven't yet earned your tattoo, no one's going to give it to you back at brigade, back in the motor pool —

you've got to be way outside the wire, a million miles from that safe Fob, out in that nowhere Bumfuck Egypt, where war stories come out of nowhere, and are lived, and died.

That's where that tatt is earned.

Chill, dude, wake up from those wishful-thinking dreams wide awake born of entirely rational fear, it's etched in stone anyway:

The first round's going to miss by a hair or a foot, and if anything it's going to waste the other guy not you.

Your job's to save his ass before he's hit and everybody else's ass and then your ass too.

That's why you're up top.

Why you've got the big gun. Cleaned and oiled. Locked and loaded now.

Why you're alert.

Like Specialist Lee Tran in the turret of the lead truck. Behind his big awesome .50-cal machinegun aimed ahead downstream.

In the turret of the Mrap a ways behind, that gunner's got his Mark-19 grenade launcher aimed up the mountainside to his left. The Pakistan side.

Farther behind, the rear humvee gunner is faced backwards, aiming his M240-B machinegun upstream, where these three trucks just came.

Front, flanks, rear covered.

Oldest Rule of Combat #3.

Whether on foot or riding. On land, sea or air.

The three gunners each holding on tight to his gun and the turret, jerked and bounced as each truck splashes in the water, slowly picking its way between the boulders, some as big as refrigerators.

A rock house up ahead just downstream, a hundred feet at least up the mountainside, built right into it. The only pretty color the faded teal blue wooden frames of the pane windows. Rough-hewn timber beams for a flat mud roof where a dozen kids—boys and some girls—are watching the approaching trucks.

A zigzag path goes down to the stream here.

Midway, two women are stopped, a plastic pail dripping water on each one's head, their backs turned to the approaching American trucks. Their colorful layered bulky clothing contrasted against the gray rock mountainside. Each with her shawl pulled around concealing her face.

It's what women do in Afghanistan. Shawl pulled around, backs turned. You aint going to see their faces. It's a culture thing. As in Muslim.

Specialist Tran is happy.

Relieved happy.

Simple rule of thumb: *When kids are out in plain sight there are no Taliban.*

Or if there are, they're in the background laying low, waiting to fight another day, not today.

Tran waves to the kids.

All but the two older boys wave back.

And down below—

Inside this lead truck, this humvee, in the seat behind the driver, platoon medic Doc Eberly is looking out up at the rock house.

Wondering out loud, "Winters, how do they live up here . . . ?"

"They'll know in about a month." That's Kyle Wolfe.

Civilian contractor. Was Marine Corps Force Recon.

He's in the seat opposite Doc, with turret gunner Tran's legs and butt standing between them on the flat transmission case cover.

He's wearing a simple headset, like all in here. Plugged in for intercom and radio. Tiny earplug down below his ballcap in one ear, mic curved down across his cheek.

With the soldiers' earplugs hidden under their helmets. Just the curved mic showing.

Wolfe goes on, "This'll all be two foot of virgin white powder."

Driving, Pfc Holloway hoots out, "Woo-hoo, virgins! Gonna get Holloway a virgin!"

Doc Eberly, "Takes one to know one."

"I've got more beaver in a week, Doc, you ever had. Eight to eighty, crippled, blind or crazy. The Holloway Groove."

Again Eberly wonders aloud, "What do they do? How do they eat? What do they eat? How do they keep warm?"

"They're Afghans." From Redcloud up front.

He's the boss, Travis Redcloud. The platoon sergeant.

Sergeant First Class Travis Redcloud.

Seated right behind Redcloud, civilian contractor Wolfe jokes, "Dude's got ten acres of poppies down in Helmand, this is their vacation house. Fly fishing, white-water rafting in the summer. Skiing in winter."

"Like, right," from Pfc Holloway. "I don't see no ski lifts."

"They're Afghans." Wolfe this time, like Redcloud a moment ago. "Run up and down there like mountain goats. Barefoot in the snow."

Pfc Holloway, "Shit." The way he says it, *sheeeee-at*.

Doc Eberly taunts him, "You ever skied, Holloway?"

"Skiing's so yesterday. Last century. Your gran'pa skis. Snowboarding, that's where it's at."

"You ever snowboarded?"

"Gonna. When I get outta this place. Outta the Army. Gonna be the next Shaun White. Make a million bucks drinking Red Bull."

"Drive." Redcloud. Really saying *Shut up and pay attention where you're steering, Private*.

"Com'on, Sarge, I'm a multi-tasker."

Doc Eberly, "Can't even spell it."

"Your mama," Holloway spits back at Doc, and the steering wheel pops out of his hand in a sudden nosedive, water up over the hood, a geyser spraying Spec Tran up top, and Holloway fights the steering wheel, punching the gas, up out of the eddy hole—

Redcloud snapping, "What'd I tell you about getting me wet?"

A proud smirk of a grin from Holloway.

Just twenty, not quite three years in, no wife, no kids, no responsibilities, his whole life ahead, Pfc Holloway's got the world by the tail, can't nothing affect him.

"Aw, Sarge," he exaggerates a whine. "How'm I gonna see that hole? C'mon, you see it? Sheee-at, I'm supposed to have Superman xray eyes?"

Redcloud, "You're bucking for cook, aren't you?"

"Sa-weeeet, no more patrols. Won't never hafta leave the Cop anymore! Chef Holloway in the Holloway Groove. Chef Boyardee Holloway!"

Shit yeh make him cook. He's got his Zoo tatt—three months with the Zoo in Iraq—no need now anymore to go out every day or every other day, each patrol upping the odds that much more of getting his ticket punched, even if it's just one leg lost. One leg, he thinks, he can live with that. *Not my balls, no way, no how, I aint givin up my balls.*

Doc Eberly, "Best rethink that, Sergeant. I don't want him in the D-fac. He'll muck up the chow."

Redcloud, "Good point. Considered. I send you to the mess hall, Holloway, it's gonna be washing pots and pans, not cooking."

Pfc Holloway, "Sheee-at, Sarge, I'll make you eggs t'order every morning. Omelet with everything. Steaks and lobster every ni—" —

"Drive!" from Redcloud just as

crunch! everyone's thrown forward—a submerged boulder run into.

And Tran kicks Holloway in the helmet, "Sonovabitch! Where'd you go to driving school, shitbird?!"

Doc Eberly, "Montessori."

Wolfe chuckles at that.

Kyle Wolfe.

He's not in the Zoo. Not in the Army.

No longer a Marine, with his week stubble of beard and his civilian clothes. No Kevlar helmet either. Just his ballcap—the *Sig Sauer* logo stitched across the brim.

Civilian ballistic vest and civilian ammo rack.

Army-issue M4 carbine, like everyone else.

Wednesday, the first day Wolfe went out with the Zoo, before leaving the Cop, Redcloud had asked him if he had a Kevlar. As in helmet.

Nope.

Why?

"Helmet's for wusses."

Okay, then what about his body armor vest there, that'd be for wusses too, wouldn't it?

"To carry this crap." The attached pouches of ammo and gear, like binos and GPS and first aid pack and Sure-fire flashlight and Leatherman. And *"Habit. Like a second skin. Putting on pants every day."*

And Wolfe had reversed it and proposed to Redcloud right back, *"If you wouldn't be taken down in rank to private for not wearing your Kevlar, would you, would you wear it?"*

Redcloud had thought a bit, then, *"Guess I'm a wuss,"* he'd said. With just the barest of a grin.

And right now Redcloud thinks of that, that moment two days ago, and he wonders if he'd toss aside this helmet that always pinches his forehead, a constant nagging ache. He wonders if he'd strip off this thirty-five pounds of body armor. Army says wear it, sergeant majors and colonels command wear it, he wears it. And he tells his guys they'll wear it all—Kevlar, body armor, eyeprow—when they're outside the wire, *"Cuz the Captain don't wanna be writing home to your mamas your coffin's closed cuz you took a bullet to the head and there's nothing left of your pretty pale face but one big open scabbed-up bleeding zit."*

Holloway here, Redcloud thinks, *he'd toss his Kevlar in a second. Toss his IBA—body armor—run 'round in bermudas and flipflops.*

And Pfc Holloway now manages to get the truck up around the boulder.

A familiar voice comes from the radio, from one of the two trucks following. "That dumbshit Holloway driving? Guys bring your wetsuits? Life rafts? Seen the movie *Titanic*?"

That's Corporal Sandusky, in the Mrap, and Redcloud doesn't even answer. No sense encouraging Sandusky.

Sandusky's voice again, "Gonna hafta grow gills you keep letting Holloway drive."

Again Redcloud won't answer.

Seventeen years in now, Travis Redcloud has been Zoo platoon sergeant since just before Iraq and would be perfectly happy to stay it for the next three years, then at 20 he'll take it one year at a time, he can do thirty standing on his head, and they can put him permanent behind a desk back in the States for all he cares, and then maybe at least he'll get to go see his older kids' baseball and soccer games and be there every evening to sit down at the kitchen table with the three young ones doing their ABCs and 2+2s.

Not like no one sure had for him growing up.

But he doesn't think of that, not those years growing up, not longer than a millisecond, that past is long gone, dead, buried, it doesn't do any good to resurrect it but to haunt you to fill a two-gallon bucket of bile and piss for what can't ever be any different.

The present's all he's got right now. Here, keeping these men all alive. He's confident in his experience, his knowing how to fight in real time, as the bullets fly overhead. He's confident in his knowing how to prepare to fight, how to feel one coming up, when to charge, when to wait and figure it out first, when and how to call in artillery and gunships and let them

clean it up, and he knows the simple, inescapable and irrelevant truth that there's no conquest of victory here, not here in Affuckingstan.

Only his first obligation to get these men under him home alive and in one piece.

Not just these men in these three trucks right now, but all the Zoo. His platoon.

To real home. Stateside.

Where he can bury this 'Stan forever, make this his last deployment and year-in-year-out sleep in his own bed spooned up tight against Brenda every night. *Hmmmmmm, spooned up against Brenda . . .* No, don't go there, don't think about it, it doesn't do any good, you're half a world away and you won't be any closer tomorrow and the next day and the one after, and next month, or the month after. Count em off til the end of May, early June, got to make it to then. Worst case, June/July. And he blocks Brenda, the kids, home, all of it from his mind. He's in Afghanistan, or Af—frickin—istan, it's all the same, here, right now, nowhere else.

Going down this stream, which is widening a little here, as the gorge is opening up, that much closer to the village Wajma down around the next couple of bends maybe, which means that much closer to the secure bosom of the rest of the platoon down there.

"You want to be a cook, Holloway?" he says without even looking over. Eyes betray nothing behind his tinted Oakley wraparound eyeproof constantly scanning ahead. "Blowtorch in the motor pool, we burn the tattoo off."

"The F you do."

"Wanna try me?" Dead serious. Now he grins right at Holloway.

Rare for Redcloud, a grin.

The thorn roses inked up his neck and along his chin and up his cheeks add a cynical hint to the grin.

Kyle Wolfe, "I love the smell of flesh burning in the morning."

Doc Eberly, "Acetylene torch. Six thousand degrees Fahrenheit. That's gotta hurt like a mother."

Redcloud, "Nothing but blue flame."

Holloway, "You got morphine, Doc. Shoot me up, burn it off, sheeeee—at, I don't give a flying fuck, I'll be tripping out in la-la-land."

"No morphine," and Redcloud is back to scanning ahead.

Scanning, always scanning, wary, got to look, they're not back with the platoon yet.

He can't resist, adding, "Six thousand degrees you say, Doc?"

"Six thousand two hundred. Or three hundred."

"What's a hundred degrees, give or take." A quiet snort. "Blue flame, Holloway."

"F you, Sarge. Due respect."

"Smart of you, PFC. Leave that part out" — that *due respect* — "have to write you up. Letter o' Reprimand. Take away that rocker."

Meaning, his rank, down from pfc to just pvt. Ouch!

Redcloud, first impression, you'd think that was an Indian name.

As in Native American Indian.

As in *woo woo woo woo woo*, the war cry.

And the first time a guy did that to him in Basic way long ago when Redcloud was just eighteen, Redcloud stepped to him slowly, calm, and whispered, "What was that again, paleface?" The big Bronx or Brooklyn dude laughed and again went "Woo woo woo," and Redcloud threw his fist into the guy's chin, sending him limp to the floor unconscious with a busted jaw and two teeth loose.

And Redcloud was left himself with busted fingers and a hand swelled up as big as a boxing glove, he couldn't salute properly for weeks, couldn't take apart his M-16 and flunked disassembly/assembly, and could barely pull the trigger on the rifle range, a pure natural-born shooter hitting six silhouettes out of forty and winding up getting recycled back into the next Basic class where, when a guy first called him Tonto, he ignored it and him, and when others called him Tonto, he ignored them too, simply pretended they didn't exist. And the guys stopped calling him that, he was just "*Redcloud*", and he fired forty for forty on the rifle range, followed orders and kept his mouth shut, and months later on his final jump in Airborne School, like he'd heard as a kid so many times from his grandfather of his parachute jump into France the night of D Day, he too yelled "*Geronimo!*"

Redcloud to Wolfe, "You don't mind, Kyle," without looking around at him. "How's a guy go from Marine Recon door-kicker to bleeding heart social worker?"

"College. BS in anthropology."

"Yeeehaa!" from Holloway. "B-S, that for bull shit?"

"If for you, PFC" — Wolfe emphasizing the P-F-C in a derogatory tone. "One-sixty starting is bullshit."

Redcloud, "One-sixty a year?"

"Starting. First hundred and change tax-free."

"Where do I sign up? Doc, you've got college, you got a sheepskin. That's right up your alley."

Eberly, "Not anthropology. The other ology. The bio one."

Holloway, "I thought it was math you were in college for."

"The other math. The phi one. As in P-H-Y."

Wolfe, "Physics? Really, dude, physics?"

A shrug from Doc Eberly *No big deal*.

He won't mention, it was a double major.

Physics and biology.

3.9 GPA.

In four years.

At Cornell.

Enlisted right after, three years ago. Figured with two wars then being waged a guy shouldn't miss the opportunity to find out how much of a man he is for real where bravery doesn't come in *Top Gun* movies or Xbox PlayStation killing but from real bullets snapping by and splashing the dirt of the berm you're crouched behind, and if you don't rise up to pick out the enemy and take sure aim to return fire then you are a coward and you know it and will always know it, there is no hiding from it and never will be. Lord Jim. That challenge.

