

Chapter 1

A New Life

24 February 1991

The minefield erupts with an explosion forty yards to my right. My A driver, Sergeant Ford, shouts, "What the fuck was that!"

I don't answer because I believe it was enemy artillery. Another explosion to my left confirms my fears. Without thinking, I blurt out, "They've got us bracketed, Ford. The next rounds are going to be dead-on!"

His lips tremble as he cries out, "What the hell are you talking about?"

I try to remain calm even though I know this might be the end. "We're bracketed. As soon as those guns get confirmation, they'll rain down on us. Remember the Iraqi ambush the captain warned us about? We're in it."

"We gotta get out of here! Do something!"

"Do what, Ford? We're trapped."

He looks left and right then behind, and I see his fears take root. I try to calm the sergeant, telling him, "There's nowhere to go. Cool down. We'll be okay."

Ford pays no attention. He's scared. I get that. But when he shouts that he's getting out, I yell, "Stay where you are, Sergeant! That's an order!" I take a deep breath and say, "Think what you're doing. You want to tell those drivers Iraqi artillery is about to come down on them? Tell them they have two minutes to get their MOPP suits on? To get out of their trucks? What's going to happen?"

Ford stops, looks at the convoy, and says, "Not good."

"Yeah, man, not good." I give it a moment. "We order them to start evacuating their vehicles, they might panic. Guys might end up in those minefields. And where should I send them? Forward? To the rear? What if they're caught in the open? Where will those shells land? It's best to stay in our trucks and ride it out."

Ford seems to accept our situation as he calms down and stares out the front window. "How many vehicles you figure are out here, Staff Sergeant?"

"Don't know. Could be a thousand."

"Out of all those trucks, why is our convoy the one bracketed?"

Without thinking, I answer, "It's because of me."

Ford faces me and stares.

I sit back and wait to hear the shells come in. There's an old saying, "You never hear the one that's got your name on it."

What the hell am I doing in this shit again? Wasn't Vietnam enough?

My mind blanks as the ground around me erupts. Huge explosions send sand high into the air. I'm not scared, not even worried. No, I'm relaxed, at peace. I begin to recall decisions made many years ago.

Eighteen Years Earlier

12 July 1972

It's two o'clock in the morning. My name is Sergeant Rick Green, United States Marine Corps. I'm lying in bed with my wife, Peg. It's another hot night in our Camp Pendleton base-housing unit. The breeze blowing through the window does little to stop the miserable heat of these summer nights. Suddenly I sit up screaming, "Blood! Look at all the blood!"

Her hands trembling, Peg shakes me. "Wake up, Rick, wake up. You're having another dream."

My eyes are cast down, and my body is covered in sweat. Slowly I turn and stare at my wife. Moving away, I throw the covers off and sit on the edge of the bed.

Peg gently touches my shoulder. "It's the third time this week. I think they're getting worse."

"They are."

"Can't you find someone on base to help you? Isn't there anyone you can talk to?"

I tell her, "No, Peg, there's no one. If I want to stay in the Corps, I can't let anyone know about these nightmares."

We've talked about me staying in the Corps, or maybe I should say "fought" about it. She wants to go home, I know this. But then she says, "Let me help you. Talk to me about what happened over there. You've never said anything. If things are bothering you, then let me help, please."

I study her, looking for sincerity. "Do you really want to know?" I ask.

“Yes, I do. Come on.” Smiling, she holds my hand and rises from the bed. “Let’s sit at the kitchen table. I’ll make some coffee.”

It’s difficult for me to start, but once I do, everything pours out. I explain from the beginning how I went from being a naive kid to a stone-cold killer. She listens to every word, wincing at the talk of death, laughing when the stories are funny. While she’s sipping hot coffee, her eyes never leave mine.

When I finish, I blurt out what I’ve done. I don’t know why, I just do. “I reenlisted yesterday.”

Her expression changes from loving concern to fury. “You promised you were through. You said the Marine Corps was in your past. Why did you do this?”

“What else can I do, Peg? You think the metallurgical job is still there for me? All that awaits me back in Chicago are dead-end jobs for a guy who doesn’t even have a high school diploma. I’m good here. I know how to be a Marine. If I leave the Corps, then it’s over for me.”

Her facial muscles tighten as her tone turns ugly. “You want to stay? Then stay. I’m leaving. And Kimberly is coming with me. You won’t see either of us again. Ever!”

I don’t know what to say. She’s never given me an ultimatum before. She’s never told me to choose between the Corps and my family, my daughter. That night, I make the decision to leave the Marine Corps and go back to Chicago. On 10 December 1972, I’m discharged and heading home.

January 1973

I was paid thirty days’ leave when I received my discharge from the Corps. Living in my parents’ home has helped me make that money last, but now I need to find a job. I call the plant I worked for before enlisting four years ago. The owner says, “I hired someone as soon as you left, Rick. If I take you back, I’ll have to fire him. He’s well liked, and I’m not sure how the other employees will feel about you coming back. You understand, don’t you?”

Yeah, I understand. I understand I’m not welcome. People in America have turned against us. Young people and the media talk about us being baby killers. I ain’t killed any babies. Screw this shit. I’ll take care of my family. I don’t need anyone.