Yeh, Doc Eberly has read *Lord Jim*.

Tested two years ago in Iraq in Stryker brigade, he learned of himself that he would not run away, that he could be very afraid and still not run from the sound of the guns, yet off the battlefield, away from war, he's learned that a man again doubts his courage, needs to reaffirm it, become confident again of it, envies those who are in the midst of battle challenging themselves, feeling less of himself for being safely away from the battlefield, as if perhaps he was courageous in the past but would run this next time and the only way to be confident in one's own courage is to be tested, placing oneself voluntarily again in war, in spite of the first-hand knowledge of one's breathless, near immobilizing terror of the previous time. And ever such it has probably been, Eberly knows, back to before even the Greeks and their Battle of Issus—that warriors have felt the same, have needed to again and again reconfirm their courage. And Eberly understands now the old veterans dressed in their musty, ill-fitting uniforms on the sidewalks during the parades, that even in their physical and mental decay and infirmness, no longer soldier material, they still yearn to again test themselves, uncertain that they are still as brave as they long ago once had proved to themselves to be, dressed now again as soldiers as a visible, tactile reminder more for themselves than for others that they indeed once, despite their fear, went forward to the sound of the guns.

Yeh, Doc Eberly has read *The Red Badge of Courage*.

A studious geek since as long as he can remember —

chess club, science fairs, wrestling his sport, the individual one-on-one, not team play of football or basketball

—and with his college degrees he could have gone officer OCS but what he also wanted from the Army and combat was to know what it's like to live for a change not among bookworms and brainacs, the ambitious already headed toward med school or grad school or lab jobs on well-paying linear career paths, but with average-Joe grunt GIs making a crummy fifteen-hundred a month. GIs who Eberly knows wouldn't know

adenosine triphosphate from deoxyribonucleic acid.

And don't give a shit.

And pretend to give even less a shit that you do know it.

Smirk scorn on you for knowing it.

Guys like Pfc Holloway.

"Beer U!" Holloway hoots. "I get out, I'm goin to Smirnoff State!"

Doc Eberly, "I thought you flunked out of U Tokem High."

"Sheeeee-at. We useta smoke homegrown in homeroom, wimp-ass Mr Lawson right up front. The Holloway Groove"—again, suddenly, he loses the steering wheel as the truck dives into an eddy, sending up a geyser showering everything, and Gunner Tran snap-kicks Holloway in the helmet harder this time, "Holl-a-fuckin-way!"

"Jiminy Crickets, Holloway!" from Redcloud.

And Wolfe chuckles.

As Holloway now guns it up and out, Redcloud says it calmly, plainly, matter-of-factly: "Blowtorch. Blue flame. Six thousand degrees."

Doc Eberly, "No morphine."

From the radio, again Cpl Sandusky's voice, "You guys gonna put in for a Purple Heart, Sarge? You want, I can waterboard Holloway when we get back on the Cop."

Again Redcloud doesn't answer.

Holloway, "He's a asshole."

Redcloud, "Drive."

Pfc Holloway bounces the truck over some rocks, with everything in here all jerking so hard side-to-side that the guys have to grab or brace against something to keep helmets from banging the steel frame.

"They teach in your anthropology, Kyle," Redcloud asks Wolfe. "They teach why we have to always pick the most jacked-up places to fight our wars in?"

"Because the most jacked-up people live in these most jacked-up places."

Redcloud, "Just once I'd like the next war to be in like Hawaii. Fiji. Barbados."

Pfc Holloway, "Margaritaville!"

Redcloud, "You know how to spell it?"

"What, Margaritaville? C'mon, Sarge. M-A-R—"

"D-R-I-V-E!" Redcloud's not playing. "S-H-U-T your trap."

Which Holloway does. At least for now.

"Kansas," Wolfe says. "Flat as a pancake. No mountains they can hide in. No rocks they can hide under."

It's simple to Redcloud. "No hajj in Kansas."

Doc Eberly, "Lucky they haven't figured out how to put IEDs in these rivers."

A quiet "Yeh" from Redcloud. "So far."

"In sh'allah," says Wolfe.
 As in, *Allah willing*.
 Doc Eberly echoes it, Americanizing it, "En-shall-aw."
 Tattoo it in your brain: *Allah willing*.
 Redcloud too, "En-sha-lah."
 And Pfc Holloway hoots, "Enchilada!"
 Which gets a laugh from Wolfe. "From the mouths of babes."
 "You aint that much older'n me, Kyle."
 "If ten years isn't old enough to slap the shit out of a PFC and make you call me Staff Sergeant Kyle."
 "Screw you, I don't see no rank on you."
 "Holloway!" from Redcloud.
 "I know, I know. D-R-I-V-E."
 Wolfe has to smile. Thinks, *This Holloway were a Marine, drill sergeant would be riding his ass sunup to sunset. All night too.*
 He thinks of *Full Metal Jacket* the movie and then instantly discards it because *Holloway's not crazy, he's no Private Pyle. Opposite, he'd have the drill blowing his own brains out just to not have to listen to his shit 24/7.*

Three days ago, on Tuesday, Wolfe and his HTT teammate were dropped off by chopper into the Cop.

Wednesday they went out with the Zoo to a district center.

Yesterday they went out with 2nd Platoon to a village a few miles southwest of the Cop.

Today it's with the Zoo to Wajma. Tomorrow with 2nd Platoon or 3rd or the Zoo, whichever the company commander decides—it's a coin flip, a toss-up—to survey the settlements way up the gorge seven clicks or so to the southeast.

Wolfe's a contract civilian, which is what most HTT are.

Army-speak for Human Terrain Team.

Which in layman-speak is anthropologists.

Cultural scientists surveying and documenting the human terrain.

Human terrain, in everyday layman-speak, being people.

Situation: Afghanistan is a 13th century country made up of tribes within tribes within tribes—

like a carnival funhouse tent full of distorting mirrors

—about which America and its Nato partners knew very little after the initial rout of the Taliban around the beginning of 2002.

Problem: How do you tell the good guys from the bad guys?

Solution: Human Terrain Teams.

Process: Learn everything about those tribes, studying the human terrain, so to speak, down to the sub-sub-sub-sub-sub-sub tribal level.

Military assignment: Kill or capture the bad guys, give \$ and lots of goodies to the good guys.

Result: Bad guys get captured or killed. Good guys get captured or killed. Bad guys become millionaires. Good guys become millionaires.

Conclusion: Everybody in Afghanistan is a good guy and a bad guy.

Effect: All Afghans like the \$ and goodies they get but hate the foreign armies anyway, in particular these days, the Americans, no rational explanation necessary, it's just the way it is with the culture. For centuries.

Problem: How do you get them to love you anyway so that you can nation-build them into a 21st century democracy?

Solution: Human Terrain Teams.

Process: Repeat process above.

New emphasis: To know them is to know how to treat them and know what to give them so that they'll love you.

Endgame simplified: Knowing them will get them to love you.

Endgame in a nutshell: Oprah.

Human Terrain Team composition: Anthropologists.

Since the Army doesn't have anthropologists like it does infantry, artillery, MPs, truck drivers, xray techs, cooks, chopper pilots, mechanics, pay clerks and everyone else, the Pentagon's HTT brainchild became just another \$100 million civilian contract.

Wanted: *Anthropologists, BS or PhD required. Int'l travel. Big pay. Food, lodging, transportation provided. Combat survival training/equipment provided. Medical/life insurance provided.*

Place of employment: The Stan.

A no-brainer for Kyle Wolfe, who'd had enough of the Corps and its regimented totalitarian order and little tolerance for creative initiative, doing what they say, when, where, why and how they say.

They say "*Jump*," a Marine doesn't even ask "*How high?*"—he jumps as high as he can and keeps on jumping. Until someone commands him to stop.

Big Army wanted anthropologists, Wolfe would be an anthropologist, and get to hang and play in a war zone. Hang loose and play. Go where he wanted, when he wanted, wear what he wanted, eat when he wanted, and quit the whole thing when he wanted. On his terms, more or less, a lot more than less. For many times more than what he was making in the Marines, an E-6 coming up on the end of his enlistment.

Sure, a BS in anthropology after doing eight years in Marine Corps Force Recon, that's not your typical HTT applicant.

As in, Not - Your - Typical - HTT - Applicant.

First, that Force Recon thing.

Anthropologists don't do Force Recon.

Don't do Marine Corps.

Don't do Army. Not even the part-time once-a-month weekend thing in the Guard.

They're An-thro-pol-o-gists. Yeh, with a capital A.

Second, that BS from Arizona State is exactly to the letter what Pfc Holloway had said it was without even knowing he was correct.

BS as in Bull Shit. With a capital B and S.

100% pure angus bullshit.

If a Force Recon stud with lots of Delta/Cag time and a creative bend-the-rules streak can't counterfeit a reasonably authentic university diploma and accompanying transcripts to land an overseas government contract job toting a gun and starting at one-sixty a year—

mostly tax-free, remember

—what'd he waste those years attached to Delta for?

Audacious, Wolfe likes to remember, that afternoon in the DC conference room sitting across the table from the corporate HR exec studying his paperwork. Mr HR looking up over his glasses at him, and Wolfe knowing that he knows that he knows that he knows that Wolfe's two years of community college followed by eight in Force Recon then three for the BS from Arizona State don't add up.

Except to Pfc Holloway's version of BS.

A blind deaf-n-dumb HR intern could see that it's impossible to get an anthro degree from ASU when you are for most of those same three years—it's right there in the record—in Recon in the Stan.

With a chunk of that Recon Stan time on loan out to Delta, in a full beard, dressed in Afghani shalwar kameez pajama garb, MP-5 sub-machinegun and mags hidden under the full wool shawl wrap.

Which is what the snapshot photos right in front of Mr HR show.

Along with it all right there in the DD-214 Record of Service (not forged). Right there on the table with the fake diploma and transcripts and the USMC Pashto Language Qualification Test scores (not forged).

Mix the very real Corps, Delta and Pashto documents with scanned and Photoshopped college transcripts, and you've got the perfect candidate for HTT in warzone Afghanistan.

And Mr HR straightened up all those docs, paper-clipped them and smoothly slid them all back into the manila folder.

A wan smile.

Then, "Don't worry about your field analysis reports," Mr HR told Wolfe. "Just get some numbers, and no one's going to want to know how. They'll write the reports back here in the home office."

Wolfe couldn't even hold back his shit-eating grin.

"Win win," is what Mr HR later told the exec above him, who agreed.

A geek fresh-right-outta-grad-school anthropologist getting killed or wounded makes for a shitload more paperwork (not counting all the family

lawsuits soon to follow) than a year's worth of a non-anthro ex-Marine's gibberish field reports having to be written or rewritten in the home office, accurate or not.

Bottom line, a highly experienced combat former Force Recon gyrene can decrease the odds of that nebbish geek grad getting killed or wounded, say ten-fold.

Rotate the newbie, pale, soft-palmed tenderfoot rookie combat-ignorant real college-grad anthros into operation with Wolfe for their first couple of months to learn firsthand combat survival in person from one who's lived it.

They can do the real anthro work for Wolfe.

And learn to stay alive for later on their own.

Win win win.

Wolfe's in his eleventh month.

Already signed on for another year.

He's on his fifth rookie. Like the first four, a real anthropologist. Their seventh week together.

She's in Wajma right now. With the rest of the platoon.

Yeh, she. Most anthros are. By nature.

She's likely on her fifth or sixth interview. Getting every tiny little detail just right. For those field analysis reports she writes up impeccably exact that tell the Army precisely who these people are in all these tiny villages so that the Army will know where to send the rice, beans, cooking oil, wells, roads, high-yield seed, electricity, schools, health clinics, bridges, and hydroelectric dams in the president's grand scheme of nation-building, hearts-and-minds, fighting a war as Santa Claus.

All of which Kyle Wolfe couldn't care less about.

He's in the Wild West, carrying a gun, in the open, legally, where there are people out there who want to kill him just to kill him, nothing personal, jihadist to infidel, making a ton of money direct-deposit right into his bank account and not having to touch a dime.

"*Fuck me to tears*," civilian contractor Kyle Wolfe would say with a grin.

And it's good tears, orgasmic tears of joy, because there's nowhere he would rather be than here right now, doing this, in the Wild West.

The Wild West of the Stan.

Af-fuck-him-to-tears-istan.

Platoon Sergeant Travis Redcloud is different.

All he wants right now is to get these three trucks back joined up with the platoon and the relative safety there in the village.

He glances quickly at the computer screen mounted right in front of him—

the live map image showing three tiny blue dots that are these three trucks and just a bit down around the bend of the steep contour are the six blue dots that are the other Zooster trucks.

Everything satellite-GPS linked.

It's called the Blue Force Tracker.

Blue Force are the good guys. Nato good guys — Americans and Euros. Yeh, the Blue part probably comes from the sissy blue of the Nato beret. Like as if powder blue puts the fear of anything into anyone. Whatever.

Blue Force Tracker's the computer program that does just that. Tracks.

Redcloud if he wants can scroll the computer map left and right, up and down, all over Afghanistan to find the blue dots of all the other Army trucks on patrol and actually bring up the unit designation of each individual dot. Send texts to any of them. Get texts from them.

21st century warfare, American style.

Through the windshield Redcloud checks out another rock house built into the mountainside and a cluster of kids on the path just up off the streambed.

He grabs up a jumbo plastic baggie of Tootsie Roll Pops and Baby Ruths and Snickers and calls out "Tran!"

He hands the bag up to Tran in the turret.

"Talk about touchy-feely bleeding heart do-gooder," Wolfe teases Redcloud. "If I don't say so myself."

"They send that stuff from home by the crate-loads."

"Let me guess. Churches. Elementary schools."

"Rotary Club. Girl Scouts."

Up top .50-cal gunner Spec Tran flings a fistful to the Afghan kids, who scramble among the rocks to retrieve the candy.

"Uncle Gunny Redcloud," Wolfe says.

Redcloud, "Wrong army. Gunny's you ex-gyrines."

"There are no ex Marines."

"Pardon me. Former."

"Uncle Sugar Sergeant Redcloud. They'll put your picture on the cover of the Coin Manual."

As in COIN.

Counter-insurgency.

Newly defined in the highly touted 21st-century field manual.

Boiled down, the Bible about winning a war with that hearts-and-minds Santa Claus stuff.

Less killing and lots more handshaking, hugging and handing over duffle bags overstuffed with cash.

Crisp, newly printed U.S. dollars. Bankable. Untraceable. Real or not.

Bundle upon bundle upon bundle, all in denominations of twenties, fifties, and hundreds.

Wolfe, he'd put Redcloud's face on the cover of the Coin Manual just for shits-n-grins, print up a million copies and ship them straight to the nearest landfill.

Even better, he thinks. Print up the Koran in Pashto on paper soaked in bacon grease. Put a picture of Porky Pig on the cover and leave them by the truckloads in every village in this friggin shithole armpit of the world.

He's thought it through before.

Extensively.

Some might say he's been here too long.

"It's not the kids' fault this is such a jacked-up place," Redcloud says. "Jacked-up people. Those boys there"—scurrying for another handful of candy thrown by Spec Tran. "Maybe they'll aim high in ten years when they're shooting at us."

Wolfe, "In sh'allah."

Pfc Holloway, "Enchilada!"

Doc Eberly, "Ten years more? Ten?"

"Fifty," from Wolfe. "It'll be like Western Europe, Korea. We'll be here forever. Except without the peace and prosperity. And they'll despise us even more."

"You'll be a millionaire," says Redcloud.

"In sh'allah."

And "Enchilada!" again out of Pfc Holloway.

"I've gotta get a different driver," Redcloud groans.

"Aw, Sarge," from Holloway, "you've got the best. A-numba-one. The Holloway Groove."

Redcloud tunes him out, doesn't really care, there's sunshine ahead. And rounding the bend, coming out of the shadows of the gorge there's safety in numbers here, there's security.

It's all opened up into a valley.

A huge bowl ringed by the mountain range.

The Village Wajma

On the maps that's how this valley is labeled. Wajma.

This wide and long valley plateau of fields terraced by rock walls.

The fields are harvested barren now in October.

Walled family compounds of rock, mud, and timber dot the far terraces.

Redcloud's truck climbs up out of the stream and heads for the six Zoo trucks spread out wide, wagon-wheeled on the rocky dirt of the wide beach.

A Zooster in the turret of each truck, on his gun.

Close now to the safe bosom of the Zoo, Pfc Holloway speeds up, like a runner with a sudden spurt in sight of the finish line.

"One-sixty a year," Redcloud says to Wolfe. "And that's even before having a partner she could be on the cover of *Maxim*."

Wolfe, "Robyn? Doctor Robyn Banks, make note. PhD doctor. Like, and I can't even spell anthropology. Let me tell you, she just turned twenty-four—her birthday was last week, and she didn't tell anyone, so I didn't. So make it twenty-three, and no one has a PhD at twenty-three. You know what that is, Holloway? PhD, doctor of what?"

Holloway, "Means she's smart."

Doc Eberly, "Wicked smart."

Wolfe, "Way way outta my league."

Redcloud, "I thought college chicks dug studly Force Recon dudes."

Wolfe, "The dumb ones maybe. Drunk ones."

Redcloud, "That's her seat. No offense, going back to the Cop you're back riding in the lieutenant's truck."

Holloway, "Ditto that."

Doc Eberly, "Ditto on the ditto."

And Holloway smacks Tran's leg, yelling up, "Hey, Tran, you want Kyle riding with us back to the Cop or you want the smokin-hot babe Robyn, and she's a PhD to boot?"

"Give me a hard question, would you."

Doc Eberly, "What's the square root of sixty-nine?"

"Huh? What? I hate math."

Wolfe corrects Doc, "There is no square root. Not of sixty-nine, Doc."

Doc, "Eight point three zero six six two three eight. Ad infinitum."

And Wolfe remembers the Montessori remark, and the one about acetylene flame's six thousand degrees, and the physics and biology in college, and thinks, *Now this guy's really no slouch, has got an actual brain.*

Up ahead where we're heading is the PL's Mrap—

where Platoon Leader Lieutenant Matt Caufield is leaning up against the big front bumper

— with Sniper Rodriguez seated right above him, on the hood. His ever-present Knight Arms sniper rifle across his lap.

That's Sergeant Rodriguez, of the very first Zoo tattoo, the artist. Of the truism "*It's the only war we got.*"

Rodriguez, barrio punk made good, finding a perfect fit in the Army and winding up selected for Sniper School, where he'd have been Honor Grad, except for the written exams and their math by rote instead of instinct. Now he eats, sleeps and shits all things sniper.

No exaggeration, Sniper Rodriguez eats, sleeps, shits, shaves and showers with his Knight rifle right attached to him. It's his third arm.

The Mrap where Lieut Caufield and Rodriguez are watching is parked a respectful distance away from where Wolfe's HTT teammate Robyn Banks is on the raised area of beach where a half-dozen battered

and rusted steel conex shipping containers sit in front of the first terrace rock wall.

She's got HTT terp Gulbarhar sitting with her on the ground with the lone village man they're interviewing.

Robyn's helmet off and on the ground, her Army-issue IBA body armor off as well.

Her Army-issue M4 carbine lying atop it.

It's all there in the Coin Field Manual:

Undressed for war means nonthreatening.

Nonthreatening means villagers will be more open.

More open means they'll be your friends.

Your friends means they'll turn in the Taliban among them.

Turning-in means eventual victory.

The corollary is why Robyn wears the head scarf—you've got to show them you respect their culture. Thus, cover thine head.

The only thing missing is a blue burka, and the scarf can't begin to hide that she's female, can't hide her attractiveness, her simple beauty, what Pfc Holloway had called:

Smokin hot.

Relatively speaking.

At Arizona State or any other university where Wolfe did not attend and did not receive a BS in anthropology or anything else, on a scale of 1 to 10, Robyn would be an 8 or 8+.

Makes her a 14 here where these Zoosters don't ever see any real live American women in person in the flesh except if they were to make it back to one of the big Fobs, and that's only if they've been wounded and are still conscious enough to care about the pretty female doctors and nurses, or if they've shot off a magazine in the latrine late at night, remember, for that psych eval/rec trip to the rear—never actually shooting off any mag in any latrine to get sent back for in the first and last place.

And Robyn Banks, anthro PhD, looks good, would look good, really, anywhere. Out here real good. And that's in combat boots, cargo 5-11 pants like Wolfe wears, and topped a guy's poplin safari shirt.

Without lipstick or eyeshadow or blush coloring or foundation or anything.

She doesn't do the "*Doctor*" thing either, tell people she's a PhD.

Wolfe knows it because, One, he's read her personnel file. Two, you don't not know things like that working so closely with someone for these many weeks, not in a 24-hour-a-day combat environment.

Like he knows about her longtime fiancé boyfriend, an MD doctor in his cardio-thoracic surgical residency, and how he told her that if she took this job and left him to come to Afghanistan he wouldn't wait for her. And he hasn't. When Wolfe found her that third week in tears over an email

from a friend telling her that the MD was already hooking up with a resident radiologist, he wanted to take her into his arms, pull her to him and let her cry against him.

He didn't.

And wouldn't.

And if he tells guys anything about her —

infantry guys they're out in villages with, like these Zoosters today

— it's nothing private, nothing personal, nothing about her as a woman or a chick. Nothing about the douchebag surgical resident MD now ex-fiancé.

It's more along the lines of her having told him that she'd never held a weapon in her life before the HTT Indoctrination at Fort Leavenworth, and that was nothing more than *That's the M4, don't worry, you might carry it, but you're never going to use it*, and Wolfe gave her a full course of instruction, including time on Fob Salerno's range, and got her confident and skilled, consistently putting three rounds in a circle the size of an orange at 25 meters, then the same at 100 meters, then out to 250. The weapon's with her always outside the wire. Cleaned daily back inside.

To Wolfe, if she has a fault, it's not that she's too smart, or that she doesn't pretend to know what she doesn't know, or that she grasps new things and masters them so quickly.

It's that, to Wolfe, she takes this job too seriously, she thinks it matters.

It's not a dis on her.

It's her nature, it's a valued character trait. You take a job, you do it and do it well. Same as his job's teaching these egghead anthropologists fresh and eager with their important real diplomas how to survive in a combat environment and to be assured they can do it alone without him.

That's his job. And doing it the best he can. What he gets paid the big bucks for.

Teaching her the knowledge and skills and instincts to stay alive out here on her own.

Out of the truck now, from this distance Wolfe watches Robyn so single-minded in documenting in her notebook what their terp Gulbarhar is translating to her of what the village man is saying.

Redcloud directs Spec Tran to swing the big .50 off his aim at the collection of a hundred or more village men and boys hanging around watching from the concrete mosque down a ways on the first terrace —

"Com'on, Tran, use your brain. How you going to get them to love you like that?"

Wolfe laughs. "Take out the belt there, Tran, and load that fifty with those candy bars and Tootsie Roll Pops."

Redcloud, "Don't give the colonels any ideas."

"Yeh like they're going to listen to me."

They head over for Lieut Caufield's truck.

Pfc Holloway and Doc Eberly stay here in the hummer, doors all open, with Tran up on the gun.

Eberly already into a paperback.

Holloway mixes an MRE packet of grape drink powder into a bottle of water. "What you reading now, Doc?"

Eberly shows him the cover. *Slow Walk in a Sad Rain*.

"Never heard of it. Walkin in the rain? Sounds like a drag. Sheeeet-at. Boooooorrrrr—eeeen. Snooooooze—ville. What's it about?"

"A classic. Vietnam."

"Veeeeet—Nam? Ancient history. They make it into a movie?"

Nope.

"Why not? Say it's a classic? How a classic?"

Doc Eberly doesn't want to be bothered, wants to read.

"Sheeeee-at, Doc." Holloway shakes up his bottle. "Y'know, yer gonna go blind always reading."

Doc Eberly ignores him.

"You are. They're always saying jacking off makes you blind, but it's reading, reading all the time yer gonna go blind. Blind as a bat. Blind as a bat's got his face buried in a witch's deep dark black scabby cunt." And *heh-heh-heh-heh* at his own cleverness.

Holloway downs the entire bottle.

Lets the last mouthful fly in a spit for distance.

Then, "Gotta wonder, ever think, bats are blind, that mean they jerk off?"

Works his mouth, then spits a glob of purple loogie about twenty feet.

"Must be good. What's it about about Vietnam?"

"The platoon medic gets pissed at a private who's always haranguing him and beats him upside the head with his M-16 to a bloody pulp and stuffs his corpse in a body bag DOA."

Holloway laughs. "You're a real comedian, Doc. Get your own show on Comedy Central. Get a date with Snooki. She can break your cherry."

Doc harshly, "Nothing like the star you'll be in your own primetime show on Cartoon Network," and he gets out and goes around the back, pops open the lid and climbs up inside to get comfortable reclining on the gear to read unbothered in peace.

Redcloud thinks it's all too quiet, too peaceful, the calm before the storm, and he knows that's crazy because all those village men and boys around the mosque, and those few men together crossing that field, and those boys sitting on that wall down there watching, they're all watching, and they

wouldn't be out, they'd be invisible, he knows, they wouldn't be anywhere in sight, *If there were a storm coming. Storm of Taliban. Not today. It's TV time. Afghan TV.*

The American GIs are the one channel they're all watching. The only channel they get.

Exactly what Wolfe is thinking this moment. *Afghan TV. Those boys on the wall, like those kids on the roof of the house back there up the gorge.*

He remembers telling Redcloud the other day when they went out to that district center, same thing, same TV show. *"They don't even need a remote. No channel to change to. Volume, who gives a shit, they can't understand the English anyway."*

Wolfe remembers it's been this way since the first time he was here, a grunt Marine, in those first months of this war, Afghans wide-eyed at the "Creatures from outer space" a buddy said. "We're space aliens." Decked out in futuristic armor. *Starship Troopers* meets *Star Wars*. Kevlar and body armor and wraparound eyepro and little radio antennas sticking up out of pouches and short sleek little guns that spit bullets in one frightening stream of fire, and that's not even counting the fast-mover F-16s coming in streaking by just three hundred feet overhead at 500mph.

Couldn't lose the war then, Wolfe thinks now. All those hajj up there at that mosque, they know different now, they know how this show's going to end, they just don't know when.

"Afghan TV," Redcloud says now.

Wolfe, "All they're lacking's popcorn and a 32-ounce Coke. Five-dollar box of Milk Duds and some Junior Mints."

Redcloud's comfortable, at ease satisfied.

Because all his men are on or in or close right there to their individual trucks—each truck faced out at its point of the clock that is a wide wagon-wheel. Doors all open and, sure, guys smoking and eating—but the turret gunners on their guns, facing to the front, none of the guys out wandering over to the other trucks, his squad leaders Ketchum and Nell and Utah doing their job right, keeping their men tight. Ready for something and staying close right there to the thick steel trucks if that something comes, even though everyone knows nothing's coming today, *Not today, not with all these Afghans around. Watching Afghan TV, Redcloud thinks. The ANA, who knows it better than them?*

That's the two squads of Afghan soldiers, the Afghan National Army, along on the patrol today, as normal protocol is for a couple of squads from the half-strength ANA company sharing the Cop with the Zoo's company to always go out with the GIs.

These ANA soldiers are hanging outside their three standard-issue tan Ford Ranger pickup trucks, *Shucking and jiving*, thinks Wolfe. *Always with their chai, their freakin' chai.*

ANA won't go anywhere, Wolfe'll swear, they don't bring their big chai kettle, their glass cups and a propane tank. *Screw the ammo, bring the chai.*

Time can almost stand still right now, tic toc tic toc . . .

tic . . .

toc . . .

tic . . .

So slow with nothing happening.

Principle of Combat #1:

99.8% of the time is sit-around-and-wait.

Pure quiet of nothing happening.

.2% is boom! Yeh, note it, not plain naked 2, but .2. Point 2.

Every once in a great while.

And most every last one of these Zoosters won't say it aloud but secretly craves that .2%—those electrifying adrenalin-rush seconds and minutes, just let it happen, today, right now, and these Zoosters to the last one is John Wayne for real. Each one imagines himself living through it unscratched, dude, then reliving it, retelling those moments with the others all the rest of the afternoon and evening and later back home stateside in the platoon rooms and barracks and dudes' houses over six-packs or a keg and years later at the American Legion hall with all the other middle-aged beer-paunch-gut triple-chin barstool vets.

Which ones of them are thinking it right now this very moment this very instant, craving that .2%?

Not Redcloud.

Even with all these guns, all this firepower, this widely spread-out circled-wagons perimeter, behind these armored steel trucks, it's overwhelming, and they can't lose, can't no way no how lose.

Not Redcloud.

He's been there.

Done that.

Got the tee-shirt.

Even winning, he knows, you can lose a man KIA, a couple WIA.

Been there.

Done that.

Packed up their tee-shirts in their duffle bags to ship home.

At Lieut Caufield's Truck

Redcloud shows Caufield on his map their route up the gorge.

"All kinds of goat trails snaking up, here, Pakistan side. Paki I-95. All that's missing's the median and white lines and guardrails and Cracker Barrels on every exit."

"Ratlines," Caufield says matter-of-factly, as if he has more experience than he does.

Ratlines. The routes the enemy comes and goes. Infil routes. Supply lines.

"Half expected to run into a donkey caravan carrying Stingers," Redcloud says only half-joking.

Wolfe, "Taliban version of the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

Just a nod from Caufield, like he knows this, nothing unusual, all part of this war, as if the Zoo isn't his first platoon and these aren't his first months in combat.

Which they both are. Firsts. But he's a quick learner, and this stuff isn't unusual.

A quick learner also in knowing that a first-time platoon leader makes his men confident in him if he projects calm knowing. Crate up and trash the braggadocio.

On the map Redcloud indicates the end of the gorge. "Waterfall, about thirty feet, in steps up high 'til you can't even see it. Water running so clear you could wash your newborn infant baby in it."

Slight nods again from Lieut Caufield. Nothing he can add. His five months as Zoo PL prior to the deployment to here and these four months here now, he understands his platoon sergeant, Redcloud, and will not insult him by patronizing him trying to impress him with a false superiority of experience or knowledge or military gut-instinct.

Redcloud, "Like drinking from a creek bubbling out of the mountain-side high up in the Rockies. Cool clean Coors spring water."

Wolfe, "A picture postcard. Build a hotel up there, like Club Med, make it a tourist trap for yuppie trekkers. Make a killing, money up to your eyeballs. Sandals Afghanistan. Club Med Afghanistan. If these pre-industrial goat-herders could ever get their shit together."

Sniper Rodriguez spits a stream of chew. "Ay, Kyle. Afghans get their shit t'get'er? What planet you livin on? Disneylandia?"

"Hey, we're HTT. We can dream. By definition. Our job description."

"Dream? I dream of mi mamacita with tetas par' chupar sticking out to here, 'mano. Gonzo tits."

Redcloud, curtly, "Save it, Sniper, we don't want to hear your personal problems."

Wolfe, "Talk to the hand, Rodriguez."

Rodriguez, "Oh I'm gonna. Talkin to my hand. Be taking one chingada long shower t'night. Gonna say hola, cómo estás, how you doin, wit' esa chica mamacita Rosa."

"What's this guy?" Wolfe asks Lieut Caufield about Robyn's interview. "How many's she done?"

Caufield shows four fingers.

First Lieutenant Matt Caufield.

Two years ago he was finishing his third year teaching Head Start after graduating University of Wisconsin, Madison, an English Lit major, when he shocked his friends and family—

and made his girlfriend cry and pound him in the chest and plead that he was crazy and didn't he love her?

—by enlisting for Army Officer Candidate, and he could only explain it away saying that the upper middle class college slackers like him as well as the rich-kid town-'n-country elites should serve in times of war same as the blue-collar trade school schlubs and the food-stamp ghetto thugs and hayseed dustbowl farmboy hicks.

A fairness.

A moral equivalence.

That's his story and he's sticking to it.

Because it was the one rationalization, he knew, that the college-class educated and wealthy-cultured elites would understand and respect. Like his family, his peers, his entire social world.

Not the other, his real reason—damn that moral equivalence crap—that there were two wars going on and someday they would be over and he'd be forty and entering middle age and he'd slap himself in the face, he'd be disgusted with himself, he'd be sullenly regretful for having missed them.

For having not challenged himself in combat.

And he would always wonder if it was in the back of his mind somewhere, pushed away invisible, that he had avoided joining and going to war because he was afraid of being killed.

A coward.

Afraid of losing his legs.

Afraid of life in a wheelchair.

Losing his arms.

Who's going to wipe his ass?

Losing his nuts.

How do you live, what do you do without nuts?

Kill yourself?

In OCS he found himself with infantry- and combat-arms-branched young men just like him, that miniscule .001 percent of college grads who do join up. Young men who would never say it out loud but were thinking it too, that *Men go to war, they don't live to regret having missed it, having rejected the challenge of bravery and finding out if they have it or not. Men go to war.*

His family and friends might never know it, but Lieut Matt Caufield and most of those others in OCS are here because, as highly uneducated barrio schlub Sniper Rodriguez says:

"It's a shitty war, but it's the only one we got, 'mano."

But college-educated officers, unlike grunt GED guys like Rodriguez, they don't say it out loud.

Wolfe just asked how many interviews Robyn's done. Four.

And they're all watching her from this distance, not close enough to hear her questions to the villager.

"Indig interviews, who needs stinkin interviews?" Wolfe offers. "I could make up the raw data right off the top of my head, she could write up all the reports, and we'd never have to leave the Fob. Afghanistan for Dummies."

Lieut Caufield, "Idiot's Guide to Afghanistan?"

"Same thing. Number One, their tribe comes first, foremost. It's the tribe, stupid. Number Two, Islam, Sharia and all that shit. Three, what have you got for me, gimme gimme gimme."

Redcloud, "You got that right. No shortage of hands out. Can't blame them. You going to turn down the millionaire comes through town riding down Main Street throwing out hundred-dollar bills from the back of his limo?"

Lieut Caufield to Wolfe, "Number Four. You're forgetting the man-boy thing."

"Shhhhhhh!" Wolfe exaggerates. "Walking on thin ice there, Lieutenant. They'll knock you back down to butterbar. Make you go to re-education classes. Put you in a pogrom camp. What's a little pedophilia when you've got a war to not win? First tenet of the Human Terrain System, wanna guess? Dictated down to each team. Don't ask about the boys."

Caufield, "Got to wonder whose brainchild it was. Imagine the clusterfuck of eagles and stars deep in the Pentagon conspiring to come up with a whole new military bureaucracy, Human Terrain System."

Clusterfuck, that's one of those words you'd never hear at UW Madison. Never use in Lit 320 Henry James. Not going to hear around the Head Start breakroom.

Wolfe jokes, "All part of St Claire's hearts-and-minds. You haven't seen St Claire's PowerPoint slide briefing?"

As in General Pete St Claire. 4-star. Credited author of that Coin Manual. Commander of the whole war.

Sniper Rodriquez pats the stock of his Knight sniper rifle. "Two in the heart. One in the mind."

Wolfe, "You, Sergeant, you're talkin court-martial there, you let St Claire hear you saying that."

"Oh yeh 'mano, he's gonna come down here where he's gonna get his ass shot up, wit' he don't got F-15s flyin cover up there arriba. Apaches too. And's got his own Blackwater s'curity dudes guardin his puke 4-star culo. Hearts and pinche cabrones minds . . ."

Redcloud warns him, "Watch your lip, Rodriquez."

"Aw c'mon Sarge, la verdad es la verdad."

"General St Claire's just following orders. At ease with your tongue."

Sniper Rodriquez, "Orders from who, like from who? Aint nobody higher'n him, Sarge. Who's got more stars'n him?"

Lieut Caufield, "The President."

Wolfe, "Oh yeh, like it's going to get St Claire a fifth star."

Redcloud, "There is no fifth star."

"Exactly." Wolfe smiles.

Caufield, "Chairman of the Joint Chiefs."

Wolfe, "Not when he loses this war, he's not getting Joint Chiefs."

Caufield, "No one's ever going to admit losing."

Wolfe, "Bingo. First chapter, Politics of Command for Dummies."

Caufield, "You going to start a library with all your books?"

"Just one book. The Cliff Notes version. How to Not Win Wars and Not Influence People. It'll be required reading, colonels and above."

Rodriquez, "How's that, how you gonna do that, how you gonna win here?"

"Not win. Get the wax outta your ears, Sergeant. How would you propose winning, huh, c'mon you tell me."

"Turn the whole place into glass." A grin from Rodriquez. He doesn't have to explain it, everyone knows the adage, but he does anyway, loving the sound of it coming out: "Nuke – em – til – they – glow."

"Young sergeant," Wolfe exaggerates his praise, "you belong in the White House. The very least, NSC."

Caufield, "National Security Council? Sniper Rodriquez?"

Wolfe, "Brief the president every day. Twice. Dawn and dusk."

Rodriquez, "Oye, 'mano. They aint let gonna let ese cholo take out the garbage."

Laughs all around.

Because it's true.

Redcloud asks Wolfe how many more interviews Robyn is going to want to do. "I'd like to get movin back out of here."

Unsaid, Rule of Combat #4:

Never go back the way you came.

The Cop to Wajma is one way in, one way out. Up the stream in, back down it out.

Today they've got no choice—going to have to break #4.

You know it, the enemy, if he's around, he knows it.

Oh, and he's around, somewhere, if only a watcher or two. With their little walkie-talkies up here far from cell service.

The less time you linger in the box, the less time you give them to get the word passed along on those walkie-talkies, the less time for them to get together—for that ambush.

Less is the better.

Wolfe, "She'll want to talk to the whole village, women too, if you let her."

"No way," adamant from Redcloud. "Been here too long already. We're not driving back through a shooting gallery, ping ping ping, and we're the sitting ducks going by. Taliban handing out kewpie dolls to the guys who get the most hits."

Lieut Caufield is less sure. "Captain said it's her call."

"My call," Wolfe corrects him. Then shows one finger. One more interview. "Lucky, remember? They haven't figured out how to put IEDs in water. Yet."

From Rodriquez. "They're buildin them in Pak'stan right now. Fact'ry crankin em out. They put a sticker on em, Made in Pak'staniland."

And Redcloud calls up for the driver to get out a case of MREs while he climbs up onto the hood, with Sniper Rodriquez scooting a bit to make him room.

Turret gunner Pvt Bybee here calls down, "Sergeant Redcloud," then tosses down to Redcloud an open case of MREs.

Redcloud, "Kyle, you hungry?"

Wolfe, "Chili mac. If you've got one."

He now glances around at Robyn.

Wonders what she's asking right now.

He could step closer to hear.

No need, he knows without hearing.

Multiple Choice. *If there is one thing your village needs more than anything else—one thing only—would it be: a health clinic; a water well; a schoolhouse; electricity; teachers; paid local police presence?*

Wolfe doesn't even think about smiling, but he is, knowing the answer that's always the same:

All of the above. "Everything, all of it, we need everything, we want everything. You give us everything. Yes, all, you give to us?"

"Wolfie," from Redcloud. "You're in luck," and he tosses Wolfe an MRE.

Wolfe checks it out, the markings. Yep, chili mac.

He plucks his knife from where it's clipped to his pants pocket.

Flicks it open.

Slits open the MRE bag.

Snaps the knife shut and slips it back down clipped to his pocket.

tic

toc

tic

toc

tic

Redcloud asks, "Is Robyn going to want one? She got a preference?"

Wolfe, "She's waiting for them to ask her to join them for lunch."

"No way, we're outta here, we are not sticking around for lunch or tea."

"I'm just saying."

tic

toc

tic

toc

Sniper Rodriquez, "Greasy stringy goat? One bowl a'rice they all stick all their hands in all covered with all their shit wiping their asses? Robyn like gettin the screaming shits?"

Wolfe, "Hearts and minds, Sarge."

He sets the individual items from the MRE bag one-by-one lined up on the bumper.

tic

toc

tic

toc

Rodriquez, "Shittin green outta both ends for a week."

Redcloud, "Com'on, we're trying to eat here."

tic

toc

tic

"La Vengaza Montezuma. Here gonna call it Mohammed's Vengaza."

Wolfe, "That's what Cipro's for."

He holds his chili mac pouch up to the sky, an offering to the sun. A gift from the gods. He kneads it aggressively, mixing the contents.

tic

toc

Out with his knife again. He slits open the pouch longways straight and exact.

Flicks away the thin strip.

Knife folded back closed and clipped to his pocket.

Plastic spoon from the bumper.

Bites off the cellophane wrapper.

Spits it out.

Licks the spoon once—habit.

Just another part of his MRE ritual.

Spoon now dipped into the chili mac.

One spoonful into his mouth. Eyes closed loose in pleasure. Savors the taste and texture. Delicious ecstasy.

Swallows slowly.

Opens his eyes.

Rodriquez is amazed. "Shit, Kyle, you gettin yer rocks off?"

tic

toc

"Chili mac," Wolfe says. "Hot or cold, this, mi amigo, this is why God made MREs" —

tic —

Wolfe's eyes jump to something —

the man being interviewed suddenly hopping up to his feet —

another village man suddenly appearing from behind the conex shipping containers —

toc

"Robyn!" — Wolfe tosses aside his chili mac pouch — "Let's go, com'on, we're —"

— the second man flings the red bucket he carries, drenching Robyn and terp Gulbarhar and the ground around them, as the interview guy flicks a Bic lighter and it's suddenly all a gasoline explosion of fire —

And, M4 carbine snapped up to his shoulder, Wolfe fires *clack clack clack clack clack*, stitching the Bic lighter guy from neck to waist and immediately swings the rifle up to sight through the flames on the gas thrower who's not there, gone back behind the shipping containers —

as both Gulbarhar and Robyn are in flames, calling out, the ground around them afire, and they can't crawl out of it, with

Wolfe yelling at her "Roll! Roll! Roll, Robyn!" running to them, but it's a wall of flames, and he throws blurred scoops of dirt and sand at the flames, to no avail, and

Pfc Holloway is the first to arrive, with a fire extinguisher from his truck, and Wolfe snatches it away from him and shoots its ferocious cloud of white powder through the flames and onto Robyn.

And Redcloud is here with an extinguisher from the Mrap, spraying terp Gulbarhar.

Wolfe grabs Robyn under the shoulders and pulls her from the flames of the ground burning, and Doc Eberly elbows aside Wolfe, away from Robyn, and unzips open his aid bag.

Redcloud orders Holloway, "Litters. Ponchos." Orders the rest of the platoon through the handset clipped near his shoulder that runs to his small MBITR (Mbitr) platoon radio in its pouch low on his body armor, "Hold your fire, everyone. Eyes on your sector. Eyes — on — your — sector."

Sniper Rodriguez, standing on the roof of the Mrap, is sighted in through his sniper rifle scope on the gas thrower fleeing fast across the first barren field. "P'mission t' engage, Sarge!"

"Negative, hold your fire!" from Redcloud.

Lieut Caufield reinforces it. "He's not carrying a weapon, Rodriguez!"

"Fuck that, L-T."

"Just hold your fire."

"Chingada, L-T!"

"That's an order, Sergeant!"

The entire Zoo is at combat alert.

Meals and cigarettes discarded.

Turret gunners sighting down their weapons.

The others behind their M4s behind the open doors of the trucks, each man sighted out on his sector.

While the village men and boys are scattering far from the mosque, sprinting away, toward the compounds up on the higher terraces.

And Wolfe steps to the Bic lighter guy sprawled, his back against the rusted shipping container, the chest of his white shalwar kameeze man-jammie garb soaked solid crimson blood red, his throat gurgling blood, his eyes blinking rapidly with hateful terror right at Wolfe coming near.

Wolfe says something in guttural, violent Pashto that loosely translates as "*See you in hell, hajji Mohammed,*" and he puts the muzzle of his M4 right over the guy's heart and *clack clack clack* puts three shots there.

Wolfe looks around at Doc Eberly tending to Robyn.

At Redcloud watching him right back.

Their eyes, his and Redcloud's, meet behind their tinted eyepro.

Redcloud with the exhausted extinguisher above terp Gulbarhar moaning on the ground. Not a hint of any emotion in him, nothing. Just a blank flatness at Wolfe's three-shot coup de grâce into the man. An action for which Redcloud knows any court-martial board would punish Wolfe with life without parole.

Nothing, Redcloud could be a statue.

Wolfe glances up at Lieut Caufield up in the door of the Mrap on the radio handset to call back to the Cop for a medevac. Like with Redcloud a moment ago, their eyes meet behind their eyepro. Just a slight wince in Lieut Caufield's upper lip. Slight, that wince, nothing more.

Wolfe gives a final glance down at Robyn.

What remains of her clothes is burnt tatters.

Blood already seeping through the purple-tinged white extinguisher powder of her exposed skin.

Burnt skin.

Black. Down to the bleeding muscle.

Her head, only patches of hair left.

Doc Eberly pulling an IV from his aid bag.

Wolfe senses the tragic sadness of Robyn's whole world suddenly so completely radically changed. For the worse. *Worst. Worse to the max. Smokin-hot-babe Robyn Banks, next minute she's a burnt piece of toast. I shoulda seen it. If anyone coulda seen it, I shoulda seen it.*

And he calmly steps between the shipping containers and climbs up onto the rock wall.

He sights in his M4 carbine on the figure of the gas thrower a good three football fields' distance away climbing up over the terrace rock wall.

Settles the dark form of the man center on the peak of the chevron crosshairs of his Acog sight.

Calms his arms to absolute taut stillness.

Forces the carbine up even tighter to his shoulder.

Lets out his breath slowly, ever so evenly.

Fires *clack clack clack clack clack* and way out there the guy goes down, pitching forward. And doesn't move.

In the Third Terraced Field

A few minutes later, the gas thrower, his baggy, billowy pantlegs blood-soaked, is struggling to crawl away on his belly.

Wolfe's boot clamps down on his neck, pushing his face into the dirt.

"Where are you going?" he snarls in Pashto/English mix. "Where are you running away to?"

The guy grabs at Wolfe's legs, and Wolfe kicks his hands away then kicks him over onto his back, and the guy screams in the agony of his legs shattered by the two of Wolfe's previous shots that hit.

Wolfe now puts the muzzle of his M4 right on the guy's forehead.

And the guy's eyes squint, focus sharply, and he starts ranting an indecipherable Arabic, repeated, fast, with Wolfe catching the many "*Allahs*".

It's rote Muslim prayer.

"Yeh yeh pray. Pray," Wolfe tells him in English. "Lotta good that's gonna do."

And the guy keeps praying, faster, more urgent, eyes boring with hate straight into Wolfe's.

Now Wolfe pulls his M4 off the guy's forehead. In English, "Seventy-five virgins," he says. "Gonna get you some virgin tail?" He smiles.

Silence from the guy.

Wolfe in halting Pashto, "Seventy-five virgins? You want? Yes? Virgins? You want virgins?"

The guy's eyes soften. This Am'rican isn't going to kill him after all.

Wolfe says in English, "Shit yeh who wouldn't want a virgin or two?" He chuckles. "Or seventy-five." He puts the muzzle of his M4 right above the guy's groin, an inch away, and the guy is suddenly very very scared.

A sneer from Wolfe. "Good luck with that, buddy. With the pretty girls."

"Death to Am'rica!" the guy shouts in English, and

Wolfe pulls the trigger *clack clack* point-blank into his crotch.

Hello virgins.

Bye bye gonads.

Thirty Minutes Later

Just waiting on the medevac chopper.

Not a villager anywhere in sight.

Not one.

None.

Nowhere.

To Lieut Caufield it's *Like the whole village is deserted after a plague. The time of the locusts.*

No one here but for the Zoo.

And their two squads of ANA soldiers.

Both Robyn and Gulbarhar on litters set behind the Mrap. Ready to be rushed to the medevac chopper when it arrives.

Each wrapped in a poncho, with just their heads all wrapped in white gauze dressings showing. A slit where their noses are to breathe.

Pfc Holloway holding up an IV bag for each.

Wolfe on his knees beside Robyn. Words of comfort. *Medevac's almost here. Cash is just thirty minutes flight from here. I'll be right with you, Robyn.*

Cash, as in Combat Support Hospital.

Real docs, full-fledged surgeons, RNs.

The Cash on Fob Salerno these days is no longer a series of tents from the first years of the war but a concrete building, modern and well equipped, like a big-city trauma ward.

Get Robyn stabilized there and get a C-130 in asap to fly her up to the bigger hospital at Bagram, then maybe even by tonight a flight on a jet to the full US military hospital in Germany, and in as little as a couple of days she could be in the burn center at Brooke in Texas.

Gonna be in the hands of the best care in the world, Robyn. Gonna be alright, Robyn. I got the sons-a-bitches, Robyn. Dead and in hell, Robyn, they're done with, they're taken care of. Just breathe. Slow and steady. In. Out. We got this, I'm gonna be with you, Robyn. I'm here, I'm gonna be with you every step of the way.

Her lips move, and he puts his ear right to them to hear her whisper in her frightened stutter, "I'm -- cold."

"Cold's good, it's okay, they're gonna take care of you in the Cash."

"I - I - I - I don't - want - to - die - ."

"You're not going to die, no one's gonna die, don't think like that, Robyn. Best care in the world, lady. Have you back on Sal in thirty minutes. I'm right here and you're not going to die on me. We got you, you just hold on, hold on to good thoughts, think of your family. Your brother, your mom and dad. Your dog, think of Zelda, think of her. You're gonna be back with them, with them all, it's going to be all right. Going to look at this someday down the road as just a little bump in the road. We're here for you, all of us here for you. Chopper's on the way."

One of the ANA pickup trucks bounces up to a stop.

This squad had come over a while ago to see about the body of the Bic lighter guy, and no one had said anything to them or stopped them when the Afghan sergeant had his guys wrap the body in a white cotton blanket, and they drove it down and left it on the steps of the deserted mosque for the villagers to deal with.

This time they've got the gasoline guy in the pickup bed, wrapped in no white cotton blanket, he's alive.

And the Afghan sergeant hops out barking quick Pashto at Redcloud, which Zoo Platoon terp Nouri translates as a demand for medical treatment for the guy.

Nouri repeats it. "He says Cash for him helicopter take him. He goes to Cash."

Redcloud, so unfazed. So calm. Looks at the wounded gas guy in the pickup bed.

Looks right in the Afghan sergeant's eyes. They're close, within arm's reach. The Afghan sergeant's eyes burning fierce, angry. The man is tall for an Afghan, broad shouldered. He's Redcloud's height and build; Redcloud wouldn't have anything on him in a fight.

Redcloud says calmly, quietly, "Tell him, Nouri. Tell him . . ."

And that cynical grin of Redcloud's—deadly serious—and he pulls off his Oakley eyeprep, eye-to-eye direct with the Afghan sergeant.

Unflinching.

Clear, concise, crisply exact.

No mistranslation going to happen here now.

Cold. Emotionless. Almost ruthless.

"Leave – him – for – his – Tal-eee-ban – doctors."

And he turns away from the Afghan sergeant, ordering Nouri, "Tell him, dump him, get his men ready to leave. The medevac takes off, we're out of here." He catches Lieut Caufield's eye and cuts off any dissent with a fierce grimace that demands, *Don't even think of countermanding that.*

Sniper Rodriguez saw the look. Smiles. Thinks, *Roger that, Sarge. Let the pinche pendejo cabron die.*

He spits a stream of tobacco juice.

Pahumbang! from somewhere—

"Incoming!" and "RPG!" shouted—

Pahumbang! again, and *Pahumbang!*

Which were two fiery flashes from the windows of the concrete schoolhouse way far at least six-hundred meters up the beach, built right against the mountainside near where the streambed opens up from the narrow gorge upstream, and

the turret gunners of Ssgt Ketchum's three trucks facing that way open up with their .50-cal, M240 machinegun and Mark-19, and

their bullets hit high on the mountainside above the school, as three more rockets are fired in white flashes from the windows.

Paashooowoosh! of a rocket whizzing by twenty feet overhead, over all the trucks, and it explodes in the rocks down across the stream.

Passhooowoosh! of another rocket overhead, to explode like the other downstream.

Pahumbang! from the veranda of the school, and that rocket blurs in straight and explodes just in front of Ketchum's middle truck, showering it with dirt and rock. But the turret gunner on the Mk19 just keeps *plomp plomp plomping* out his grenades.

Pahumbang! from another window of the school, and that rocket *whooshes* toward one of the ANA pickups where, standing in the bed an ANA soldier is firing his PKM machinegun from his hip as another does likewise with his AK, and the rocket explodes right on the cab, throwing those two soldiers out of the bed and shredding the two inside, as

Ketchum's turret gunners have found their aim:

The .50-cal and 240 gunners sending their streams raking the school, all that ferocious volume of firepower shattering the huge wood frame windows and wood doors, splintering the concrete.

The Mk19 rounds plunking against the outside walls and right through the school veranda and in the windows.

There are explosions inside the building, with flames and now smoke billowing out the windows and up through the veranda.

The three turret gunners rain their violence against the schoolhouse from this distance.

No more RPGs are shot.

Standing on the roof of the Mrap, Redcloud commands the squad leaders through his pouched Mbitr radio, "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

He watches from this distance Ketchum get his gunners to do that, and it all so gradually grows quiet, to near silence.

Just the smoke and flames from the burning ANA pickup, and those soldiers there pulling their wounded and dead away from it.

Smoke and flames snake up from the distant school, from which there's now *Pahumbang!*

And Ketchum's three turret gunners again open up, and that rocket sails over those trucks and explodes near Ssgt Nell's trucks on the other side.

As Ketchum's turret gunners' belts run out, there's quiet. They pull open new cans of ammo, slap the belts onto their guns and slam the first linked rounds into the chambers.

Redcloud demands over the radio, "Status report. Casualties. Ketchum?"

Gets a *Negative* back.

"Nelly?"

That squad the same, just some "Scratches, minor, not even Purple Heart worthy," from Ssgt Nell.

"All clear, we're good," from Ssgt Utah.

Redcloud likes what he sees, that no one in Nell's squad fired. Same with Utah's, they all kept their discipline, kept their eyes on their sectors, their backs to the school.

Guaranteed everyone took a glance or two to see the destruction rained upon the distant school, but they didn't fire, and that's good. Redcloud won't say anything now but it's not something he'll forget this evening, to compliment Nell and Utah back on the Cop when they get together to wargame the day.

Same with Pvt Bybee on the 240 on the Mrap here, and Spec Tran on the .50 back over there, good job, neither fired. Neither had to be yelled at not to fire.

No one sure had to tell Doc his duty, Redcloud thinks, as Eberly is sprinting with his aid bag toward the wounded ANA soldiers on the ground near their burning pickup.

An itch in the back of Redcloud's mind tells him to call Eberly off, let the ANA medic deal with them, *If they've even got a medic. And what's he got, a band-aid and an aspirin? Let them treat their own wounded.*

Except, *They're wounded, wounded are wounded*, that's Redcloud's better self. *Ours or theirs, they're wounded.*

He asks of Lieut Caufield, "Thought the ANA were supposed to check that school?"

"They did."

Wolfe, "They must of been hiding in the cloakrooms." It's not a joke. Said bitterly.

Redcloud watches the smoke coming up out of the school. "If they had cloakrooms."

"Then they'd have to have coats to hang in them." Wolfe again, and again not a joke.

Lieut Caufield, "The sergeant said, he said they checked it out and it was clear. No one, no kids, no insurgents. Nobody. Nouri! Nouri, what'd the ANA say about that?" The school. "ANA sergeant told you what?"

"No people in school. M-tee."

"He said that, empty?"

"Yes yes. M-tee."

Redcloud to Wolfe, "You're the anthropologist. What'd they teach you in college, what's that tell you?"

"Your ANA's either lazy or lying. Big Lima for Lazy or Lying. Or both."

Lieut Caufield grabs his binos from inside the Mrap.

Wolfe continues, "Or they're working for the Taliban. Haqqani in this neck of the woods."

Redcloud, "They paid for it." The wounded ANA. "Taliban could of sneaked in around back."

"Nope," Caufield scanning with his binos. "Not possible."

The school is built right up against the concave mountainside which shelters most of the building.

Caufield, "No backside. It butts right up to the mountain there."

Wolfe, "Or they've got caves back in there. We should've checked it out."

Redcloud on the radio, "Ketchum, did you see anyone going into or out of that school building?"

And back from Ketchum over the radio, "Negative. Sarge, we was told the school was empty. My guys woulda said somethin."

From the school, a bright, loud explosion, with a surge of flames and streaming clouds of jet black smoke from the windows. Then a second explosion inside.

"Jesus Cristo!" from Sniper Rodriguez. "What do they got in there, a ammo dump?"

Wolfe, "I've seen, they store diesel in the schools. And clinics. District centers. Fifty-five gallon drums. Diesel and gasoline."

"AKs. RPGs," Rodriguez adds. "Fert'lizer they use in their roadside bombs. Prob'ly got cases of our claymores they rip off from the trucks comin in from Pak'stan."

Lieut Caufield, "It doesn't leave a lot of room for books."

Wolfe, "Books? We don't need no stinkin books." Not a joke. Again. Scorn. "I wouldn't build them any more schools. Clinics. Or mosques. District centers."

Redcloud, "Hearts and minds. You're the HTT, Wolfie."

At the corner of Wolfe's eyes, Robyn is motionless on her litter, wrapped up in the poncho, her head all white gauze seeping blood through. "F—double-U—double-C—double-K these people." At least, he knows, she's not hurting now, not with the morphine Doc gave her.

Quietly he adds, loaded with bile, "Twice on Sunday."

Sniper Rodriguez laughs. "Yeh 'mano, you be the one, Kyle, you tell that to Gen'ral St Claire."

Wolfe, "I'll get right on that PowerPoint."

Redcloud cocks an ear, downstream, and there it is, the sound of a helicopter. An Apache gunship appears high over the ridgelines in the gap downstream, and it dives now screaming down into this valley.

Over the platoon freq comes the pilot, "Tattoo Zoo Platoon, this is Talon Three. Over."

Lieut Caufield answers, "Roger, Zoo Six here. Over."

Caufield's call-sign, Zoo Six. All unit commanders are something Six.

"What you got going, you got a barbeque cookout going on down there?"

Redcloud motions Caufield that he'll take it, and cuts in over his Mbitr radio, "Negative. Neg—ga—tive. All clear. Just a little remodeling of the country schoolhouse. We've got two critical here for the medevac. Over."

"Say again, all clear?"

"All clear. This is Zoo Seven." A unit's ranking NCO is something Seven. "Threat's been neutralized. Calm here as a kindergarten classroom at naptime. Repeat, two criticals for immediate evac."

A laugh over the radio. "Kindergarten what?"

"Classroom at naptime. You're in the protective bosom of the Tattoo Zoo. Bring in Nightingale."

"Talon's never been known to turn down any bosom. You hear that, Nightingale?"

"Roger that on the bosoms," is a second voice, the pilot of the Blackhawk medevac helicopter coming in fast now over the gap between the ridges downstream. "Give us a smoke, Tattoo Zoo. Where do you want us?"

"This is Zoo Seven. Center of mass," from Redcloud over the radio. And, "Nelly, you heard that? Toss them a smoke."

Over by his truck, Ssgt Nell pulls the pin on the grenade and heaves it with all his might, its green smoke billowing and the grenade bouncing close to the center of this wide circle perimeter.

Four Minutes Later

The Blackhawk is ascending, speeding forward, banking, to get out of here to follow the Apache gunship already climbing fast for the open sky above the gap in the ridgeline downstream.

Wolfe is left alone here.

Redcloud and the others jogging back for the Mrap.

Both ANA pickups bouncing back toward where the other pickup burns.

Wolfe's eyes following the departing Blackhawk.

Robyn is on it. Leaving. Gone.

He's not.

And there's a clenched fierce anger in his face, in his hands on his M4 carbine. Thoughts, feelings, he'd shoot off a whole magazine, thirty rounds, at that chopper. No—rather, turn and shoot up those ANA pickups. *Kill that hajj sergeant.*

They'd met the chopper as soon as it touched down, and they loaded Robyn and terp Gulbarhar inside, with Eberly coming in on one ANA pickup truck with their two wounded to load aboard.

The ANA sergeant came with the second pickup, with the wounded gas thrower, which had Wolfe going ballistic. "No fuckin way!" he'd

screamed at the sergeant. And in Pashto/English mix, "Get him out of here, they are not taking him, he is going nowhere!"

But the Afghan sergeant, the gas guy in his arms, shoved right by him.

The rotors spinning in a loud blur right overhead and the Blackhawk twin engines screaming, Wolfe shouted right at the crew chief, "No, no, not him, he's Taliban! Haqqani Talib! He doesn't get on, he did all this!"

"Is he alive?" the crew chief shouted back.

"Who cares! He did that to her! He set her on fire!"

"Geneva Convention!"

"Geneva frickin bull shit! He's—not—going!"

"Tell it to your congressman!" And the crew chief held off Wolfe from pulling the gas guy off, then from climbing aboard, "No pax!"

"I'm going with her to the Cash!"

"Overloaded!"

"She's my teammate!"

"Maxed-out weight! The altitude!" Final word, and the crew chief stepped back up inside then and slid the door shut.

Leaving Wolfe. Taking Robyn.

Wolfe motionless now. In the growing quiet as the Apache helicopter is gone and the Blackhawk is about to cross through the gap downstream.

Wolfe just watches the dark blur of the Blackhawk disappear.

Back at the Mrap Lieut Caufield asks of Redcloud, "Travis." It's an order, a question, a request. "We need to get a squad, do BDA."

Battle Damage Assessment. Check out the school. Account for the enemy dead.

BDA.

Getting numbers.

Higher headquarters likes numbers. All the way up, everyone likes numbers.

Numbers to affirm they're killing the bad guys.

Testament to a mission being accomplished.

With snapshot digital photo verification.

Numbers and pictures to make the battalion and brigade commanders look good, essential for eventual promotion. To give the generals a positive argument that they're winning, which gives the politicians protective cover to justify the cost. In dollars and blood.

The more enemy killed, the fewer enemy there are.

When you get it down to 0 enemy left, you win.

Tally up those numbers, scrapbook those photos.

Send it all up, and everyone along the way adds their own PowerPoint slides, until a final presentation at the White House shows the enemy on

the run, on their last legs, and *"It's just a matter of a little longer and the Afghan Forces will be up to strength and in position to take over this war all by themselves."*

Redcloud over the radio, "Utah. Two trucks. BDA. Pick me up."

He pulls from a chest pouch a small digital camera. Centers the burning ANA pickup in the viewscreen. Zooms in. *Click*. Moves the camera to get the smoking schoolhouse in the viewscreen. *Click*—

Pahumbang! from somewhere, and those here duck down behind the Mrap. They count four seconds, and the rocket explodes just to the side, showering the Mrap in dirt and rocks.

Pahumbang! of another, and Spec Tran has seen the flash and a puff of smoke from a compound way up in the terraced fields.

Pahumbang! another comes from there, and Tran opens up with his .50, as Bybee in the Mrap turret blasts his 240 machinegun.

And the second rocket sails *whooooosh* overhead, with the next exploding on the sand near Ketchum's trucks.

Redcloud advises Lieut Caufield, "You sure we want to stick around? It gonna be worth taking casualties? One in the hand, Lieutenant, count our blessings, get while the gettin's good."

Caufield runs his hand across his throat, doesn't have to put his *Nix on the BDA* into words, and

Redcloud orders over the radio, "Zoosters, frag-O. No BDA. Mount up. Now, asap. Ketchum, you're in the lead."

Frag-O, literally a fragmentation order, a change in an original order.

And word is passed on the radios and in shouts and gestures, and guys never move faster than when they know they're getting out of a place they no longer want to be, where maybe the next surprise RPG actually hits its target, like that ANA pickup burning, except *It's one of ours this time*, and *Damn straight we're gettin outta this shit-assed place* is what most of them are thinking, before it actually is one of theirs. *Hooah on the frag-O!*

Not so with Private Finkle, the pimply-faced eighteen-year-old Mk19 grenade gunner in Ketchum's truck. No hooah. He whines to Ketchum climbing in, "C'mon, Sarge, what's this shit, they're not doin BDA? I want to see who I wasted."

"Next time."

"How we gonna know how many I wasted?"

"They're crispy critters —"

"Even more reason, Sarge!"

"Get back up on that gun!" And Ketchum motions driver Specialist Van Louse a pissed *Get movin behind our lead Mrap there* already moving out bouncing over the boulders heading for the stream. "Get your head outta your ass, Louie," he tells him.

Van Louse guns the hummer ahead, yanking the wheel to turn to follow. "I kinda wanted to see the BDA pictures too. How many you think we got? Dude, hadta be a shitload."

Ketchum, "What's it fucken matter?"

"Com'on, whaddaya think? Ten? Fifteen? That was one shitload of rockets coming outta there, Sarge. A shitload, you seen em."

Ketchum holds up three fingers.

Van Louse, "Three? No way. There was at least, I counted, I lost count, there were at least ten. Minimum."

Ketchum, "Three windows."

"Alright. And you got let's say three shooters in each one of them windows. Nine. Nine enemy K-I-A for the Zoo today. Kilo India Alpha. Big day for the Zoo."

"What's it to you, you think yer gonna get a attaboy from Colonel Pork-You-In-The-Ass? Yeh, in yer dreams."

"Notches. I wanna start puttin notches on her here." On this humvee's door outside. "Com'on whaddaya think? Skulls? Think I oughta do skulls? Skulls would be cool, don't ya think? Like the tatt."

Ketchum. "With beards. Turbines and beards. I think you got something there, Louie. Notches. Skull and crossbones. Sorry I ever tol' everybody yer a shitbird. Sorry I ever called you a lamebrain."

From the radio, Redcloud's voice, "Listen up, Zoosters. No horseplay, no relaxing. Keep a sharp eye out. It's not longer in doubt, we know they're out there watching us. Waiting their opportunity."

Redcloud is at the open door of his humvee. Pfc Holloway revving the engine, anxious to get going.

Redcloud watches the Zoo trucks taking their proper order heading out, an order they know without thinking, widely spaced out.

Combat Rules #s 1 and 2: *Don't bunch up*.

Radio mic up close to his lips, Redcloud is calm, precise. "Enemy's out here. Itchy to play footsie. Get themselves an E-ticket to paradise. Let's not give them it."

Redcloud climbs in, cramped up in this tight space.

Motions Holloway *Turn it*, to take the tail end.

Cautions over the radio, "We're not home yet. Let's have all eyes peeled. Ketchum, stay in the water. At all times. You gotta get out, go where it doesn't look like anyone'd want to ever drive."

Taliban know to plant their roadside bombs in the path the average-Joe anybody will instinctively take—the easy way.

"Stay in the tracks, Zoosters. Exact, right in the tracks of the truck in front. The bad guys are out here alright, aint no doubt they're watching."

And a final word, "Eyes like an eagle, men. Eagle that hasn't eaten since Sunday."

"Reminds me, Sarge," Sandusky's voice on the radio. "Speaking of chow and lunchtime, think we can make a quick pit-stop at McDonald's? Or a Jack-in-the-Box?"

"What'd I just say about horsing around, Sandusky!"

No reply.

Nothing, silence on the radio.

For Redcloud, as it should be.

He points for Holloway to head for Wolfe, who's squatted on his haunches Afghan-style, unmoving, where the chopper left him. Like he's staying right here in Wajma. Alone, the lone American.

Holloway pulls up to Wolfe on Redcloud's side.

Redcloud drops his window. "Didn't want to ride with the L-T?"

Wolfe stands. Joyless smile. "He drove right on by. Like he didn't even see me."

Redcloud, "He's got a lot on his mind."

"Yeh," Wolfe pulls open the door behind. "Life's a bitch." Dry, dark, bitter.

"Sheeeeeee-at," from Pfc Holloway, and Redcloud shuts him up with a killer look that says *Shut — Your — Trap — Private*.

Wolfe climbs in into the seat behind Redcloud.

It's like it was before.

Up front, Holloway driving and Redcloud.

Doc Eberly seated behind Holloway, and Tran's legs and butt standing between him and Wolfe.

Wolfe in the seat that Redcloud had said was reserved for Robyn on the return.

Day One, Afternoon

NATO/ISAF Compound, Kabul

A handful of Nato countries is ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force.

Pronounced I-saf.

Spell it Isaf.

It's Nato, but it's really America predominant.

Predominant predominant, the gorilla in the room.

That's the way Kyle Wolfe had described it for his second anthropologist trainee, who could not seem to grasp the difference between Nato and Isaf.

"The nub, in a nutshell," Wolfe had explained. "Think of it as the U.S., plain and simple." The U.S. is the gorilla in the room and the rest of the countries a bunch of playful little chimpanzees, and they're all scampering around hopping on and off of the gorilla, tugging his hair, boxing his ears, checking his teeth, yanking his crank, and he feels like a big rich daddy having quality time with the kids after a stressful day in the corporate boardroom. "Not that I'd know anything about a rich guy coming home from a day at the corporate office."

Not that that second trainee or any of the others would ever confuse Kyle Wolfe with someone who could survive more than a few hours in any corporate office.

Isaf is Nato but really America, who's got ten times the soldiers in this war, twenty times the equipment, a thousand times the \$.

Isaf is the boss of the entire war.

Isaf headquarters is this fortress compound here dead center of Kabul.

It's a square chunk of three or four city blocks cut out and completely cordoned off surrounded by multiple layers of concrete blast walls fifteen feet tall.

Blast walls topped with embedded broken glass and strung coils of razor wire.

Video surveillance cameras mounted atop the wire every fifty feet or so, wide-angle coverage.

Inside the perimeter, reinforced concrete buildings. Two and three stories tall.

Helicopter pad on the roof of the HQ Command building.

Blast-proof glass windows. Where there are windows. Few.

Modest-sized pastorally quiet quads of mowed lawns crisscrossed with cobblestone footpaths bordered with pines and cypresses.

Manicured ivy in clay planters along the concrete steps into buildings.

Homey.

Peaceful.

The quiet richness, the feeling of a scaled-down Oxford, Harvard or Dartmouth.

Rows of two-high stacked prefab conex officer living barracks.

For the many American, far fewer British, German, Canadian, Italian, French, Pole, Dutch, Dane and Norwegian officers running the war and their NCOs and soldiers making things run.

A few, officers and enlisted, seen today outside moving about. All in impeccably clean, perfectly pressed uniforms.

Trimmed, immaculate fingernails.

Not a speck of a smudge of black under them.

As it should be. This isn't Wajma. It's not the Zoo's Cop.

Those places, that's outdoors combat down there, grunting out the war, going outside the wire to find and engage it.

This here is where all that hands-on combat prosecuted down there is prioritized and watched over, with directives to the four regional combat two-star commands and from there to the full-bird brigades and shot down to the lite-bird battalions and then down to the mere-captain companies.

Principle of Combat #2:

The higher up the food chain you go, the greater your responsibility for the many more lives you direct below and the many more dollars you spend that come raining a downpour from above.

Corollary Principle: *With greater responsibility comes better living.*

Begrudged, of course, by just about every line-dog infantry GI, who all believe that soldiers back in the comfy rear should have it rough like them and don't realize that the colonels and one-stars and the four-star here can't be meeting with ambassadors and visiting senators and Karzai and 60 Minutes dressed in filthy uniforms torn at the knees and crotch, hands blackened with gunpowder and grease, and brown grit embedded under hard-crusted broken fingernails.

Hard-crusted broken fingernails? Here?

C'mon dude, get real. There's a manicurist from Belarus who works in the salon/barber shop just over there the other side of the HQ building, next to the Tim Hortons.

In the HQ Command Building

Pete St Claire. Here he comes striding down the corridor.

General Pete St Claire.

Isaf commander.

Afghan War commander.

The four-star who Wolfe and the Zoosters were talking about before in Wajma. The man credited with the gospel Coin Manual, that four-star.

Most four-star generals, you think they're going to be someone out of Central Casting. Tall, broad shouldered, ruggedly handsome, a bear of a man, commanding if only from a dominate physical bearing.

Think Patton, Schwarzkopf, Tommy Franks.

Think George C Scott.

Not General Pete St Claire.

5'9" at best. Wiry. Tight, sinewy. Precise in his movements. Precise and fluid. The physicality of a magician.

Short, thin, small, nothing but muscle, and in complete control of every tendon.

Ran cross-country in high school, ran it at West Point, runs five miles at 5:30 per mile today, and can do ten at 6:10/mile, has run the New York City Marathon four times, the last just three years ago, at age fifty-four, in 2hrs 52mins.

Pete St Claire has an elliptical and a treadmill in his office suite here, for the days there's no time for the short chopper hop over to Bagram for a run of the airfield perimeter there. Twice. Three times if he can slip it by his demanding schedule, with at least two of his young captain aides keeping up while huffing staccato notes into a mini-recorder and receiving operational updates and relaying directives on secure cell phones, voice and text.

Back in Isaf HQ Kabul in his office suite St Claire has weights for strength and tone along one wall.

A pull-up bar in a doorway.

A sit-up incline board.

Was the shortest, smallest cadet on the rugby team at the Point and made up for it by being physically and mentally all that much more aggressive.

Still takes to heart a lesson his father drilled into him as a boy: *Disciplined in body and disciplined in mind, can't have one without the other.*

And a second lesson from him: *More sweat in training, less blood in combat.*

St Claire's got footlockers of books in the backroom where he sleeps on an Army cot.

When he sleeps. In snatches, three, four hours, at most.

The books are mostly military and histories. Some go-down-easy popcorn fiction. Clancy and Grisham. Scott Turow. He leaves the Faulkner, the Mailer, the Cheever and Roth and Heller and Frazen and Dostoyevsky and Twain and Chekov for the literati snobs. He's already read them once—for familiarity and insight not art—no need for twice.

St Claire is nowhere near handsome but not overtly ugly either. Indistinguishable, forgettable. Solely his face.

A portrait artist studying him would instinctively relate that face to a mole's, maybe a chipmunk's.

Out of uniform St Claire blends right in, he could be the manager of a Walmart, the neighbor down the street mowing the lawn and trimming the hedges who you wave to but don't really know. The construction engineer of the town's new sewage treatment plant. The high school math teacher who coaches the wrestling squad.

The last guy Central Casting would pick for a general.

He's really no different from the next gent in the country club locker room, looks like the average 12-handicap duffer, but outside he'll shoot 18 holes two over par and beat you. That evening, upstairs at the formal dinner, when he strides in, in dress blues, a chest full of medals of every rainbow color, his elegant, quiet wife Margaret on his arm, every eye will turn his way. He's taller than his 5-9, he's General Pete St Claire and this is just outside Washington DC, or across country on the other coast at Torrey Pines while assessing the Marines at Pendleton. Every eye's on him because he's the one who's been entrusted with, in command of the Afghan War. He's the one, everyone knows, for whom unlimited fortune of whatever his choosing awaits after this war.

Unlimited political fortune, if he cares to go that way.

Which, as of now, no one knows.

And he's not saying.

Actually, always deferring the often raised question with a smile and *"I have a war to prosecute, that's my single duty and single objective."*

Earlier, throughout his career, from the highest cadet rank of First Captain at West Point and forward to three-star deputy commander in Iraq, he's led through his competence and confidence. Today he commands from his competence, confidence and his position, and knows that the last is the most powerful of the three. He knows as well that to misuse or abuse that position with incompetence, recklessness or overconfident immodesty is to lose it, to toss it away forever.

Gen Pete St Claire knows that if he were to lose that position, this position of master of this war, have it taken from him, it would mean throwing away that future limitless fortune.

He knows that he won't let that happen.

It's not who he is.

Another lesson from his father: *Respect the men below and those above will respect you.*

You don't command in the infantry from platoon through brigade and division and now theater over the course of thirty years from lieutenant to four-star by being limp, ho-hum, wet-noodlely.

You don't get that first star or keep it, or get another, if you aren't as smart as a brain surgeon.

As political as a senator.

As agreeable as a butler.

You don't get a four-star theater command of a war unless the president is convinced that you'll win that war for him.

Or make it appear that you have.

Or at the very least allow no one to rationally argue that your war is heading for the one word that must not be spoken.

Defeat.

At least never to be spoken in the short-term.

Long-term, in the history books, who cares, you'll all be long dead by then anyway, and generals don't get blamed for losing a war, political leaders do; look at Robert E Lee, he lost his war and he's a hero a hundred-fifty years later, haloed in biographies and film documentaries, and who the hell remembers anything about his feckless president, what's his name, that Jefferson Davis fellow?

In the simplest terms, you don't keep a four-star theater command unless the president believes you're doing him no harm.

In the short-term.

In increments of four-year chunks. Election to election.

From St Claire's father: *You take a job, you do in one day what other men do in a week.*

And that work ethic, along with his brains, ambition and zipped-lips when prudent has propelled Gen St Claire to here, the most powerful man in Afghanistan, foreign or native.

Total, some 200,000 American and Euro-Nato soldiers and civilian contractors are under him, under his command. Add in de facto the disparate 300,000 Afghan forces, however ineffectual and rinky-dink.

That's a half-million-plus whose actions St Claire is responsible and accountable for.

Along with a few hundred billion dollars worth of equipment, from light bulbs to jet fighters.

A running yearly budget of ninety or a hundred billion dollars, no one's really that gung-ho about counting accurately.

And in the Op Center, listening to the radio comms of a Marine company in a firefight down in gates-of-hell hot Helmand or a GI scout platoon caught in an ambush up in the wicked mountain passes in Kunar or a lonely two-squad observation post getting rocketed on the border in Khowst, Gen St Claire is nostalgic to be the captain or lieutenant down there in the midst of it, where he never was as a captain or lieutenant—wishing to be leading men who he knows by their first names in combat where the bullets from your own gun directly kill people, whose own bullets can in turn kill you.

Every true warrior officer in the Op Center listening to that far away fight in real-time wants to be in it, is envious of the low-ranking officer down there on the ground who is.

Every infantry officer worth his salt, regardless his rank, longs to be kneeling in the dirt directing his handful of men, his privates and sergeants, to kill the enemy just fifty meters away trying to overrun his platoon. Four-star and lower, the true warrior would trade ranks and places for a day to be that nameless lieutenant down there where real courage is tested and galvanized by the rounds snapping just overhead or splattering the rock beside you or splintering the tree you're behind, whacking your radioman at your elbow, two in his body armor, another that crushes his shoulder, and you're scared as all hell, but you're in control of that fear, in control of the terror, no one sees it, you won't dare show it, no one knows it but you, and you're directing your platoon, grabbing that radio handset, reporting and ordering, making the instantaneous and correct decisions that are going to save the lives of most of your men and are right now effectively holding off and killing the enemy.

Just for an hour.

Maybe today.

For Gen Pete St Clair it wasn't to be as a lieutenant or captain because the only wars in those years after West Point were the tiny engagements in Grenada and Panama, and they were over in days and he was assigned somewhere else thousands of miles away during them.

He was a lieutenant colonel on staff in brigade op center for the Gulf War.

Was assigned to the Pentagon during that quick Somalia debacle.

Commanded a division as a two-star in Iraq after the fall, in '04, '05.

That's when that war had already turned vicious, in the streets, and he'd go on patrol with a random company, out into those streets, to the futile protests of his staff, just to be out there, out where his troops were being engaged and being killed and maimed.

Got a rep for it. The men admired him for it.

And it wasn't with a bunch of Blackwater bodyguards, no personal security at all, wouldn't Sniper Rodriguez be surprised to learn, but with

his issue Beretta 9mm in a shoulder holster and a borrowed carbine on his lap, that's all, as he'd ride the backseat in a humvee.

Leaving command of the patrol to the captain or lieutenant—he wouldn't think to micromanage their company or platoon, but knew that his very presence would bring out the best in them.

He'd ride just to be there, in the streets, where the maiming and killing was being done.

Because that's what warriors do.

They, like St Claire, think that in any time and any place they would be Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore—and they know him by his real name, as they've all read his book, more than once, and they visualize him and thus themselves as Mel Gibson in the film *We Were Soldiers Once*, as they've all seen the movie, multiple times, from lieutenants to colonels here, Americans and Euros, and countless have the DVD in their rooms here and have watched and rewatched it.

St Claire has a hardbound first edition of the book.

Signed.

Personally, to him, from Hal Moore.

In a footlocker here.

A warrior officer by definition of being a warrior imagines himself Gibson as Lieut Col Moore, seeing himself in the Ia Drang Valley, Vietnam, his battalion of 450 surrounded by 2,000 NVA enemy. In battle. Where you can die.

No one's going to die here in Isaf HQ Kabul.

Had Gen St Claire been born a dozen years earlier he might have been a first lieutenant platoon leader in Moore's battalion in the Central Highlands.

Born years later than he was, he might have been a Ranger captain fighting for his men's survival on the streets of Mogadishu.

Even more years later, he could be Lieutenant Matt Caufield taking his platoon back down Wajma Gorge right this very minute.

If he knew of Matt Caufield.

If he knew of the Zoo Platoon as anything more than a unit designation number on a status chart on an Excel spreadsheet.

You can't pick your generation nor your birth date or place. *It's what you do with what you're dealt*, he learned from his father. *Can't make your good luck any more than your bad. Confront the bad luck headstrong. Fight through it. Push it aside.*

Good luck and bad, an ROTC career artillery lieutenant colonel, his father was killed in Vietnam when an errant round from one of his own Central Highlands battery firebases on a hilltop four miles away made a direct hit on the outhouse he just then happened to be taking a dump in.

Pete St Claire was in high school then.

It wasn't until years later as a lieutenant colonel in the Pentagon that he dug up the file with the dry clinical details, which didn't matter, didn't change his remembrance, his father was still a hero, he'd died in combat, in a war, like any war, where the most clear determinant of life or death was that random good luck or bad.

In war, where, despite his father's teachings, St Claire accepts that sometimes the bad will come so suddenly with such finality it cannot be confronted, fought through and pushed aside.

Sometimes. But so far never for him.

He's thought about it now and then, often enough. And he just knows, he feels it, he's confident that his good luck will hold out.

By anything other than its inconsequential numerical unit designation, and surely not by its nickname, as of this very moment right here right now in Isaf HQ, Gen St Claire has yet to hear of the Tattoo Zoo.

Here in the corridor, his strides long, sharp, St Claire's soft-soled boots make no sound on the polished linoleum-tile floor.

One's eyes automatically travel up from the boots and zero in on the four jet-black stars one above another sewn into his uniform right down his sternum.

Four perfect embroidered black stars.

Power, ultimate power in those stars. In their perfect sewn alignment.

Your eyes jump across from those four stars over to the civilian man on the general's flank, stride for stride beside him—not even an effort keeping up. Abreast on line with St Claire, without being the centimeter or inch or half a stride behind that is the deference everyone seems to pay when walking with a four-star.

At 6'6" this man is a good nine inches taller than St Claire, a husky guy, huge-boned and still at least fifty pounds overweight.

Comfortably dressed in wrinkled, baggy slacks and a Caribbean guayabera shirt, pastel pink. Yeh, wrinkled.

No tie.

Of course no tie; you don't wear a tie with a guayabera.

Dreadlocks growing full and rich and long, bouncy.

Faded red-canvas laceless Keds, size fifteen or sixteen.

No socks.

All told, in appearance and deliberate disregard for convention, taste or neatness exactly contrasted to St Clair's physical and uniform perfection.

Twenty-plus years St Claire's junior.

That's right, junior. Young.

The only child, and a bastard, of an immigrant housekeeper from the Dominican Republic and a British Royal Navy aviator in Florida assigned

on temporary exchange duty at the Jacksonville Naval Air Station whom this man as a boy never knew or knew of except for the bio-dad's own first and last names his mother gave him and his skin half the dark brown of his mother's and his superior intellect, a gift from his father, no more significant than his fierce self-assurance and his dogged competitiveness, gifts from his mother.

It was that superior intellect that from kindergarten on would separate him from his inner-city classmates in a culture that values above all else physical strength and aggressive pure hedonistic meanness on the baked asphalt streets and the dirt front lawns to the basketball arenas and football stadiums, all of which he shunned after having to just once use his towering size and strength, and an exaggerated wantonness, to pummel with his stuffed bookbag the top dog of a teen gang taunting him from out under a street hoop, "*C'mon, nigga, wanna show you aint a sissy-ass mama's boy out here*".

No one ever taunted him again. Not on those streets.

Years later as a Yale undergrad he let the white ruling class elites around him assume he was an affirmative action ghetto token and didn't care when his performance changed their minds, and he shot through Princeton postgrad in eighteen months then a Stanford doctorate in sixteen, International Relations, Southwestern Asia.

On a map that's Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan.

This man's fluent in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese.

Fluent in Persian and Arabic.

Semi-fluent in Pashto and Urdu.

Recruited by the State Department in spite of his anti-Ivy League dress and Caribbean ganga dreadlocks, because the rising importance of a nuclear Pakistan made his doctorate rare and highly in demand. He then spent the mid- to late-90s in a back cubicle in the embassy in Islamabad where no one called him "*Doctor*" and his extensive reports about the threat of bin Laden and the al-Qaeda training camps just a stone's throw across the border went largely ignored.

Repeat: Where his extensive reports about the threat of bin Laden went largely ignored.

Until 9-11.

Since, he demands nothing of a title but everyone calls him "*Doctor*" anyway, and he had his own personal secretary and two assistants in the embassy here in Kabul until St Claire borrowed him after a first briefing from him just before taking command.

That was twenty months ago.

St Claire has yet to return him.

He is Dr Gene Hutchinsen, PhD.

"*Doctor Hutchinsen*" to everyone here at Isaf.

"*Hutch*" to St Claire.

He is St Claire's senior political adviser.

Only political adviser.

The prejudices and relative mediocrity of Hutchinsen's Ivy League peers and profs and of those State Dept superiors who ignored him in that embassy cubicle have made him respect and accept only hard verifiable facts scattered in an airy gauze of political machinations while disrespecting and disregarding rank and position to the point of a undisguised sarcastic scorn and flippant, unapologetic insubordination.

Four black stars on the chest of a man a generation older merit no more of his deference than does the single gold bar on the chest of a young lieutenant fresh out of Officer Basic.

Which is why Gen St Claire keeps Dr Hutchinsen close.

For his blunt non-Machiavellian honesty.

For his encyclopedic knowledge and chess-master understanding of this Southwestern Asia, from language to history to culture to prejudicial religious mindset locked still in the 7th Century.

Like right now. Here striding the corridor together, side by side, equal.

Hutchinsen is saying, "In and out, Pete, all they're going to do is whine. District Governor Achmad, remember, with him it's going to be 'Why'd you give the road contract to whatshisname's brother?' Hello goodbye, ixnay on the frickin three cups of tea. I'll assure Achmad that we have satellite imagery assessment showing insurgents driving past his district center in their Toyota Hi-Luxes in broad daylight daily stopping in for tea and a six-course lunch."

Interrupted, "General St Claire sir!" from an American Army officer — a major — hurrying up the stairwell from the basement.

St Claire doesn't even break stride.

Ten paces behind is one of his captain aides who are always near, bulging leather satchel in one hand, cell phone in the other, and he tries to stop the major, who simply snaps "Colonel Pluma" and proceeds to follow Gen St Claire and Dr Hutchinsen going out the doors.

Outside, the major catches up, keeping up a quarter step behind.

For that deference, remember?

He's on St Claire's flank opposite Hutchinsen, is tall like Hutchinsen, just a couple of inches shorter, visually balancing out and making seem diminutive Gen St Claire between them, but contrasted to Hutchinsen's casual, rumpled civilian appearance by the same crisp immaculate uniform and commanding carriage of St Claire.

He's Major Zachary Dove.

Quickly reporting, "Sir, Colonel Pluma thought you should know. A Human Terrain Team, in P2K, they took a hit, sir, about fifty minutes ago."

Dr Hutchinsen answers for St Claire. "And Dan thinks this is of such pressing concern precisely why?"

"R-C East is reporting, the anthropologist, a Dr Robyn Banks, female, twenty-four, from Maryland —. A villager doused her with gasoline and set her afire."

Gen St Claire still doesn't break stride, shows no reaction.

Has a single-word question, "Status?"

"We'll know when the dustoff arrives at Salerno, sir. It's still fifteen minutes out."

"Tic?"

As in TIC.

Troops in Contact.

Today's military lingo for firefight.

"Sketchy, sir. Not confirmed. R-C East isn't saying. Officially."

"Were there any embeds with the Human Terrain Team?"

"Sir? Embeds?"

"Find out."

"Yes sir." Maj Dove instantly knows the finality—that's all, nothing further—by St Claire's intonation and abruptly stops.

Can't help but admire the lightning speed and vacuum clarity of Gen St Claire's mind. *Embeds? Find out.*

Embeds, shorthand for embedded journalists.

Maj Dove watches St Claire and Dr Hutchinsen turn down the walkway to head for the meeting with district governors he knows the general has scheduled at the on-post mosque. Dove turns back for the steps of the HQ building.

Dr Hutchinsen is twenty-months accustomed to St Claire's speed and clarity. Matches it now with his own devilish, dark humor. "A female contractor torched like Joan of Arc." A sadistic grin more than a smile. "That kind of media, Pete"—

"Priceless."

Wow. Priceless.

Did he just say priceless?

It's enough to take one's breath away.

Not Dr Hutchinsen's. It had been his thought.

And Gen St Claire could say it aloud to him, but would never with anyone else, because he damn well knows that Hutch doesn't covet his four stars, doesn't want to be country chief, doesn't want to be ambassador, could not care less and has no ambition for position.

St Claire knows that all Hutchinsen cares about is winning this war, and he isn't even sure whether that's from USA rah-rah-rah patriotism or simply the challenge of winning under a strict counterinsurgency strategy imposed by stateside and global politics that limit the extreme violence and ruthless destruction here and in neighboring Pakistan that an acne-pus'd buck-tooth'd two-digit-IQ basic-trainee recruit could see would be the more

direct course to victory.

Victory.

Back in the days when it still meant vanquishing the enemy.

Priceless.

Inside the HQ corridor Maj Dove is stopped by a female voice calling "Zachery!"

Immediate recognition, it's Vicky Marshall approaching.

Major Victoria Marshall.

American.

Medical Corps.

A nurse anesthetist.

By definition, in a Cash trauma center The Anesthetist.

Dove knows she's stationed at the hospital at Bagram Airfield, he's seen her around here in Kabul a few times already. First knew her from a Cash in Iraq, she's not someone anyone forgets.

For her looks alone.

She could melt the cover of a Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, he thinks.

In uniform. Burn your eyes out imagining her out of it.

Even more than her stunningly-natural physical beauty, her attraction is of a self-confidence in her intelligence and beauty and a reserve that signals to all that she's not giving it up to just anyone or everyone, and Maj Dove knows she's single—that's the word on her—and doesn't know if she's ever been married and doesn't want to imagine that she has been and can't recall that there's anyone she's ever been pinned to—that he's ever heard of anyone, *In all these Cashes she's been with since called up out of her reserve medical unit after 9-11 in all these combat zones. No one.* He imagines as if it's an ontological truth that *Major Victoria Marshall is the unobtainable woman*, the dream angel of all men's lust. And love. The woman walking the beach alone at sunset who you can't take your eyes off of and at the same time can't approach, feel too small, too lacking, to approach. A woman not deliberately hunted by men, but when glanced upon, stumbled upon, to be instinctively desired immediately and yearned for thereafter beyond anything rational. And never obtained. *She's never been linked to any guy, not generals, not colonels, not Brits or Canadians, not special ops sergeants or gun-slinger contractors.* Ever.

Not that he's heard. And he'd remember, if he'd heard.

"Are we going to see you tonight at Oktoberfest?" she asks as she comes near. "All that ballroom dancing you had to take at West Point, I hope they taught you how to polka."

All with a playful, innocent smile, and she goes right on by, continues down the corridor, doesn't even look back.

Maj Dove wouldn't be a heterosexual man, married with three kids or not, if he didn't allow his eyes to linger on her—

that backside, even under a uniform it's tight and enticing. With just the right, and not too much, feminine motion.

Locomotion.

Loco motion.

It drives you loco.

He now breathes in to smell her perfume, even if he's experienced wise and introspective enough to know that it's just his imagination—

but it's not—

Ah so much sensuality in that just bare scent.

A whiff, a hint, really, but with a siren note of ensnaring sweetness.

Expensive.

Feminine.

Maj Vicky Marshall knows he's watching her, knows that for just these few moments his eyes have lingered on her, is one hundred percent certain of it without turning to see, and she won't turn, she doesn't have to, not to remember him—his face is singed in her memory, from that first time, what was it?, three or four years ago, *When he came into the Cash in Iraq, he was a captain then*, she remembers, *twin bars on his uniform.*

A chunk of skin missing from his arm, and above his ear a scalp wound bleeding through the field dressing. Both wounds from bullets or shrapnel or both, but it was his three Ranger soldiers brought in on litters who everyone congregated over. One so bad he was brought straight into the OR, Vicky Marshall holding back then-Captain Zachery Dove, telling him, *"We'll take it from here."* Then seeing *His face watching through the little window in the doors*, and she doesn't remember whether the soldier died then, he wouldn't have in surgery, most likely, but perhaps later he did, that was daily then in Iraq.

She's as far down the corridor now as she was up it when she called "Zachery", and she knows he's no longer watching her, that he's moved on, down the stairs, down to the basement Op Center most likely, where he's just a lowly major with the other junior staff captains and majors among the seasoned lite colonels and the princely full-birds.

Zachery Dove should be a general, she thinks.

He looks like a general, like a general should look.

6'4" or 5", 220 and *All muscle, no fat, chiseled Hollywood good looks. Not that weasel General St Claire. Weasel-looking St Claire.* She thinks now of that one time in the crowded Cash tent in Iraq at Biap when the general was standing close and she felt he was just begging her to allow him to draw even closer, inching his arm closer, so that the sleeves of their uniforms touched, and she could sense the lust, feel it in the itch of her skin, that he was willing her to allow him to take hold of her in both his arms and pull

her to him forcibly and kiss her—*St Claire kiss me?, even touching his bare hands on mine?* She shudders, *Never never ever—*

She's ruined it for herself, clouded over with the repulsiveness of General St Claire those very pleasant thoughts of Zachery Dove.

She brushes it off, too late now to change that. *Later, tonight.*

In Wajma Gorge

Zoo Platoon's trucks are making their way, spaced a good thirty meters. All nine in the water.

It's slow going, each picking its way around the boulders and rocks.

The gorge is maybe sixty meters wide here.

The second truck is Ssgt Ketchum's hummer. Pimply-face young Pvt Finkle up top in the turret on the Mk19 auto grenade launcher.

Inside, Spec Van Louse driving, asks Ketchum, "That Robyn chick, what was she doing anyway, what do we gotta come all the way out there for them for?"

Ketchum, "Army bullshit."

"Thought she was a civilian. That dude, what's his name? Fox I'm thinking?"

"Wolfe. Kyle. Sergeant Redcloud calls him Wolfie."

"Ex-Marine Corps isn't he, someone said, he's ex-Marine?"

"Former, there are no ex-Marines. You wanna call him that he'll be slappin you upside the head, don't you know nothin? Never ever ever call a guy was a Marine ex."

"What they doin way out here, with their own terp too?"

"Army bullshit, I told you. Census shit. Census takers. You know, when they go 'round and count up the pop'lotion, like every ten years they do it. How many kids you got. Caucasian, black, brown, dumb Polack, spic, wop, chink. They wanna know do you jack-off how many times a week, you still beating your wife, you got a hard-on for the neighbor girl next door, she gets out back there on their trampoline, bouncing, bouncing, her little tight hard boobies in her tank top. Bouncing bouncing, y'know, in her shorts and doin splits in the air, her legs up, Louie dude, spread out like this, she's cheer-squad at the high school. All that kinda shit."

"Sarge, you're a sick mutha."

"Hey, you asked."

From the backseat, behind Ketchum, the Zoo's mortar man Sergeant Delmacha—

who everyone calls Slurpee because back in garrison in the real world he was always coming back from lunch with one and sucking it up hard and he'd go "*Brain freeze! Brain freeze!*"

—he simply says, like he really knows, like it's a cold hard fact, "They're CIA."

Van Louse, "Aw bullshit! Who told you that?"

"Ask um. Fact, Sar'ent Ketchum, it is. Ask um."

Slurpee's 60mm mortar tube and plate and five cardboard-tube-encased rounds are on the empty seat across from him.

He repeats it, "C – I – A."

Ssgt Ketchum, "You don't know shit, they're not CIA, the CIA's huntin the big dudes. Bin Laden. And they are not wastin their time puttin guys riding with the Zoo, for what, com'on, when they got sat'lites, they got Pred'tors, they can count every cunt hair in that ville if they want to. The single cunt hair of a ten-year-old peeing in a pot. They're not sending a skirt as god-awesome gorgeous, and that's with a capital G—they're not sendin her here, not the CIA, not today, not tomorra, not ever. Count on it."

Slurpee, "You see the way that Wolfe dude wasted that hajj, that first dude? Man, he had him blown away 'fore Sar'ent Redcloud even had his weapon raised up and off safe."

Ketchum, "What'd you see? You got telescopic eyes?"

"I saw him, he blowed him away. And the other dude, runnin, that hajj was at least five hundred meters and bamm bamm bamm bamm he dropped him. Wicked-ass shooting, Sar'ent. C – I – A."

"Gonna put you, Slurpee my man, gonna put you in a rocket ship, blast you up into outer space, strap you up there lashed to a sat'lite, have you lookin down sendin back all the super-secret spy images 'n shit. Sat-tel-lite Slurpee gonna call you, yer eyes are so goddamn awesome spectac-tac-tacular, and that's with a capital S. Sat-tel-lite Slurpee."

"Maybe you oughta have your eyes checked, Sar'ent Ketchum."

"Check this," Ketchum flashes him the finger.

"How'd those two dudes get killed then if it wasn't him?"

"One's just wounded, and I'm not saying it wasn't him. He's not CIA, he's ex-Marine. And ex-Marines, every one of em knows how to shoot."

Driver Spec Van Louse, "Thought you can't say ex-Marine, Sarge?"

"Just testin you." A sneer. "Testin you, Louie."

And Van Louse to Slurpee, "Even a former Marine sniper, he aint gonna, no Marine, not a sniper or none of them's gonna hit someone at five hundred meters with a M4, no way, not a M4."

Slurpee, "Okay, four hundred meters."

Ketchum, "Standin still like a statue maybe, but was the hajj standin still or was he runnin like a jackrabbit scared naked of his own shadow, or couldn't yer bionic 20/20 vision eyes tell the dif'rence?"

"Running."

"Shooting prone, from the prone position? Kneelin? Standing?"

"Standing."

Cover soldier portraits, L-R: *Ssgt Marcus Vasquez, 1Lieut Kevin Bell,
Spec John Phillips, Pfc Anthony Overby, Sgt Thomas Travis*

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